Why Technology Isn't Making Employees More Engaged

By **Nancy Sansom**

Prepare yourself. You will not hear this often from someone who works at an HR software company: Technology does not make employees more engaged.

It is well-accepted that engaged employees fuel productivity and drive a company's growth and profitability. While engagement can have a negative side, as recently pointed out in a Harvard Business Review article, "The Dark Side of High Employee Engagement," it is something that most companies strive for. Indeed, it has become the Holy Grail for many HR professionals, who spend countless hours concocting programs and initiatives to engage their employees. In this quest, technology invariably enters the picture as a quick and efficient way to boost engagement numbers. As a result, an entire industry has sprung up to supply companies with new gadgets, gizmos, software and systems promising to crack the engagement code.

However, technology can only take you so far. Engagement is dependent on a very complex set of factors, which include an employee's working relationships with peers and managers, career support, connection with the company's culture and mission, pay and benefits, development opportunities and so on. It doesn't magically appear by implementing the latest and greatest technology tools. Rather the role of these tools is to help create an environment that today's employees expect, which then allows true engagement to occur.

Technology is an enabler, not a driver of employee engagement

Granted, technology can help do a lot for employee engagement. It can help companies hire the right employees, facilitate communication, encourage collaboration, provide a mechanism for feedback, promote wellbeing and a number of other good things. Note that the key word here is "help." The technology is not doing these activities but rather enabling HR professionals. Technology does not create a program for employees to collaborate with one another; a person creates the program and uses technology as one of the ways to bring it to life. Technology does not know the culture of the company in which it is implemented. People know the culture and they will know how, for example, to design a wellness activity that fits with the demographics, culture and interests of their employees, and then put technology in place to track and monitor progress.

A quick example: I love Google Docs. Google has solved the document collaboration problem. Gone are the days when an email circulates with a document and different people create different versions. It has changed how I collaborate with my team, but am I more engaged because I use it? Not really. I am engaged because I find it fulfilling to work together with a group of like-minded colleagues toward a common goal. Google Docs makes it easier for me to do that, so it deserves some credit, but honestly, it's not the reason I love what I do.

Don't get me wrong; it's not that employees don't need or want technology. They do. It is an integral part of their lives and an integral part of their jobs. But it can't be forced upon them in a way that doesn't fit with their natural workflow or works counter to how they already use technology. So, the trick is to use technology wisely.

Here are a few things to keep in mind:

What works at home doesn't always work in the office. When Facebook began to assert its dominance in the world of online social networking, there was a mad rush to duplicate it in a company setting. Companies invested heavily to create corporate social networks, yet research shows that employees regularly use less than half of the enterprise collaboration tools available. Why? Most reasons you hear for failing corporate social networks include lack of executive support, integration issues, data security and poor usability.

All valid reasons, but I believe that the main reason they are failing is that they are a solution looking for a problem. The need is simply not there. Employees need to collaborate, yes, but the need to share aspects of their work life with colleagues in the same way they share aspects of their private life with friends on Facebook does not exist. There is no incentive to do so. You don't get a raise for posting an awesome pie chart, but when your video of a grumpy cat getting a bath with a parakeet goes viral, you get a rush. A corporate social network will never be as addictive as Facebook, Twitter or Snapchat, so uptake in corporate settings will never reach the same levels as those networks.

That said, I am not proposing we drop corporate social networks. There is a segment of most employee populations that actively participate in a network and they should be encouraged to keep at it. I'd wager that those employees are pretty darn engaged with their work already, so HR teams would be wise to harness some of their energy and try to spread it throughout the company.

Get buy-in from senior management. Interactions outside of work are different from interactions at work. When a friend recommends a restaurant, you are more likely to try it too. But there is a different dynamic at work. It's much more hierarchical. A recommendation from someone in upper management carries a lot more weight than someone at your same level. And this works for technology as much as it does for restaurant recommendations. If the CEO is the first one to sign up for a wellness challenge using a wearable fitness tracker, then chances are employees are going to start signing up too.

In some cases this directly affects the bottom line. A Society for Human Resource Management study found that about two-thirds (66%) of organizations with strong leadership support of employee health management programs reported improvements in health risks, compared to 26% of those with little or no support. These organizations were 10 times as likely to report that the program had a substantial positive impact on their medical cost trend. That's great news and gives credence to the old adage that managers should model the behaviors they want to see. So when designing any engagement program, start at the top.

Make it mobile. When considering any form of employee engagement activity, one has to think about the device it will be consumed on. More and more, that means making it mobile friendly. The facts speak for themselves: Smartphone usage is approaching 70% in America, and according to the Pew Research Center, one in five Americans are dependent on their smartphone for Internet access. Consumers spend about five hours on their phones each day and look at their phones 50 times per day (it's up to 70 times a day for millennials).

What's more, it has been shown that consumers will complete increasingly complex processes on their phones. Eighteen percent of consumers have applied for a job on their phones. Forty percent of TurboTax customers used mobile devices in some way last year to file their taxes, nine times more than the year before. H&R Block saw a 200% increase in activity from mobile browsers last year compared to the year before, and the company expects that trend to continue this year.

What all these numbers add up to is simple: You've got to meet employees where they are. More frequently, employees are somewhere other than the office. The number of remote workers is steadily increasing and employees are doing their work on whatever device that suits them best. This means that the success of employee engagement activities will increasingly depend on the ability for them to work on a small screen.

Implementing technology is just one part of the engagement process, not the end. The percentage of people nationwide engaged in their jobs has grown over the past three years, but the number still only sits at just 34%, according to a recent Gallup poll. With numbers this low, it seems pretty obvious that companies need to try anything and everything to improve engagement. It's also proof that there is no magic technology bullet. If there was, no employee would ever sit at his or her desk wondering "Why am I here?" again. Technology certainly has its place in an HR professional's bag of tricks, but it is not the entire bag. Companies should spread their engagement activities out using a variety of techniques, be it online or offline, face-to-face or remote, high tech or low tech.

It seems that true engagement happens when all of the things a company provides, such as pay, benefits, tools, processes and culture, line up with what employees want. If it makes sense for technology to help with engagement initiatives, then use it. If not, find something else that works. This is why some startup companies offer services like on-premise childcare, laundry and dry cleaning services. They have these options because they know that these services fulfill a genuine need for their employees. And that is what ultimately matters: finding what helps employees the most to become actively engaged in work by creating authentic connections and meaningful participation.