

# EMPLOYEE RETENTION AND ENGAGEMENT IN INDIAN IT COMPANIES

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**Abstract** *Employee engagement is the process through which employees develop a deep attachment with their organization, driving them to work more actively towards organizational goals. The present study examines engagement levels of employees across gender, age, functional domains, and experience levels in Indian IT companies and their impact on retention.*

*It was found that the critical dimensions of employee engagement were: performance evaluation and development, manager's support, and effective leadership. Also, it was found that employee engagement levels follow a life cycle. Thus, IT companies should design their employee engagement programs to offer mentoring for less-experienced employees and autonomy and participation in decision-making for more-experienced employees.*

**Keywords:** *Employee Engagement, Retention, Performance Evaluation & Development, Manager's Support, Effective Leadership*

## INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement is a process encompassing almost all facets of human resource management, with the goal of motivating employees to stay with the organization. Employee engagement is a heightened emotional and intellectual connection that an employee has for his/her job, organization, manager, or co-workers that, in turn, influences him/her to apply additional discretionary effort for his/her work (The Conference Board, 2006). Engaged employees are emotionally attached and committed to their organization and its values, highly involved in their jobs, and willing to go beyond what is usually expected of them in order to ensure the success of the organization.

Organizations clearly need to foster employee engagement for sustainable success. Employees can be classified into three categories based on the level of commitment or engagement which are as follows: 1) Engaged employees, are those who are passionate, emotionally connected to the company, and are innovative. They contribute new ideas and turn these ideas into reality. 2) Disengaged are another set of employees which include the large majority of employees in organizations. They only do what they are told. They put in time, but not energy and passion. They may be either positive or negative in their outlook and opinion about the organization. 3) Actively disengaged, this category of

employees are those who tend to be unhappy with the organization, and they spread unhappiness and negative word-of-mouth in the organization. They can potentially harm the morale of other employees, and may even instigate them to leave their jobs.

In any organization, *every individual* is accountable for his or her own engagement; anyone with direct subordinates must coach team members to higher levels of engagement *and* manage his or her own engagement; and executives set the tone for high morale and motivation *plus* shoulder the responsibilities of individuals and managers.

Employee engagement in recent years has increasingly caught the attention of HR researchers and practitioners. Several research agencies publish periodic reports of trends in employee engagement across industries.

The Corporate Leadership Council study (2004) has found low levels of engagement amongst employees, with more than 10% fully disengaged. They estimated that truly engaged employees performed 20% better, and were 87% less likely to leave. They did not find significant differences in engagement based on demographics, but company strategy and policy did have a significant impact on engagement. They also found that emotional engagement had four times as much impact as rational engagement on employee's

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effort, and that employee retention depends on a balance between rational and emotional engagement. They identified the most important driver of employee engagement as the connection between an employee's job and organizational strategy; other crucial factors were employees' commitment to their manager and the role of the manager as the enabler of employees' commitment to their jobs, organizations, and teams.

The Development Dimensions International study (2005) suggested that certain things that managers must do to ensure a highly engaged workforce: align efforts with strategy; empower; promote and encourage teamwork and collaboration; help people grow and develop; and provide support and recognition where appropriate.

The Blessing White study (2006) reported that retention was still a concern, with only 65% of employees committing to stay with their organizations, and less than 20% of employees truly engaged. Further, they found that there was high persistence of lack of alignment with organizational goals, and that most employees were not aware of what their organization was doing to build employee engagement. They also found that, though employees may leave for various reasons, most would stay for more than just the job, and that job satisfaction depended on the right match of work and talents, as well as opportunities for growth. In particular, they found that a strong manager-employee relationship was a very crucial ingredient in the employee engagement and retention formula.

The Blessing White study (2011) presented a better picture, with 31% of employees truly engaged, and engagement levels stabilizing around the world, though more employees were looking for new opportunities outside their organizations. They found a strong correlation between engagement levels and age, role/level, and tenure in the organizations. They also found that engaged employees stay for what they give, whereas disengaged employees stay for what they get. They identified the key drivers of employee job satisfaction to be: opportunities to enhance and apply their talents, career development, and training. Though they found that trust in leadership can have twice the impact on engagement levels as trust in immediate managers; they also found that executives and managers were not doing the things that matter most to the employees.

