# EFFECT OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT ON ATTRITION WITH RESPECT TO SERVICE INDUSTRY

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#### **Abstract**

Background: As economies develop and there is more choice of employment, organizations will find it increasingly challenging to attract and retain talent and potential. This change in economic conditions would mean being less dependent on manufacturing markets and more focused on service industries. This increases the importance of employees becoming brand ambassadors. In a race to survive in a highly competitive service industry, most organizations realize that a 'satisfied' employee does not necessarily mean a loyal employee and a high performer. Moreover, in times of diminishing loyalty, employee engagement is a powerful retention strategy. The fact that it has a strong impact on the bottom line adds to its significance, thus making employee engagement an essential tool in managing human capital (Sarah Cook, 2008).

Objective: The research paper aims at investigating the effect of employee engagement on attrition in organizations with special reference to service industry.

Methodology: Secondary data sources were used to understand the existing literature on the topic. Survey, personal and telephonic interviews were used to gather data from primary sources. HR professionals of 64 organizations from the service industry were surveyed.

Results: Correlation and Regression analysis was applied to the dataset using SPSS 15. The Hypothesis "Employee engagement practices significantly affect employee attrition" was accepted at 0.01 level of significance.

Conclusion: It was found that employee engagement strategies do have a significant effect on reducing the attrition rate in organizations. However, a more serious consideration in exploring the relationship between the two variables needs to be made by the organization to have an impact on bottom line results.

Key Words: Attrition, Retention, Employee Engagement, Service Industry, Business Environment

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The business environment around is full of trials and many executives are facing an acute challenge of making the people changes that they feel are necessary to rapidly improve performance whilst maintaining employee engagement. The success of organizations in a changing economy is tied in large measure to the creative and innovative energy from the most significant asset: employees. When employees are effectively and positively engaged with their organization, they form an emotional connection with the company. This impacts their attitude towards the company's clients, and thereby improves customer satisfaction and service levels. Successful employee engagement helps create a community at the workplace and not just a workforce.

India and Brazil have young and plentiful growing workforces; China has one of the world's largest but oldest populations. Retention issues are already beginning to emerge in these countries with workers quick to leave for better remuneration and higher job

titles. Countries such as China and India are experiencing skill shortages in many fields. The workforces in these countries frequently show the desire and ambition to get ahead that contrasts with their U.S. counterparts. Research by consultancy DDI shows that employees in China are more satisfied than their U.S. counterparts with their work – life balance. They are more willing to make personal sacrifices; they have stronger desire for promotion and find work more fulfilling than their personal life. Conversely, workers in China were twice less likely to agree with the statement "I have too much to do" than their U.S counterparts. So while U.S. employees are striving for balance and are fairly cautious about making personal sacrifices to advance their careers, their Chinese counterparts have a thirst for advancement, new knowledge and skills.

According to Sarah Cook (2008), as economies develop and there is more choice of employment, organizations will find it increasingly challenging to attract and retain talent and potential. In order to harness the ambition of employees, businesses will need to put in place programmes for robust recruitment and selection, ongoing development and succession planning. For example, Proctor & Gamble has been successful in attracting and retaining high—quality managers although the compensation package is not as attractive as elsewhere because they offer continuous learning and development to their managers. Businesses that thoroughly embrace the concept of employee engagement will carve a clear competitive advantage for themselves in the future.

#### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

# 2.1 Employee Engagement – Evolution & Concept

Engagement at work was conceptualized by Kahn, (1990) as the 'harnessing of organizational members' selves to their work roles'. In engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances.

The term employee engagement, in its present usage, was coined by the Gallup Organization, as a result of 25 years of interviewing and surveying employees and managers. Their intent was to create a measure of workplaces that could be used for comparisons. According to Buckingham & Coffman (1999), Gallup spent years refining a set of employee opinion questions that are related to organizational outcomes. The statistically derived items, called the Gallup Workplace Audit (GWA) that measure employee engagement are related to productivity, profitability, employee retention and customer service at the business unit level (hospital, hotel, factory, etc.). They report that employees who score high on the questions are "emotionally engaged" in the work and the organization (Sources quoted by Little, 2006).

Melcrum Publishing (2005) found that from a global survey of over 1,000 communication and HR practitioners 74% began to formally focus on the issue between 2000 and 2004.

