



Shining a Light on Employee Engagement

The Key to Combatting Turnover and Improving Performance in Healthcare

In February 2017, the Gallup Organization, known for polling and researching the entire globe's opinions, released a sobering report on the state of our nation's workforce: 67 percent of Americans are not engaged—or worse, actively disengaged—in their jobs. Further, actively disengaged employees are almost twice as likely as engaged employees to seek new jobs.

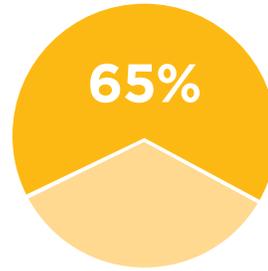
Gallup estimates that actively disengaged employees cost the U.S. \$483 billion to \$605 billion each year. These costs stem from lost productivity, theft, missed workdays, customer dissatisfaction and other related factors that undermine a business' profitability. The effect on the bottom line sends a clear message to America's employers: staff retention and engagement are an ongoing journey and investment. Despite making strides in recent years, employers still have a long way to go.

What's the Problem and Why Do We Care?

Two trends are developing in the world of work today—the economy has opened up and more people that felt “frozen” due to the tightening economy of days past are now considering greener pastures and fresh starts. According to the February 2017 Gallup report, a staggering 91% of employees say the last time they switched jobs, they left their employer to do so. This is unfortunate, as Gallup analysis shows that the longer people stay at their job, the more likely they are to strongly agree they have opportunities to do what they do best every day (a major element of engagement). In addition to these global trends, the healthcare industry is seeing its own shift. New rules and regulations being considered now mean the industry could be looking at developing an extraordinarily high percentage of more staff in the next 15 years.



“...project **50% more personal care and home health aides**, and **20% more registered nurses (RNs) and nurse assistants** over the next 10 years.”
—Bureau of Labor Statistics



Right this minute, **65%** of your workforce is **looking for a new job**.
—Gallup

All this is no secret, and the 2017 changes in political leadership within the U.S. may only exacerbate the challenges ahead. Proposed changes to the Affordable Care Act and other federal funding changes create increased uncertainty for healthcare organizations regarding long term financial stability. A focus on reducing workforce turnover now will only help organizations prepare for future change.

Turnover has an impact beyond its direct costs, which can reach thousands of dollars per employee. Indeed, high turnover rates can send an organization into a downward spiral that impacts more than just the bottom line and is quite challenging to reverse. Healthcare is especially susceptible.

Consider what happens when turnover is high: when employees leave at higher than expected rates, new staff cannot be hired and trained quickly enough to keep up with demand. Additionally, the learning curve for any new employee causes a temporary dip in productivity. This results in an understaffed work environment that requires existing staff to do more with less.

What happens next? Staff morale starts to suffer and quality of care starts to dip. The two go hand in hand. A decrease in patient and family satisfaction quickly follows, leading to more stress and frustration at the point of care. The downward spiral has begun. Add to the mix a work environment which is already challenging and the situation becomes more dire. On the other side, organizations with lower than average turnover demonstrate healthier staff stress levels, more engaged staff, happier patients, and better quality of care.

So, how do you reverse the ‘turnover spiral’? By becoming a high-performing organization dedicated to building a positive company culture, retaining an engaged workforce, and providing best-in-class patient care.



What Does a Great Healthcare Organization Look Like?

Allow your imagination to craft the type of healthcare organization your employees are proud to work for. One where they are excited to show up every day. One that delivers on its promise to deliver great patient-centered care. What does it look like? What are its rewards?

CONSIDER THIS:

Healthcare consultant Press Ganey has shown that **hospitals with greater employee engagement have superior patient satisfaction scores and perform better overall** in core measures that influence federal Value-Based Purchasing and Readmission Reduction programs. As these adjustment programs continue to mature under the evolving healthcare environment, **hospitals will become increasingly wary of whom they partner with in the continuum of care.** Sending patients to the wrong center will mean increased risk for a poor outcome and, thus, the potential for financial penalties.

