

Engaged employees are good, but don't count on commitment

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The notion that highly engaged workers will continue to work tirelessly for organizations despite diminishing resources often isn't true, according to Clemson University psychology professor Thomas Britt.

Britt, an industrial-organizational psychology professor, outlines his research in "Amplifying the Relationships Between Organizational Constraints and Outcomes," currently under review at the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*; as well as in prior work published in 2003 in the *Harvard Business Review* and in the 2007 book chapter "Self-Engagement at Work."

According to Britt, there is a difference between an engaged worker, meaning one who invests himself or herself in superior job performance, and organizational commitment, a worker's psychological attachment to his or her organization or employer. Britt's research found that an engaged employee isn't necessarily committed to the organization.

"When the economy is experiencing a general downturn, it may be unlikely that engaged [employees](#) low in organizational commitment can find another position. But if they do have the opportunity to change jobs they will," he said. "Managers who fail to position employees to be effective in their roles and provide organizational support may lose their most talented and energetic people.

"The ones who stay behind may well be the ones who just don't care," said Britt.

Engaged workers are highly attuned to aspects of their work environment that either will facilitate or thwart job performance, said Britt. If the workers are not getting the resources they feel they need to perform at their best, their engagement may be diminished.

"Engaged workers are more likely to place importance on being able to perform well because their performance matters to them ahead of corporate loyalty," Britt said.

Britt said barriers to engaged workers' peak performance may include lack of budget and equipment support, access to important information, work overload, unclear objectives and goals and assigning employees tasks that don't fit their training.

Britt's research finds that employees are more engaged when their leaders provide clear guidelines for job performance, which gives the employees a greater feeling of clarity and control over what they were supposed to do.

According to Britt, the benefits of employee engagement can be squandered if leaders do not position employees in roles that match their skills and provide the workplace supports they need to carry out their responsibilities.

Another limit is work overload, which can lead to lower levels of morale and job satisfaction. In other words, the workers who care most about their work feel they are not performing to their full capability because they have so much to do that they cannot do anything well, Britt said.

One obvious consequence of this is burnout. Highly motivated employees are willing to go beyond the call of duty to help the organization, but when temporary overload continues and they continuously fail to meet their own high expectations, their motivation

becomes directed at locating other job possibilities.

These are critical times for managers, said Britt, citing the [economy](#) and organizations' efforts to trim costs. Managers need to balance the pressure from their bosses to do more with less against motivating and keeping their employees engaged in their work and in the organization. This becomes more important when work forces are reduced and employees are asked to increase their work output, especially work that reaches beyond the scope of their jobs and their capabilities.

Britt's research shows engaged employees are likely to become frustrated and dissatisfied and may blame their supervisors if they do not have the systems and support necessary to be effective. Given the higher proactivity and energy levels of engaged employees, this frustration could lead to turnover as they begin to look for more supportive [work](#) environments.

Source: Clemson University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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