The term has shown up in Workforce Magazine (2005), Harvard Business Review (2005) and the Washington Post (2005), not to mention the websites of many Human Resources consulting firms such as DDI (2005) and Towers Perrin (2003) (Sources quoted by Little, 2006). The term seems to be attractive for at least two reasons:

a) Employee engagement has been shown to have a statistical relationship with productivity,

profitability, employee retention, safety, and customer satisfaction (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Coffman & Gonzalez-Molina, 2002). Similar relationships have not been shown for most traditional organizational constructs such as job satisfaction (Fisher & Locke, 1992) (Sources quoted by Little, 2006).

b) The items used in employee engagement surveys measure aspects of the workplace that are under the control of the local manager. (Little, 2006)

Employee Engagement became a topic of concern in early 2000 when the dotcom bubble burst, 9/11 occurred, the economy dipped, and unemployment rose. At that time, the common response from managers to employees was, "You should be happy you have a job." Work expectations rose, while companies froze employees' pay. The result was a disengaged workforce. Employees had been put through so much that when the economic conditions improved they realized that they have choices elsewhere. This caused immense pain to employers who were afraid of losing them. Employers then started doing engagement surveys, engagement studies, and engagement workshops to develop engagement strategies. (Ketter, 2008)

Although the term 'employee engagement' has become a buzzword, it is used quite inconsistently by research institutes, corporate houses and consulting firms. It is also used to refer to a number of employee attitudes like satisfaction, motivation, commitment etc. Most of the literature employs a multidimensional approach to defining employee engagement, where the definition encapsulates several elements required in order to achieve 'true engagement'. As a result there has been extreme confusion with regards to the construct.

A variety of definitions have been put forth leading to lack of clarity and understanding about what engagement is all about. For the purpose of the research paper, employee engagement is defined as 'A positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organisation. The organisation must work to develop and nurture engagement which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee'. (Robinson et al., 2004)

# 2.2 Employee Attrition

Hiring and employee retention have been identified as the "key challenges" in managing and measuring employee productivity, according to a survey conducted among more than 200 HR managers across industries. The Workforce Productivity India 2012 report revealed that HR managers are "too caught up in fire fighting" attrition that they are less able to focus on more strategic objectives of their business operations. (The Hindu, 2012)

Attrition rate has always been a sensitive issue for all organizations. Calculating employee turnover rate is not that simple as it seems to be. No common formula can be used by all the organizations. A formula has to be devised keeping in view the nature of the business and different job functions. Moreover, calculating attrition rate is not only about devising a mathematical formula. It also has to take into account the root of the problem by going back to the hiring stage.

There is no standard formula to calculate the attrition rate of a company. This is because of certain factors as: (Dev, 2005)

- The employee base changes each month. So if a company has 1,000 employees in April 2004 and 2,000 in March 2005, then they may take their base as 2,000 or as 1,500 (average for the year). If the number of employees who left is 300, then the attrition figure could be 15 per cent or 20 per cent depending on what base you take.
- Many firms may not include attrition of freshers who leave because of higher studies or within three months of joining.
- In some cases, attrition of poor performers may also not be treated as attrition.

A simple formula that can be used includes:

Attrition = (No. of employees who left in the year / average employees in the year) x 100.

Thus, if the company had 1,000 employees in April 2004, 2,000 in March 2005, and 300 quit in the year, then the average employee strength is 1,500 and attrition is 100 x (300/1500) = 20 percent.

# 2.3 Reasons for Attrition

Hay Group (2013) in association with the Centre for Economics and Business Research conducted the study "Preparing for Take-Off". It covered 700 million employees in 19 countries. According to the study,

worldwide, attrition is predicted at 21.2% in 2013 as compared to 20.3% in 2010. The number of workers expected to take flight in 2014 will increase by 12.9% as compared with 2012. This is mainly due to increase in industry growth and employment opportunities. Comparatively, turnover was minimal between 2010 and 2012. In the next five years, 49 million employees will leave their employers globally.

(Hay Group, 2013)

In India, employee turnover is predicted to rise to 26.9% in 2013 compared with 26% in 2010. This makes attrition rate in India the highest in the world making it a dire necessity for oorganizations in India must give serious thought to what drives employee commitment. Firms need to focus on employees with mission-critical skills, as well as high-potentials and those holding crucial roles. (Hay Group, 2013)

The India Attrition Study 2008, done between October 2008 and March 2009, was a partnership between BT and People Strong to figure out why employees quit (published by BT in April 2009). In the good times before September-October 2008, attrition in India was as high as 20 per cent (and up to 40 per cent in the booming services sector). Research by BT People Strong found that India is not only losing fair bit of top performers but plenty of the 'Universal Leavers', who form any company's backbone. The survey found that opportunity for career growth tops the list of reasons for employees leaving their organization (Fig 2.1).