The Blessing White research update (2013) also found stable engagement levels and stable retention levels, as well as a strong correlation between engagement levels and age, role/level, and tenure in the organizations. They also found a great extent of trust for managers, followed by trust for senior leaders. However, they found a large gap in engagement levels between men and women in India, the Persian Gulf, and South America. They identified the key drivers of engagement to be: clarity on the organization's

priorities, getting feedback, having opportunities to use skills, and career development.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature pertaining to employee engagement is relatively new which started from the early 2000's. Different authors have used varying definitions of employee engagement, exploring different facets of employee engagement. There is still a vast scope for research in the field, particularly relating to employee engagement as compared to other HR concepts. The following is a review of some threads in the literature on employee engagement.

The earlier literature (e.g. The Conference Board, 2006) focused on defining employee engagement and its dimensions. They proposed a composite definition, derived from different approaches to employee engagement, as follows: "employee engagement is a heightened emotional and intellectual connection that an employee has for his/her job, organization, manager, or co-workers that, in turn, influences him/her to apply additional discretionary effort to his/her work." Gallup Consulting (2006) proposed a scale (called Q12) to measure employee engagement, with four dimensions - Basic Needs, Management Support, Teamwork, and Growth.

Another thread in the literature focuses on the relationship between employee engagement and company performance. Bates (2004) discussed some of the major social trends that affect employee engagement, and the impact of engagement on company performance. He suggested some management and communications strategies for encouraging and enhancing employee engagement. Baumruk (2004) analyzed the role of employee engagement in high-performance companies. He found that improvement in employee engagement lead to improvement in financial performance. Drizin (2005) used human factors metrics in demonstrating the effects of talent on company performance. The key finding of his study was that the most significant drivers of engagement are daily satisfaction with one's job, ethics and concern for employees, reputation of the management team, and effectiveness of senior leadership. He also demonstrated the impact of employee engagement on customer service productivity, and revealed a pattern: engagement is high with new employees, it then drops, then rebounds after five years of service. Markos and Sridevi (2010) suggested that employee engagement was stronger predictor of positive organizational performance, clearly showing the two-way relationship between employer and employee, as compared to the three earlier constructs: job satisfaction, employee commitment and organizational citizenship behavior.

Another important thread in the literature focuses on strategies for enhancing employee engagement. Sundaray (2011) focused on various factors which lead to employee

engagement and what should company do to keep the employees engaged. He argued that properly developed engagement strategies would increase the organizational effectiveness in terms of higher productivity, profits, quality, customer satisfaction, employee retention and increased adaptability. Madan (2011) found that communication, equal opportunities and fair treatment, and cooperation had the highest influence in creating a feeling of being valued and involvement among employees; training, development and career, job satisfaction, immediate management, performance appraisal, and work-life balance had a moderate influence; while health & safety and pay & benefits had the least influence on feeling valued and involved. Aguenza and Som (2012) identified various motivational factors that influence employee retention, and examined their impacts on both organizations and employees. They argued that the motivational factors that are crucial in influencing employee retention are financial rewards, job characteristics, career development, recognition, management and work-life balance. They proposed that organizations should formulate appropriate retention strategies in a holistic manner for long-term sustainability.

Much of the employee engagement literature emphasizes its link with retention strategies. The present study examines engagement levels of employees in Indian IT companies and their impact on retention.

## METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of the present study is to examine engagement levels of employees across gender, age, functional domains, and experience levels in Indian IT companies, and to examine the impact of employee engagement on employee retention. The study has been undertaken specifically in the IT sector, where human capital plays a major role in business success.

The data for the study was collected using a structured questionnaire from a sample of one hundred and fifty employees working in a cross-section of IT companies, based in Bangalore, India. Four dimensions of Employee Engagement were considered for the study, viz. Nature of Job, Manager's Support, Effective Leadership, and Performance Evaluation and Development. These dimensions of Employee Engagement were measured using five-point Likert ratings, with the following multi-item scales:

### Nature of Job (Cronbach alpha = 0.669)

- I have a clear sense of my present job role in the company.
- At work I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
- I have the materials and equipment to conduct my work in an appropriate manner.

### Manager's Support (Cronbach alpha = 0.680)

- At the workplace I get all the support I need to succeed in my job from my manager.
- My manager provides timely feedback that allows me to improve upon my performance
- In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.

### Effective Leadership (Cronbach alpha = 0.815)

- I have confidence in the leadership of the company.
- Employee options and suggestions are given due consideration by senior management.
- The senior management makes sure that they balance employee's interest with that of the organization.

### Performance Evaluation & Development (Cronbach alpha = 0.692)

- In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
- This last year, I have had opportunities to learn and grow.
- The compensation is proportional to the contribution that I make.
- I am aware of the career opportunities that are available to me at my company.

