

CULTURE & ENGAGEMENT

Wired for Engagement

Improving Engagement
Through Better Hiring

KINCENTRIC A Spencer Stuart Company

Introduction

Imagine an employee who's in a less-than-stellar work situation; we'll call her Sally. Her employer is going through a big change, which isn't being communicated very well to employees. The uncertainty has inspired a lot of turnover, and her manager is preoccupied, maybe a little abrupt, and not very responsive. Through it all, Sally continues to be highly engaged in her role — she puts forth extra effort to get the job done well and is willing to stick it out until things settle down and improve. Why?

Now consider Samuel. He has been with his company for 18 months. He is paid slightly above market, is working for a company that is performing well, has responsibilities that suit his experience, has a team that is motivated, and has a leader who genuinely cares. In short, he has the conditions that should make it easy to be engaged. But he hasn't been for the last six months. The same thing happened in his previous job. No matter what occurred, he just couldn't sustain the initial enthusiasm he had about his new opportunity.

Employee engagement is an increasingly important focus for executives. And we know from our research that a 5% increase in employee engagement is linked to a 3% lift in revenue a year later. Globally, employee engagement peaked at 65% in 2015, and is staying relatively stable across recent years, to 1 pp rise (66%) in 2019 according to [Kincentric's 2019 Trends in Global Employee Engagement](#). That means employees, now more than ever, are likely to bring their whole selves to work and embrace the three components of engagement: That they'll say good things about the company and its leadership, that they're willing to stay and that they'll strive to do their best.





If organizations do a good job of assessing the right people, they're going to have an easier time engaging them.

In light of our Say, Stay and Strive model of employee engagement, we may be tempted to think Sally is in denial or unaware of the chaos around her; some kind of engagement anomaly. But what it really comes down to is personality. Kincentric's research has found that an employee's personality – the inborn traits that make them who they are – plays a large role in how engaged they'll be at work, no matter the situation. Sally and others like her are wired for engagement.

Hiring is, generally, an unexamined lever in managing engagement. There are some people who are inherently wired to be engaged in a wide variety of environments, even those with organizational challenges. If organizations do a good job of assessing the right people, they're going to have an easier time engaging them. Leaders have an opportunity to align assessment and selection with engagement to boost and protect engagement across the organization.

The economics of this strategy are strongly supported, too. The cost of an assessment can be trivial – as low as \$5 to \$25 per candidate. Now imagine the cost of trying to engage someone who is actively disengaged. Good luck!

This white paper will look at the role of personality traits in engagement, how hiring for engagement creates advantages for your organization and how to combine your hiring practices with your engagement goals to drive elite performance.

How Personality Affects Engagement

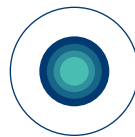
It's important to understand that some people are predisposed to be engaged and that others simply can't be engaged no matter how people around them (or their employers) try. However, the personality traits Sally has that make her "wired for engagement," no matter the situation, will show up on pre-hire personality tests. The same is true for the personality traits that make Samuel challenging to keep engaged.

There are three traits in particular that contribute to an employee's inclination toward engagement across jobs and organizations:



Positivity

This trait establishes a baseline level of optimism in a person's outlook. For someone high in positivity, it is likely that they will say positive things about their organization, see a future worth sticking around for, and have the optimism required to invest their discretionary energy, even in less-than-ideal environments.



Cooperativeness

Each of us has our own level of willingness to work with other people and a belief in the value of working together. People with a high level of cooperativeness think about work as a social exercise, and often look for ways to get along in the face of conflict. Conversely, someone who prefers to work on their own may have strong engagement in their tasks or work but may struggle to connect and engage in shared team or organizational objectives.



Drive

We all have some intrinsic motivation to do our best in our work, but that level of motivation is different for everyone. That translates into engagement through the sheer virtue of wanting to do the very best in everything we can: This is the definition of investing discretionary effort. That doesn't mean that someone with lower drive is a slacker; that employee just may be more discerning about where they apply their drive.

Everyone has these traits built into their personality; we all just have different levels of them. In general, about 25% of people are considered "high" on a given trait, and another 25% are considered above average.