What does that mean for healthcare providers across the continuum? **An engaged frontline is more likely to do the right thing for patients and families, provide greater quality care and in turn support the organization's business objectives.**

What Does the Ideal Organization Look Like?

There are common traits shared among high-performing organizations. While organizations may implement different programs to correspond to the specific needs of their industry, what these programs share is their intent to build and maintain an engaged workforce.

An engaged workforce is aligned with its organization's mission, vision and values; understands and supports business objectives; delivers safe, quality care to patients; and when the time is right, can accelerate meaningful change across an entire organization.



These organizations are committed to building an engaged workforce by:

- **Reinvigorating employee orientation programs**
- **Offering opportunities for staff development**
- **Protecting staff well-being**



Engaged employees are connected to those they serve, their communities, their colleagues and senior leadership. They fully understand and are proud of their well-defined roles, make strong contributions and look for ways to continuously improve. Perhaps most importantly, they are committed to staying with their company. You might think engagement sounds purely aspirational—and daunting—for any workforce to achieve. Think again.

Besides U.S. manufacturing workers, U.S. service workers report engagement levels that are “the lowest of any occupation Gallup measured, while engagement for every other job category increased.” Healthcare turnover data reflects this trend. The American Health Care Association’s

10 TRAITS OF AN ENGAGED EMPLOYEE:

1. Speaks positively and enthusiastically about his or her projects and the company.
2. Shows up on time every day (because there's important work to be done).
3. Asks for new challenges and additional responsibilities.
4. Embraces change and voices support when others are skeptical.
5. Recommends friends to apply for job openings.
6. Participates in events, fundraisers and other team-building opportunities.
7. Shares cost-saving ideas or suggests ways to eliminate waste from processes.
8. Offers to serve in a mentorship role for new hires.
9. Helps colleagues who are overwhelmed with multiple tasks.
10. Pursues leadership opportunities within the company.



most recent Quality Report published in 2014 illustrates that turnover rates remain high—44.4 percent for RNs, 30.8 percent for LPNs, and 45.8 percent for CNAs.

Meanwhile, the industries around you have been taking engagement seriously for years and celebrate the incremental progress they have made. They are seeing reduced turnover and associated cost savings. According to Gallup, the gap between highly engaged workplaces and those that are disengaged is more like a chasm. The most recent data shows that when comparing top quartile workplaces to those in the bottom quartile of engagement, there are median differences of 22 percent in profitability, 65 percent in turnover, 41 percent in patient safety incidents and 37 percent in absenteeism. One thing should be clear for your business: ignore employee engagement today, and the rest of America may leave you behind.

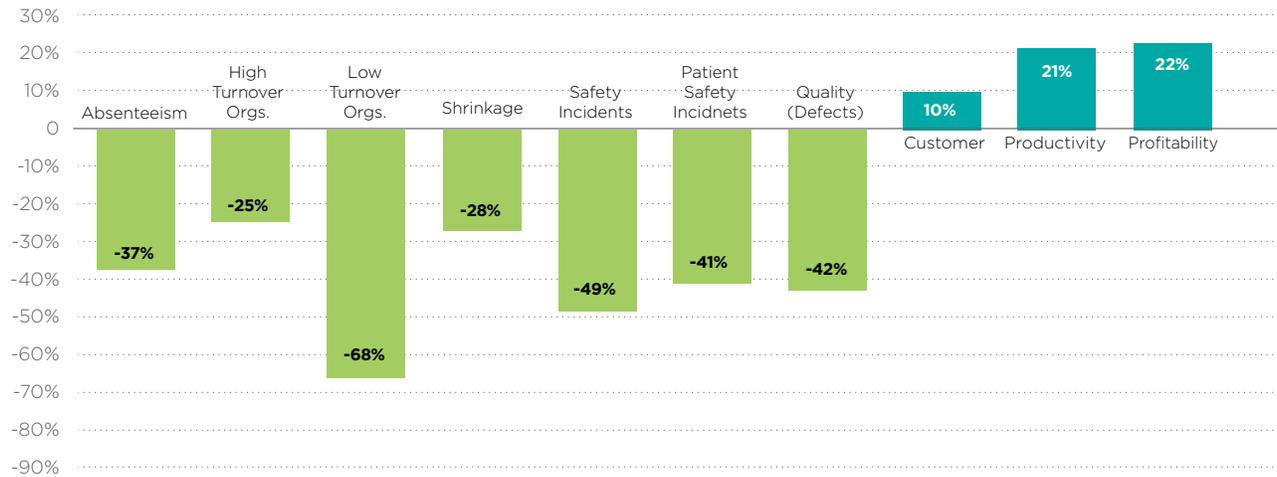
#1. Reinvigorating Employee Orientation Programs

