# Assessing intrinsic motivation to facilitate two-way exchange

This paper explains the relevance of research on the Elemental measure of intrinsic motivation to employee engagement.

According to the Kingston Report (Kerstin et al, 2010), meaningfulness is 'the most important driver of engagement for all employee groups' (p.24). Research by May et al (2004) shows that meaningfulness depends primarily on the fit between self-concept and the role, so the implication is that this should form the basis of two-way exchange between managers and staff – it's a very direct way of creating the right environment to foster engagement.

EMPLOYEE'S SELF-CONCEPT/FIT WITH ROLE   -   TWO-WAY DISCUSSION   -   MEANINGFULNESS OF THE JOB   -   EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

So how to measure self-concept relating to work? The relevance of intrinsic motivation has been noted by numerous researchers, for example Chalofsky (2003) refers to the continuing importance of traditional theories of work motivation in emphasizing the centrality of the job itself as a source of meaning in the workplace. Similarly, May et al also explain that engagement is most closely associated with job involvement (Brown, 1996) and 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Job involvement results from 'the need satisfying abilities of the job' and 'the degree to which the job situation is central to the person and his or her identity' (Lawler & Hall, 1970), and flow is defined in terms of successful experience with challenging tasks.

ENGAGEMENT + MOTIVATION (meaningfulness)   =   JOB INVOLVEMENT (satisfying needs/ identifying with the role)   +   'FLOW' (success with challenging tasks)

In fact, the common theme running through several decades of research on intrinsic motivation is *identifying with the nature of the task* and *encountering appropriate challenge*, so this was the starting point for devising the Elemental measure which was first published in 1997. The two parts of the instrument present an objective view of *what you want to do* (satisfying needs) and *how you want to do it* (the goals you will set yourself), which together represent self-concept relating to work – basically, seeing the job as what you should be doing.

It has long been recognized that two-way exchange between managers and staff is an essential ingredient for a healthy and productive work environment, and common sense would suggest that individual differences must be taken into account when implementing strategies to improve employee engagement. So for example, in a paper on organizational entry from the individual's point of view Wanous (1977) explains that organizations must attempt to match the opportunities they provide with individuals' needs for personal fulfilment. And going back even further, Miles (1965) proposes that employees should be meeting their own personal goals at the same time as organizational goals.

So Part 1 of the Elemental measure is about 'needs' in relation to *identifying with the nature of the task* (*what you want to do*). This was derived from factor analysis of the 'big three needs' (Achievement, Affiliation, Power) to produce seven needs in three categories, with each need relating to a particular type of role:

Achievement (specialist) + Independence (consultant):
*do not get involved with other people/systems*

Structure (maintainer) + Affiliation (team worker):
*seek support from other people/systems*

Systems Power (generalist), People Power (manager), Personal Power (project leader):
*make use of other people/systems*

These 'intrinsic drivers' help organizations to make decisions on where to place people to best effect. For example, it becomes very obvious whether or not they should promote a technical specialist to a managerial role, and which graduate recruits will thrive in a structured environment and which will react against it.

Elemental Part 2 is about *encountering appropriate challenge* and the 'goals' individuals will set themselves (*how you want to do it*). This is based on three fundamental dimensions of career striving: belief in self, belief in control over situations, and where priorities lie overall:

Short-term striving (self-starting): *belief in self*

Medium-term striving (goal-focused): *belief in control over situations*

General Orientation (operational vs entrepreneurial): *where priorities lie overall*

What we have here is self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), locus of control (Rotter, 1966), and resultant achievement motivation (Atkinson & Birch, 1970), three fundamentals from many different theoretical approaches. In the context of employee engagement, it is interesting to note that Saks et al (2006) suggest that self-esteem and locus of control may be mediators of engagement, and also point out that 'challenge plays a key role providing that it offers stretch and can be overcome successfully, but is not so great that it leads to stress and disengagement' (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009, p.81).

In relation to what employees want from the job, these dimensions tell us for example to watch out for those who score low on Self-starting because they may be slow to show their true potential, and those who score high on Goal-focused because they stop listening to others once their minds are made up, and those high on Entrepreneurial because they may lose sight of current objectives.

In conclusion, the Elemental assessment provides HR departments and line managers with objective information to establish meaningful dialogue, so that employees feel that they are where they want to be and managers are equipped to make best use of them. Accounting for individual differences in this way may be considered an essential prerequisite for engagement – employees must see that their line manager is taking notice of what they want from the job in order to feel engaged with the organization. Satisfying employees' needs is described by researchers in the area of transformational leadership as 'the essence of the leaders' power' (Burns, 1978) which enables them to engage the full potential of their workforce and to achieve 'performance beyond expectations' (Bass, 1985).

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