

Dolgozói elkötelezettség és HR gyakorlatok kapcsolata az Európai régióban

Relationship between employee engagement and HR practices in the European region

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Összefoglalás

A cikk bemutatja az összesen közel 300 Európai HR szakember részvételével 2010-ben és 2012-ben végzett európai "Employee Engagement Maturity Survey" kutatás eredményeit. A kutatás a különböző dolgozói aspektusok, illetve az alkalmazott HR és elkötelezettségi gyakorlatok közötti összefüggést vizsgálja, továbbá ezek kapcsolatát különböző tényezőkkel, mint a szervezet mérete, regionális elhelyezkedése és üzleti környezete.

Kulcsszavak: dolgozói, elkötelezettség, európai, HR gyakorlatok

Abstract

The article presents the results of the European "Employee Engagement Maturity Survey", which was conducted with the total participation of almost 300 European HR professionals in 2010 and 2012. The research investigates the relationship between different employee aspects and applied HR and engagement practices as well as their relationship with different factors such as the the size of the organisation, its regional location and its business context.

Keywords: employee, engagement, European, HR practices

Background of the research

The 'Employee Engagement Maturity Survey' was conducted on behalf of Stamford Global (SG Magyarország Vezetőképző Kft.). The company's mission is to nourish international transfer of cutting-edge knowledge and pioneering practices. Participants of the research were clients of Stamford Global and members of the HCM Excellence network, which is an on-line business community moderated by Stamford Global. In 2010 149, while in 2012 127 European HR professionals participated in the research.

Objectives of the research

The main objectives of the research were to reveal the following areas:

- How did the perceptions about the business context and certain employee aspects of European HR professionals change during the downturn and in the last two years?
- How important was employee engagement within organisations across Europe?
- How consciously was employee engagement managed by European organisations?
- What were those HR practices that had been applied the most commonly in organisations across Europe?
- What are the possible effects of different HR and employee engagement practices on certain employee aspects?

Demographics of research participants

Majority of respondents (80% in 2010 and 65% in 2012) were HR Directors and HR Managers.

The Central and Eastern European (CEE) region was represented by 50% of respondents in 2010 and 41% in 2012. In 2010 a considerable group (35%) were coming from the UK or Ireland, while in 2012 there was a more balanced distribution of respondents among the European regions out of CEE.

In 2010 70% of organisations had less than 2,500 employees, while in 2012 62% of respondents represented large organisations employing more than 5,000 employees, while the ratio of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises was 19%.

Importance of employee engagement in Europe

Almost all responding European HR professionals (98% in 2010 and 100% in 2012) agreed that improved employee engagement has a direct and positive effect on the organisation's better business performance. In the majority of represented organisations (79% in 2010 and 81% in 2012) employee engagement was considered to be a top priority or very important. In both years app. two thirds of respondents (65% in 2010 and 68% in 2012) reported to have a clearly or somewhat defined employee engagement strategy, moreover in 2012 72% of these strategies were clearly linked to business results.

We can conclude that among European HR professionals participating in the current research it is a widely accepted notion that engagement directly contributes to business results. The research shows that within the current sample high importance is assigned to employee engagement and efforts are expressed in order not only to develop defined engagement strategies but also to clearly link engagement measures to business results. According to Ulrich and Smallwood (2005) even though it is accepted that the investments in developing HR practices contribute to an increased level of employee engagement, which may predict higher profitability, it is substantial that return on investments could

be measured clearly. The findings of the current research support the observation of a positive change into this suggested direction.

Measurement of 'Employee Aspects'

The research was carried out in a period of time, when the business environment was characterized by dramatic changes due to the world-wide economic crisis followed by a slow recovery period. In order to investigate whether this was reflected within certain employee aspects participants of the research were asked the following questions (in each year referring to a two-year period):

- How has employee morale changed?
- How has the engagement level of your employees changed?
- How has your ability changed in attracting talent?
- How has your ability changed in retaining talent?

Based on the responses to these questions principal component analyses (PCA) were conducted. Since the original variables were measured on a five-point Likert scale, while PCA can be conducted only on variables measured on a ratio scale or alternatively dichotomous variables (Sajtos and Mitev 2007; Székelyi and Barna 2008) answers were re-coded into dichotomous variables, where 'significantly worse' and 'somewhat worse' answers were coded as '0' and 'remained the same', 'somewhat better' and 'significantly better' responses were coded as '1'.

