



“Employee Engagement: Engaging In a Virtual / Remote Era” - A Qualitative Empirical Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores employee engagement in today’s virtual/remote era/ environment. Today more than ever employee engagement is crucial due to the pandemic, its social distancing constraints, and the essence of technological advances that afford employers with the capability of literally “reach”ing” out and touch”ing” someone” (AT&T, 1971) virtually/ remotely.

KEYWORDS: Employee Engagement; Virtual; Remote; Organizational Culture; Communication

INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement is an important variable in organizations period; however, how does the change in conducting business person-to-person verse virtually/ remotely compare? Employee engagement whether traditional and or virtually/ remotely continues to affect business, employees, and shareholders. In addition, it is essential and can also influence performance and productivity rates. Hence, employee engagement is critical to an organizations long-term success. For this reason, the intent of this study was to examine scholarly research that has taken place within the past and present on issues influencing virtual/ remote employee engagement and understanding the lived experiences from employees themselves. In addition, ideas on how to engage employees virtually/ remotely will be discussed through data retained from a survey of 5,602 participants throughout various industries.

PURPOSE STATEMENT

This study is instituted to afford its audience with a general understanding of what virtual/ remote employee engagement is and how it can be implemented through a professional and unique perspective.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND RESEARCH DESIGN

According to Castillo (2018) the nature of the research was an empirical phenomenological research which referred to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions of events lived. These descriptions then provided the basis for an insightful structural analysis which represents the essence of the experience. The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological investigation was set forth to identify human experiences that are not approachable through quantitative approaches and to obtain descriptions of experience through first-person accounts in informal and formal survey style virtual/ remote interviews.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review consisted of past and current research and findings in the employee engagement and virtual/ remote domain. The works reviewed for the purpose of this study encompass the core foundations and theories relevant to employee engagement, organizational behaviour, and methods of communication/ conducting internal communications. These methodological approaches have greatly influenced research and theory in the field of employee satisfaction, motivation, organizational psychology, organizational and industrial culture, to name a few.

DATA COLLECTION PLAN

The purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of the participants, through their perspective of what they would like their employers to implement, offer, and execute, to promote virtual/ remote employee engagement within their organizations; a concrete description was the most appropriate for expressive purposes (Seamon, 2000).

SIGNIFICANCE AND POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Awareness of the significance of virtual/ remote employee engagement is fundamental for creating a well-developed understanding of what employees' desire in order to maintain a positive and constructive sense of occupational purpose and job satisfaction.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research concentrated on topics related to virtual/ remote communications, employee commitment, engagement, enthusiasm, and productivity. In this study, the researcher was aware of the probability of revealing negative, positive, and neutral professional experiences. At this time the population parameters are set determining participants inclusion or exclusion criteria for participating in the study (Moustakas, 1994). No participants relayed being negatively impacted by the study and or its content. Furthermore, many concurred that the study was appropriate and in compliance with the topic of virtual/ remote employee (participant) engagement.

EXPECTED OUTCOME

This study was intended to afford its audience with the lived experiences of the participants in the area of virtual/ remote employee engagement, and introduce potential recommendations for employers (e.g., supervisors, departmental heads, managers, etcetera) to consider when establishing virtual/ remote employee engagement events and or training.

SETTING, POPULATION, SAMPLE

The sample size for the study consisted of 5,602 participants nationwide. The intent of the study was to examine virtual/ remote employee engagement through the eyes and experiences of the participants. The participants were solicited via the use of SurveyMonkey, and was monitored continuously for saturation purposes. Saturation was met at 4,144 responses.

MATERIALS AND INSTRUMENTS

The material and instruments used were SurveyMonkey to gather participant responses and NVivo 12 (2021) software, which is software that supports qualitative research by allowing the researcher to collect, organize, and analyze survey content. The ensuing steps were taken to safeguard proper handling of data and analysis.

1. Step 1 consisted of labelling of each question as it was answered.
2. Step 2 involved reviewing the data.
3. Step 3 entailed that the data be reviewed a second time and compared with the survey output for accuracy.
4. Step 4, three topics/ themes were created; these topics/ themes were analyzed and compared to find commonalities through the use of

NVivo 12.

