

A Comparison of Employee Engagement: Pre- and Post-COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has created major disruptions in the global economy and employee working patterns. Employee engagement is a key factor for organizational management in that it provides an organization with employee commitment to the goals of the organization. The research literature shows mixed results related to the effects of Covid-19 on employee engagement pre-and post-periods. As a result, the literature on employee engagement across different industries is inconclusive. This research study explores the effects of employee engagement pre- and post-COVID-19 and attempts to identify differences across industries. The researcher administered a 15-question survey to organizations on factors related to employee engagement across five industry categories—Health Care, Food Services, Consumer Retail, Manufacturing, and Professional Services.

Keywords: employee engagement, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement is a relevant and important topic in today's workforce, more so than ever. The COVID-19 pandemic alters the way organizations may do business. For example, employees are now expected to perform their jobs from home facilitated by technology (ZOOM and MSTEAMS). The level of engaged employees in the physical workplace may differ from that of work performed by telecommuting. Based on research from Quantum Workplace, highly engaged employees increased by .4% during 2017 and 2018; during that same period, .6% of disengaged employees decreased. During the 2019, pre-COVID period, the rate of highly engaged employees is 74%; this represents no change in employee engagement from 2018. During the first 5 months of 2020, 76% of highly engaged employees existed compared to pre-COVID (2017-2019). During the 2019 and 2020 years, the average change for highly engaged employees is +2.6%; for disengaged employees, the average is -2.4% (Quantum Workplace, 2021).

Three areas of employee engagement changed most significantly: communication and leadership, compensation and benefits, and health/well-being/balance. Questions related to organizational changes and senior leadership valuing employees as their most important resource increased year-over-year by 7% and 8% respectively. "These increases in favorability indicate that many organizational leaders were obligated to become agile in the face of disruption. And organizational communication became paramount as leaders and teams coordinate their responses" (Quantum Workplace, 2021, p. 16).

Highly engaged employees are affected differently by industry. For example, Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation declined by 7%. However, double-digit increases occurred in non-profits (15%), Accommodation & Food Services, Educational Services, Agricultural Forestry/Fishing/Hunting, and Utilities increased by 10% or greater. Increases in Real Estate (9%), Manufacturing (8), Retail Trade (7%),

Transportation and Warehousing (6%), Software and Information Technology (3%), Finance and Insurance, Health Care and Social Assistance (1%) occurred pre-and post-COVID-19 (Quantum Workplace, 2021 p. 17).

According to the *Essential Guide to Employee Engagement*, employee engagement is “personified by the passion and energy employees must give their best to the organization to serve the customer, (Cook 2013, p. 9). Engaged workers increase an organization’s value, which in return assists the company in running more effectively and efficiently, essential characteristics of a successful twenty-first-century firm.

When considering employee engagement, one may examine how employees think and feel about the organization they are working for and how proactive they are in achieving the organization’s goals. These aspects are linked to their commitment, which is a characteristic directly related to the term “employee engagement.” According to the eleventh edition of the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “commit” is defined as “a pledge or bind to a course, policy, or use.” The dictionary also uses the phrase, “[dedicated] to a cause,” when defining “commit.” (Oxford University Press, 2023). Thus defined, employee engagement is an intangible asset. While it is not a physical advantage, it is something quite valuable that an employee can offer to the business.

Employee engagement can either benefit or harm organizations. High employee engagement results in more enthusiastic, satisfied, and committed employees. These types of employees are generally more productive and provide better customer service. Employee retention is also higher. All these factors can lead to a satisfied customer. Satisfied customers become loyal, which can increase sales and profits. However, if an organization has unengaged employees, opposite results are likely to occur. A higher employee turnover rate and declines in customer service and productivity often result in an overall lower customer experience, and consequently decreased sales and profits (Birkman, 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee engagement is personified by how positively an employee thinks about the organization, feels about the organization, and how proactive that employee is regarding achieving organizational goals (Cook, 2013). Feeling, thinking, and doing are the three aspects of employee engagement (Cook, 2013). Engaged employees are critical and vital to a company’s success; hence, employees directly influence productivity and assist in establishing or diminishing a firm’s competitive advantage (Cook, 2013). “From the employer perspective, engaged employees tend to be more productive, more profitable, safer, create stronger customer relationships, and stay longer with their companies than less-engaged employees” (Pitt-Catsouphes, et al, 2013, p. 220). Therefore, identifying the key drivers of engagement becomes imperative. Questions such as, “what is motivating employees to work harder? Who is motivating them to work harder? And what conditions motivate them to work harder?” can assist management in determining the drivers of employee engagement. Utilizing survey instruments and enhancing the quantitative results with focus groups is another effective strategy a firm can employ to determine key drivers (Cook, 2013). By asking these types of questions, management may discover better operating methods. Employee engagement is an essential ingredient for success; for that reason, it is crucial that management copiously understand it.

