



RETURN on ENGAGEMENT

Measuring ROE and maximizing transferee engagement  

By Ellie Sullivan, SCRCP, SGMS-T

“Can’t nothin’ bring me down ... ’cause I’m happy, happy, happy, happy!”

Does Pharrell Williams’ infectious song “Happy” make you want to “clap along like a room without a roof”? It’s certainly a prescription for success: When your employees are happy and highly engaged, your business thrives—profits soar, service levels become legendary, and stock values skyrocket! No wonder today’s CEOs are so concerned with employee engagement.

While stimulating opportunities, career progression, and a promising future should make mobile employees happy, work-related moves can bring a host of challenges that make maintaining high levels of engagement more difficult.

Think about it. Not only is relocation one of the more stressful life events one can endure, it also bombards employees with a unique assortment of challenges, including—but not limited to—adjusting to a new boss, being separated from their former leader, finding their place in a new team or leading a new group of colleagues, and navigating new organizational land mines. For assignees in a new country, the situation can be even worse,

with language and cultural barriers and family adjustment adding another layer of concern. Even being on assignment for a short period of time on an unaccompanied basis can put strain on the employee, family, and household.

So we can all agree that the risks and rewards are magnified within the mobile workforce. But we need to acknowledge the primary reason: It’s because these employees are rock stars. They are executives, technical experts, critical recruits, and high-potentials who drive global expansion and profitability. Chris Brunone, executive vice president of Talent Management at Weichert Workforce Mobility, explains, “They propel growth and shape the future of your company, and because they can impact the bottom line so significantly, keeping them highly engaged is vital. In fact, most companies struggle to measure return on investment, which is why I recommend measuring ROE, or return on engagement, as more meaningful and impactful!”

So how can we better understand ROE and begin to improve engagement among the mobile





Source: BlessingWhite Inc.

workforce? It starts with a common understanding of what it means to be highly engaged.

DEFINING ENGAGEMENT

Experts agree that being highly engaged is not just a “happiness” metric—it’s a two-way street, fulfilling the employee while advancing company goals. Global consulting firm BlessingWhite Inc., a leading authority on employee engagement and leadership development, defines engaged employees as workers who are personally satisfied with their role *and* are making a valuable contribution to the company’s success. Engaged employees are not just committed. They are not just passionate or proud. They have a line of sight on their own future and on the organization’s mission and goals. They are *enthused and in gear*, using their talents and discretionary effort to make a difference in their employer’s quest for sustainable business success. Simply put, engaged employees are having *great days at work* at a higher rate than disengaged employees. Does that describe your mobile employees?

You would hope so, but the sad reality is that many organizations fail to leverage opportunities to sustain

and increase engagement during or after relocation. The bottom line is, employees want to know someone cares about them now and in the future.

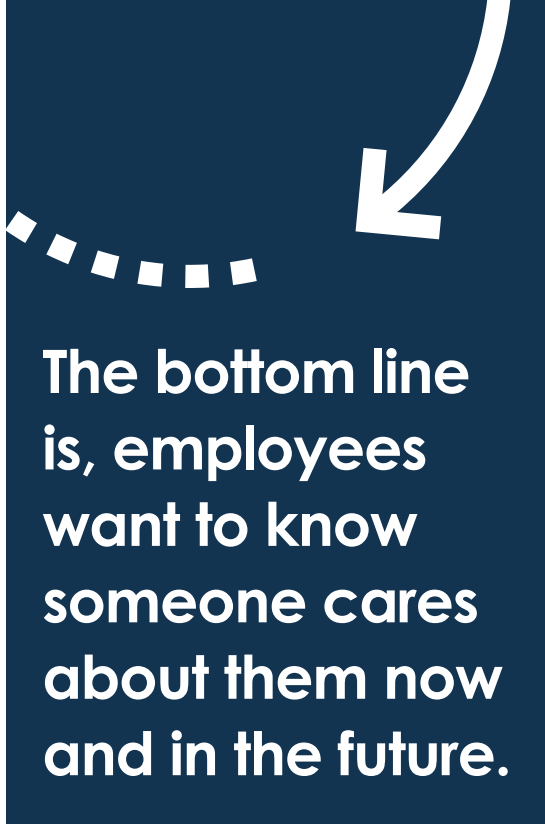
OPPORTUNITY COSTS

Despite the desire to be more strategic, many companies still manage mobility reactively, assigning employees to fill urgent gaps without giving thought to the long-term ramifications of each assignment, how it correlates with their career development goals, how it will impact skills development, and how the enhanced skills their employees acquire in the new location can be cascaded back into the organization to help grow the business.