The dependent variable was the Employee's Intention to Stay/Leave ("I expect to continue working at my present company in the near future."), measured on a dichotomous scale (Y/N). Multivariate discriminant analysis was used to study the effect of the Employee Engagement on the Employee's Intention to Stay/Leave.

## FINDINGS

The descriptive statistics of the dimensions of Employee Engagement and of Employee's Intention to Stay are shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Employee Engagement and Employee's Intention to Stay**

	mean	std. dev.	z stat	p-value
Nature of Job	3.5850	0.6822	6.6423	0.0000
Manager's Support	3.2857	0.6632	3.3369	0.0004
Effective Leadership	3.1429	0.7698	1.4379	0.0752
Performance Evaluation & Development	3.2602	0.6884	2.9278	0.0017
Employee's Intention to Stay	61.22%	49.23%	1.7382	0.0411

The respondents had a high level of engagement in terms of nature of job (42.8%), manager’s support (28.6%), and performance evaluation & development (24.5%), and a moderate level of engagement in terms of effective leadership (22.4%). The average retention rate among the respondents was 61.2%.

The engagement levels of men and women employees are compared in Table 2 below.

The perception of manager’s support was found to be significantly higher for women employees than for men employees, particularly in terms of providing timely feedback to improve employee performance. There was found to be no significant difference between men and women employees in terms of the other dimensions of engagement. There was also no significant difference in the retention rate for men and women.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Engagement Levels for Men and Women Employees**

		male	female	F Stat	p-value
Nature of Job	mean	3.5455	3.6667	0.335	0.2825
	std. dev.	0.6282	0.7982		
Manager’s Support	mean	3.1818	3.5000	3.561	0.0410
	std. dev.	0.6671	0.6206		
Effective Leadership	mean	3.1010	3.2292	0.294	0.2950
	std. dev.	0.8100	0.6962		
Performance Evaluation & Development	mean	3.2045	3.3750	0.656	0.2110
	std. dev.	0.6326	0.8010		
Employee’s Intension to Stay		63.6%	56.3%	0.248	0.6190

The engagement levels of employees in different age groups are compared in Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Engagement Levels across Age Groups**

		20-25 y	25-30 y	30-35 y	F Stat	p-value
Nature of Job	mean	3.7222	3.5556	3.5897	0.144	0.4330
	std. dev.	0.3897	0.6911	0.7953		
Manager’s Support	mean	3.3889	3.3556	3.0769	0.879	0.2110
	std. dev.	0.4431	0.7162	0.6109		
Effective Leadership	mean	3.0556	3.0778	3.3333	0.533	0.2950
	std. dev.	0.4907	0.7666	0.8923		
Performance Evaluation & Development	mean	3.2917	3.4083	2.9038	2.606	0.0425
	std. dev.	0.5342	0.6646	0.7184		
Employee’s Intension to Stay		66.7%	63.3%	53.8%	0.429	0.8070

The perception of performance evaluation & development was found to be significantly higher for the 25-30 years age group than for the 20-25 years age group and the 30-35 years age group. Also, the perception of regular discussion with managers about career growth was found to be significantly higher for the 20-25 years age group than for the 25-30 years age group and the 30-35 years age group. There was found to be no significant difference across age groups in terms of other dimensions of engagement. There was also no significant difference in the retention rate across age groups.

The engagement levels of employees in different functional domains are shown in Table 4 below.

There was found to be no significant difference across functional domains in terms of all of the dimensions of engagement. However, the perception of regular discussion with managers about progress was found to be significantly higher for Operations and Human Resource employees than for Finance and Marketing employees. There was also no significant difference in the retention rate across functional domains except HR which was higher than others.

**Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Engagement Levels across Functional Domains**

		Mktg.	HR	Fin.	Ops.	F Stat	p-value
Nature of Job	mean	3.5333	3.7083	3.4815	3.6061	0.173	0.4570
	std. dev.	0.7888	0.6531	0.6690	0.6873		

		Mktg.	HR	Fin.	Ops.	F Stat	p-value
Manager's Support	mean	3.1333	3.3750	3.3704	3.2879	0.261	0.4265
	std. dev.	0.4216	0.6770	0.6961	0.7580		
Effective Leadership	mean	3.1333	2.8750	3.1852	3.2273	0.405	0.3750
	std. dev.	0.9838	0.7754	0.8184	0.6697		
Performance Evaluation & Development	mean	3.1500	3.3438	2.9167	3.4205	1.293	0.1445
	std. dev.	0.7284	0.6806	0.5995	0.6917		
Employee's Intension to Stay		60.00%	75.0%	55.6%	59.1%	0.810	0.8470

The engagement levels of employees with less than five years of experience and employees with more than five years of experience are compared in Table 5 below.

**Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of Engagement levels wrt. Experience (less than vs. more than 5 years)**

		< 5 yrs.	5+ yrs.	F Stat	p-value
Nature of Job	mean	3.6071	3.5556	0.067	0.3980
	std. dev.	0.6608	0.7252		
Manager's Support	mean	3.4643	3.0476	5.146	0.0140
	std. dev.	0.6308	0.6437		
Effective Leadership	mean	3.1429	3.1429	0.000	0.5000
	std. dev.	0.7394	0.8271		
Performance Evaluation & Development	mean	3.2946	3.2143	0.161	0.3450
	std. dev.	0.6669	0.7301		
Employee's Intension to Stay		57.1%	66.7%	0.458	0.4980

The perception of manager's support was found to be significantly higher for employees with less than five years of experience than for employees with more than five years of experience. Also, the perception of manager providing timely feedback to improve employee performance, manager giving recognition/praise for doing good work, and regular discussion with managers about career growth were found to be significantly higher for employees with less than five years of experience than for employees with more than five years of experience. There was found to be no significant difference between employees with less than five years of experience and employees with more than five years of experience in terms of the other dimensions of engagement. There was also no significant difference in the retention rate for employees with less than five years of experience and employees with more than five years of experience which are 57.1% and 66.7% respectively.

The engagement levels of employees with less than seven-and-a-half years of experience and employees with more

than seven-and-a-half years of experience are compared in Table 6 below.

**Table 6: Descriptive Statistics of Engagement Levels wrt. Experience (less than vs. more than 7.5 years)**

		< 7.5 yrs.	7.5+ yrs.	F Stat	p-value
Nature of Job	mean	3.5079	4.0476	3.989	0.0260
	std. dev.	0.6837	0.4880		
Manager's Support	mean	3.2540	3.4762	0.669	0.2090
	std. dev.	0.6977	0.3780		
Effective Leadership	mean	3.0635	3.6190	3.273	0.0385
	std. dev.	0.7371	0.8483		
Performance Evaluation & Development	mean	3.3095	2.9643	1.526	0.1115
	std. dev.	0.6848	0.6836		
Employee's Intension to Stay		59.5%	71.4%	0.358	0.5500

The perception of nature of the job and the perception of effective leadership were found to be significantly higher for employees with more than seven-and-a-half years of experience than for employees with less than seven-and-a-half years of experience. Also, the perception of clear sense of job role in the company, having the opportunity to do one's best, and confidence in leadership of the company were found to be significantly higher for employees with more than seven-and-a-half years of experience than for employees with less than seven-and-a-half years of experience. There was found to be no significant difference between employees with less than seven-and-a-half years of experience and employees with more than seven-and-a-half years of experience in terms of the other dimensions of engagement. There was also no significant difference in the retention rate for employees with less than seven-and-a-half years of experience and employees with more than seven-and-a-half years of experience which are 59.5% and 71.4% respectively.

The results of discriminant analysis of retention with respect to the dimensions of employee engagement are shown in Table 7 below.

**Table 7: Canonical Discriminant Functions with respect to Retention**

	<b>Coeff.</b>	<b>Beta</b>
Nature of Job	-0.433	-0.287
Manager's Support	0.783	0.456
Effective Leadership	0.350	0.249
Performance Evaluation & Development	1.438	0.780
(Constant)	-6.807	
Function at Group Centroids	<b>Stay</b>	0.713
	<b>Leave</b>	-1.126
correctly classified	81.6%	
Eigenvalue	0.837	
Canonical correlation	0.675	
Wilk's Lambda	0.544	
p-value	0.000	

The most significant dimension of employee engagement affecting retention was found to be perception of performance evaluation & development, which had a positive impact on retention, and which by itself correctly predicted 81.6% of attrition/retention. Perception of manager's support was the next most significant dimension affecting retention, also having a positive impact on retention. Perception of nature of job and effective leadership were less significant in affecting retention - perception of nature of job had a negative impact on retention, while perception of effective leadership had a positive impact on retention.