As shown in Table 1 the KMO measures are both above the 0.5 required limit (Sajtos and Mitev 2007; Székelyi and Barna 2008), therefore the new principal components are appropriate to represent the original variables. This is reinforced by the Bartlett-tests, where level of significance were both below the 0.05 required limit (Sajtos and Mitev 2007; Székelyi and Barna 2008). Henceforth the constructed principal components are referred as 'Employee Aspects'.

Table 1. KMO and Bartlett's Test for 2010 and 2012

KMO and Bartlett's Test		2010	2012
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.581	.700
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	101.006	172.276
	df	3	6
	Sig.	.000	.000

Source: Own research

As Table 2 illustrates in 2010 ability to retain talent, employee morale and employee engagement were included into the 'Employee Aspects' principal component, while in 2012 ability to attract talent was also included. Ability to attract talent showed a somewhat different pattern than the other 3 components. This may be explained by the economic environment as during the downturn—which was characterized by a high-level of uncertainty—people may have been

less willing to leave their organisations, therefore a notable proportion of respondents perceived their ability to retain talent as somewhat or significantly better than before the downturn. At the same time—hit by the downturn—a lot of organisations were forced to lay off a huge number of employees, which made it possible for other organisations to attract more talents than before, consequently talent attraction ability was also perceived as somewhat or significantly better in the corresponding period. From 2010 a slow recovery in economy could be observed which may explain that a growing ratio of respondents perceived their ability to retain talent somewhat or significantly worse comparing to the retrospective period.

Table 2. Component matrix for 2010 and 2012

Component Matrix^a 2010		Component Matrix^a 2012	
	Component		Component
	1		1
Talent retention	.636	Employee attraction	.747
Employee morale	.859	Talent retention	.806
Employee engagement	.901	Employee morale	.895
		Employee engagement	.805

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 1 components extracted.

Source: Own research

The 'Employee Aspects 2010' principal component included 65.1% of information content of the original variables, while 'Employee Aspects 2012' included 66.4% (Table 3).

An 'Employee Aspects' score was generated and assigned to each respondent in both years. The higher the 'Employee Aspects' score is the higher degree of increase in employee morale and engagement as well as a higher increase in the level of ability to retain (and in 2012 also to attract) talent was reported based on the perceptions of responding European HR professionals.

Table 3. Total variance explained for 2010 and 2012

Total variance explained 2010						
Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	1.954	65.128	65.128	1.954	65.128	65.128
2	.763	25.427	90.556			
3	.283	9.444	100.000			
Total variance explained 2012						
Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.658	66.438	66.438	2.658	66.438	66.438
2	.757	18.937	85.375			
3	.390	9.743	95.118			
4	.195	4.882	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Source: *Own research*

Measurement of HR practices

The research also revealed those HR practices which were the most commonly used among European organisations represented in the research. Participants were asked to indicate those HR practices—from a pre-defined list—that were being applied within their organisations on a regular basis. Table 4 illustrates the ratio of respondents who indicated the use of referred HR practice on a regular basis.

HR practices were operationalised by standardising each HR practice based on occurrence frequency within the sample, where more frequent HR practices were taken into account with lower weights, while higher weights were allocated to less frequent HR practices. An 'HR Practices Index' was developed and assigned to each represented organisation by summing up the standardised values of each HR practice that was indicated as being used on a regular basis within the organisation. Hence, the higher the 'HR Practices Index' is the more progressive the organisation may be considered based on the variety and nature of HR practices being applied on a regular basis.

Table 4. HR practices indicated as used on a regular basis

Applied HR practices	2010	2012
Regular performance reviews	89%	89%
Training and development programs	87%	85%
Leadership development programs	66%	77%
Employee Engagement surveys	59%	62%
Behavioural interviews in recruitment process	59%	62%
Succession planning	61%	60%
Identifying talent pool	55%	59%
Flexible work arrangements	n.d.*	58%
Coaching	62%	58%
On-boarding / induction programs	71%	57%
360 degree evaluation	49%	57%
Employer branding	39%	53%
Talent management programs	n.d.*	52%
Overall competency model	49%	51%
Employee Satisfaction surveys	63%	50%
Career planning	50%	47%
Competitive remuneration	55%	45%
Mentoring	n.d.*	43%
Social media	n.d.*	43%
Management trainee programs	47%	37%
Assessment Centres (AC) in recruitment process	37%	36%
Participating in 'Best Employer' surveys	29%	34%
Work-life balance programs	28%	34%
CSR programs	36%	33%
Development Centres (DC)	25%	23%
Individually customized incentives	17%	22%
Individualized job design	20%	17%
Interim managers	n.d.*	11%
Participating in 'Family Friendly Employer' surveys	7%	8%
Total	100%	100%