Such a narrow, tactical, and short-term focus can be costly and result in lost productivity, lower morale, absenteeism, safety incidents, or in the worst case, higher turnover.

MEASURING ENGAGEMENT

Management consultant and author Peter Drucker is often quoted as saying that “you can’t manage what you can’t measure,” and for many organizations the annual employee engagement survey is how they



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measure engagement. BlessingWhite's research indicates that engagement levels among "great" organizations hover at 77 percent, but sadly, great organizations represent only 10 percent of the organizations measured by BlessingWhite. We can, however, learn a lot from these companies.

Great organizations focus on the drivers of engagement by creating an environment in which employees can do their best work. Mobility, if positioned and implemented effectively, can ensure employees are in the right function and location to do their best work. But that's not all it takes to drive engagement. Companies and managers need to invest in the people, focus on their culture, and develop leaders. The BlessingWhite infographic (Page 56) illustrates the tenets that impact engagement and the results great organizations enjoy.

HOW TO IMPACT ENGAGEMENT AMONG THE MOBILE WORKFORCE

Most of us, at one time or another, have been asked to participate in a corporate engagement survey. While this touch point is essential, it may not be crafted to gain insight into the unique perspective transferees have. Furthermore, to be effective, Matthew Varava, vice president, employee engagement practice leader, at BlessingWhite, suggests measuring and managing engagement should "move from annual and awkward to everyday and energizing." People don't measure their job satisfaction or contribution once a year. As they progress through an assignment or relocation, they are constantly assessing their decision to move and their level of contribution and satisfaction.

As a result, Weichert and BlessingWhite are conducting comprehensive research to gain a deeper understanding of engagement among the mobile workforce. While results are pending, we can learn a lot from BlessingWhite's broader engagement research, which concludes that what drives engagement is clarity on the organization's priorities, communicating through authentic feedback, and having plentiful career development opportunities. What these factors mean in practice, however, can be deeply personal and magnified for the mobile population.

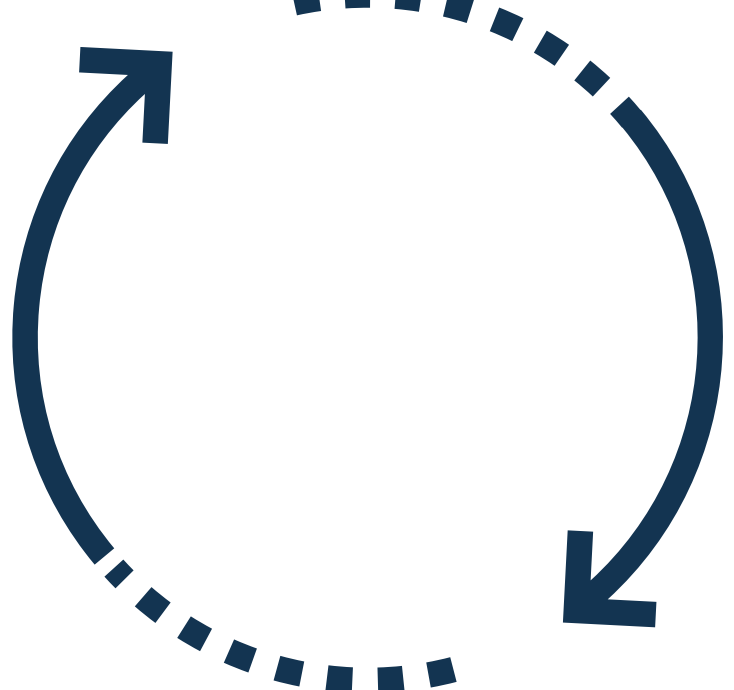
BEST PRACTICES

Great organizations use engagement surveys and listening strategies to improve communication. They focus on linking their strategy to the employee and realize that engagement isn't the end ... it's the beginning. They make engagement a shared responsibility among leaders, managers, and employees and infuse consistency around frequent and energizing conversations about career progression.