Turnover is especially troubling with frontline staff who are the backbone of the service delivery model in healthcare. Newly-hired frontline staff often have little or no experience. This statement holds true whether you examine certified nursing assistants, social workers or direct support professionals who begin work in a new setting. These hires can make or break your organization's reputation, referrals and bottom line.

Efforts to orient new hires in healthcare settings are primarily compliance driven. The prevailing mantra is "Get 'em trained!" and "Document the process!" Whether that means watching an outdated DVD (usually alone in a room prior to interacting directly with the people they serve) or participating in an instructor-led class, too much information is given in too little time. Further, memory retention decreases once new hires leave the training room.

A great majority of training professionals function as subject matter experts, not learning and development professionals. When this is the case, learning often begins at too high a level and the

Employee Engagement Affects Key Business Outcomes



Work units in the top quartile in employee engagement outperform bottom-quartile units by 10% on customer ratings, 21% in productivity, and 22% in profitability. Work units in the top quartile also saw significantly lower absenteeism (37%), turnover (25% in high turnover organizations, 65% in low-turnover organizations), and shrinkage (28%), along with fewer safety incidents (48%), patient safety incidents (41%), and quality defects (41%).

teacher can become a lecturer, not a facilitator of learning. This approach presents a variety of issues that are detrimental to the engagement of new hires:

- Checks the compliance boxes, but ignores learning effectiveness and practical application of knowledge.
- Covers an organization's bases for surveys and audits, but neglects quality and caring.
- Perpetuates the myth of education as a drain on staff, rather than being seen as a valued effort made by the organization.
- Pushes more information than can be absorbed.
- Neglects context (the "why") to get out the "what."
- Focuses on rote learning rather than story-based learning.
- Divorced from the reality of the day-to-day role.

What this approach leads to is an eventual mismatch of what is taught and what is experienced on the job. This includes skills, knowledge, and even culture. Learners see this as soon as they exit orientation. They match what is taught to what they see on the job. Any mismatches are immediately obvious. While some try to make sense of it, many more get frustrated and some quit. For those who stay, your future education efforts are a major factor in their length of tenure. Without professional development and professional support, they'll leave for greener pastures. Their jobs are demanding, why wouldn't we want to provide them with our best efforts, even if it means rethinking what we've always done?



Our past work in orientation hasn't been all wrong, but it didn't take sufficient account of the learner's needs. Here's a checklist of what you can do during new employee onboarding:

- Schedule lunch with an experienced colleague.
- Encourage friendships among staff.
- Ensure your culture in practice matches your culture in teaching.
- Give new hires time to learn, practice, and apply.
- Make sure managers engage in their learning after the fact.
- Enlist high performing peers to teach and mentor.
- Set goals that grow over time.