How Personality Affects Engagement

While these traits are good predictors of engagement, it's not enough to assess candidates, pick the ones with the highest levels of these traits and think you're done. Each of the traits that contribute to engagement is positive, but it doesn't mean that stacking your teams with people with only the absolute highest levels of these traits is the best way to approach engagement. Here's why:



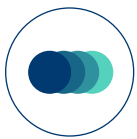
Diversity Is Always Best

It's best to have people with a variety of personalities on a team. Someone with lower positivity, average cooperativeness, and high drive can be engaged just like someone with high positivity, lower cooperativeness, and average drive. The watchout is hiring the "unengageable." People below average across all three traits are unlikely to be engaged across situations. Just like when evaluating skills and fit for a role, engageability should be a key factor in the overall hiring decision.



Engagement Can Depend on Context

Just as too much of one trait can skew someone's perspective, the traits that predict engagement are likely to be different depending on the role. And while these traits are critical across roles and organizations, there are also a number of traits important for specific roles and within particular organizational cultures. For example, in managerial roles, individuals who are highly ambitious — those who thrive on challenging goals and moving up the career ladder — tend to be more engaged. Your company culture may also determine traits that foster engagement or organizational objectives.



Engagement Is an Ongoing Action

The power of assessing people for the likelihood of being engaged is in using this information to "stack the deck" through hiring and then actively engaging employees in their roles. You can use these assessments to identify people who are likely to engage and stay engaged, and weed out those who will probably not give you their best in their work, through ongoing assessments before and after you hire, discerning about where they apply their drive.

In the case of Sally (and others like her), she has a blend of these traits that makes her inherently engaged. It's also important to note that "engageability" is a continuum and not a binary condition. Some people (a small percentage) will be engaged no matter what. Others, like Samuel, will be disengaged no matter what. The rest fall somewhere in between. Unless your organization has an incredible employment brand, you likely will not be able to select only those who fall in the engaged-no-matter-what category. The power in assessing for engagement is that you can quickly weed out those who cannot be engaged and advance those who are more likely to engage.

How Hiring for Engagement Creates Organizational Advantages



When assessing and selecting for leaders, your hiring managers should understand that in some cases, a better “engageability” result may be more desirable than specific skills.

An engaged employee like Sally is more likely to do three things in the course of employment at your organization.

- When people are engaged, they’re more likely to say good things about your organization and leadership. This, in turn, can spread engagement throughout the organization as employees influence their peers’ outlooks and attitudes.
- Employees are more likely to stay when they’re engaged, so turnover goes down and recruiting and training costs drop.
- Employees who are engaged strive to do their best, to go above and beyond, even in daily tasks.

Combining assessment and selection with your engagement strategy in a holistic way boosts the best efforts of both, giving you the ability to find people like Sally who are likely to be engaged no matter what happens at your organization, and then bringing that engagement out once they’re employed.

Some of the advantages of this approach include:



Improving Engagement More Quickly

Kincentric’s research has found that an organization’s efforts affect about 75% of any given employee’s engagement at any time. Until now, the rest of it – that other 25% – was a mystery to employers and the HR experts tasked with managing engagement. And that meant that even if your engagement efforts were top-notch, there would still be a gap between your efforts and how engaged a person might be at your organization. Hiring for engagement maximizes the impact of your engagement strategy by bringing people already inclined to engagement on board and reaching them more fully with your engagement efforts.



Selecting Engaging Leaders

Just as important is finding “[Engaging Leaders](#)” who are wired to engage others. Too often, people who are technically gifted or who stand out because of their skills are chosen to lead teams and departments when they actually don’t have a lot of understanding of how to manage or lead. We know that engaging leaders are vital to the engagement of their teams and direct reports, and that leaders who are highly engaging can help make engagement “cascade” throughout an organization. When assessing and selecting for leaders, your hiring managers should understand that in some cases, a better “engageability” result may be more desirable than specific skills. Leaders’ personalities are one of the strongest leverage points an organization can use to engage employees, so picking people who are wired for engaging others as well as technically gifted can help boost engagement of groups of employees over the long term.