Blustein and others state that the pandemic has created massive employment challenges across all industries (Blustein, 2020). The lockdowns in a pandemic-driven environment challenge management and employees to engage in different ways. Web-based technologies such as ZOOM, MSTEAMS, and Google Meet provide platforms for engaging employees in non-office workplaces such as employees’ homes. In support of the health and well-being of employees, their families, and coworkers, companies adopt practices to enhance productivity and flexibility. “Virtual social time has been encouraged and hosted by them” (Hodder, 2020, p. 269). Employee engagement is one of the most highly prized skills in employees for yielding maximum productivity at the office and at home. Several factors affect engagement: work culture, job satisfaction, compensation, coworkers’ relationships, etc. The COVID-19 lockdowns for numerous organizations affect employees’ motivation levels, thereby affecting productivity (Sadhna, 2021).

One of the major issues related to lockdowns is job burnout. “Six areas of work life can lead to employee burnout or the level of employee engagement: workload, control and autonomy,

rewards/recognition, community, social support, fairness, and unbiased culture and value system...For a worker to be satisfied and committed to the job, freedom at work, rewards and recognitions, fairness and justice, work ethic and values really matter” (Maslach, 2001, p. 52). Similarly, the perceptions of employees concerning the workplace are connected to their levels of engagement and their performance. Satisfied employees feel greater loyalty and commitment to their organizations (Holbeche, 2003). Saks et.al. suggests that “the only way employees repay their organizations is through their levels of engagement. Employees choose to engage themselves to varying degrees in response to the resources they receive from their organizations. In other words, employee engagement is a two-way process dependent upon how well the employee or staff is taken care of by the organization” (Saks, et al, 2000, p.162).

A Zhang et.al. research study identifies workload and interaction patterns and their effects on employee engagement during the pandemic. The multiple regression analysis suggests a negative correlation with stress and workload. Several factors such as sociodemographic characteristics, contribute to the explanation of employee engagement. The respondent group, nurses, perceived low stress and workload but high employee engagement. Other variables from the study such as mental demand and good performance, were positively associated with employee engagement (Zhang, et.al, 2021).

Spurk identifies the challenges within the teaching profession by requiring classes be taken remotely. Wide-range options to deliver content, project-based applications, and critical thinking development requires significant rethinking to engage students and faculty in a different type of relationship (Spurk, et al, 2020).

Aparna Nancherla authored a publication discussing the topic of employee engagement, stating that employee engagement varies “based on the amount of tenure the employee [has] with the company” (Nancherla, 2013 p. 22). The article continues to report that employees with tenure for less than a year have an 83% employee engagement rate. Individuals with 1-2 years tenure have an employee engagement rate of 79%, while respondents with 2-5 years of tenure have a 75% employee engagement. Employees who have worked for a company for 6-10 years have an employee engagement rate of 76%. Respondents with more than 10 years of experience at a firm have a 79% employee engagement rate. Estimo et al.’s findings show no significant difference before and during the pandemic (Estimo, 2023). The level of employee engagement remains high.

COVID-19 has created a widespread effect on various occupations’ mobility and growth. Factors of occupational mobility are associated with increases and decreases in economic growth within an industry (Kramer, 2020). Recession and economic uncertainty led the professional organization Society of Human Resource Society (SHRM, 2019), to conduct research on employee engagement. SHRM states that employee engagement is essential to retaining employees and sustaining a competitive advantage. For SHRM to support their claims, SHRM conducted a research study where an outside consulting group developed a survey instrument to administer. SHRM randomly surveyed six hundred individuals with the help of the internet, which yielded an 83% response rate. The survey was available to take over a period of seven days. All respondents were full- or part-time employees (SHRM, 2019). COVID-19 research on employee engagement does not exist in the research literature. This study would be the first study to compare employee engagement pre-and post-COVID-19.