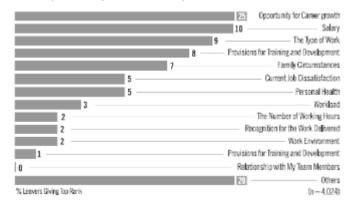


Fig 2.1: Reasons for Employees Leaving the Organizations (Source: Business Today, 2009)

The study also found that during downturn organisations that have shed chunks of the workforce are left with insecure employees who tend to jump ship if they can to avoid a pink slip. Companies that ignore attrition in a

downturn do so at their own peril as it means letting go of top performers. It has been noted by experts that talented employees are always high on aspirations and their worry is how fast they climb the corporate ladder much more than survival. Organizations who do not address the concerns of their top performers will tend to lose them at all times. Losing employees to the competitors is also a concern for HR professionals. Recession was found to be a good time for organizations to pick up talent from the market. Unfortunately it worked both ways for organizations. (Business Today, 2009)

Given the importance of personal fulfilment to Gen Y employees (Glass, 2007), work life balance has emerged as a factor in employee attrition. Long working hours, work overloads, limited leave and requirements for relocation all have the potential to interfere with employees' home and lifestyle priorities. The consequence of this interference could either be workfamily conflict (Armstrong, 2007) or a work-lifestyle imbalance that eventually contributes to voluntary turnover (Dunne, 2007).

Conflicting demands and organizational constraints, role ambiguity, and conflict with service managers, teams and customers, lead to job stress among client interfacing employees (Wetzels et al., 1999). Unmanageable workloads and inadequate resources, as well as other job-related factors increase the amount of stress at work (Price, 2001). Immediate superiors and co-workers form the social support pillars for employees of an organization. Having an unsatisfactory relationship with supervisors or with peers negatively impacts individuals' performance and satisfaction and can push them to resign from their workplace (Price, 2001).

It has also been found that different groups of employees cite different reasons for leaving their job. Managerial staff cites "career growth" and "leadership" as the major factors that influence attrition and retention, together with "opportunities for management", "ability of top management" "use of skills and abilities" and "work / family balance". Professional employees cite concerns about "supervisory coaching and counseling," "company direction" and "interesting work"; Clerical employees voice concerns such as "type of work," "use of skills and abilities" and "opportunity to learn"; Hourly employees notice whether they are treated with respect, their "management ability" and "interesting work" (Nair, 2008).

Some aspects that affect turnover intentions of employees and can be taken care of by employers and are under the control of the HR managers of the organization are: High Stress, Working conditions, Supervision, Communication, Inability to use core skills, Proper organization's goals / mission, Inadequate training, Employee – employer relationship, Balance between work and life, Flexible work options and Proper reward systems.

However, it is important to note that employee attrition rate can be never be entirely eradicated. It can only be influenced to keep it in control. The business model on which a subsidiary operation runs is significant in achieving this. Outsourcing higher end responsibilities that offers challenging tasks to the employees goes a long way in helping to deal with the issue (Nair, 2008).

# 2.4 Effect of Employee Engagement on Attrition

One in four employees in the organised sector in India is set to switch jobs, the highest attrition rate globally, according to a Hay Group study. The series of fresh investments planned across sectors could raise demand for talent even as economic conditions remain tepid, raising concerns on employee engagement and retention. (Economic Times, Jun 2013)

Senior executives, human resource professionals as well as line managers realize that employees who feel uncertain about their careers or who find "better opportunities" elsewhere would leave the company causing a talent gap. All this has led organizations to use different strategies to retain their talent pool. As cited by Nancherla (2009), report by Right Management has cited very high attrition rates for some sectors in India. In addition to management skills, lack of investment in employee engagement, career progress and meaningful work was cited as important reasons for high attrition rates in certain sectors.

Report published by Lloyd Morgan along with the Corporate Leadership Council (2004) states that by increasing employees' engagement levels, organizations can expect an increase in performance of up to 20 percentile points and an 87% reduction in employees' probability of departure. The highly engaged outperform the average by two deciles and are dramatically less likely to leave the organization.