Ratio is in proportion to the total number of respondents of the present question in the corresponding year

* No data

Source: Own research

Relationship between 'Employee Aspects' and the 'HR practices Index'

Hypothesis 1: 'Employee Aspects' and 'HR Practices Index' are positively related to each other.

In order to test Hypothesis 1, a correlation analysis was conducted between the created variables of 'Employee Aspects' principal component and the 'HR Practices Index' both in 2010 and 2012. As Table 6 illustrates in both years correlation between 'Employee Aspects' and the 'HR practices index' was found

to be significant at a 5% significance level however the strength of this relationship can be considered only as weak, because the Pearson correlation coefficients were only 0.225 in 2010 and 0.220 in 2012 (Sajtos and Mitev 2007; Székelyi and Barna 2008).

Table 5. Correlations between 'Employee Aspects' and 'HR Practices Index'

Correlations							
2010		PC Employee Aspects 2010	Stand HR Practices Index 2010	2012		PC Employee Aspects 2012	Stand HR Practices Index 2012
PC Employee Aspects 2010	Pearson Correlation	1	,225*	PC Employee Aspects 2010	Pearson Correlation	1	,220*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.013		Sig. (2-tailed)		.032
	N	120	120		N	95	95
Stand HR Practices Index 2010	Pearson Correlation	,225*	1	Stand HR Practices Index 2010	Pearson Correlation	,220*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.013			Sig. (2-tailed)	.032	
	N	120	149		N	95	127

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Own research

Based on these results we can accept Hypothesis 1, thus 'Employee Aspects' and 'HR Practices Index' are positively related to each other. Therefore we can conclude that in the current sample of European organisations the more various and progressive HR practices were used within an organisation the higher level of positive increase in employee morale and engagement could have been anticipated as well as the higher level of increase in the ability of retaining (and in 2012 also attracting) talent based on the perceptions of responding European HR professionals.

This result allows us to assume that investments into the development of various HR practices contributes to a positive change in certain employee aspects such as the level of engagement and morale of employees as well as the organisations' ability to attract and retain talent. Even though the relationship between the 'Employee Aspects' and the 'HR Practices Index' was found to be significant, the strength of correlation wasn't proved to be strong within the current sample. This means that the operation of certain HR practices itself may not necessarily lead

to the high level of 'Employee Aspects'. We assume that the quality of way certain HR practices are being applied may also have a notable effect on 'Employee Aspects'. For instance, an organisation may have the most cutting-edge performance management system in place if managers are not skilled in providing clear, objective and constructive feedback to their subordinates than it may rather disengage than engage employees.

Further analyses

Table 6. Analyses of variance

	'Employee Aspects'				'HR Practices Index'			
	2010		2012		2010		2012	
	Sig.	Eta Squared	Sig.	Eta Squared	Sig.	Eta Squared	Sig.	Eta Squared
Size of the organisation	0.966		0.883		0.000	0.166	0.000	0.222
Region	0.652		0.713		0.122		0.198	
Business context	0.000	0.267	0.000	0.259				
Importance of employee engagement	0.023	0.062	0.001	0.177				
Having a defined engagement strategy	0.000	0.144	0.008	0.144				
Measurement of engagement	0.029	0.059	0.031	0.095				
Conducting employee surveys	0.346		0.734					
Sharing results of surveys	0.771		0.753					
Employee involvement in follow-ups	0.560		0.235					

Sig.: refers to whether the relationship is significant between the examined factors (significance is calculated at the 0.05 level)

Eta Squared: percentage of variance in the heterogeneity of dependent factor explained by the independent factor

Source: Own research

In order to test the forthcoming hypotheses analyses of variance were conducted in SPSS between 'Employee Aspects' as well as the 'HR Practices Index' and the corresponding survey responses.

