

OPINION

The hook factor – why do professionals go to work?

By Pia Lee

Everyone needs a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Making money, creating shareholder return, or general commercial success – is a given in any business, but people really want more. So what is beyond quarterly targets that can become a deeper reason for arriving at work with a spring in your step?

Walt Disney has a history of positive culture and high employee engagement – its corporate 'purpose' is to make people happy. KPMG Australia's is to turn knowledge into value for the benefit of their clients, people and the capital markets.

This is called the 'hook factor'.

A recent analysis by global HR consultants Hewitt Associates shows that employee engagement and morale in the workplace are in a significant trough post the GFC. Their research indicates 46 percent of the global organisations polled experienced a decline in employee engagement levels in the quarter ending June 2010, whilst only 30 percent saw an improvement. As an employee's willingness to work has long been linked to commercial success, this is a problem.

The employees may be giving enough to the organisation to stay in a job, but no more. They exist 'under the radar'. This 'presenteeism' is perhaps the most pernicious as it is invisible and, worse, those feeling it don't leave!

Leaders in stretched businesses often believe that salvation from challenging times is best achieved by working their people harder. It's a Victorian work ethic clearly outdated for today's much more complex environment.

The other myth is that only salary drives performance and productivity.

It's a courageous professional services firm, therefore, that asks not just what are they trying to achieve but 'why'?

It's also a wise firm that creates the right climate for a motivated employee. This rich combination provides meaning for individuals beyond making money which, in turn, 'unlocks' discretionary effort.

So how can professional service firms create this 'hook factor' and keep their staff motivated, inspired and engaged at work'?

First this is *not* a marketing opportunity. A firm's ability to inspire and keep their staff motivated and interested is powerful, and goes a long way in enhancing their reputation.

A simple exercise for any managing partner is to divide your top team into two or three groups and tell them that the firm is to be closed down. They have one minute to explain to the Australian Securities and Investment Commission why they should be allowed to stay in business. Capture the key ideas and craft a simple statement that embodies them.

Now comes the hard part – the leaders should use this in all their communications and decision-making.

This focus on getting employees hooked on their work life is growing, not diminishing in importance. Generation Y and their successors, for example, will not put up with a toxic workplace. They expect more. They want to work in organisations that have a clear sense of why they exist and will choose them because they are aligned with a culture that cares for them and provides great careers, or because of that firm's commitment to a sustainable future.

It is in these conditions that people give not just the most, they also give their best. This is good not just for the employee but for all partners in a firm as it gives them an opportunity to leave a greater legacy.

After all, they have a moral obligation to provide jobs where people can thrive.

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