Match the Age to Keep them Engaged: Decoding the Secrets of Creating a Happy Workplace

Deepak Malhotra
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The book is a culmination of author’s doctoral research findings from a study on employee engagement among different age groups. The author was able to generalize his findings through observing close to 1,000 sample respondents along with the feedback from 72 leaders and 25 human resource heads of major Indian organizations in service, hospitality, infrastructure, manufacturing, and ITES setups. The unique selling proposition of his work is to understand leadership vis-à-vis engagement, while proposing the ways for deriving productivity through applying different strategies for different age groups.

Knowledge, skill sets, drive for multi-tasking, and ability to pursue challenges, etc. vary across age groups. Therefore, in an organizational setup, it is important to understand and distinguish the social characteristics of different generations, their needs and the way management strategies work out for them (May, Gilson & Harter, 2004). Deepak Malhotra, being a part of many businesses, especially MNCs, has had a ringside view of unfolding of the people challenges in organizations. The title of his work ‘match the age’ to ‘keep them engaged’ aligns with his prescriptions for decoding the secrets of creating a happy and productive workforce irrespective of age group.

The book is divided into 14 chapters with three important sections: the first section provides a brief overview of various concepts and approaches on the journey of matching the age for keeping them engaged, while the rest of the sections focus on beliefs affirmed through author’s research findings and strategies for addressing the needs of different generations. This style of writing is maintained throughout the book with the author’s interesting alternate explanations between the relevant theoretical frameworks and practical insights. Author’s parable of a casting director makes this book a very interesting read for everyone, especially the way he has appropriately drawn the examples from the corporate world and paralleled them with the film industry.

The ability to engage and retain a valuable employee has a very deep impact on an organization’s bottom line (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). Many studies have proved that engaged teams produce better results. The author’s own research with some of the eminent Indian organizations has cited the fact that while around
15 per cent of the employees are fully engaged across the globe, in India, the engagement is merely 9-10 per cent. Further, 60 per cent of the employees across the globe are on the bench as they are partially engaged with the need to ‘keep themselves towards the status of being engaged’. Engagement was found with older employees belonging to senior echelons of management with an annual income of INR 10 lakhs or more. On the other hand, youngsters in lower income levels with a good educational background having less than a year of experience are found to have the lowest levels of engagement. Some of the key indicators cited by the author are quite surprising in the context of Indian organizations – 50 per cent of the Indian organizations do not have a proper retention and engagement plan while the corresponding figure for global organizations is 60 per cent. In majority of instances, the employees were made to feel good in the recruitment stage, but were neglected when on board. The leaders across organizations are found not sparing time to induct or mentor them. Thus the fresh talent starts feeling disengaged and apparently not welcomed to the family. The result is: Three out of every hundred so-called engaged employees start looking for a job in India and what is more shocking is the fact that, it has gone up by three times in the last five years.

Keeping people engaged is a continuous process of entrepreneurial leadership which is a universal procedure that needs to be generated out of sensitivity and thoughtfulness. The definition of engagement prescribed by the author is through continuously creating a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by drive, guarantee, and passion for success. Simply looking at these drives of engagement at workplace, one will note that emoluments and designation or the overall role might affect the verdict to join an organization, whereas the factors such as opportunities for learning and development when connected with engagement will create the ‘magic’ for upholding organizational productivity. Watson Wyatt’s survey (2007) with 946 companies across 22 countries has found that employees, who are highly engaged, are more than twice as likely to be top performers. A study of 50,000 employees, carried out by the Corporate Leadership Council (2004) has confirmed that the most engaged and committed employees perform better than the rest. The author has extended the earlier findings to suggest that more than 80 per cent of the engaged employees plan on working with the organization, compared to about 25 per cent of disengaged employees. In addition, more than 40 per cent of the engaged employees said that they would prefer to stay even if the organization struggled to persist. Further, establishing a link between engagement and performance, the study found that companies with 70 per cent or more of engaged staff showed an overall improvement of close to 20 per cent. On the other hand, the organization with low level of engagement (under 70% of staff disengagement) declined by approximately 35 per cent and incurred loss.

The research has touched the needs of baby boomers (age group of 46 and above), Generation X employees (age group of 31 to 45 years), Generation Y or millenium employees (age groups up to 30 years) and one-click generations (Gen-G of 12-18 years age group). Interestingly, Gen-G are found to be believing in self-learning as they are far more active in social media and closer to technology. Mentoring at an early age, giving them responsibility and autonomy, clarifying their expectations and sharing experiential learnings are some of the best ways to nurture them. Irrespective of age group, in other three generations, it was found that for employees the work itself and its nature and contribution to organizations’ bottom line are always the principal influencer of good performance and the utmost significant driver of retention. However, the core value of the organization and leadership team becomes slightly more important in driving good performance and retention especially in Gen Y and X. Good remuneration and safety of income in the current market, fairness of booty through transparent measurable criteria with timely distribution of the same are important regardless of age. To keep them engaged, the major chunk of the sample, that is Generation Y, has mentioned that if their needs are individually taken care of, they would rarely think of leaving the organization. On the other hand, baby boomers stated their needs as assuming larger or meaty roles and timely professional evaluation of progress.

The author has impressed on the fact that we can compete with the world, as we are going to have one of the youngest workforce. The responsibility is on us to provide them with the correct learning opportunities and groom them for a better future. Interestingly, the research findings have found that generation Y wants
to contribute to make the world a better place. They expect their professional mentors to demonstrate all the characteristics of an exceptionally good school teacher. The most important factor for them is timely feedback and a continuous pat on their back. Generation X needs to believe in the overall mission of the leadership team and that of the organization. They have a lot of self-pride, ego and recognition needs. They believe in a blended culture, freedom, and adaptability; their flexibility seems to be quite close to generation Y when it comes to usage of technology. Measurable and timely booties and empowerment are found to motivate them.

It is evident that engagement needs differ from one generation to another. Engagement begins with satisfaction but outgrows it. Long-term engagement starts with good communication with leader and employees as well as among co-workers, fostering a positive operational atmosphere. Engagement is directly dependent upon the value system of the organization. Enhancing employee engagement requires leaders to make a long-term commitment. The quick-fix approach in this regard is rarely sufficient or sustainable whereas a perpetual fire-fighting would lead to employee disengagement. This book is written for all entrepreneurial leaders, business and people managers, and academicians who would handle the coming generations. The author has explained the concept of disengagement of employees due to protruding generation gaps, and the systems proposed are some of the valiant ways to bridge those gaps that would undoubtedly facilitate any organization to nurture better employee interrelationships. The setup of the book with informative notes, and facts from real life are spread throughout which makes it for a more interesting read and gives ample time to absorb the information. The conversational style of writing is quite rare among Indian authors and this book has been attempted without jargons making it overall a good read. Finally, for those seeking more satisfaction from work, the book could be a good partner.

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Lalatendu Kesari Jena
Doctoral Scholar
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kharagpur, India
e-mail: lkjena@iitkgp.ac.in