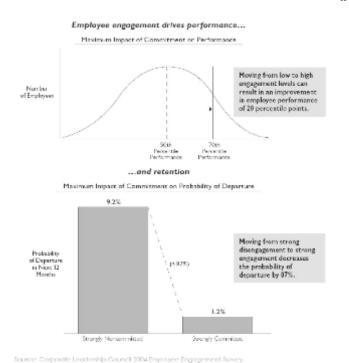


Fig2.2: Relationship between employee engagement, retention and performance (Source: Corporate Leadership Council, 2004 Employee Engagement Survey)

Additional support for the positive relationship between engagement and organizational and personal outcomes has been shown in a meta-analysis by Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes (2002). In this study, which encompassed 7,939 business units in 36 companies, employee engagement, measured by the Gallup Workplace Audit (GWA), demonstrated true score correlations with employee turnover of -.30, customer satisfaction .33, and profitability .17.

Data from CIPD (2010) survey revealed that engaged employees are significantly more likely to want to stay with their organisation compared with those who are less engaged. Consolidated data from their surveys suggested that it cannot be taken for granted that people who are not engaged and quit would be no loss to the organization.

#### 3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 3.1 To review existing literature on the effect of employee engagement on attrition.
- 3.2 To study the effect of employee engagement on attrition among organizations in service industry.

#### 4. HYPOTHESIS

H1: There will be a significant negative correlation between employee engagement and attrition rate in organizations.

#### 5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

# 5.1 Sources of Data

- a) Secondary Data: The research paper has used secondary data sources like books, magazines and journals to explore the existing literature on the topic. Various e-journals and websites were also reviewed to arrive at an understanding of the variables under consideration.
- b) Primary Data: A questionnaire was developed to investigate employee engagement strategies and to find the attrition rate of organizations. HR professionals of 64 organizations from service industry were approached to collect data with regards to the variables under study.

# 5.2 Questionnaire Description

Questionnaire developed was based on Robinson's model of the drivers of employee engagement. Sample questionnaires from the internet included Gallup's 12 point questionnaire and a questionnaire developed by Scarlett Surveys also helped in framing the statements used in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was designed to understand employee engagement strategies implemented by organizations and its effect on attrition. It included items to measure employee engagement strategies from an organizational perspective as well as some other items which aimed at gathering information regarding attrition rate in organizations. The questionnaire consisted of 37 items out of which five point rating scale was used for 33 statements (where 1 – strongly disagree and 5 – strongly agree), two items involved direct response in terms of attrition rate and reduction in attrition rate respectively, four items involved nominal scale and ordinal scale was used for one item.

Cronbach Alpha reliability for the 33 items in the questionnaire was found to be 0.949 which is considered to be in the range of excellent reliability score (George & Mallery, 2003).

# 5.3 Operational Definitions of Variables

1. Employee Engagement: 'A positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context and works with colleagues to improve

performance within the job for the benefit of the organisation. The organisation must work to develop and nurture engagement which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee'. (Robinson et al., 2004, p. 4)

2. Attrition: Unpredictable and uncontrollable, but normal, reduction of workforce during a definite time duration. (as cited in www.citehr.com, 2010)

# 5.5 Sample

The unit of analysis for studying the effect of employee engagement on attrition was organizations. Data was collected from 64 HR professionals using the questionnaire developed. Data collection methods included interviews (face to face & / or telephonic) as well as questionnaire received via email.

# **5.6 Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive statistics was found for the variables under study. They have been used further in the paper to discuss findings from the study. (Table 5.1)

Table 5.2: Frequency distribution for reduction in attrition rate among organizations

Reduction	Frequency	Percent
missing	18	28.1
1-3%	18	28.1
4-6%	18	28.1
7-10%	6	9.4
>10%	4	6.3
Total	64	100.0

#### 6. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

High profits and fast paced growth, don't tell the full story about many companies in India's economy (Nancherla, 2009). Enhanced technology and booming economy have given rise to numerous employment opportunities. This is creating a pressure on senior executives, human resource professionals as well as line managers who realize that employees who feel uncertain about their careers or who find "better opportunities" elsewhere would leave the company causing a talent gap. All this has led organizations to use different strategies to retain their talent pool. Further, a number of researchers have found that lack of investment in employee engagement strategies invariably force an organization to bear a high cost in terms of lost customers and increase in employee attrition.

