Study Reveals Characteristics of Disengaged Workers

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By Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR

What differentiates engaged and disengaged workers? The market research firm ORC, an Infogroup company, decided to apply a consumer market segmentation approach to a dataset of 700,000 records from 220 employee surveys conducted in various countries since 2008 to see what the data would reveal.

ORC’s data was gathered using a “say, stay and strive” model to measure engagement:

- Say refers to employee advocacy on behalf of the organization and is measured by employee agreement with statements such as “I feel proud to work for my organization” and “I would recommend the products and services of my organization.”
- Stay measures the level of employee commitment, as evidenced by respondents’ reactions to statements such as “I feel a strong sense of belonging to the organization” and “It would take a lot for me to leave my organization.”
- Strive refers to discretionary effort and is measured by the extent to which employees say “this organization energizes me to go the extra mile” and “I feel motivated to do the best I can in my job.”

“The overall engagement picture is not very positive,” said Matt Roddan, research director of ORC’s employee research division, during an Aug. 24, 2010, webinar. While most respondents said they intended to stay with their organization, almost four out of every 10 employees do not strive for their organization, he said.

ORC’s segmentation analysis revealed six categories of employees:

- **Elizabeth the Engaged**—The largest group identified by ORC, at 35 percent of the respondents studied, “Eлизabeths” are ideal employees. They have favorable results on the three measures of say, stay and strive, are highly motivated, go above and beyond, and are adaptive to change. Roddan said that individuals in this category have a lot of confidence in their leadership team and feel a great sense of accomplishment.
- **Lucy the Laggard**—The next largest group in ORC’s population, at 19 percent, are the most disengaged. These employees don’t hate their job and don’t plan to leave, but they tend to do their work half-heartedly and make careless mistakes. These workers can be turned around, he said, with more challenging work.
- **Colin the Comfy**—According to Roddan, those in this group, representing 16 percent of employees, have no intention of leaving their comfy, safe and friendly environment. They get little sense of accomplishment from their work and don’t feel valued for their contributions, yet they rarely complain. Instead, they simply put in their eight hours and head straight out the door at the end of the day. Employees in this category need to be challenged to step out of their comfort zone.
- **Alison the Ambivalent**—Twelve percent of the population are in the wrong job and are thus not very happy. Because they often lack a connection with the job or the
organization, Roddan said, they are one of the most dangerous kinds of employee. As such, organizations might need to manage such workers out of the organization.

Simon the Saboteur—Eleven percent of respondents tend to be very negative and say critical things about the organization. “They are resistant to change and are quick to find fault,” Roddan said, because they feel they have no voice. “However, if you can speak to this group and find out what is really bothering them, you can engage them,” he noted.

Peter the Promiscuous—The smallest group, at 6 percent of respondents, are positive, proud of their organization and put in effort, yet it won’t take much for them to leave because they tend to be motivated by money or personal development and lack an emotional connection with the organization. “It’s not bad to have some people like this, because a little turnover is good,” Roddan noted. He suggested that organizations try to get the most out of such employees while they are there.

Once organizations segment their population of employees (and find out the relevant percentage of workers in each group) they can analyze demographic information to see if group members have any other common characteristics, such as age, role or manager, and then build engagement strategies to meet their needs.

Not all employees are the same, so it follows that different efforts will be needed to ensure that employees are engaged, Roddan explained. “As line managers we really do need to adjust how we interact with employees to get the most out of them.”

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