THE RESULT: When new employee onboarding is done correctly, it leads to:

- higher job satisfaction
- increased organizational commitment
- decreased turnover
- higher performance levels
- career complementing
- lowered stress

Better onboarding and new hire orientation will only increase in importance as population growth demands more trained staff in the healthcare industry. Compliance goals, while necessary, must share focus with building an engaged workforce that can realize better surveys and audits, happier individuals served, and a better bottom line for themselves and their organizations.

Doing so will necessitate an investment of time, a change of thinking, an increased skill set and an understanding and appreciation of the value that results from improving these programs. Keep in mind, different results require new tactics.

#2. Offering Opportunities for Staff Development

Another straightforward way to engage your workforce: improve staff development initiatives. Investing in your frontline employees gives them the tools they need to do their job effectively—a key component of any engagement measurement—while improving reimbursements, compliance and patient care.

Moreover, employees need to feel that their careers have momentum and are not static. A person's calling to healthcare must be reaffirmed through continuing education and development. Hone their skills and provide leadership opportunities. Empower clinicians to operate at the top of their license.

Managers are also critical to great learning. They must understand, support and grow learning by budgeting time for it and following up on what was learned. They should ask team members:

- How would you apply what you just learned in your job?
- How can we develop your skills even further?
- What else would you like to know?



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Effective training provides employees the confidence they need to understand their roles and perform at a high level. It's also an opportunity to cascade consistent messaging from senior leadership across a large organization. Well-trained employees speak the same language, are aligned with the company's mission and feel engaged in its success.

#3. Protecting Staff Well-Being

In a September 2014 research report, organizational consultancy TechnologyAdvice found that the most popular engagement program employees say they want to participate in today is one involving wellness and fitness.

The data backs this up. Engaged workers lead healthier lives and consume fewer healthcare dollars, per Gallup's 2017 State of the American Workplace. Gallup found that employees who are "thriving" cost less than \$7,300 to insure annually. Those same employees are engaged at work and more likely to participate in employer-sponsored wellness programs that reinforce healthy living and chronic disease management.

In their studies, both Gallup and TechnologyAdvice agree: A person who makes consistent healthy choices through diet and exercise is more productive and less stressed. Is there any better place to initiate that behavior than at work—where they spend hours a day, every week?

The U.S. Department of Labor distinguishes workplace wellness programs through three types of activities:

- ➡ **Screening activities** to identify health risks; most commonly the health risk questionnaire and biometric, or clinical, screening.
- ➡ **Preventive interventions** to reduce health risks and prevent disease exacerbation. These include lifestyle risk factor management programs designed to help workers make healthy changes as well as disease management programs.



Health promotion activities that encourage healthy lifestyles regardless of one’s health risks or chronic diseases. These include onsite vaccination services, fitness benefits, healthy food options within cafeterias or vending machines, and nurse advice lines.

Positive Employee Engagement leads to ‘Job Embeddedness’

Healthcare organizations like the one we asked you to imagine earlier are real. They are all bound by one common trait: employing professionals who believe in a single mission and following it as if it were their North Star. Though employees may not recognize it, they are all woven into a tightly knit social fabric that goes beyond the workplace. The concept of “social capital” offers an explanation.

The World Bank defines “social capital” as relationships and norms that shape the quality and quantity of social interactions, whereby social cohesion allows societies to prosper sustainably. “Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society—it is the glue that holds them together,” the World Bank writes. On a much smaller scale, social capital is the same force that binds your employees to the organization and its goals.

“Job embeddedness captures a broad range of ideas that influence employee retention. One way to think about a person’s life is to visualize a net or a web created by strands connecting the different parts of one’s life. A person who has more roles, responsibilities, and relationships would have a more complex web than someone who had fewer. We would say that the person with the more complex web is more embedded in a situation; a person with more strands connected to her job would be more ‘job embedded.’ The person with the more complex web would experience more disruption in the web if she severed ties at a central intersection in the web.” (Holtom, et al, “Increasing human and social capital by applying job embeddedness theory,” Organizational Dynamics, 2006.)

