

JCURV PERSPECTIVES

HOW AGILE WAYS OF WORKING BOOST STAFF ENGAGEMENT



High levels of staff engagement lead to enhanced productivity, performance and wellbeing, yet many UK businesses are struggling to increase engagement levels within their organisations. Agile ways of working can have a profound positive impact on employee engagement and, in so doing, help businesses realise their true potential in these uncertain, Brexit-dominated times.

Uncertainty and the UK's declining engagement

Staff engagement levels in the UK currently lag behind those of many of our European peers and countries like the United States. A recent study on [Trends in Global Employee Engagement](#) (AON, 2018) showed a UK engagement score of 56% (against a US score of 64% and a global score of 65%). The study also found that the UK's employee engagement had fallen since the previous year and had seen the largest decrease among the 29 largest global economies. The study suggests this is related to increasing levels of instability.

In this volatile and uncertain climate, it is vital that organisations, and the UK as a whole, act swiftly to increase employee engagement. Organisations delivering a people strategy which increases actively engaged employees and reduces actively disengaged employees will not merely survive, they will thrive in these uncertain times.

Employee engagement boosts profits

According to the same 2018 study, an increase in employee engagement by five points increases revenue by 3%. Other research backs up the fact that a greater level of engagement drives productivity, improves products or services, attracts and retains talent, and enhances staff wellbeing to name but a few organisational benefits.

So, what do we mean by employee engagement? It has been defined in many ways, but the key principle is this: an engaged employee is enthusiastic about, and emotionally committed to their work and willing to 'go the extra mile'. Gallup data collected in 2014, 2015 and 2016 ([State of the Global Workplace Report 2017](#)) indicated that in Western Europe engaged employees account for just 10% of the workforce, while 71% are not engaged and 19% are actively disengaged.

How agile boosts staff engagement

Our experience has shown that agile ways of working are an effective way to increase staff engagement levels. Having supported several agile transformation programmes valued at over £1.6bn across several industries, we've helped over 5,000 people move to agile ways of working. (For more about agile working, see our report on [How to increase UK agility.](#))

As part of our approach, we measure employee engagement levels throughout the different stages of the transformation and have found that engagement of team members improves, on average, by 21% within the first 12 months.

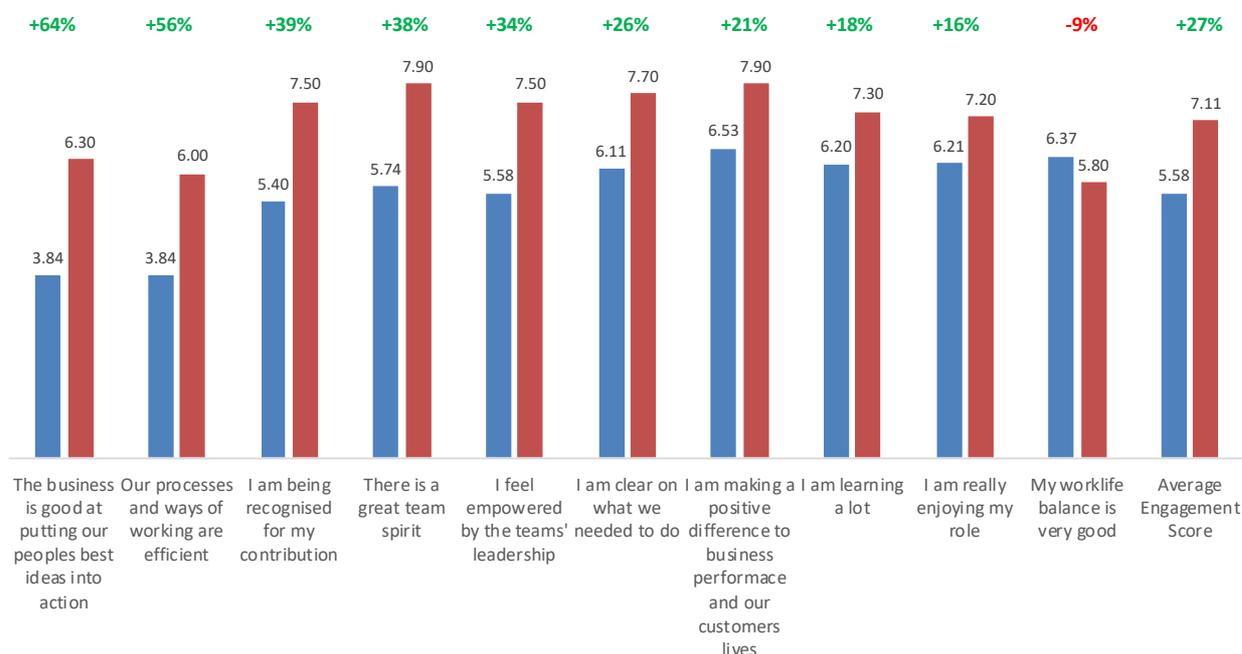
We asked team members at all levels to rate themselves against a series of statements, including: I am enjoying my role; I am learning a lot; I feel empowered; I am making a positive difference to our customers; there's a great team spirit; it's easy to get things done around here. After implementing agile ways of working, here is where we saw the most significant improvements:

