

THE ENGAGEMENT GAP

Nearly 70% of employees are disengaged. Most aren't looking for a new job — they're looking for a reason to care about this one.

BY WENDY HAUSER, DVM



Every day, employees make choices and perform tasks that affect clients, pets, team members, and the practice. These actions impact workplace culture and efficiency. Why are some employees enthusiastic about their roles and workplace, while others seem mentally detached from their work? More importantly, how do you get more employees to contribute to self-growth, to each other, and to practice success? The answer is workplace engagement.

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Three Types of Employee Engagement

Workplace engagement refers to the commitment an employee has to their work, teammates, and the practice. According to Gallup, there are three types of employee engagement:

- ▶ Engaged
- ▶ Not engaged
- ▶ Actively disengaged

When engagement is high, the employee is invested in their work, deriving a sense of purpose from daily activities that fuel their well-being. Gallup estimates that only 31% of U.S. employees are engaged — ouch!

The remaining 69% of your workforce is either not engaged or actively disengaged, meaning that they are psychologically detached from their work and the practice. Because their engagement needs are not being met, they are dedicating time — but not energy or passion — to their roles.

Disengagement can take many forms in the workplace, like when employees do the bare minimum, are reluctant to pitch in and help others, or don't buy into the practice's beliefs and initiatives. Disengaged employees avoid high-profile work and special projects because these require more effort than they are willing to give. Many disengaged employees are "quiet quitters" — when faced with a persistent and inescapable stressor, they give up. Why try when your efforts don't make a difference?

According to Gallup, about 17% of disengaged employees are actively disengaged. They are resentful that their needs are unmet and act out their unhappiness. They voice their dissatisfaction for all to hear by talking negatively about co-workers, the workplace, clients, and patients. Because misery loves company, they stir the pot, creating discontent that can be contagious. The most damaging thing that actively disengaged employees do is model a lower

level of performance, and other team members must work harder to compensate. When this behavior is tolerated by leadership, it is demotivating and feels unfair to fellow teammates.

Identifying Employee Disengagement

There are different behaviors present across the engagement spectrum that can give leaders clues about how well they are meeting the needs of their employees. Recent research from McKinsey identified six unique employee personas and their representative percentages of the workforce based on their levels of satisfaction, job execution, well-being, and degree of engagement.

- ▶ **Thriving stars (4%):** These employees find meaning and purpose in their work, contributing to a profound sense of satisfaction and well-being. They are deeply motivated, identifying inherently with what is asked of them.
- ▶ **Reliable and committed (38%):** These engaged employees are satisfied and feel a strong sense of commitment. They enjoy going beyond their job descriptions to make valuable contributions.
- ▶ **Double dippers (5%):** This category is absent from most traditional practice models because it requires an individual to hold two full-time jobs simultaneously, doing less than full-time work for each and getting paid for both. In veterinary practices, abuse potential exists for remote customer care, management, and telemedicine roles.
- ▶ **Mildly disengaged (32%):** These employees can be identified by their below-average commitment levels and job performances. One example in veterinary practices is an employee who exhibits "lean-and-don't-clean" behaviors.
- ▶ **Disruptors (11%):** These actively disengaged employees have the largest potential for negative influence over other employees.
- ▶ **Quitters (10%):** These are deeply dissatisfied employees who have checked out. While physically present, they are unmotivated and contribute the bare minimum to work and the practice.

Which categories best describe your team members?

Reconnecting Disengaged Employees

Disengagement arises from neglected elements in the workplace. Gallup has identified key drivers of employee engagement.

QUOTABLE

"No company, small or large, can win over the long run without energized employees who believe in the mission and understand how to achieve it."

— Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric

OUT OF TOUCH

A 2024 study found that 89% of managers believed their employees were thriving, while only 24% of employees actually reported thriving, a more than 3-to-1 discrepancy.

When leaders commit to making workplace changes in these five areas, engagement increases.

1 Purpose

Purpose connects the daily actions of a team member to their values and feelings, allowing them to act from the heart as they do their work. Acknowledging what makes each person unique is the first step in creating employee engagement.

