

## Employee Engagement: Can Do or Will Do?

By Lewis Hollweg, Ph.D.

### The Buzz

The research evidence is starting to pour in from consulting firms, companies, and academia: “Increases in employee engagement increase profitability through more employee retention, productivity, and customer satisfaction.” Long heralded by the service/profit chain philosophy, employee satisfaction, commitment, and motivation are proving to comprise a competitive edge for sustainable corporate profit in today’s global economy. The buzz at business and professional conferences is escalating and many companies are already very involved in designing and implementing engagement initiatives that they believe will lead to greater profits. Employee surveys, (measurement and diagnostic questionnaires) are being re-built to include the broader concepts of engagement and a debate is accelerating around what exactly defines “engagement” for employees. An enormous amount of time and money is being spent by companies to tap what they consider to be the newest potential reservoir of profit drivers. However, a more fundamental question exists – do you have an engageable workforce? Or, more to the point, is your workforce capable of responding to your engagement initiatives?

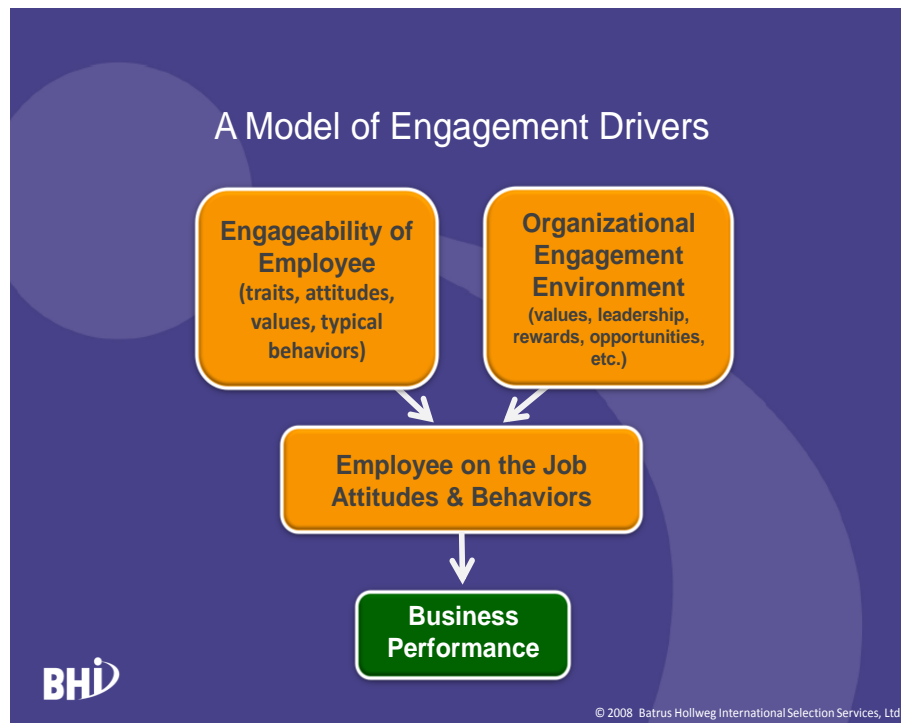
### Warning

BHI’s experience and research show that many companies are assuming that all (or most) of their employees have the potential to be engaged in their work. None of the conferences or engagement studies (that we are aware of) have dealt with the issue of engagement as a fundamental capacity of the individual and not solely related to how the employee is treated or managed once they become an employee. I am not suggesting that the corporate culture, leadership, and management practices are not extremely important, but I do believe that there are clear differences in individuals’ capacity to respond to corporate engagement efforts. Just as each of us has a physical or intellectual limit no matter what the motivation or reward, all of us have limits on our capacity to respond to the work environment. In other words, the “can do” is just as important as the “will do.” The separation of the capacity from the motivation is an important component of maximizing the ROI on any new investment in organizational engagement initiatives that use significant resources. We will have little or no return from engagement activities for those that lack either the fundamental capacity to do the assigned job or the capacity to become more passionate and committed to our work.

## Drivers of Engagement

Figure 1 shows the two major factors involved in determining the job attitudes and behaviors of your employees. On the left is the individual with all their accumulated traits, behaviors, values, and expectations that they bring into your company – aspects that we know contribute to the engageability of the employee. On the right is the organization with its unique culture, environment, values, leadership, and policies. This is what the employee experiences when he/she enters your workforce – conditions that can foster an engaged work environment. Both of the factors influence job performance and, ultimately, the performance of the business.