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Establishing Sustainable Hiring Decisions

Hiring too often takes a skills-only approach. And while technical skills are important, they don't indicate whether someone has a positive outlook — or even enjoys what they do and wants to give it their all. When you expand your candidate assessment to include their predispositions, style, and personality traits, you get a much clearer picture of whether they'll succeed fully in their new role by being engaged as they work. By determining whether a candidate is wired for engagement, your hiring decisions will become more sustainable as your engaged employees 'Say' good things about the company, 'Stay' with the company and 'Strive' to do better.



Creating a Culture of Engagement

Understanding that people can be wired for engagement, that you can assess someone's inclination toward engagement and that you can pick that person out when hiring helps create a seamless approach that uses hiring itself as a lever of engagement as much as rewards, value proposition, career opportunities and development. This approach then builds a culture of engagement as new hires who are predisposed to engagement are exposed to your ongoing engagement efforts. The resulting "virtuous" cycle fosters engaged behaviors that are ongoing and not simply a once-a-year action item.

Sally's high engagement may be the result of a lucky hire by her employer — hiring managers may have hired her for her skills and experience and not known anything about her inherent inclination toward being engaged. But organizations that want to intentionally create a culture of engagement must hire people who can be engaged. The larger the organization, the more important this assessment for engagement becomes. Employers can prepare their workforces for engagement success by assessing and selecting employees who are already wired for engagement, who are ready to strive at the organization, and who won't let setbacks hold them back.

How Hiring for Engagement Creates Organizational Advantages



Establish a Feedback Loop

Weaving your assessment and selection practice into your engagement efforts is meant to move the needle on engagement over time as you discover different insights about the employee lifecycle. It's a systemic change that fills your organization with engaged employees through selection and retention — and attrition of those who aren't engaged — while helping boost engagement of employees already there. Through it all, regular measuring of engagement levels, traits and actions will provide information that managers and leaders can use to improve current engagement efforts.



Break Down HR Silos

One of the challenges many organizations will have to address is the isolated factions that are common to HR departments. Getting them to work together may not be easy, but a leadership strategy established at the C-level will help them understand that they're likely already doing much of the work in assessment, measuring engagement and engagement intervention efforts. They just need someone with a holistic vision to get them pulling in the same direction. There's a tradition to hire for skills and then to engage employees; now it's time to move engagement into the "hire for" column as well.

Merely hiring a bunch of employees like Sally won't establish a culture of engagement at your organization. If you hire highly motivated and positive people and set them up with poor equipment and unfulfilling career prospects, your assessment and selection efforts will be wasted. There's a limit to what even the most positive person can endure and still stay engaged; to harness the exponential potential of someone who's wired for engagement, you need to engage them after you hire them. Commit to long-term strategies that take the people like Sally in your workforce and leverage their traits, strengths and skills to grow and reinforce the culture of engagement on the groundwork you've already built.

How to Combine Hiring and Engagement

Assessment, selection, and engagement are converging in a way they haven't before. As such, this combination will require organizations to take a new look at how they find employees like Sally to work at their organization, how they engage them once they're there and how their talent strategy should address this new understanding. Too often, organizations concern themselves with narrow tactics or point solutions, rather than understanding hiring and engagement as an integrated strategy.

As a result, engagement – whether of current employees or measuring predisposition of candidates – can't be an HR-only issue. It's time for organizations to build a framework in which they can take full advantage of the technologies available to them to hire for and build engagement. Here's how to get started:



Make Creating a Culture of Engagement a Top Strategic Priority

Chances are your organization already has a clear approach to hiring and engagement, and your leaders and maybe even managers probably have a pretty good idea about how engagement is important. Now is the time to make it a top priority for your organization. Your CEO, chief human resources officer, or chief talent officer must own that strategy to ensure everyone is on the same page and understands the stakes. Making it a C-level priority will help ensure it becomes a top priority.