Purpose of Research Study

In this research study, the focus is on engaged employees’ responses pre-COVID-19 pandemic (2015-19)) and the post- COVID-19 (2020-2024) periods for different industries. Comparison of the responses for the two periods provides the basis of the statistical analysis.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers developed a 15-question survey instrument, administered the survey to collect the responses, and applied a Factor Analysis technique for each question in Table 5. The sample is a stratified randomly selected group of organizations in five industry categories—Health Care, Food Service, Consumer Retail, Manufacturing, and Professional Services. Qualtrics software manages the distribution

to the human resources department or someone who manages the human resources function in the organization distribution, the collection, and analysis of the survey. A total of 479 responses from the pre-COVID-19 organizations represent 10.3% response rate and 399 responses from the post-COVID-19 period represent an 8.6% response rate.

FINDINGS/RESULTS

The results from the data are as follows.

**TABLE 1
FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF POPULATION BY INDUSTRY**

Industry	Frequency	Percent
Health Care	486	10.5
Food Service	1098	23.7
Consumer Retail	1520	32.8
Manufacturing	709	15.3
Professional Services	820	17.7
Total	4633	100.0

**TABLE 2
SIZE OF THE RESPONDENT ORGANIZATIONS**

Size	Frequency	Percent
Less than 50	2137	46.2
51-100	1620	34.9
101-500	77	1.7
501-1,000	55	1.2
1001 and greater	744	16.0
Total	4633	100.0

**TABLE 3
FREQUENCIES, PERCENTAGES, AND AVERAGES RESPONSES BY INDUSTRY
PRE-COVID-19**

Industry	Frequency	Percent	Average	Weighted. Average
Health Care	87	18.0	3.9	.70
Food Service	116	24.3	4.0	.97
Consumer Retail	144	30.1	4.2	1.26
Manufacturing	71	14.9	3.6	.54
Professional Services	61	12.7	4.2	.53
Total	479	100.0		

A comparison of Table 1 and Table 3 shows that the respondent sample of organizations in the Food Service, Consumer Retail, and Manufacturing industries are comparable to the population percentages. Health Care and Professional Services percentages are dissimilar to the population percentages.

TABLE 4
FREQUENCIES, PERCENTAGES, AND AVERAGES RESPONSES BY INDUSTRY
POST-COVID

Industry/Organization	Frequency	Percentage	Average	Weighted Average
Health Care	71	17.8	3.2	.57
Food Service	67	16.5	1.9	.31
Consumer Retail	119	29.9	2.8	.84
Manufacturing	63	15.8	3.5	.55
Professional Services	80	20.0	4.6	.92
Total	399	100.0		

Average responses to questions for Health Care, Food Service, Consumer Retail, and Manufacturing pre- and post-COVID-19 are lower in the post-COVID-19 period. Professional Service post-COVID-19 average responses are higher than in the pre-COVID-19 period. Refer to Tables 3 and 4 for comparisons.

TABLE 5
FACTOR ANALYSIS AND LOADINGS

Question	Loading
1. I am determined to accomplish my work goals and confident I can meet them	.601
2. I frequently feel that I'm putting all my effort into my work.	.590
3. I'm often so wrapped up in my work that hours go by like minutes.	.500
4. I have passion and excitement about my work.	.290
5. While at work, I am almost always completely focused on my work projects	.674
6. In my organization, employees are encouraged to act when they see a problem or opportunity	.542
7. My colleagues quickly adapt to challenging or crisis situations	.644
8. Employees in my organization deal very well with unpredictable or changing work situations	.680
9. The people in my work group are always flexible in expanding the scope of their work.	.443
10. Identify the extent of the work itself	.420
11. Identify the extent of the relationships with co-workers	.578
12. Identify the extent of the relationship with immediate supervisor	.717
13. Identify the extent of the variety of the work	.519
14. Identify the extent of the management's recognition of employee job performance	.638
15. Identify the extent of career development opportunities	.352

SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS

A comparison of Tables 4 and 5 shows an increase in average frequencies from 136.2 in the 5-year prior period to COVID-19 and 176.6 since the COVID-19 pandemic— 2020-2024. The data analysis suggests that there is a difference between the 5-year pre-COVID-19 period (2015-2019) and the post-COVID-19 period (2020-2024). The findings from this study counter research studies cited in the literature

review. One explanation could be that several of the studies focused on a single industry such as the health care industry. Another explanation could be the use of different methodologies.

Future Research

The COVID-19 pandemic created an employment scenario in which organizations changed their business model and product and service delivery methods. It is not clear if this is a temporary situation for employee engagement; only time and future research may reveal any effects on employee engagement. One issue is clear, however—various organizations have experienced a new way of conducting their operations for the future and are not likely to return to pre-COVID-19 practices.

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