Social capital is a force that binds your employees to the organization and its goals. To increase the force of attraction, individual employees need to be further embedded into the whole.

Holtom, et al, go on to describe job embeddedness as a three-pronged construction:

- 1. Fit within an organization and community.** Employees must consider their personal values, goals and ambitions alongside the larger organizational culture and demands of their job, such as know-how, skills and abilities. This determines “fit.”

Fit is most important to establish during employee onboarding and orientation, when employees ask themselves, “Are these the same people who I thought they were when I agreed to this job? Do they display behaviors that I am comfortable with? Are they reflecting an organizational mission larger than themselves? Am I going to fit in here?” Look at your orientation process from the perspective of a new hire, and make a change if necessary.

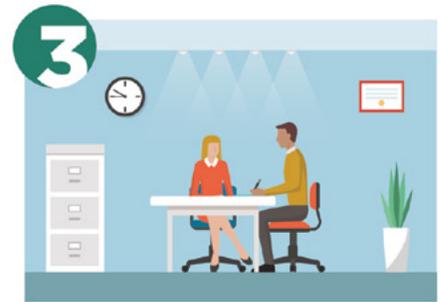
9 Ways to Increase Job Embeddedness



1 Provide extensive information to recruits about career opportunities.



2 Use realistic job previews.



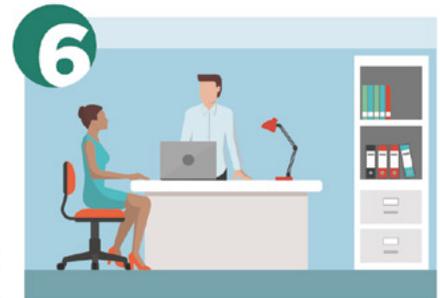
3 Select employees whose values “fit” with the organization.



4 Provide socialization opportunities to new hires that allow them to meet and get to know other employees and management.



5 Provide training and development opportunities that help employees meet their career goals.



6 Provide mentors (or be one!)



7 Provide recognition and facilitate peer recognition.



8 Provide opportunities for knowledge sharing among employees to improve customer service and skill development.



9 Provide employees with information about the community—its history, its residents, its future.

Source: Increasing human and social capital by applying job embeddedness theory. Brooks C. Holtom, Terence R. Mitchell, Thomas W. Lee. *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 35, No. 4, pp. 316-331, 2006

2. Links within the organization and to the community. This translates to the connections between your business and the people who make it function. The study’s authors break it down as such: “Job embeddedness suggests that a number of threads connect an employee and his or her family in a social, psychological, and financial web that includes work and non-work friends, groups, the community, and the physical environment where they are located.”

Think of it as a social network, such as Facebook or Twitter, where the accumulation of interpersonal links further embeds the individual in the network. This same passion should be nurtured within the organization. Softball leagues, potlucks, fundraisers, group volunteer opportunities: these are all ways to form relationships, create memories and strengthen the social web.

3. Sacrifice in leaving the organization and community. This is what an individual would be giving up, either in material or psychological costs, when handing in their resignation. These costs manifest in friendships with fellow employees, or a special affinity for the patients they serve. They also include perceived perks, such as a convenient commute to and from work, or a project that offers satisfying personal accountability. “The more an employee must give up when leaving, the more difficult it will be to sever employment with the organization,” the authors write.

As implied by this theory, the decision to leave an organization is more than a financial one. People can budget the differences in wages on a calculator. But deciding to leave an organization is a decision to make a break from their fellow employees, their patients and quite often their community. There is risk involved! Job embeddedness makes it harder for employees to leave, and should be what you’re trying to create as an organization to retain your most important resource.

Measure and Operationalize Engagement

Investing in the above strategies will be for naught if you do not establish an engagement measurement. Ask the questions about your workplace culture—then do something with the data.