The researcher wanted to investigate whether

organizations which invest in engaging their employees have lower attrition rates. Table 3 shows descriptive statistics for the variables employee engagement and attrition rate. The range of scores for attrition rate was found to be very wide with the minimum score being 1% and maximum score being 60%. This could also be due to the fact that in service industry in general faces a turbulent and unpredictable business environment which also gets reflected through the attrition rate faced by the company. Mean and Standard deviation for employee engagement was found to be 76.45 and 13.882 respectively (Table 5.1). High standard deviation indicates that there is great variation among the employee engagement scores of organizations.

To test the hypothesis, respondents (HR professionals) were asked about the attrition rate calculated for the previous year. This was correlated with total employee engagement score obtained. SPSS 15 was used to test the hypothesis under consideration. Pearson product moment correlation was applied on the data set of 64 organizations. (Table 6.2)

Results showed that employee engagement has a moderately strong negative correlation with attrition rate in organizations (r = -0.638). The correlation coefficient was found to be significant at .01 levels. Thus, indicating that organizations that score high on employee engagement tend to have a lower attrition rate.

Regression analysis was further applied to the data set to find whether any predictive relationship can be established. The coefficient of determination (r2) was found to be 0.407 (See Table 6.3). Thus, it can be said that 40% of the variation in attrition rate can be explained by employee engagement initiatives of the organizations.(table 6.3)

One of the key reasons for companies to invest in employee engagement initiatives is employee retention. Melcrum Publishing (2008) found that 73% of companies have seen positive results in employee retention due to their efforts in engaging employees. Findings from the study further affirm existing literature.

Thus the Hypothesis, "Employee engagement practices significantly affect employee attrition" is accepted at 0.01 level of significance.

# 7. KEYFINDINGS

 Findings from literature indicate that reasons for employee attrition vary across industries as well as individual differences do creep into the whole process. Some of the reasons for attrition as cited by researchers have been pay & benefits, career growth, role ambiguity, work – life balance and inadequate training.

- Majority of the HR professionals surveyed identified compensation and benefits as the primary reason for employees leaving their job. Contrary to what HR executives believe, much of the research evidence indicates that pay many a times is not the primary reason for employees leaving instead career growth has emerged as one of the major factors affecting attrition amongst employees (Business Today, 2009).
- Statistical Analysis found that employee engagement initiatives of organizations have a significant effect in reducing attrition rate.
- However, when HR executives were asked as to what has been the reduction in attrition rate due to employee engagement initiatives, around 28% of them chose not to answer the question. The reason given was either they did not calculate the reduction in attrition rate or they were not very comfortable disclosing information about it. About 28% of the respondents reported a reduction of 1-3% and 4-6% respectively (Refer Table 5.2).

# 8. IMPERATIVES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The present research highlights the fact that employee engagement initiatives significantly reduce attrition rate in organizations. Future researches can aim at finding the reduction in attrition rate in organizations due to employee engagement initiatives.

#### 9. CONCLUSION

The present research found that organizations which score high on implementation of employee engagement strategies have a lower attrition rate. Correlation Analysis used to test the hypothesis under consideration was found to be significant at .01 level. Regression analysis revealed that 40% of the variation in attrition can be explained by employee engagement initiatives.

Employee attrition is both a straightforward and complex issue. The ray of hope for HR executives and line managers, who struggle to keep their talented employees, is to systematically build employee engagement initiatives into their work culture. Further the effect of

these investments in reducing the employee attrition rates needs to be demonstrated to the top management who then will feel more confident in further investing in such initiatives. Thus, helping in creating a cyclical process

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Table 5.1: Descriptive Statistics for Attrition Rate and Employee Engagement Total Score

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Attrition rate for last year	64	1	60	15.25	8.808
employee engagement total score	64	38	102	76.45	13.882

Table 6.2: Pearson product moment correlation coefficient for employee engagement total score with attrition rate calculated for last year

		employee engagement total score	Attrition rate for last year
employee engagement total score	Pearson Correlation	1	638(**)
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.000
	N	64	64

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

Table 6.3: Summary of Regression Analysis between Employee Engagement & Attrition rate in organizations

Independent variable	$\mathbf{r}^2$	F		Sig
Employee Engagement	0.407	42.520	46.192	.01
total score				