Applying the discriminant function across demographic groups, women (with a discriminant score of 0.3293), employees in the age group 25-30 years (with a discriminant score of 0.2592), and employees in the functional domain of Operations (with a discriminant score of 0.2542) were found to be more engaged than other corresponding groups. On the other hand, employees in the age group 30-35 years (with a discriminant score of -0.6098), employees in the functional domain of Finance (with a discriminant score of -0.3664), employees with more than seven-and-a-half years of experience (with a discriminant score of -0.3084) were found to be more disengaged than other corresponding groups; and to some extent employees in the functional domain of Marketing (with a discriminant score of -0.2572), employees with more than five years of experience (with a discriminant score of -0.2381) were found to be neither engaged, nor disengaged.

## DISCUSSION

To foster an environment of employee engagement, organizations need strong systems and strategies that promote and support employee commitment, both at a rational level and at an emotional level. Organizations must re-examine their hiring and selection systems, must provide enhanced leadership training (coaching, influencing others, managing change), and must establish performance management and accountability systems that provide direction, support, and objective assessments. In fact, all aspects of HR work together to provide a foundation and environment in which engagement can flourish.

The results of the study suggest that there are some weaknesses in all dimensions of employee engagement in Indian IT companies. Perhaps the most interesting finding was that the older, more experienced employees were more disengaged than their younger, less-experienced counterparts. In fact, this finding is contrary to the findings of most recent research studies (e.g. the BlessingWhite studies, 2011 and 2013), though it may be compatible with Drizin's (2005) life cycle of engagement. In particular, this could be a peculiarity of the Indian demographic cycle. The age group of 30-35 years is typically that when employees get married, when they generally "try something new," and as a result their engagement levels drop. The finding suggests that there is an urgent need for IT companies to re-examine their employee engagement processes.

The results of study suggest that the first process that needs redressal is that of performance evaluation & development. This is the critical dimension of employee engagement. Thus, learning, growth, and progress must be fostered in IT companies, particularly amongst the older, more experienced employees.

Manager's support was also found to be a critical dimension of employee's engagement. This is in conformity with several studies that suggest that the major reason for an employee quitting their job is their manager. Managers must be able to help their team members, to give them timely feedback, and to give them recognition and rewards for good performance.

Trust in the leadership among the employees must also be enhanced. This can be achieved by developing and communicating an employee-friendly work culture. Executives must demonstrate consistency in words and actions, communicate a lot (with a lot of depth), and align all business practices and behaviors throughout the organization to drive results and engagement.

Nature of the job was surprisingly found to have a negative impact on retention. This is contrary to the finding in

several studies which suggest that lack of role clarity is a major reason for employees being disengaged. Perhaps this dimension needs to be examined more carefully in order to develop better retention strategies.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The results of the study seem to be compatible with Drizin's (2005) life cycle of engagement, suggesting that employee engagement levels are initially low, increase with experience/tenure in the organization, reaching a peak at around 5 years, and then decrease slowly to moderate levels beyond 7.5 years. Thus, IT organizations need to design their employee engagement programs to motivate both the less experienced, junior employees and the more experienced, senior employees. Further, at each stage, the focus of the employee engagement programs should be on certain specific aspects of employee engagement. For the less experienced employees, employee engagement programs should focus on reassurance of manager's support and instilling confidence in leadership, for which a structured mentoring program may be an effective approach; and rewarding good performance, which can be addressed through a well-designed incentive structure. On the other hand, for more experienced employees, employee engagement programs should focus on improving perception of nature of job, which may be achieved by giving employees greater job autonomy; more proactive manager support, in terms of timely feedback and recognition; greater role in decision-making, particularly in terms of management listening to employee suggestions; and a salary structure commensurate with their contribution to the organization.

Of course, the design of the employee engagement programs should take into consideration the factors that affect employees' perceptions of employee engagement at different stages of the life cycle. This is critical to the effectiveness of employee engagement programs, and is therefore an area that needs to be examined in greater depth.

## LIMITATIONS & SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The present study has several limitations. The sample size considered for the study is relatively low. Also, the study was a perceptual study, so it may be subject to various perceptual biases. Also, the data was collected from employees in different IT companies, so that there may be a high degree of heterogeneity in employee engagement processes across the samples.

Research on employee engagement is still in its nascent stage. Employee engagement must capture the two-way exchange

of effort between employees and employers, beyond the related concepts in HR such as job satisfaction, employee commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior. The present study has not addressed this aspect. There is a vast scope for research in this area. Also, as discussed above, another important area for further study is that of the factors that affect employees' perceptions of employee engagement at different stages of the life cycle.

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