Figure 1



## A Closer Look at the Employee

The start of employee engageability begins with the family of origin. Our genetic and biological heredity drives significant behavioral predispositions. Research psychologists have long proven the evidence of these propensities. Most of us are aware of our traits that are sometimes uncomfortably close to some of our relatives or aware that we have exhibited certain behaviors since birth or at least from a very early age. A short list of some of the genetically influenced core traits are:

- ❖ Extraversion
- ❖ Self-esteem
- ❖ Locus of Control
- ❖ Optimism
- ❖ Aptitudes
- ❖ Physical Skills and Attributes

Clearly, not all of the characteristics we bring into our jobs are determined by our DNA. Our life experiences also have a profound impact on who we are and how we deal with the world. Early life experiences can have a lasting impact on us, but every year of life brings new changes and influences that affect our behaviors and outlook. In general, the magnitude of the later life experiences is probably less than early influences but even as we grow older, our environment can have a significant impact. Some of the attitudes and behaviors driven by early and later life experiences are:

- ❖ Honesty: Right and Wrong
- ❖ Justice
- ❖ Fairness
- ❖ Meaning of Money
- ❖ Definition of Love

Figure 2

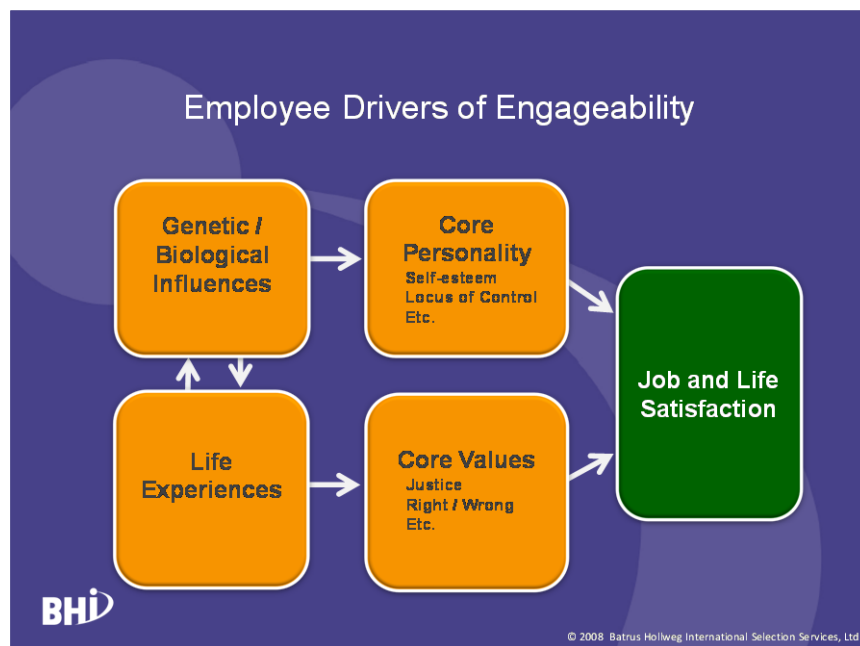


Figure 2 describes the combination of these two powerful factors that create the traits and attitudes that are carried by each employee when they arrive at your workplace. One of these fundamental traits is the propensity for job satisfaction, commitment, and involvement. If we think about it, all of us interview candidates for many of these attributes: enthusiasm, energy, conscientiousness, etc. ***Job engagement is consistently predictable from the measurement of these traits.*** We know that the greater the potential engageability of the employee, the more impact we can have with our engagement initiatives.

## A Few Research Examples

While I hesitate to detail research findings, a few examples may prove helpful. These examples may reduce the skepticism concerning the prediction of an employee's engageability or identification of an employee's capacity to be fully engaged in his/her responsibilities. Staw (1986) published a 40+ year longitudinal study that showed a significant linkage between the measured traits of teenagers and their job satisfaction rating when they were in their 50's. This study had a unique approach and had the power of predicting job attitudes over 40 years later.