As Ehrich (2005) suggests, these measures permit a strict method of data collection and data analysis, which was indispensable in obtaining thorough, reliable, and authentic information from participants.

WHAT IS EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Kahn (1990) defines employee engagement as "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances." Meanwhile, Truss, Soane, Edwards, Wisdom, Croll, and Burnett (2006) define employee engagement simply as "passion for work", a psychological state. Robinson, Perryman, and Hayday (2004) defined engagement as "one step up from commitment." However, the consensus of the participants in this study was that employee engagement is defined as "events where employees can participate in and establish peer networking, exchange of communication." Many however stated that they felt virtual/ remote employee engagement is difficult and frustrating at times.

FINDINGS

According to Kular, Gatenby, Soane, Truss, and Rees (2008) it is evident that giving employees the opportunity to feed their views and opinions upwards is a key driver of employee engagement. People want a sense of involvement with their employer. Employers can increase employee engagement by going beyond downward communication and making sure that people are not just treated as employees; instead, they should be treated as valued individuals, as the research on individual experiences suggests.

A total of 5,602 participants were interviewed for this study. Saturation was met at 4,144 responses (Note: Saturation within a study is when there is enough information to replicate the study).

There were three questions total and each participant was asked the same questions. The interviews began with a brief description of the study and overview of the definition of employee engagement and meaning of virtual/ remote communication. Then the specific questions were asked:

1. How would you define employee engagement?
2. Describe how employee engagement is implemented(virtually/ remotely) within your organization.
3. What would you like to see implemented within your organization, as it relates directly to virtual/ remote employee engagement?

Participant/ interview results were grouped by question. Below are the node summaries from the participant interviews supporting the findings:

Question Number 1 (Node A: Definition of employee engagement).

How would you employee engagement?

The purpose of the first question was to establish the participants' definition of the term and to ensure their understanding and perception of the term.

- 65 percent of the participants revealed that their perceptions of the "meaning" of employee engagement in the workplace are linked to their levels of engagement and their performance.
- 35 percent argued that employee engagement is simply being engaged in their work and performing well.

Question Number 2: (Node B: Employee engagement implementation within individual organizations).

Describe how employee engagement is implemented (virtually/ remotely) within your organization.

- 59 percent of the participants stated that employee engagement is conducted through training events and introductions "socializing before such events" via Zoom, Skype, MS Teams, and or organizational communication platforms specific to their business
- 27 percent of the participants described employee engagement as simply communicating with one another and or management via e-mail, texting, Zoom, MS Teams, and Skype
- 14 percent of the participants stated that they do not participate in events in fear of managerial discipline and lack of productivity; they only respond to e-mail correspondence and avoid "replying all."

Question Number 3: (Node C: what would you like implemented as a form of employee engagement (virtually/ remotely)).

What would you like to see implemented within your organization, as it relates directly to virtual/ remote employee engagement?

- 64 percent of the participants concurred that they would like their employers to create motivational and fun events; where they can interact and or communicate with other employees and management via communication platforms
- 15 percent stated that they did not care what their organization implemented, as long as it provided time away from work
- 12 percent stated they would not participate in any virtual/ remote events unless it was mandatory due to privacy issues (e.g., if they were at home).
- 9 percent stated they would not participate in any virtual/ remote events

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is worth considering how employee engagement levels vary across occupations, industries and globally with the onset of the pandemic. Whether employee engagement takes place in a traditional setting or a virtual/ remote setting building engagement is a process that never ends and it rests on the foundation of a meaningful and emotionally enriching work experience. However, considering the thoughts, perceptions, and desires of the participants of this study; the following recommendations will be made.

Pragmatic Thinking (2021) a leading video meetings coach that affords organizations great resources for productive virtual communications suggests that making virtual work fun helps to encourage employee engagement and communication. Why not make it fun? Here are 11 entertaining virtual/ remote activities to boost moral and liven up the day, help promote a stress-free work environment across the miles, and potentially encourage virtual/ remote employee engagement:

1. **Pets at work** - include your pet in a video call.
2. **Playlist swap** - encouraging your team to share a link to their favorite music playlist or get them to each list out their top three work from home tunes.
3. **Themed video calls** - challenge your employees to themed team video meetings.
4. **Seize the midday** - getting up and moving in the middle of your workday will help you and your team to release some endorphins and come back to your afternoon sprint with a second wind of energy and motivation.
5. **The great at-home bake-off** - set up a monthly bake-off challenge for your team to participate in? Nominate a panel of judges for each month on rotation and come up with a fun prize for the winner of each bake-off round.
6. **Lunchtime gathering** - choose a set day for your team to have a "virtual lunch" and come together to connect and chat.
7. **Background competition** - Challenge everyone to come to the team virtual meeting with a customised background. Set some ground rules beforehand and give your team a quick run-down on how to set up a virtual background.
8. **Show and tell** - for a personal, connection-building virtual team activity give "Show and Tell" a try. Ask everyone to bring something to the

video conference call that they can share a story about.

9. **Motivational quote of the week** - ask everyone before a meeting begins to share a motivational quote.
10. **Weekend round-up** - Up the connection and build rapport with your team by encouraging everyone to share one great thing that they did or enjoyed about their weekend.
11. **Pajama Day** – encourage everyone to attend work in their pajamas (adhering to dress code guidelines).
12. **Virtual tea/coffee party** – encourage a tea/ coffee break with good conversation.
13. **Chair dance off party** – encourage your employees to dance in their chairs to a pre-selected playlist.

CONCLUSION



iStock (2020)

In closing, employee engagement whether it be traditional or virtual/ remote is crucial in the workforce. Engaged employees feel motivated to show up to work and help their organizations succeed. Satisfied employees feel personal and professional gratification when doing their job. Market surveys show that 13% of Americans are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their present job. This is an alarmingly high rate (Lorman Education Services, 2021).

Keep in mind that satisfaction fuels engagement. Employee engagement serves as a catalyst to empower, engage, motivate, promote communication, ascertain communication skills, and promote positive and fun dialogue. Tools that in today's virtual/ remote environment are essential and reap significant impact on improvements in productivity, satisfaction and performance.

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Giselle A. Castillo is a former AT&T service professional with 18 years' experience providing stellar telecommunication, customer service, leadership, financial analysis, and project and record management in diverse business settings. Dr. Castillo received a B.S. in Business Management and an M.B.A from the University of Phoenix (UOP), and was awarded a dual PhD in Organization and Management from Capella University for her studies in Emotional Intelligence (EI).

Dr. Castillo is a Subject Matter Expert (SME) in Leadership Styles, Organization and Management. She has authored a book; *Emotional Intelligence and Non-Management Employee Reaction: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study*, and has published numerous Leadership works in journals such as: The International Journal of Economics, Business, and Management Research (IJEBMR), the International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT), the International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning (IJNREL), and three articles outside of her expertise related to Renal Cancer, and COVID-19, in the International Journal of Novel Research in Healthcare and Nursing (IJNRHN), and her most recent publication is *Virtual Leadership: A Qualitative Study*, published in the International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews (IJRPR) for Higher Education purposes.

On her personal time, Dr. Castillo enjoys contributing and advocating higher education and professional growth through mentor and academic programs. Since 2008, Dr. Castillo has volunteered her time and knowledge, as an Academic Mentor for UOP. She is the former UOP Alumni Association, Los Angeles Chapter President (2013- 2016), and the founding President for the Southern California Alumni Chapter (2016- 2017).

Dr. Castillo is actively pursuing committee responsibilities with UOPs School of Advanced Studies (SAS) Special Interest Group, Center for Workplace Diversity and Inclusion Research, Women and Leadership Research Group, and Renal Cancer advocate opportunities with local cancer research organizations.

Dr. Castillo is dedicated and passionate about assisting individuals achieve their academic and personal objectives and is proud to be a life-long learner, educator, and researcher. One of her most prized possessions is a letter of academic excellence and recognition for having ascertained her doctoral degrees; this recognition was from The White House, President Barack Obama.

She believes that knowledge is essential and takes great pride in supporting such regardless of the subject matter. You can read more about Dr. Castillo and her endeavors in UOPs Research Hub, as she is a recognized figure in academia (<https://research.phoenix.edu/news/alumni-spotlight-giselle-castillo> and <https://research.phoenix.edu/users/giselle-castillo>), and (<https://uphoenix.academia.edu/DrGiselleACastilloPhDMBABSBM>).