Senior leadership should provide an inspiring vision for the future and increase communication and clarity to provide alignment to business strategy. To align long-term employee aspirations with the organization's talent needs of tomorrow, great organizations focus on career and growth.

For transferees and assignees, leaders need to remove obstacles to empowering employees to do their best work. Specific to relocation, this means policies and how they are administered should enhance communication, ease the transition, and ensure a speedy and successful settling-in to the new location.

For example, the true intent of home leave is to facilitate opportunities to conduct engagement discussions, performance reviews, and other career-oriented activities, yet too many organizations miss the opportunity to leverage this built-in chance to communicate with assignees about their experience in real time. Another, more positive example is ATB Financial, an award-winning "best company to work for" that is reinventing the "mobile experience" by connecting transferees and their families with colleagues in the new location before the move. These resources serve as ombudsmen—establishing and strengthening relationships in the new location to ensure a successful landing. They are increasing their ROE with timely, personalized networking.



WHAT CAN MOBILITY MANAGERS DO?

Voice-of-the-customer surveys reveal that most transferees or assignees share one common belief—that mobility is a positive experience for the individual, family, business, and company. Through this lens we also gather insight into what they value most. When employees are relocated with competitive benefits that relieve financial burdens and unshackle them from tactical aspects such as packing, arranging temporary living, etc., they focus on:

- having enough information about the destination (especially schools and housing),
- having an advocate to help navigate the situation when they get there,
- devoting more time to accommodate family issues and school schedules, and
- knowing how the move will impact their career.

These are the attributes of a relocation program that will drive higher engagement. But we can, and should, do more.

Mobility has long aspired to play a more strategic role in the organization, and what sets the most effective functions apart from the rest is the ability to contribute on a more strategic level in areas such as engagement. Even without a direct reporting arrangement—less than 10 percent report in to talent—these functions need to be aligned in efforts to drive ROE, and measuring and impacting engagement provides a distinctive opening to become more strategic.

Adapting these tenets for the mobile workforce starts with measuring engagement levels within the mobile workforce. Professor and author W. Edwards Deming is often quoted as saying that “without data you’re just another person with an opinion.” This will provide informed insight into how to favorably impact the mobility experience before engagement dips, and how to better drive engagement over the life of the assignment and beyond.

Mobility can also equip home and host managers with tools to facilitate communication, provide authentic feedback, and plan for repatriating employees. These tools could be something as simple as a checklist or automatic triggers to alert managers of impending assignment end dates. Facilitating deeper, more frequent, and personalized career conversations is the purpose of career discussion tools such as the X Model developed by BlessingWhite.

The X Model is a proprietary methodology to determine engagement levels across two axes:

contribution and satisfaction. As illustrated in the sample X Model (Page 57), maximum engagement is a function of maximum contribution to the organization and maximum satisfaction for the individual. This kind of tool is a particularly effective way to drive engagement among the mobile population.

A VITAL ROLE

There is a strong correlation among highly engaged employees, retention, and performance, and because the mobile population is especially vulnerable to dips in engagement, it becomes vital to support transferees and assignees with the right tools, policies, and strategies to sustain engagement levels. With significant investments already being made in the mobile workforce, the risks are much greater, but so, too, are the rewards and the opportunity to demonstrate a favorable return on engagement!

We know that “engagement scores” are not the prize, but savvy organizations realize having the right data to inform your engagement efforts is critical to improving ROE.

Mobility managers can play a vital role in sustaining a highly engaged—and, yes, happy—mobile workforce. It begins by acknowledging the vital role you can play in helping leaders, managers, and relocating employees measure engagement—lest you be perceived as just another person with an opinion. Fueled by these insights, you can ensure the support, communication, and commitment required at each stage of the employee’s journey to enhance and sustain a highly engaged mobile workforce. *M*

Ellie Sullivan, SCRP, SGMS-T, is senior vice president, advisory practices, at Weichert Workforce Mobility. She can be reached at +1 781 982 5017 or esullivan@weichertwm.com.