Changing your employee engagement strategy

It is widely acknowledged that there is a shortage of software engineers worldwide, and that the best ones are in incredibly high demand. It is also acknowledged that in the service industry, the way a company's employees engage with their clients can make or break that company.

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Towards the end of the decade, Entelect started to make the shift from a labour broking type of organisation to a full software-services firm. The major force driving this change, and indeed growth, was an innovative employee engagement strategy. This strategy allows Entelect to attract talent better, retain that talent for longer, deliver a more efficient service to its customers and build a differentiator for the business.

Shashi Hansjee, Entelect's CEO, discusses how the company used a series of identification and action steps to transform Entelect's employee engagement to a point where the company is known to be a leader in this field. Hansjee's belief in the success of Entelect is underlined by firm's clean sweep in the 2014 Deloitte Best Company to Work For awards.

Step 1: Identify the values that are important to the business

The starting point is to identify the values that are important to the business, and employees need to be made aware of these values. An 'engaged employee' is one who is fully absorbed by his work and is enthusiastic about it. This employee takes positive action to further the organisation's reputation and interests. Hansjee believes that these values should be well known to business owners and leaders. He explains that Entelect chose to stay with the same set of principles that it had had in the previous years before the transformation process began. These include delivery of value to clients, technical excellence, quality output, continual improvement and empowering each other.

Step 2: Identify the values that are important to your employees

Identifying the values and areas that are important to employees can be a quite a lengthy process, involving surveys, interviews and informal discussions with staff members. Entelect is fortunate because the company's employee base comprises relatively like-minded software professionals, and the entire management team worked as software engineers in the past, giving its leaders a good idea where to start. There are standard areas that most people want from their work environment, such as career progression, growth opportunities, recognition and autonomy. To this list, Entelect added learning new or different technologies, being able to work on interesting challenges and projects and being able to innovate.

Step 3: Find where the overlaps exist to define the target culture and philosophy

Finding the overlaps between what is important to the business and what is central to the staff is where leaders need to be creative. Leaders need to make an effort to understand how employees will behave towards their areas of interest and importance and that these behaviours can be channelled towards the organisation's interests.

"Looking at these two lists, it became obvious to us that learning, growth, improvement, empowerment and technology were the areas we could combine into something that we could base our strategy around," explained Hansjee. "To turn those concepts into a reality, we encapsulated those areas into a core philosophy of improving and learning. We realised that employees who were granted the opportunity to improve themselves, to be innovative and to learn new technologies and best practice techniques, would, in turn, be more effective in continually driving improvement in our collective ability and therefore improve the quality and value delivered on our clients' projects."

Step 4: Transform this philosophy into concrete pillars where certain behaviours are defined and engagement is increased

Taking the values and philosophy, and transforming them into a realistic set of plans, policies, processes and programmes is the most difficult part of an employee engagement strategy. At Entelect, the strategy is structured around three pillars or areas. The first two - career growth and social organisation - should be important to any organisation. The third, and central, pillar involves the improving and learning focus.

In terms of career growth, Entelect launched an innovative performance management and coaching programme consisting of performance reviews four times a year and monthly one-on-ones with line managers. Employee's roles and responsibilities were defined in more detail, along with performance guidelines, which are then tailored to each individual employee. However, the responsibilities for each role were tightly linked to the other two pillars.

"For example, our senior engineers have to be involved in training and mentoring other members of staff, our team leads need to perform monthly one-on-ones with their team members, and more junior employees are expected to participate in training and various other social programmes," said Hansjee. "This type of responsibility is written into each role's KPAs."

In the social organisation pillar, the goal is to increase the camaraderie and improve relationships between all employees, regardless of level. Working together, exploiting commonalities and familiarity allows team members to give each other honest feedback in managing performance. It also allows employees based on different projects and in different locations to feel part of the company.

At Entelect, there is something for everyone, from football, golf, running, photography group and chess group to board games, LAN games, coding clubs, braais and scheduled lunches. The company also has a social responsibility foundation, which aims to put underprivileged students through their education. These 'clubs' are incredibly successful, mainly because the social champions among the employees came up with them, they run the clubs and they take great pride in them.

While the other two pillars are based on concepts that are applicable to most organisations, this improving and learning area is very specific to Entelect. According to Hansjee: "Learning is a part of life at Entelect, and because it is woven into our job descriptions and culture, we also had to base it on the something-for-everyone viewpoint. This way everyone can contribute and participate, regardless of their level or learning/teaching preferences." To this end, the company hosts weekly training courses and has open policies for external training, open access to online learning tutorials and courses, practical programmes that allow employees to dabble in different technologies in a sandbox environment, quarterly

conferences and expos and many more delivery channels.

Step 5: Underpin the pillars with a core

"Putting all these programmes in place is one thing, but ensuring that they all run together smoothly to reach the desired levels of employee engagement is the real trick," said Hansjee. Entelect has a core role dedicated to tying these areas together. It is critical that the person in this role understands what happens in the business, can relate to the employees and understands their challenges. This role needs to have ultimate ownership of the different pillars.

"Having the right leadership in this area can make or break the whole strategy. Happily for us, our General Manager of Communications, Yatish Parshotam, saw the vision and was able to bring all these elements together brilliantly," said Hansjee. Parshotam added: "It's a time-intensive strategy, which involves a lot of face-time with employees, ensuring that each person in the organisation is catered for, that any instances of good performance are recognised and rewarded and that relationships between employees and senior management are strong." These core principles, along with Entelect's novel staff rewards and recognition, performance management and employee-relationship manager systems also help keep the engagement levels high.

Step 6: Review annually and tweak

Once an organisation has a strong employee-engagement strategy and programme, it is critical to keep reviewing and tweaking it in order to keep the engagement levels high. As with any business, the priorities of the organisation and those of the employees can change, and a strategy must be strong and flexible enough to keep up with this. At Entelect, they aim to add something new to each of the pillars each year, with one or two of the additions large enough to re-energise the employees and get them behind a particular initiative. Hansjee said: "Over the past few years, we have seen improved retention rates, hiring rates and project success rates, and, ultimately, strong growth and better service to our clients. I attribute much of our success to our strong employee engagement."

It is widely acknowledged that strong employee-engagement approaches are successful in ensuring that employees are committed to their organisation's goals and values, motivated to contribute to organisational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well-being. There are many avenues a business can take to improving employee engagement, but it is clear that Entelect's innovative approach has proved hugely effective.