Table 6 illustrates the significance value (Sig.) of the ANOVA tables of each conducted analysis of variance. If the significance value is below 0.05 than the relationship between the examined factors is significant. Based on the analysis of variance we cannot make conclusions about the strength of the relationship between the two factors however we can see if the relationship is significant. If the relationship is significant than the 'Eta Squared' value shows the percentage of variance in the heterogeneity of the dependent factor (i.e. 'Employee Aspects' or 'HR Practices Index') explained by the independent factor (i.e. question responses) (Sajtos and Mitev 2007; Székelyi and Barna 2008).

Demographics' relation to 'Employee Aspects' and the 'HR Practices Index'

Hypothesis 2: Size of the organisation is not related to 'Employee Aspects', while related to the 'HR Practices Index'.

Based on the analyses results (Table 6) Hypothesis 2 can be approved and we can conclude that the size of the organisation is not related to 'Employee Aspects', while it does have a significant effect on the variety and nature of HR practices being used on a regular basis at the organisation. Interestingly however the latter relationship was not found to be linear. Even though the smallest organisations had the lowest 'HR Practices Index' scores and the largest ones had the highest scores, a similar order could not be observed in regards to the rest categories of organisation sizes. Therefore although the size of the organisation was found to be significantly related to the 'HR Practices Index' we cannot conclude that the higher the number of employees an organisation has the higher its 'HR Practices Index' is within the current sample.

Hypothesis 3: Region of the organisation is related to 'Employee Aspects' and to the 'HR Practices Index'.

As the ANOVA significance values were all above the 0.05 limit (Sajtos and Mitev 2007; Székelyi and Barna 2008) therefore we can conclude that in the current sample the region of the organisation did neither show a significant relationship with responding HR professionals' perceptions about the change in the level of employee morale and engagement nor their organisation's ability to retain (and in 2012 also to attract) talent. Furthermore, the region of the organisation neither was found to be in a significant relationship with the variety and nature of HR practices being applied on a regular basis.

These results are somewhat contradictory to other research findings, where differences were identified in e.g. the engagement level of employees based on regional classification (e.g. Kenexa 2012). Other, more established and expansive researches (e.g. the CRANET research: Farkas et al. 2009; Poór 2009; Karoliny et al. 2010; Kohont and Poór 2011) have differentiated certain

characteristics of HR management practices unique to Hungary and the CEE region compared to a wider worldwide data, which would have supported the assumption that there might be a difference in the variety of applied HR practices across different regions.

Relationship between the business context and 'Employee Aspects'

Hypothesis 4: Perceptions about the change of business context are positively related to 'Employee Aspects'.

As per Table 6 HR professionals' perceptions about the change of business context was found to be in a significant relationship with 'Employee Aspects', having the 'business context factor' explaining app. one quarter of the variance in the heterogeneity of 'Employee Aspects' in both years. Based on the mean calculation of each response categories we can conclude that the better the business context was perceived by the responding HR professional the more positive change was perceived in the related employee aspects, such as employee morale and engagement as well as the better ability of retaining (and in 2012 also attracting) talent. Therefore Hypothesis 4 can be approved within the current sample.

Because of the nature of analysis of variance (which provides information about the percentage of variance in the heterogeneity of dependent factor explained by the independent factor in case the relationship was found to be significant between the two factors) we cannot make conclusions whether higher 'Employee Aspects' scores had an effect on the business results of an organisation and therefore the perceptions of responding HR professionals about the business context. However the current finding supports the converse causality approach between employee attitudes and performance introduced by Lawler and Porter (1967) and reinforced by Schneider et al. (2003).

Relationship between engagement practices and 'Employee Aspects'

Hypothesis 5: Importance of employee engagement within the organisation is positively related to 'Employee Aspects'.

Hypothesis 6: Having a clearly defined employee engagement strategy is positively related to 'Employee Aspects'.

Hypothesis 7: Measuring employee engagement is positively related to 'Employee Aspects'.

Hypothesis 8: Conducting employee surveys is positively related to 'Employee Aspects'.

Hypothesis 9: Sharing the survey results with employees is positively related to 'Employee Aspects'.

Hypothesis 10: Involvement of employees in the development of action plans as a follow-up on employee surveys is positively related to 'Employee Aspects'.

Based on the results shown in Table 6 we can accept Hypotheses 5-7 and reject Hypotheses 8-10. We can conclude that within the current sample of European

organisations the importance of employee engagement, having a defined employee engagement strategy and measuring employee engagement showed a positive relationship with 'Employee Aspects'. Interestingly in the meanwhile conducting employee surveys, sharing the results of the surveys with employees and involving employees in the development of action plans as a follow-up on employee surveys were not found to be in a significant relationship with 'Employee Aspects'.

