

DEVELOPING A FLEXIBLE WORKFORCE. CAN IT BE DONE?



Better People, Better Business

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Employee engagement and hiring is a big subject of discussion in the workplace lately.

These days, it seems like every business is looking to hire more people. Adding people to a disengaged workplace is not the best situation. We all know the positive impact a motivated workforce has on customer satisfaction, efficiency, and the well-being of employees. There is a solution to this challenge, and something can be done. It needs perseverance and patience because after all people change, but slowly.

You've heard it before, I know, but let's try to talk about solutions and let's keep it simple. There is a lot of talk about when it comes to lack of employees' engagement.

Numbers vary depending on the studies, but we can estimate that around 70% of your employees are not engaged. The cost of this is significant. Gallup, a worldwide research company published an article on June 14, 2022, calling engagement “The World's \$7.8 Trillion Workplace Problem.”

Wow! what a freaking big issue. That is the monetary cost of the problem, but I bet you that the non-financial impact is probably much bigger and more damaging long-term.

First, what is “a lack of engagement” from employees? How can you know if your team is engaged? If I asked the question to leaders’ chances that the vast majority would say that their team is engaged. So why is there this gap between the study and the leaders’ answer? Leaders don’t know how to recognize the symptoms of a lack of engagement.

According to Forbes in this article: 12 Signs Your Employee Is Disengaged dated in 2018, here are those symptoms:

1. *Withdrawal.*
2. *Poor Communication.*
3. *Breaks From Routine.*
4. *Silence.*
5. *An Apathetic Approach.*
6. *Absenteeism. (That’s a big one.)*
7. *Complacency.*
8. *A Decline in Work Quality; Missed Deadlines.*
9. *Exhaustion, Cynicism, Inefficiency*
10. *Lack of Participation*
11. *Naysaying*
12. *Rudeness*

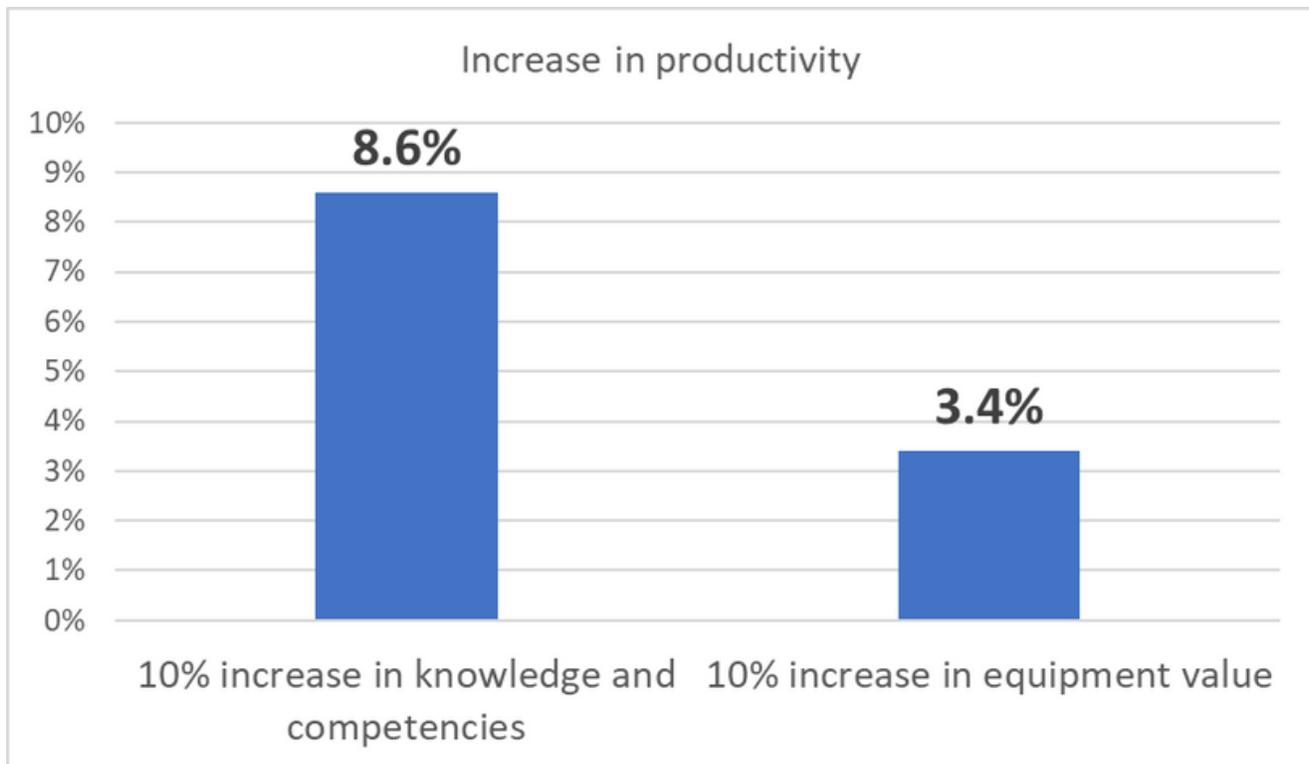
I’m sure you can recognize some of those signs in your organization. Now before I talk about a solution let’s ask ourselves the following question: What Are the Drivers of Employee Engagement?