Incorporate Your Engagement Strategy with Your Talent Strategy

Your chief human resources officer should take the lead on integrating assessment, selection, engagement and leadership. All too often, organizations see engagement and talent strategies as separate issues, and may assume that because they're assessing and selecting for engagement, they can dial back on efforts to engage current employees. Assessing and selecting for engagement makes your employee engagement efforts more effective and powerful, but only if your organization integrates them.

Conclusion



For years, engagement has been seen as something that could be managed only when a candidate became an employee. Strategies focused on hiring for skills and then starting from scratch to engage the employees you have. That's missing a critical component in the engagement equation.

Imagine your organization eliminating people like Samuel from the hiring pool and doubling or tripling the number of people like Sally — people predisposed to be engaged no matter what. Assessing and selecting candidates based on their ability to be engaged is that important part of the equation. Engagement efforts get better results when employees are screened and selected for engagement, turning engagement strategy into a holistic approach. To do so, you'll need a partner who has the technology and know-how to make your engagement strategy more powerful than ever before, through assessing and selecting for engagement.

How Kincentric Can Help

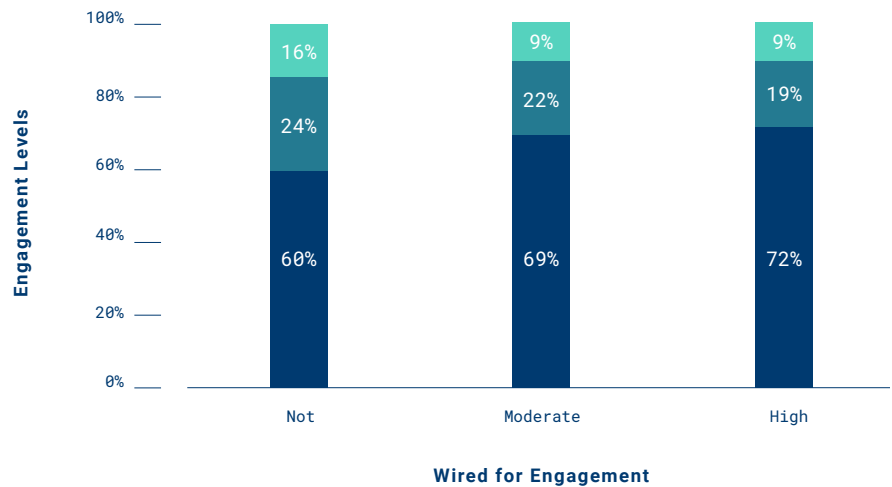
Many organizations can help you assess your candidates. Many others can help you measure and work to improve employee engagement levels. Only Kincentric can help you take a holistic, global approach to building the ideal workforce for your organization. We understand that elite results require extraordinary talent. We can help you build that talent from assessing candidates, building strong leaders, engaging employees, and supporting this with the right human capital strategy. To learn more about Kincentric's capabilities, please contact the author listed on the contacts page.

Appendix: Case Study

A global pharmaceutical company facing a rapidly changing environment needed to enhance engagement of the workforce to manage through a business transformation and reinvigorate innovation. In a 2-year study, leaders found they could increase engagement to 69% among early-career professionals by only hiring individuals at least moderately wired for engagement (predisposed toward positivity, drive and collaboration). By focusing on these “wired” applicants, the likelihood that an employee would be disengaged was reduced by 43% and the likelihood employees would be engaged increased by 15%. Based on our research, the net 9-point improvement in engagement to 69% puts the company above the average and translates into a lagged 5-point growth in revenue.

WIRED FOR ENGAGEMENT

Actively Disengaged Passive Engaged



Contact us to talk about how we can help.

Special Thanks

We would like to thank Anthony Boyce, Ph.D. and Ken Oehler, Ph.D. for contributing their insights to this article.

About Kincentric

Kincentric, a Spencer Stuart company, approaches human capital differently – we help you identify what drives your people, so they can drive your business. Our decades of expertise in culture and engagement, leadership assessment and development, and HR and talent advisory services enable us to help organizations change from the inside. Our global network, proven insights and intuitive technologies give us new ways to help organizations unlock the power of people and teams. For more information, visit kincentric.com.

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