Arvey (1994) studied a group of identical twins that were separated near birth and raised in very different family environments. He measured their job satisfaction as adults and persuasively estimated that 31% of their job satisfaction was caused by their genetic predispositions. Hulin and Judge (2003) published a summary of a large body of research showing the influence of the employees' personality traits on job attitudes and success. Many of the outcome measures were related to job satisfaction, commitment, and turnover, in addition to other performance measures.

From a different angle, almost all employee engagement surveys show the entry-level employee having the lowest engagement scores with these scores increasing at every level until the highest score is reached for the senior leaders. This result has been explained by arguing that engagement scores increase since pay, job opportunity, complexity, task significance, etc., increase as you move up the organization. Of course, executives are more engaged, they say, because they have better rewards. However, there is a much simpler and more convincing reason for these increasing levels of engagement: intelligence, conscientiousness, optimism, stability, and internal locus of control all increase as you move up the organization. Research on the magnitude of a person's capabilities before they get the job has been completed thousands of times and shows the same result. Executives arrive at the new job with strong problem-solving capabilities, energy, dedicated work habits, and a positive attitude, etc., and these have a profound impact on their level of engagement.

## Predicting the Highly Disengaged: The Dark Side

It is also important to address the issue of the most negative side of the engagement problem; the actively disengaged or the counter-productive employee. At the service level, the concern is about behaviors such as cash theft, substance abuse, verbal and physical abuse of others, and policy violations. At the other end of the organization, the concern is about position and power abuse, insider dealing, and multiple types of internal and external lying. There is a good deal of research at the entry level that can help predict this counter-productive behavior before hiring but little for upper level executives.

Our own research shows that a minority of employees commit a majority of the counter-productivity crimes. Additionally, many of these individuals can be identified and given a probability estimate of their propensity to engage in these criminal acts. At the manager and executive level, there are on-going research projects; conclusions are elusive at this point so we will have to wait for future results before we can make definitive statements. We can say that, at any level, employees arrive at the job with these predispositions for extreme disengagement and it is critical that the organization have a selection process that minimizes their employment at the company.

## Why do Organizations Emphasize Engagement “Will Do” and Minimize “Can Do?”

My observation is that there is a bias toward believing that everybody has the same potential for passion and commitment in their job, especially from HR professionals. If it is suggested otherwise, there can be a strong negative reaction that borders on political correctness: “Why would you question this core assumption about human potential?”

The result of this assumption is that there is an increased burden on the company to provide a great place to work that taps this potential more so than making sure that engageable employees are hired. I am not suggesting that companies should not do all they can to maximize employee motivation; however, all employees are not created equal in their ability to respond. Consequently, it is critical to hire not only the most capable employees available but also hire those that have the highest probability of being or becoming engaged in their work. Balancing the “can do” with the “will do” increases productivity and decreases the burden on management.

## Why the Emphasis on “Will Do?”

I believe that the long tail of the 1960’s human potential movement is still a powerful force in shaping our view of human nature and social responsibility. The elevation of individual rights and the rebellion against discrimination resulted in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and in Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society social programs. From a philosophy perspective, there was a surge of commitment to the belief that “the extraordinary potential in all humans is untapped” and to Maslow’s Theory of Self-actualization. Both of these fundamental concepts are deeply embedded in our educational and political systems. The consequences of this transition were extraordinary social change and the start of the leveling of opportunity for all Americans.

However, with every powerful positive change there are also some unintended consequences. Political correctness and entitlement attitudes have increased over the years along with a strong, negative reaction to any kind of labeling or categorization of people. This reaction to judging and labeling has been embraced by American universities where grade inflation has been rampant over the last several decades. The average student’s GPA has risen from 2.5 to 3.5 (middle C to middle B) without any indication that our student body is more educated or significantly more studious or capable.

A recently published world study struck me as highly ironic when it reported that U.S. students scored as one of the lowest of industrialized nations in math, science, and verbal skills, but the highest in self-confidence about their capabilities. Does this reflect an attitude of rewarding self-esteem over competence?

With such a strong, lasting influence, the human potential movement may have inadvertently created a climate where the responsibility of motivation and achievement is being shifted from the individual to external sources. Those of us who are focused on influencing employee productivity must be wary of placing more faith in training and engagement than in rigorous “best fit” hiring processes. Then, after hiring the employee with the most potential for the job, it is the organization’s responsibility to engage and develop these employees to their maximum potential. Great rewards will accrue to those organizations that can accomplish both of these critical goals.

