

# The Great Debate: Engagement vs. Happiness

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There's  
**no reason**  
employees  
can't be **both**  
engaged  
and happy.

Engagement. Commitment. Morale. Satisfaction. Meaning. Happiness. A lot of terms get kicked around in the human resources field and the employee engagement industry to describe the worker attitudes they are trying to attain. Which of these terms is the right objective has lately become a debate.

"The idea of trying to make people happy at work is terrible," Gallup CEO Jim Clifton told Fast Company<sup>1</sup> last fall. "Measuring workers' satisfaction or happiness levels is just not enough to retain star performers and build a successful business," he wrote on his company's website.<sup>2</sup> Businesses need their employees "engaged," he argues.

Pick any two of the terms above and it's possible to find a consultant who is against one and in favor of the other, although the main debate has centered on "engagement" versus "happiness." The arguments will continue fruitlessly until there is, first, better agreement on the meanings of the terms and, second, a better appreciation of the bargain employees make with their employers.

The term employee "engagement" originated with a 1990 Academy of Management Journal paper<sup>3</sup> by Boston University professor William Kahn. It became part of the mainstream business vernacular with the 1999 bestselling book **First, Break All the Rules**.

Yet a quarter of a century later, there is no commonly accepted definition of the term. "Some questions remain about how employee engagement differs from other well-researched and documented constructs such as job satisfaction, job involvement and job commitment," wrote University of Louisville assistant professor Brad Shuck and three coauthors in a 2013 paper titled, aptly enough, **The Jingle Jangle of Employee Engagement**.<sup>4</sup>

The same is true of "happiness," the pursuit of which is – depending on how one interprets Thomas Jefferson – a selfish quest or a virtuous one. "StrengthsFinder 2.0" author Tom Rath recently asserted<sup>5</sup> that "the pursuit of meaning – not happiness – is what makes life worthwhile." People in the field – myself included – have written and will write long treatises and book chapters on the subject. The short version is that employee engagement is what the business wants and happiness is what the employees want, and if they each look out for the other's interest, the bargain works.

By its simplest definition, employee engagement is the intensity an employee brings to the job. It's a connection to the mission of the company, trust in its leadership, willingness to collaborate and the resulting work ethic that creates a substantial competitive advantage for the firm. Businesses, not employees, sign the check to bring in the experts and tools to improve engagement so it should not be surprising that the focus of engagement initiatives is primarily on what the employees can do for the company.

Happiness – both the steak-for-dinner hedonic kind and the curing-cancer Aristotelian kind – is what employees want in their lives, including in their jobs. Forget what Jefferson meant when he wrote it; 239 years after the ink dried on the parchment, his phrase "the pursuit of happiness" appears to have caught on. The most compelling reasons why happiness should be what a company delivers in return for an employee's "engagement" are that "happiness" is what they call it and happiness is what they want.



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When the strategy is truly reciprocal, there is no reason why the goals can't be symbiotic forms of engagement and happiness.

The key implication is that a leader who holds back, who fears he or she will spoil the employees by aiming to make them happy, will find he or she gets neither happiness nor engagement. Conversely, the leader who unreservedly wants the best for his or her workers will find they reciprocate with tremendous commitment to the firm and intensity in their work.

To learn more about how BI WORLDWIDE's approach to achieving employee engagement and workplace happiness, visit: [BIWORLDWIDE.com](http://BIWORLDWIDE.com) or email [latam@BIWORLDWIDE.com](mailto:latam@BIWORLDWIDE.com).



<sup>1</sup> Crowley, M. C. (2014). Why being engaged at work isn't as simple as "being happy" [Blog]. Retrieved from: <http://www.fastcompany.com/3036399/the-future-of-work/why-being-engaged-at-work-isnt-as-simple-as-being-happy>

<sup>2</sup> Clifton, J. (2014, June 5). Employee satisfaction doesn't matter [Blog]. Retrieved from: <http://www.gallup.com/opinion/chairman/171302/employee-satisfaction-doesn-matter.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Kahn, W. A. (1990, December). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 33, no. 4, 692. Retrieved from: [http://engagementresearch.wikispaces.com/file/view/Kahn+%281990%29\\_Psychological+conditions+of+personal+engagement+and+disengagement+at+work.pdf](http://engagementresearch.wikispaces.com/file/view/Kahn+%281990%29_Psychological+conditions+of+personal+engagement+and+disengagement+at+work.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Shuck, B., Ghosh, R., Zigarmi, D., & Nimon, K. (2012, November 27). The Jingle Jangle of Employee Engagement. *Human Resource Development Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, 11-35. doi: 10.1177/1534484312463921

<sup>5</sup> Rath, T. (2015). Meaning matters more than happiness [Blog]. Retrieved from: <http://www.tomrath.org/meaning-matters-more-than-happiness/>