Here are the 5 drivers of employee engagement according to Gallup:

- 1.Purpose.
- 2.Development.
- 3.A caring manager.
- 4.Ongoing conversations.
- 5.A focus on strengths.

Employee development

In this white paper, we want to focus on employee development. A study by the National Center on the Educational Quality of the Workforce (EQW) determined that an investment in training produces much better results than an investment in equipment.



A study of 3,100 companies in the USA revealed that a 10% increase in knowledge and competencies leads to an 8.6% increase in productivity, while a 10% increase in equipment value results in a productivity increase of only 3.4%.

Now think about it: What does a 8.6% increase in productivity mean to you and your team?

The flexible workforce

We believe that part of the solution to this problem is in developing a flexible workforce. You've probably heard of "agile"; well, I prefer flexible over agile. Here is the definition of flexible according to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary; characterized by a ready capability to adapt to new, different, or changing requirements.

What is a flexible workforce? It's cross training on steroids. Who are the value-added workers in your environment? If I take the manufacturing sector, where we excel, they are the employees on the floor. It would only make sense that if you invest in training and development in them the gain will be significant since you have most of your workers on the floor.

But we often see the opposite. We invest in leaders (managers, supervisors) which is also necessary, or we get certifications, for example, a small group of people are certified Lean Six Sigma Green Belts hoping they will be able to lead change in the workplace.

Let me make an analogy to put our solution in perspective. I've watched the series "Vikings" on Netflix and they use boats call Viking Longships. They needed 16 rowers on that ship, so just imagine if they had only 4 rowers. They would still be able to navigate but they would be exhausted. If the weather was bad, they would have a very hard time to keep navigating in a safe way. So, in a business, knowing that challenges exist on a regular basis, if you have 50 employees on the shop floor and only 10 of them had proper training, would you be able to accomplish as much as if you had all employees trained? We all know the answer to that question.

This is what we call creating a flexible workforce. A flexible workforce allows your manufacturing system to react to customer demand. Flexible employees are those with the capability to perform at many different workstations in a manufacturing environment.





Where to start creating a lean and flexible workforce

1. Create a list of workstations and their roles and responsibilities for each
2. Determine each employees' experience and knowledge level for every workstation (a training matrix makes this step easy)
3. Create a Lean-Thinking workforce with continuous improvement tools and techniques, such as:
 - a. Lean 101 (9 forms of waste).
 - b. Workplace organization (6s).
 - c. Value Stream maps.
 - d. Continuous flow.
 - e. Materials Delivery system
4. Train every employee on the team on every workstation in their sector, starting small:
 - a. Focus on priority stations first
 - b. Identify champion employees that can become trainers
5. Standardize the practice:
 - a. Review employee experience and knowledge levels and congratulate successes
 - b. Integrate lean and flexibility training to new employee onboarding

Once equipped with that new knowledge, you would have made significant productivity gain if you implement a system that will teach employees to do a plant tour for example or any other structure that will entice employees to identify opportunities to improve and solve them.

Conclusion and results

There you have it. We're convinced that if you follow these steps, you'll be able to build an engaged workforce with all the benefits that come with it.

You might be wondering if it is worth the effort. Take a look at these numbers:

Work units in the top quartile in employee engagement outperformed bottom-quartile units by 10% on customer ratings, 22% in profitability, and 21% in productivity. Work units in the top quartile also saw significantly lower turnover (25% in high-turnover organizations, 65% in low-turnover organizations), absenteeism (37%) and fewer safety incidents (48%), patient safety incidents (41%), and quality defects (41%).

What do you think?



Resources:

Developing a Lean Workforce A guide for Human Resources, Plant Managers, and lean coordinators.

Chris Harris and Rick Harris
Productivity Press.

What Is Employee Engagement and How Do You Improve It?

<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/285674/improve-employee-engagement-workplace.aspx#ite-357473>

12 Signs Your Employee Is Disengaged (And How to Respond)

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeshumanresourcescouncil/2018/11/30/12-signs-your-employee-is-disengaging-and-how-to-respond/?sh=6d6d2bb72928>

Employee Engagement Solutions

<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/229424/employee-engagement.aspx>

The World's \$7.8 Trillion Workplace Problem

<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/393497/world-trillion-workplace-problem.aspx>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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The owner and president of Unison Workplace Strategies, a company located in Dieppe, NB.

Marc-André's mission is to help organizations through the growth of their employees.

Marc-André has completed his Six Sigma Master Black Belt with a major in innovation.

Being a certified coach via the John Maxwell organization, he has a passion for understanding human behaviour at work.

Marc-André works relentlessly at implementing the concept of organizational health in large-scale and custom production environments, in the manufacturing and service sectors. In other words, re humanizing the workplace. He is a learner at the service of learners