Rick Sherwood, a talent and rewards consultant for the healthcare industry at Towers Watson, writes at the Harvard Business Review blog: “Hospitals need to accurately diagnose the issues through research techniques that measure levels of engagement and identify the specific drivers that affect those levels for different groups within the system. Second, they need to translate those drivers into a set of actions and behaviors that are realistic, meaningful and sustainable. As with medicine itself, diagnosis without corresponding ‘treatment’ will not bring about lasting improvement.”

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How can you increase job embeddedness at your organization?

Brainstorm a few things that your business can do to foster connections between employees, the organization, and the surrounding community. What would your employees like to see? For more ideas, turn to the infographic on page 9.

Managers should challenge staff to conceptualize solutions for everyday problems and take ownership over their execution and long-term oversight.



What Sherwood states is also true for healthcare as a whole, because the basics for measuring and operationalizing engagement are the same. Those basics are:

- ➔ **Hold an annual engagement survey (and be purposeful with its data).** The survey should be comprised of questions that are core to your business objectives and mission, that assess the embeddedness of your employees, gather feedback on domains of manager effectiveness, and ask for feelings toward the organization and its senior leadership. Anonymity and confidentiality are key to getting honest responses. Transparency is also critical. Management must share the survey results regardless of what they are.
- ➔ **Establish your baseline and determine your action plan.** Analyze what the data is telling you about where the organization is at that moment. Establishing your engagement baseline helps you focus on immediate and long-term priorities, with the added benefit of measuring improvement (or failure) in future surveys. Once you have the plan, share it with the entire organization.
- ➔ **Build in leadership accountability.** Direct supervisors have a powerful impact on job satisfaction in frontline service employment. Consider building accountability for engagement into the annual performance reviews of your facility management. Engagement scores can be broken into units, facilities and entire organizations, with improvement opportunities at every level of leadership.

“Managers and leaders should know their people—who they are, not just what they do,” writes Robyn Reilly, senior consultant at the Gallup Organization, in the Gallup Business Journal. “Every interaction with an employee has the potential to influence his or her engagement and inspire discretionary effort. How leaders manage their employees can substantially affect engagement levels in the workplace, in turn influencing the company’s bottom line.”

Reilly outlines a few ways to get the most out of your engagement strategy:

- 1. Prioritize engagement at the frontline.** Managers should challenge staff to conceptualize solutions for everyday problems and take ownership over their execution and long-term oversight. When employees feel like they contribute to making things better, they are less likely to be open to outside opportunities.

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- 2. Put the right people in management positions.** In a 2016 study on global leadership, Dale Carnegie training showed that an employee's immediate relationship with his or her manager is one of the most important drivers of job satisfaction and engagement.
 - 3. Don't complicate your goals.** Engagement should be fun, and goals surrounding engagement should be clear to whoever is being held to them.
 - 4. Iterate (and reiterate).** There is no "one size fits all" approach to employee engagement. The process of gathering and operationalizing data is fundamentally iterative, so don't let fears of a false start keep you from getting started. Avoid the temptation to belabor your new strategy before it's had time to take root. Abandoning or overhauling it will only add confusion and keep employees off balance.

You Can Do It!

You can become a high-performance organization that delivers exceptional patient-centered care. You can create a vibrant, healthy workplace that values feedback and the honest sharing of ideas. You can achieve quality improvement that makes you the most attractive option to suitors in the continuum.

But, to get there, you must also believe in your culture and get your employees to buy into it. In other words, it must be authentic. "At the end of the day, an intrinsic connection to one's work and one's company is what truly drives performance, inspires discretionary effort, and improves wellbeing," Gallup writes in its 2013 State of the American Workplace.



Increased staff retention and engagement is within your reach. It's now time to make that first step toward becoming a great organization.

Relias Learning is ready and able to help with content knowledge, adult learning expertise and educational technology. Interested in learning more? Get in touch.

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solutions@reliaslearning.com
toll-free: (877) 200-0020

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