## Let's Simplify

Figure 3

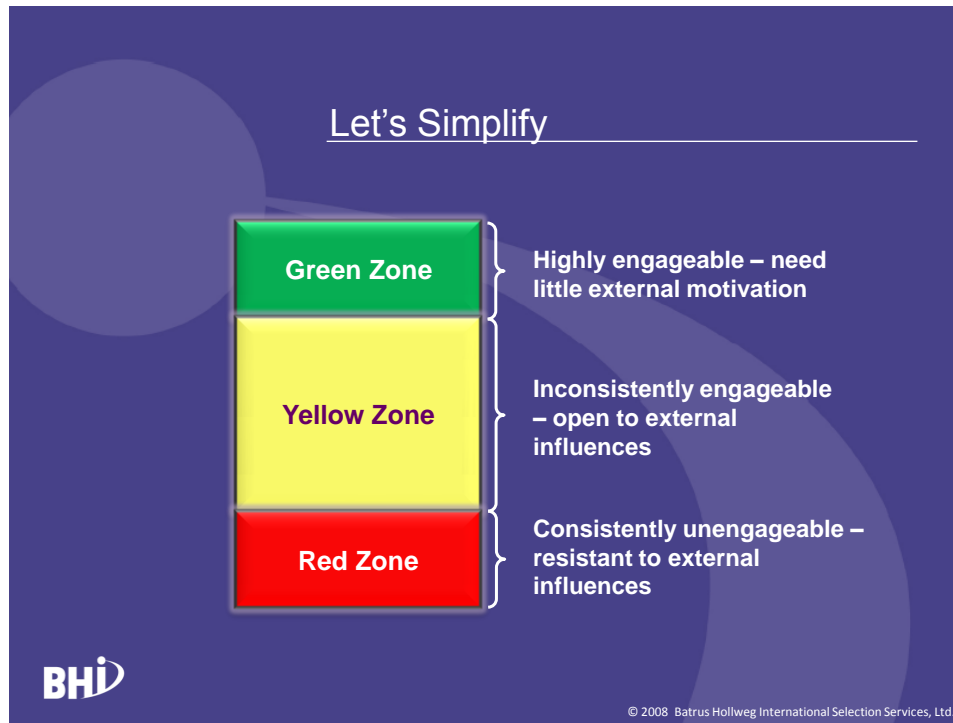


Figure 3 shows a straightforward separation of potential employees into three groups; Green zone, yellow zone, and red zone. Our research indicates that there is a group of applicants (green zone) that are conscientious, energetic, enthusiastic, and motivated in almost everything they do. These individuals arrive at the job with these characteristics and require relatively little engagement from the employer. These are the employees all of us want on our team. Those in the yellow zone group are typically inconsistent in their motivation and commitment and have variable productivity. However, many are open to influence and the team culture. Leadership and reward systems can effectively impact their performance positively or negatively. Those falling into the red zone are the ones that all of us, as employers, want to avoid.

They can be actively disengaged and at the worst, become highly counter-productive by committing productivity crimes against their co-workers and the organization. The actual distribution across each of these three levels depends on your industry, the job level, and each organization's ability to attract talent.



## Insight Articles

---

Of course, the three types of employees already exist in your organization and one of the important tasks of leadership is to identify and then reward and prune the organization effectively to maximize both the talent level and engagement of your workforce.

### Identifying Engageable Employees

BHI is currently planning an extensive research project to directly tie predictive measures of engageability to organizational outcomes of engagement and productivity. A group of personality and attitudinal scales have been identified and we are soliciting clients and non-clients to participate in this broad-based study to determine the impact of these personality attributes on the job performance categories of enthusiasm, commitment, and initiative (engagement). Please contact Scott McTague, Sr. Vice President of Talent Solutions or Bret Henley, Director of Business Development, if you are interested in learning more about this research.

T. Scott McTague  
T: 469-241-9701 Fx: 469-241-9837  
[smctague@batrushollweg.com](mailto:smctague@batrushollweg.com)

Bret Henley  
T: 469-241-9701 Fx: 469-241-9837  
[bhenley@batrushollweg.com](mailto:bhenley@batrushollweg.com)