



EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT THROUGH THE CRISIS

ZOOM INTERACTIVE EVENT

On 13th May 2020, CRF members gathered for **Employee Engagement Through the Crisis**, a Zoom Interactive Peer Exchange. CRF Research Director **Gillian Pillans** led a conversation with **Jamie Cunningham**, Senior People Science Consultant at Glint, **Sean Mills**, Director at ENGAGE, **Victoria Talbot**, Head of Brand and Engagement and **Louise Harrison**, Director HR Centre of Expertise at Direct Line Group, and **Andy Moat**, People Director at B&Q on how to keep employees motivated and engaged in the face of both the personal and business uncertainty engendered by the Covid-19 crisis.

As the pandemic progresses, we are seeing a shift from an immediate emergency response focused on employee wellbeing, towards a focus on maintaining business performance in the medium-term and looking for opportunities for growth and renewal in the longer term. An organisation's strategy for employee engagement will have to adapt as the needs of the business evolve and the picture becomes clearer as we emerge from the crisis. Themes covered in the session included:

- How have organisations' engagement strategies changed in the short-term in response to Covid-19?
- What strategies can organisations adopt to maintain employee engagement among virtual teams?
- What should companies be doing now to prepare for life after the crisis?

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CORPORATE RESEARCH FORUM

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Employee engagement scores have generally been good during the crisis for many organisations, but there are some risk factors. Burnout is increasing, as are concerns about workload and prioritisation. As the crisis evolves, a sense of belonging and pride are emerging as key drivers of employee engagement.

During the crisis, time frames for employee feedback have become much shorter – employee sentiment can change quickly and decisions need to be made at pace. So, getting data from a wider range of stakeholders into the hands of senior leaders quickly, is crucial. Frequent surveying allows quick and relevant responses to emerging issues.

The crisis has shown the huge importance of strong leadership. So, it is important to make leaders visible – or even more visible – through virtual catchups, forums, and so on, in order to drive employee engagement. Leaders who are willing to try, to learn, to be humble and to do things differently are having the biggest impact on engagement.

The business impact of engagement actions depends on the organisation's context. For example, did you have to furlough, or were you able to guarantee jobs and salaries? For those organisations that already had a robust engagement strategy, the crisis has allowed them to build on and accelerate previous engagement efforts. In these cases, it has been a unifying and bonding experience, driving business continuity, keeping people motivated, and identifying hotspots as they emerge so the organisation can respond to them.

People's main concerns in returning to work depend on where they work and what they are doing. For example, Londoners are much more concerned about commuting than non-Londoners. There are also concerns about social distancing, as this will be very difficult for some workplaces. Vulnerable populations and carers have special concerns. It's important to maintain dialogue around each employee's concerns about returning, and not to rush or force people back to work.



1 THINKING ABOUT THE DRIVERS OF ENGAGEMENT MORE BROADLY, PEOPLE WANT THE SAME THINGS – THEY JUST WANT AND NEED MORE OF THEM IN TIMES OF CRISIS. THESE THINGS INCLUDE GOOD LEADERSHIP, QUALITY COMMUNICATIONS, AND THE RESOURCES THAT WILL ENABLE THEM TO DO THEIR JOBS, ESPECIALLY IN THE EARLY STAGES OF A CRISIS.



2 Employees understand that leaders don't have all the answers during this crisis. But those organisations and leaders that accept people want a voice and take actions to allow that are seeing the biggest impact on employee engagement. What sort of actions? Continuous conversations, practical support around working environments, and flexibility around how, when, and what work is delivered.



3 It is critical to take time to understand people's unique situations and show that you care. One positive of the crisis is that there has been much more connecting between colleagues, and at a deeper level. In general, having as few rules as possible, and as much flexibility, understanding, and support as possible will help keep employees happy, motivated, and engaged.



4 THERE ARE TWO IMPORTANT LESSONS FOR HR IN THIS CRISIS. ONE IS TO ASK PEOPLE HOW THEY FEEL ABOUT THINGS, AND THE OTHER IS TO SEGMENT THOSE RESPONSES TO GET A VIEW OF DIFFERENT EMPLOYEE POPULATIONS, AND THEIR NEEDS. THIS WILL ALLOW HR TO ASK WHO COULD, SHOULD, AND WOULD GO BACK TO WORK?



5 Remember that front-line leadership is very important. It is imperative to get survey data and insights to local managers so they can have meaningful conversations with their teams.



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AUDIENCE Q&A

Q How are you managing employees who are reticent to return to work once you bring them off furlough?

A People have anxiety and uncertainty. Some managers are inviting colleagues in, showing them the new, adjusted environment before they have to return. Not forcing people to return, instead managing things on a case-by-case basis where possible, can help. It's also important to maintain open dialogue with people about their feelings and the rationale for decisions the business is making.

Q What practices have organisations introduced during lockdown that they intend to retain in the 'new normal'?

A Many organisations are trying to continue open dialogue, and use that to co-create the future. Individual dialogue and feedback are going to become more important in the more flexible future.