Leaders should help their employees understand their primary motivation by asking them questions like:

- ▶ “What are the things about your job that make you happy?”
- ▶ “What do you wish you could do more of each day?”
- ▶ “What workplace activities energize and interest you?”

Because purpose connects to values, it is helpful for employees to identify their four to six primary core values, which help them align their work with what matters most to them.

2 Professional Development

Traditionally, private veterinary practice is a stagnant career path. Employees are often expected to do all duties listed in the job description, without work tailored to what brings each employee purpose. It's rare for developmental programs and advancement opportunities to exist. When workplaces partner with their employees to identify and provide meaningful developmental opportunities, engagement increases.

3 A Caring Manager

Research has found that a primary driver for employee engagement is having a manager who believes in the worker. These managers see the employee's potential, help them to develop, and care about their well-being. Managers need training to help them develop skills such as feedback and recognition of each employee's strengths and accomplishments. Training programs include the Gallup Manager Program

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[\[bit.ly/4vj8nK3\]](https://bit.ly/4vj8nK3), the VHMA Rising Manager Training Program [\[bit.ly/30IU2f1\]](https://bit.ly/30IU2f1), and the Veterinary Management Institute [\[bit.ly/4trMUwD\]](https://bit.ly/4trMUwD).

4 Ongoing Conversations

Consistent and frequent conversations are huge drivers of employee engagement, with one study reporting that 80% of employees who had received meaningful feedback in the last week felt fully engaged. All employees want and need role clarity — how can they meet and exceed expectations if their roles are undefined or unstated?

Maximum benefit occurs when a pattern of short, weekly conversations with every team member is established. If a practice has a large staff, it is reasonable that the immediate manager or team leader is responsible for these conversations. During the manager's check-in with each team leader, brief feedback on each employee should be given, particularly if there are concerns or if there is an opportunity for the manager to recognize a team member. These conversations should include meaningful feedback that incorporates recognition, collaboration, goals and priorities, and an acknowledgement of the employee's strengths.

During these conversations, it's important that the manager is appropriately vulnerable and fully present without distractions. They should identify the team member's personal

ENGAGEMENT RESOURCES

Detecting the subtle signs of employee dissatisfaction that lead to disengagement can be difficult. If you are still unclear as to the degree of engagement in your practice, there are tools that can help quantify workplace engagement.

- ▶ **Take a free quiz:** bit.ly/4c6srGD (find the quiz under “Five questions help discern the archetypes present on your team”)
- ▶ **Understand results and identify an action plan:** bit.ly/4c3pp5V
- ▶ **Review engagement surveys, reports, and focused action plans:** bit.ly/4tmVEUI (Culture Amp) and bit.ly/4t2HBuO (Gallup)

needs through empathetic listening and authentic communication, which is kind and supportive verbal and non-verbal communication.

Each meeting should include a brief recap of the discussion and an action plan outlining next steps. The manager should end on a positive note, such as, “Thanks for sharing your concerns with me. I appreciate your vulnerability,” or, “I know this was a tough week for you. Thanks for all your hard work.”

5 A Focus on Strengths

Find ways to help team members discover and play to their strengths. This includes helping them identify what interests and challenges them using assessment tools like the Clifton Strengths Assessment [bit.ly/4t3RUH0]. Employees enjoy tasks that motivate

them and create purpose. Collaborate with them using the results of the assessment to create tailored work where they can use their strengths.

Final Thoughts

A focus on employee engagement is missing in most veterinary practices. When employees feel underappreciated, undervalued, and taken for granted, disengagement flourishes. Economically, disengagement — as estimated by Gallup — costs U.S. businesses 34% of every disengaged employee’s salary. Creating engaged employees is critical in today’s veterinary practices, which are challenged by decreased productivity, understaffing, and declining visits and revenues.

What would happen to efficiency and productivity if at least 50% of veterinary employees fit the definition of reliable and committed? What if we could create workplaces where employees had autonomy and opportunities to grow new skills and interests? What if their days were filled with purposeful work? All of this is possible. Change starts with an awareness of the power of workplace engagement and a commitment to take action. **TVB**

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