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## Why Employees Are Less Engaged Than Ever

By Toddi Gutner | [Business on Main](#)

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**A recent study found that employee engagement is at an all-time low. Find out why, and what you can do to turn it around.**

While policymakers focus on encouraging small companies to hire more workers and jump-start the economy, business owners would do well to look at their existing workforce before taking on new employees.

It turns out they might not like what they find. According to research conducted by Hewitt Associates, employee engagement in June 2010 had its largest quarterly decline in more than 15 years, when Hewitt first began tracking this metric. While these numbers are derived more from larger companies, the trend is apparent across the board.

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It's hard to pinpoint exactly why employees are so disconnected from their work these days. Industry experts cite any number of reasons, including management distrust, lack of job mobility in the recession, and CEO turnover, among other things.

But perhaps even more important is the impact of disengaged employees, who are toxic to any company. "You don't want [employees] to feel stagnant in their careers, where they feel the only opportunity for advancement is out the door," says Barbara Zung, director of global organizational development at the American Management Association.

It isn't hard to understand that engaged employees are more productive, profitable and customer-focused, and less likely to leave. When a business loses the ability to retain and engage talent, the best and the brightest jump ship — and with them goes the opportunity to move the company forward.

So now that we've defined the problem, just what is the solution? We asked several experts and business owners for their opinions on how to re-engage employees in their work. Below are some of their suggestions.

### Provide meaningful work

Teresa Amabile, professor of business administration and a director of research at Harvard Business School, conducted a comprehensive survey where she asked 238 people to write in an electronic diary every day for five months about how passionately they felt about their work and how committed they were to do a great job in their organizations.

"We found that the most important indicators on employee engagement [were] not things that most managers think about," says Amabile, co-author of "The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work." "The most important event that happened was simply 'making progress in meaningful work.' That's not what we expected," says Amabile.

When Amabile refers to meaningful work, she's talking about "work where the person is contributing something of real value, something they care about," she says. "If they could find meaning to the work — even contributing value to the team or the organization — this would make a difference."

To aid in the process of finding this meaning, Amabile recommends that employees write in a daily journal to keep a record of both "feeling good and planning for the next day."

### Help workers understand how they fit into the 'big picture'

There are two factors to employee engagement, says Lynne Sarikas, director of the MBA career center at Northeastern University's College of Business: "How the individual feels engaged with their specific job, and how the individual feels engaged with the company."

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With regard to a specific job, it's essential that employees understand how their particular position "contributes to the overall goals and success of the company," says Sarikas. In connecting to the company, each person needs to know the mission of the organization and how they are part of it.

#### Create an empowering environment

To do this, Johnny Laurent, vice president and general manager of Sage North America, a business solution software company, has a six-step process. He recommends that employers:

- **Inform and communicate.** Small-business owners need to know their employees. "I need to be in their lives," Laurent says. "I need to be open with them about where we're going and what we're doing."
- **Build collaborative work teams.** This is essential, since businesses are built with relationships.
- **Provide work-life balance.** The up-and-coming generation wants work-life balance. "I allow them to work the way they work best, which keeps them engaged," Laurent says.
- **Recognize employees.** This is key, says Laurent. It can be in front of other employees or just one-on-one, but employers need to give employees something that isn't monetary.
- **Offer career training and development.** People today want more training to develop their careers and themselves.
- **Consider compensation and benefits.** This is last for a reason — it's usually the least important criterion for employee engagement.

To be sure, employee engagement is more of an art than a science. But these simple suggestions can go a long way toward keeping your talent from heading for the door.

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Toddi Gutner is an award-winning journalist, writer and editor and currently a contributing writer covering personal finance for Reuters.

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