Q How are organisations capturing the lessons learned about engagement during the crisis?

A Many organisations are encouraging people to reflect on what they've experienced and what they want to take forward, for example by asking them to 'write a letter to yourself'.

Q What has the crisis done for HR's voice in the organisation?

A The crisis has escalated HR's voice in the organisation, as there is so much focus on keeping employees engaged, and so the function's opportunities to help drive business strategy have increased.

Q What are some of the positives that have come out of the crisis, from an engagement perspective?

A One of the main positives is that we are seeing a real humanising of the workplace. The crisis has helped people get to know each other more deeply and has allowed us to display more vulnerability. There is much more room to bring one's whole self to work.

Q What are some of the potential pitfalls around engagement that organisations should be aware of as we return to a 'new normal'?

A Some pitfalls organisations should be aware of as they look to maintain employee commitment and engagement over the coming months include treating everyone the same (instead, segment and understand different employee groups), forgetting the lessons of agility, and forgetting the lessons of remote working and enabling better work/life balance.

AUDIENCE PRACTICES

What one action around engagement has had the biggest impact in your organisation through the crisis?

- Weekly podcasts from our CEO
- Transparent, honest, regular communication via a range of channels, local and global
- Weekly CEO Blog
- Openness and being flexible with individual situations
- Supporting line managers in virtual leadership, how to connect and keep in touch with their teams and how to understand the feelings in this situation
- Leaders stepping up with their commitments and accessibility to reassure people our aim is that no one loses their job as a result of the crisis, and directly speaking to a large number of people on calls, Yammer, video updates, etc.
- Wellbeing surveys
- A daily communication from our CEO
- Daily coffee meetings of 15 minutes with all employees per country
- Clear 'People first' messaging from our CEO, supported by weekly Q&A sessions from country leadership, and a roll out of flexible working practices for our global workforce
- Our quick and early response in dealing with the pandemic and how it was/is communicated
- Leveraging a wide range of tools such as Yammer, closed Facebook groups, Teams pages and weekly 'check in' calls with Line Managers.



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SPEAKERS



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JAMIE CUNNINGHAM is a Senior People Science Consultant at Glint (part of LinkedIn) where he advises clients on the design and implementation of solutions that drive people success and connect to critical business outcomes. Before Glint, Jamie worked at Tesco Group, Glassdoor, SNP Leadership Communications and LinkedIn. Jamie holds a Master's in Business Economics and a Degree in Finance.



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SEAN MILLS is a highly experienced specialist in leadership assessment and development, and employee engagement. He has a strong commercial background, a passion for developing people, and a track record of driving results at all levels. He joined ENGAGE from IPSOS Mori where he headed up their UK Employee Engagement business. He holds a BSc in Business Studies and Diplomas in Marketing and Market Research, and is a member of the MRS, the IDM and the CIM.



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GILLIAN PILLANS has worked as a senior HR practitioner and OD specialist for several organisations including Swiss Re, Vodafone and BAA. Prior to her HR career, she was a management consultant with Deloitte Consulting and is also a qualified solicitor. Gillian has written various CRF reports on subjects including HR strategy, organisation design and development, leadership development, coaching and diversity.

FURTHER READING

Black, Justin. 2020. **How to Connect with Employees in Times of Distress**. Glint. <https://www.glintinc.com/blog/how-to-connect-with-employees-in-times-of-distress/>

Black, Justin. 2020. **7 Tips for Taking a People-Centric Approach to Communicating with Your Employees in Times of Distress**. Glint. <https://www.glintinc.com/blog/7-tips-for-taking-a-people-centric-approach-to-communicating-with-your-employees-in-times-of-distress/>

CRF. 2016. **Employee Engagement: Current Practices and Practicalities**. Research Report. <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/employee-engagement-current-practices-practicalities/>

ENGAGE will be sharing more details of follow up information around the YouGov research in the coming weeks <https://www.engagegroup.co.uk/>

ENGAGE. 2020. **Adapting Employee Engagement in a Crisis**. <https://www.engagegroup.co.uk/adapting-employee-engagement-in-a-crisis/>

ENGAGE. 2020. **Adapting Employee Feedback: Proactive Approaches in Times of Crisis**. https://www.engagegroup.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ENGAGE_EmployeePulse_Overview.pdf

ENGAGE. 2020. **Leading Virtually – Practical Steps for Times of Crisis**. <https://www.engagegroup.co.uk/leading-virtually-practical-steps-for-times-of-crisis/>

Glint. 2020. **How to Survey Employees During Covid-19 and What to Ask**. White Paper. <https://www.glintinc.com/resource/how-to-survey-during-covid-19/?status=279414>

People Success Forum. **Navigating Challenges Times Together**. <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/13841513/>

crf UPCOMING CRF EVENTS

ONLINE:
The Geopolitical Outlook – How Is It Changing?
19th May 12.00PM BST

ONLINE:
Let's Get (Beyond) Physical: Crafting a Multidimensional Approach To Employee Wellbeing
27th May 11.30AM BST