These latter results are contradictory to those widely accepted notions according to which providing opportunities for employees to voice their opinions or give feedback, maintaining honest communication with them and involving them in decision-making contribute to a higher level of overall employee engagement (e.g. Koncz 2004; Karoliny and Poór 2010; Fehér 2011). The reason behind these results may lie in the quality of applied HR practices. Based on the current research we do not have information about whether employees of the represented organisations were indeed asked with the right survey questions, whether they really perceived the results as sincere and straightforward or whether they were really provided the opportunity to contribute to action plan development in a truly meaningful way.

Limitations of the research

Even though the research provided an interesting insight into the relationship between certain employee aspects and applied HR as well as engagement practices, the research had its limitations as well. The sample cannot be considered representative, because of the exiguous number of respondents. Also, the structure of the sample does not reflect the real regional and industrial distribution of European organisations. Therefore even though the conclusions are true for the represented organisations, they cannot be generalised for the whole European region. Additional researches are suggested in order to further investigate the findings of the current survey.

Another limitation of the research was that data regarding the business context and employee aspects, such as employee morale and engagement as well as organisations' ability to attract and retain talent were based on the responding HR professionals' perceptions and not on objective data. Perceptions are highly dependent on numerous factors related to the responding individual (Komor and Mihály 2011) that were not examined in the frame of this research. For example a research by Human Synergistics International (2006) found that top management's and HR managers' perceptions about the organisation's culture were typically much more positive than the employees'. Therefore the reliability of the data may be questionable. Also, the questions were constructed in a way that was revealing the change over a 2-year period both in 2010 and in 2012. Consequently, data was reflecting a relative position compared to a previous situation of the respondent organisation, however does not provide information that would allow a between-organisation comparison from an absolute perspective.

Furthermore even though the 'HR Practices Index' gives an opportunity to summarise into a single value the variety and nature of HR practices used by an organisation on a regular basis weighted by their frequency within the sample, it does not provide information about the quality of the related practices. The way a certain HR tool is being put into practice may have a significant effect on engagement.

Summary of research findings

Table 7 illustrates the summary of research findings.

Table 7. Summary of research findings

	2010	2012
Agrees that engagement has a positive and direct effect on business results	98%	100%
Engagement is a top priority or very important	78%	80%
Having a clearly or somewhat defined engagement strategy	65%	67%
Engagement strategy is linked to business results	n.d.*	72%
'Employee Aspects' is related to 'HR Practices Index'	r=22.5%	r=22%
dependent factors independent factors 'Employee Aspects' 'HR Practices Index'		
Size of the organisation	not related	related
Region	not related	not related
Business context	positively related	-
Importance of engagement	positively related	-
Having a defined engagement strategy	positively related	-
Measuring engagement	positively related	-
Conducting employee surveys	not related	-
Sharing results of surveys	not related	-
Employee involvement in follow-ups	not related	-

* No data

Source: Own research

As a result of the current research we can assume that employee engagement became a widely recognised concept across European HR professionals. Almost all of the respondents considered employee engagement as a key driver of business results. Engagement became top priority or very important within the majority of represented organisations, therefore not surprisingly a notable proportion of respondents reported to have developed a clearly or somewhat

defined engagement strategy, moreover in 2012 great majority of these strategies were directly linked to business results.

A significant, but not strong relationship was found between 'Employee Aspects' and the 'HR Practices Index' that allows us to assume that investments into the development of various HR practices contribute to a positive, but moderate change in certain employee aspects such as the level of engagement and morale of employees as well as the organisations' ability to attract and retain talent.

Research results also revealed that participating HR professionals' perceptions about the business context of their organisations was positively related to 'Employee Aspects' which supports the assumption of a possible converse causal relationship between employee attitudes (i.e. employee engagement) and performance.

According to the pre-assumptions importance of employee engagement within the organisation, conducting employee surveys and measuring engagement were found to be positively related to 'Employee Aspects'. Interestingly however conducting employee surveys, sharing the results of the surveys with employees and involving them in development of action plans in response to the survey results were not found to be in a significant relationship with 'Employee Aspects'. Explanation to these results may lie in the quality of applied HR practices and further research is suggested to reveal the real characteristics of these relationships.

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