Networking within Organizations and its Effects on Employee Engagement

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Abstract:

Networking through which the exchange of information or services happens among individuals, groups, or institutions is a potential tool in getting employees engaged in organizations. Employee engagement contributes to the optimum performance of employees in organizations. Networking among co-workers and between employees and management improves the engagement level of employees through better organizational commitment, improved job satisfaction and making them to be engaged to the organization physically, cognitively, and psychologically as they feel better connected to the organization through networking. Along with internet and social networking cites, intranet is another means for networking in organizations. Organizations need to encourage networking among its employees and also promote networking between management and employees as a means for increased employee engagement.

Key words: Networking, Employee Engagement

Introduction

Social networking sites are more than ever used by organizations these days in making hiring decisions. Before hiring there are also organizations that ask for the Facebook and twitter account of the prospective candidates to know more about the possible candidates before hiring. It is not just the use of networking sites that today's organizations are interested in. Networking, including social networking can be effectively used to improve the performance of the organizations. This paper looks at how networking within an organization can be used to improve the engagement level of employees. When employees are engaged, there is better productivity, increased organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behaviours, less attrition and more job satisfaction. All these translate into increased organizational performance. Let us look at networking, employee engagement and how internal networking within organization among employees and between management and employees can increase the engagement levels of employees.

Networking

Wang (2009) defines network as "a set of actors and the set of ties representing some relationship, or lack

thereof, between the actors" (p.33). But when we look at organizations and their settings, there are more to it. It can be contacts an employee has with other employees, supervisor or with customers and suppliers for their mutual benefit (Linehan & Scullion, 2008). Networking in organization also can include informal interactions among employees and supervisor who are in a position of influence. This can be through favours and persuasion (Henning & Jardim, 1977). This can also help employees to gain upward mobility and support to accomplish tasks and professional development (Bartol & Zhang, 2007).

Organizational networks can be categorized into task, career, friendship and social support networks (Ibarra,1995). When resources are exchanged for accomplishing tasks, it can be termed as task networks. When network is for career progress, it is career network and when network is based on relationships on account of trust and closeness, it is friendship or social support network (Wang, 2009). Mentoring could be another way of networking within organization to have better employee satisfaction as in mentoring, where an experienced or senior member of an organization enters into a relationship for the advancement of growth or improvement of career opportunities with a junior or new member for the developmental purposes of the new member (Kram, 1985). When it comes to social network, it is different from the network we discussed till now. Coyle and Vaughen (2008) define social network as "a configuration of people connected to one another through inter personal means such as friendship, common interests or ideas" (p.13). Social networks are used mostly for friendship network (eg. Facebook) and for professional advancement (eg. Twitter).

These days we find more and more people using social network for furthering their professional and personal life. Networking can also be used within organizational setting to connect with the fellow employees and the management through intranets and social networking sites. When there is a strong web of networking among the employees of a given organization, this can indirectly improve employee engagement.

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement as a construct has come into existence by 1990 and is now extensively used to denote the level of engagement in work by employees. Aggarwal et al (2007) define employee engagement as the "physical, cognitive and psychological absorption in one's work-roles" (p.315). Kahn (1990), who first used the engagement theory and applied that in his study, said that an employee could be engaged physically, emotionally and cognitively and these three could be affected by meaningfulness, safety and availability. Maslach et al (2001) felt that engagement was the antithesis of burnout which has exhaustion, cynicism and ineffectiveness as its dimensions. Harter et al (2002, p. 417) later defined employee engagement as an "individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work. Saks (2006) brought in job engagement and organizational engagement to make up the construct employee engagement.

Even though employee engagement as a construct has come into existence from 1990 mainly with the seminal article of Kahn (1990) and is now extensively used to denote employees' level of work involvement, Shuck and Wollard's (2010) review found only 26 empirical studies on employee engagement over 20 years. Even though employee engagement draws attention both in practitioner and academic circles, more published articles are found in the practitioner fields. Practitioners have mainly looked at the behavioural side of employee engagement, with a special emphasis on organizational commitment, values and vision (Zigarmi, Nimon, Houson, Wiu, & Diehl, 2009), while the academic side has focused on the definition and structure of this psychological concept, based on its antecedents (Wefald & Downey, 2009) and how it affects employee morale (Zigarmi et al., 2009).

Tower Perrin's 2007-2008 Global Workforce Study (Gebauer & Lowman, 2008) found that 4 out of 5 (80%) employees do not deliver their full potential to help organizations succeed due to not being fully engaged. Out of this 80%, 41% are ready to be engaged, 30% are disenchanted, and the other 9% are disengaged. Estimates show the lost productivity of actively disengaged employees costs the US economy $370 billion annually (Lupfer, 2011). Efforts to support the 41% who are ready to be engaged and make them engaged in their work would contribute substantially to the output of organizations worldwide. This makes employee engagement a hot topic today and thus any move to make employees engaged becomes an area of interest to organizations. Internal networking among employees using social networking sites and other organizational means, can be one of the sources that can make employees engaged in the workplace.

