

# Breaking off the engagement: Study shows that even loyal employees become jaded if not treated well

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All businesses want "engaged" employees -- those who are committed to the success of the company and are willing to go the extra mile to see it flourish. But there's a dark side to engagement that many organizations don't consider: Engaged employees can quickly become disengaged if they feel taken advantage of — and a formerly engaged employee can do more harm to the company than one who was never engaged to begin with.

That's a key finding in a new study conducted by Wayne Hochwarter, the Jim Moran Professor of Business Administration in the Florida State University College of Business. Hochwarter surveyed 1,000 people, in both blue- and white-collar occupations, to gain a clearer picture of the concept of employee engagement, its benefits for the employer, and its possible dangers when not managed well.

"Engaged [employees](#) work harder, are more creative and more committed, and they represent an important predictor of company productivity," he said. "Unquestionably, organizations with engaged workers have weathered recessionary pressures more successfully.

"However, those same organizations have to be sensitive to the fact that even model employees can 'give up' if they sense that they're being asked to do more and more, and with fewer resources, while comparatively little is being asked of their less-engaged colleagues."

In his study, Hochwarter found that engaged employees reported:

- a 50 percent higher rate of job satisfaction;
- a 45 percent higher rate of job performance;
- a 40 percent higher rate of life satisfaction;
- a 33 percent lower rate of turnover intention; and
- a 30 percent higher rate of commitment to their employer.

The tricky part comes in keeping those employees engaged.

Hochwarter's findings clearly illustrate that engaged workers, without needed company support and other resources, can begin to exhibit a number of undesirable attitudes and behaviors.

"Engagement often means taking on more tasks than one's less engaged coworkers, but with the expectation that the company will provide more of what is needed to assist along the way," he said. Without those additional resources, engaged employees began to display the following negative attributes:

- a decline in helping behavior (50 percent lower);
- increased anger at supervisors (35 percent higher);
- a view that expectations are beyond one's capabilities (33 percent higher);
- additional stress (30 percent higher); and
- lower overall productivity (25 percent lower).

Put another way: Engaged employees can easily become disengaged if not managed properly.

Hochwarter cited the example of one study participant who falls into that category. The 32-year-old financial consultant wrote, "I really did my

best, worked long hours, contributed something every day . . . but the more I did, the more resources they took from me and gave to other employees."

The difficult economic realities of the past few years have influenced engagement in both good and bad ways, said Hochwarter, whose field of expertise is organizational behavior, particularly with regard to employer-employee dynamics. Business leaders are learning more about generating employee engagement, he added; however, little is known about how it should be maintained and cultivated. Helping to fill that knowledge gap was the reason Hochwarter conducted his study.

Hochwarter offered several points for organizations to consider as they work to engage employees and keep them engaged.

"First, understand that getting employees engaged isn't like flipping a switch," he said. "Often, it takes a while for engagement to kick in, but it can be lost in only one incident. Second, realize that once-engaged employees who are now disengaged can cause more harm to a company than those who were never engaged.

"Third, getting employees engaged is like planting a tree: If you walk away from it, it's unlikely to grow. And finally, many leaders feel that managing engaged workers is easier than managing those who are not engaged. This is simply not the reality in most companies."

Provided by Florida State University

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