

# The Future of Engagement: Thought Piece Collection

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## The future of engagement: Conversational practice

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In this thought piece, Martin argues persuasively that, in line with the notion of transformational employee engagement practices, it is time for the *process* of capturing employees' views to be in itself engaging and interesting. New technologies will enable both this social process and the mining of data collected to produce insight, but at heart it will only be achievable via a focus on good quality 'conversational practice'.

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The evidence to support the achievement of higher levels of employee engagement in organisations has never been more compelling. Although arguments about what engagement 'is' still abound, ranging from something you can sense when entering a room to a highly sophisticated analysis of attitudinal and behavioural constructs, it has moved beyond buzz word status and now commands serious attention in both academia and practice.

An emerging view (HR Zone, 2013; Comms Lab, 2013) is that engagement needs to be characterised as transformational – with organisations spending 90 per cent of their engagement effort 'post-survey' and focusing on building an environment which truly engages people, inspires them to give of their best, and aligns their efforts with the needs of the business. The other ten per cent is attributed to 'transactional' engagement – the often sterile process of capturing survey-based evidence to support the transformational programme of engagement activities.

I would advocate that the whole process should be transformational. Why should not the capture of evidence – often seen as transactional – as well as the subsequent responses to it, truly engage people and exemplify the values of the organisation? This most certainly means moving away from a highly intensive statistics-based approach, strewn with tick-box paper copies to reach those remote, out of the way places. And it means delivering actionable insights fast and very cost-effectively. This is where technology can play a big part, to create a more natural and interactive experience for employees to engage with forging a more engaging culture. So the 'survey' gives everyone a voice, nourishes an engaging management style and brings the company's values to life.

Such an approach entails moving away from a reliance on the (often pseudo-scientific) statistical measurement of 'engagement', to one that views the employment relationship as a dynamic, social and economic exchange between employer and employee. To know that your 'engagement index or score' has risen two points may be interesting but that kind of information is seldom actionable because it fails to identify important components of the *processes* by which performance through people is *produced*. Insights into these *performance recipes* are captured through conversational practices, which depict the 'relationship-in-action'.

Conversational practices enabled by social media can be seen as genuine opportunities for the surfacing of multiple perspectives and logics at the strategic, management and front line levels of an organisation (Reddington, 2012; Francis et al, 2013). The term *practice* draws attention to the dynamic interplay between action and language that tends to be ignored in management research and education.

Pulling these strands together, the organisation can be viewed as a 'conversational arena', shaped by various tensions (such as the quality of work being compromised by time pressures) and job pressure (the sense that a job holder is under constant, excessive pressure). Within this conversational arena, *solutions-focused* conversations can be characterised as primarily concerned with creating ideas for action – the potential to get something done. *Performance-focused* conversations are primarily concerned with getting something done – converting the ideas into actions. In practice, of course, these conversational types are interwoven in nature. By viewing conversational practice as a 'pathway to performance', it creates new ways of defining transformational engagement and turns attention to ways in which conversations can be stimulated, captured and 'measured'.

Returning to my earlier point about making the process of data capture something that truly engages people and exemplifies the values of the organisation, it opens up the perfect opportunity to re-examine existing methodologies and explore opportunities for change. Here, the latest developments in social media technologies provide an array of possibilities, such as the adoption of 'bring your own device' that enables people without access to the company intranet – maybe because they are on the move or in remote locations – to have a simple and effective way to have a voice, by submitting their views via a 'free text' 'app'. Just by creating this opportunity, for people who were previously seen as difficult to reach, can also have a potent symbolic effect, showing that the organisation is prepared to embrace new technologies and is seeking to foster a more involving work climate.

Once captured, the very latest *natural language processing* technologies enable rapid and insightful analysis of this voice, adding richness and value to understanding the employment relationship. This is achieved through the *automated* production of a combined thematic *and* sentiment analysis, which distils the free text into an 'at-a-glance' overview of the main topics within the voice and ranks sentiment (attitudes and feelings) as positive, neutral or negative.

The process of 'acting' on the insights generated through employee voice should be similarly engaging. This means moving away from an often stilted governance regime, involving lots of detailed activities arranged within excel spreadsheets, to one which embraces voice as a prime source of *ideas generation* (solutions) and *action* (performance) and *measurement*. This means re-thinking the way in which employees are able to play a part in shaping and implementing change, and measuring progress through conversational practice – a new type of 'governance'. By sampling voice and applying the latest natural language processing technologies, 'progress' can be measured by comparing thematic and sentiment trends. These will reveal where things are going well and where tensions of various types are impeding progress (the 'solutions-performance gap').

Such approaches, which disrupt and challenge current assumptions and modes of thought, can be construed as *hacking*. In this spirit, the CIPD's partnership with Management Innovation Exchange to create the *Hackathon* is a direct attempt to stimulate this new mind-set, utilising engaged practitioners and an open technology platform. This work is an informing strand in educating HR professionals about challenging existing practices and exploring opportunities for re-thinking and re-directing HR management approaches – a mind-set that will become increasingly important as organisations seek to become more adaptable in the face of increasing competitive pressures and budget challenges.

Alongside this, emerging groups of practitioners from all disciplines in HR are coming together in various guises to take a collective responsibility for furthering the approach to new HR practices. One such is the #ConnectingHR body, who recently held a conference on 'Brave HR'. Brave HR was described as standing out, standing firm and disrupting the HR practice field for the better *in spite of* a lack of support, recognition and/or enablement from other stakeholders. Key behaviours identified with Brave HR include the willingness to experiment with new technologies, showing curiosity and desire to innovate, and directly challenging the 'elephant in the room' – explicitly surfacing tensions that disrupt organisational life and actively shaping solutions to them, rather than passively hiding behind processes that support the status quo.

This apparently divergent cluster of people, activities and approaches is converging on the creation of a new way for HR practitioners to operate, behave and improve. Added to this seemingly chaotic mix is the surge in social technologies and gaming approaches to learning and problem solving.

We also need Continuing Professional Development with a difference – a truly engaging way of providing continuous improvement activities to individual practitioners to ensure they are in line with those latest models, theories and practices and which can be evidenced using the novel approaches outlined.

With more organisations being differentiated **purely** by the attitudes and abilities of their people, engagement has probably never been more critical. Equally, engagement runs the risk of being misused and all the good intent negated through poor, tokenistic or ineffective use of approaches. Yet there remains persuasive evidence (Rayton et al, 2012) that the best performing organisations have the most engaged employees. So there is hope for the future of engagement if it is not overly mechanised and processed and builds on conversations that matter.

## References

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*This paper forms one in a collection of thought pieces by the Engage for Success special interest group on 'The future of employee engagement'. A white paper on the same theme is being published separately. The full collection is available (as will be the white paper) at: [www.engageforsuccess.org/futures](http://www.engageforsuccess.org/futures)*