Networking Among Employees

An organization is made up of people who relate not only on a professional level, but also at a personal level. When organizations give tantamount importance to both professional and personal level relationships, there can be better esprit de corps among employees. Networking is one of the means organizations use to further relationships between their members. How well members connect with other members would speak of the organizational culture and climate. One of the means organizations use is to give a positive outlook to the new recruits about the need to connect with other members from the time these new employees enter the organization. Orientation programs can be a useful tool to help new recruits connect with the already existing employees. If the orientation program of organization set aside sometime to give an opportunity to interact with the existing employees, that can lead the new hires to know more about the organization and its culture and also use it as a platform to network with the seniors. At the same time, use of intranet to connect with other members of the organization can help members to have better personal relationship, including helping them in their professional lives. Social networking sites also play a decisive role in this. When there is better networking, professional and personal development could be the outcome. This can lead the members to see the

organization in a favourable manner, which can improve organizational citizenship behaviour and organizational commitment and thus a better engaged employee.

Advantages of Internal Networking Among Employees Within an Organization

Internal networking can help the employees first of all to connect with other employees. The more the interaction among employees, the better can be the relationship established among the employees. When there is better relationship between employees, that develops like a bond and it would be easier for the employees to get to know more about the organization, its best practices, and to get more information about the other stakeholders of the organization like suppliers, customers, and those who are directly impacted by the organization. Also when there is better networking among the employees, it can possibly lead to better sharing without feeling threatened in quality circles, thus contributing positively to the development of the organization and thus improving the profitability of the organization. Internal networking also can help to blur the departmental divisions and work together having a holistic picture of the organization. Another advantage with internal networking is to know the expertise of others in the organization and to tap them whenever needed. (Baber & Waymon, 2008). At the same time internal networking can help organizations to get new information and also to solve problems in an efficient way (Cross, Borgatti & Parker, 2002). Knowledge sharing is the key here (Ngah and Jusoff, 2009; Marouf, 2007).

Networking Initiatives from Management

When looking at internal networking, if it happens only among the employees, and not between employees and management, then the impact of networking within the organization has only a limited scope. If organizations like to have a competitive edge over their competitors, networking has to happen between the management and employees too. One of the ways by which one can initiate this networking is by encouraging management level personnel to connect with their subordinates through social networks. Initially there can be a hesitation from the part of employees, but organizations will have to work on its culture and climate so as to overcome this initial lack of response from both sides. There are organizations that conduct business parties at a regular intervals where there is greater interaction between management and employees. When annual appraisal and promotion can be tied up with the networking initiatives of management level persons, there could be greater effect to the initiatives taken by management in networking with employees. Huang (2016) has found that networking behaviours help employees to advance their job positions in an organization. It could also be because the management now has a better knowledge about the potentialities of this employee who networks. Another outcome of this familiarity through networking can be better quality circle suggestions. When there are members from all the levels of employment for a quality circle meeting, if they know each other and they can

interact without fear and suspicion, the outcomes of quality circle meetings would be greater thus providing for continuous improvement in the organization. It is also clear that when the interactions employees have with management are done regularly, communication and friendship relative to the employee's position can play a decisive role in the decisions management makes on promoting employees to supervisory levels (Brass, 1984).

Networking Within Organization for Employee Engagement

If networking within organization can help employees to be engaged physically, cognitively, and psychologically to the work, (Kahn, 1990), then we can say that networking helps to improve employee engagement. Any networking initiative within an organization has to focus on output. When the output of these internal networking initiatives is better employee engagement, then that organization will stand out among its competitors as having competitive edge over others. Internal networking can lead to personal engagement. "Personal engagement is the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's "preferred self" in task behaviours that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active, full role performances." (Kahn 1990, p. 700). It speaks of connections and the best way to improve connections at the workplace is to have better relationships and networking helps to achieve that. When an employee feels worthwhile, valuable and useful, then he/she experiences psychological meaningfulness and that can lead to engagement. This feeling is an outcome of better relationship with the workplace and also people in the workplace. Following Harter et al (2002), one can say that better involvement and satisfaction with work can happen when the people with whom a person works is known to the person and he/she can connect better with that person. Saks (2006) made a distinction between work engagement and organizational engagement and networking helps employees to have better organizational engagement.

Conclusion

In today's business world, when organizations are searching for ways to get employees engaged, and thus to improve their bottom line, networking within organization offers rays of hope that can improve employee engagement and help to retain talents. An engaged employee is a productive employee, he/she exhibits organizational citizenship behaviour, and has greater job satisfaction, and works like a champion for the cause of the organization (Rich, Lepine & Crawford, 2010). Internal networking is seen as one sure means to improve employee engagement. But at the same time, there could be grey areas in internal networking where questions can be raised about the line of separation between professional and personal life, over-familiarity with management and thus affecting the lives of employees. In this study I tried to look at the brighter side of internal networking. Studies could be made on whether internal networking has its drawbacks and how those could be addressed. That could be an area for future research. An empirical study could be undertaken to

measure the effect of internal networking on employee engagement and what could be the moderating and mediating variables. We can speak of levels of management, job involvement, organizational support to name a few as moderating variables in this relationship between internal networking and employee engagement.

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