Statement	Percentage increase in score
It's easy to get things done around here	+45%
I'm really enjoying my role	+38%
There's a great team spirit	+25%
I am making a positive difference to our customers	+20%

A member of an agile delivery team said: 'For the first time, I am being trusted to fix a significant business problem, working with the right people and not weighed down by bureaucracy. We can deliver things in weeks rather than months or years. I am loving working in this way!'

The chart below illustrates how engagement increased over six months during a recent agile transformation supported by JCURV.

Figure 1: Survey results from a retail bank comparing engagement scores before and after six months of introducing agile ways of working (engagement scores out of 10)



Why agile working has this positive impact

In the long term, intrinsically led people (people motivated to perform an activity for its deep internal and personal reward) outperform extrinsically led people (people motivated to perform an activity to earn an external tangible reward). In his seminal book *Drive*, Daniel Pink shows that the secret to high performance isn't our biological drive or our reward-and-punishment drive, but our third drive: our deep-seated desire to direct our own lives, to extend and expand our abilities, and to live a life of purpose. There are three intrinsic elements at work here:

- Autonomy – the desire to direct our own lives
- Mastery – the urge to get better and better at something that matters
- Purpose – the yearning to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves.

It is these three elements that really matter to employees and can be enhanced within an organisation through agile ways of working. The table below shows how:

Intrinsic elements	How agile ways of working support increased engagement
<p>Autonomy – direct our own lives</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders let go of control and empower teams to deliver, test and learn within a clear and safe environment. • The teams have a voice and leaders listen through regular and constructive conversations. • The self-organising, dedicated nature of the team means the team works out the ‘how’ within parameters set by the leaders. • Tackling big challenges as a team increases collaboration and strategic thinking. • Teams and stakeholders are kept aligned through frequent Reviews, Retrospectives and Stand-ups.
<p>Mastery – get better at something that matters</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals and teams realise more of their own potential more quickly than before as a result of frequent feedback, which occurs throughout the Sprint process. • Teams undertake regular Retrospectives ensuring continuous learning of what works, what doesn’t and what could be done better. • The cross-functional, collaborative approach of teams leads to a sense of ownership of their development as well as team connection. • There is continual feedback from peers who are delivering together daily.
<p>Purpose – serve something larger than oneself</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders and teams are mobilised by a real sense of vision and direction by working on audacious challenges they genuinely care about. • Agile is customer-centric: teams are able to make a meaningful difference to their customers by focussing on truly valued outcomes, not processes.

From sprinting to sustaining

Implementing agile practices is only the start. The ultimate aim is embedded agility within an organisation, an agile mindset, if you like. This requires the organisation to:

- Maintain a compelling vision to win employees’ hearts as well as minds
- Proactively practise being agile, not just doing agile – leaders should be role-models for agreed values and behaviours
- Empower teams to work out the ‘how’ – consistently focussing on delivering value to the customer early and often
- Create an environment that makes teams feel safe to experiment, adapt, learn and innovate
- Celebrate successes and learnings, recognising teams at regular milestones.

Our experience is that achieving agile working across an organisation creates an exciting and engaging place to work, where employees are willing to go the extra mile to achieve a shared goal. As Brexit and other related factors continue to create uncertainty, it is organisations that empower employees, enable continuous learning and create a compelling sense of purpose during times of uncertainty and change that will thrive.

JCURV is a London-based management consultancy working with FTSE 100 organisations, with a mission to increase the agility of the UK.