

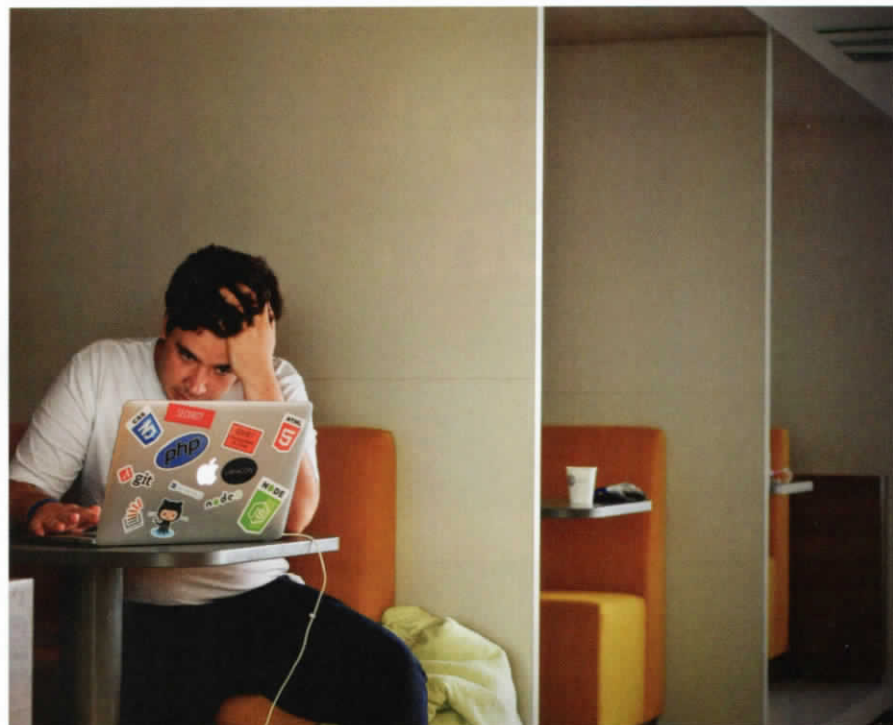
IS ANYONE THERE?

The five signs of employee disengagement, and what to do about them.



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Engagement put simply is the extent to which people feel connected with and committed to their job, team and organisation. Being connected is most clearly reflected in the emotional ownership people feel; in other words how much they really care about achieving their own objectives as well as the success of the team.

The ultimate indication of disengagement is the decisions people make to leave their job. While some people will stay in a role they're not happy in, most will eventually choose to look for a new and better opportunity elsewhere. Of course, some people leave feeling satisfied with their employment experience but the reality is many don't. Inspiring people to build a career rather than simply do a job is an important challenge for the legal firms I work with.

Most people move on because they are looking for something they don't have or can't get where they are.

Whether it be to find a more interesting or challenging job, more money, greater work-life balance, or a healthier workplace culture the reasons people choose to leave are many and varied.

HOW TO SPOT DISENGAGEMENT

The five most common signs of disengaged staff include:

- 1. Absenteeism** – high rates of frequent and unplanned leave. Most people find it much harder to get out of bed and go to work when they are dreading what's waiting for them when they get there.
- 2. Lack of discretionary effort** – what people do because they want to, not because they feel obligated to. Disengaged people typically do only what they have to do to keep their job. Some deliberately limit their contribution in silent protest of their unhappiness.

3. Absence of teamwork – people who are disengaged will often fail to work well with other people. Those who are engaged will often find their disengaged colleagues frustrating and a roadblock to success. The potential for these frustrations to escalate to conflicts is very high.

4. Suboptimal productivity – simply focusing on the task at hand, let alone driving to achieve optimal results, is a challenge for disengaged staff. While they struggle to find energy and focus, their job is not getting done.

5. Poor quality work – errors, overlooked priorities and missed deadlines are just a few examples of the impacts disengagement has on the standard of performance achieved.

COMMON CAUSES OF DISENGAGEMENT IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION

While a legal firm will often have different challenges engaging their staff to a corporate legal department, common to both are two key factors.

Firstly, demanding workloads, long hours and uncompromising deadlines. Maintaining a healthy balance between work and life is challenging. Our clients within the legal profession tell us this especially becomes an issue when the reasonableness of the manager's expectations is questioned in the employee's mind. When people lose trust and run out of energy they typically disengage.

And secondly, leaders often have a heavy individual workload to manage. Typically, this leads to inadequate focus on the essentials of people management – providing clarity, coaching and accountability.

DRIVING ENGAGEMENT

Identifying and accepting the fact that you have a staff engagement issue

is the first step toward overcoming it. Choosing to do something about it is the next. The leaders I work with are typically frustrated by the demands on their time and energy of having to deal with performance issues, however, all too often they fail to act. Overlooking or avoiding obvious signs of disengagement is a common mistake I observe heads of legal teams make.

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It's important to understand that each and every moment someone experiences at work has the potential to influence the strength of his or her engagement. Each person is unique, and to influence their commitment takes understanding what makes them tick. As I share in my latest book *The People Manager's Toolkit*, the most important

thing any leader can do to improve engagement is focus on the spirit of their team.

Our spirit is the positive energy we have in reserve and draw on to get our job done. People who are energised typically choose to behave in ways that enable success. Conversely, when people are drained they become more likely to disengage and behave in ways that undermine not only their own success but also that of their team. Four common influencers of a person's spirit and, therefore, engagement at work include:

- 1. Sense of personal value:** How we feel about ourselves as well as how we believe others feel about us energises or drains our spirit. Feeling valued, qualified, capable and successful are powerful energisers and drivers of engagement. Influence people to feel valued and they are more likely to remain connected with their job and your business.
- 2. Relationships:** The quality of our relationships with our boss, colleagues, staff, clients, service providers etc. influence the way we feel about being at work. When we trust and respect the people we work with we are more likely to be engaged. Contemplate for a moment the people who inspire you to give your all. Equally reflect on those who cause you to minimise your efforts
- 3. Purpose and meaning:** How people feel about what they and their organisation contribute to the world matters. Doing a job that has an altruistic purpose energises many people, while for others purpose and meaning derive from the harmony between their values and those of the organisation they work for. Still other people want to feel a part of something bigger than themselves or to contribute to the organisation's success.
- 4. Belief:** The strength of our belief is reflected in how we feel about the future and our ability to influence that future. Examples of the types of positive emotions we want people to feel include being hopeful, optimistic, confident and empowered.

Make engagement matter, hire and retain people who want to be there, understand your team, deliberately influence the things that energise their spirit and you are well on your way to overcoming most causes of disengagement. On a final note – as a leader there is a lot you can do to influence the engagement of your team, but only so much. Expect people to also take ownership for their own spirit and level of engagement. As the age old saying goes, “You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink”. ■

