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# Employee engagement across career stages

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## **Abstract**

Employee engagement strategies that recognize and adapt to different career stages—Explorers, Contributors, and Impact Pursuers—significantly enhance organizational outcomes. Drawing from interviews with professionals in various sectors, this paper highlights how career stages influence engagement needs. Early career "Explorers" are engaged by job roles that resonate with their personal values and provide clear career progression and learning opportunities. Mid-career "Contributors" seek deeper expertise and autonomy, finding engagement in diverse tasks and broader learning opportunities. In contrast, "Impact Pursuers," often in or aspiring to leadership roles, are driven by the broader impact of their decisions and crave significant decision-making power and strategic influence. Adopting a nuanced engagement approach that addresses these distinct needs leads to a more inclusive and supportive workplace environment. It also ensures that organizational resources are aligned with the specific developmental pathways of employees at various career stages, strengthening human resources and talent management practices across the board.

Keywords: Employee engagement, career stages, workplace diversity

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## **Employee engagement across career stages**

All companies strive to attract and retain diverse talent, but many lack a nuanced understanding of the varied needs and preferences of their diverse workforce, and therefore, the tools required to effectively engage them. It is true that employee diversity could be manifest in many ways, including demographics, experience, and skills. However, one of the most obvious, yet often overlooked instances of diversity, is that of career stages (Bilimoria, 2008). Employees enter organizations, become full members, and gradually move towards more established positions, often as managers, and at each stage, their needs for growth, development, and engagement evolve (Miller, 2019). Yet, research and practice indicate that company leadership frequently fails to acknowledge and address these unique career-stage requirements (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016).

A career-stage approach recognizes that employees at different stages have distinct needs and aspirations. For instance, while entry-level employees often seek mentorship, skill development, and opportunities for advancement, those with long work tenure desire challenging projects, recognition, and impact. By tailoring initiatives to the specific needs of each career stage, organizations can create a more inclusive and engaging workplace for all employees. This approach not only enhances employee satisfaction and retention but also contributes to the broader organizational goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

### **A career-stage approach to employee engagement**

The adoption of a career stages approach in employee engagement can be crucial for organizations looking to harness their workforce's full potential and navigate the dynamic business environment of today. While traditional one-size-fits-all approaches to engagement often miss the mark, a career-stage approach appreciates employees' diversity of needs, motivations, and goals, which, if properly addressed, can benefit employees and organizations alike.

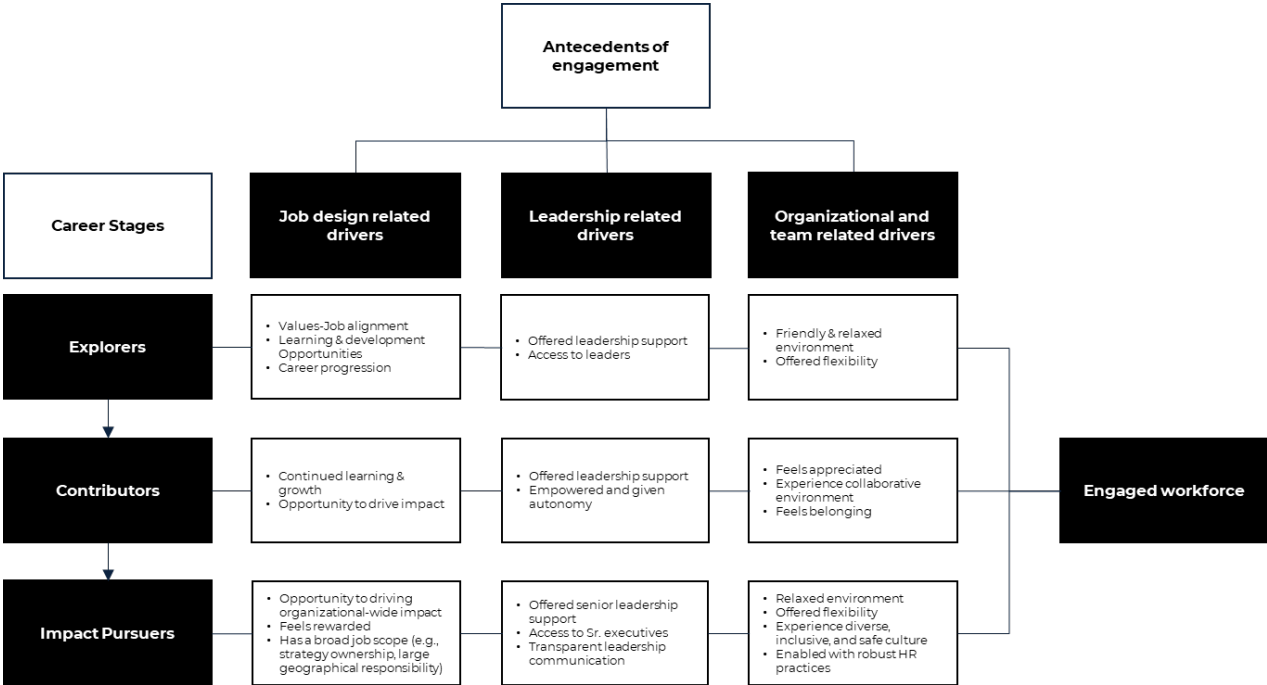
#### ***How can organizational leaders engage employees throughout successive career stages?***

To answer this question, we leverage our joint research on diversity and employee engagement in a variety of organizations and geographies. We looked at existing research on engagement drivers (Bailey et al, 2015) and expanded it with interviews with professionals from multinational organizations in sectors like banking, technology, media, telecommunications, and pharmaceuticals. Specifically, we examine career stage engagement drivers– i.e. the different factors that influence employee engagement levels at the various career stages. Employees at each stage have a role to play in an organization, and all stages are necessary for all organizations. Understanding what each phase entails enables organizations to manage their workforce in a more inclusive way, as well as benefiting from the many positive outcomes correlated with high engagement such as enhanced job satisfaction, reduced turnover rates, organizational citizenship behaviour, elevated creativity, and increased customer loyalty (Rich et al., 2010; Alfes et al., 2013b; Salanova et al., 2005).

While acknowledging that any categorization has its limitations, we propose that with an understanding of the concept of career stage engagement and of the drivers associated with three broad categories (i.e., Explorers, Contributors, and Impact Pursuers)

organizations can better identify what their employees mostly need to foster meaningful engagement (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 - Engagement drivers across the three career stages**



**Career stage engagement drivers**

*Explorers*

Explorers are energized by roles that resonate with their values and aspirations, emphasizing the importance of personal and professional development. They aim to find ways in which their personal interests and work demands can co-exist. For Explorers, work engagement drivers revolve around job alignment with personal interests, therefore they feel engaged when the tasks that they perform at work resonate with activities that they enjoy and are good at outside the workplace. Most of our respondents who feel that their job allows them to bring in knowledge and skills they gain from personal activities describe their work as “fun” and engaging.

Explorers also strive for access to learning opportunities. Additionally, we found that learning is such a key driver of work engagement that some can easily prioritize learning over applying learning. As highlighted by one participant in our study *“every single day I get to know something new, I wouldn’t stop learning.”*

Explorers are also sensitive to job and career clarity and are more easily engaged in activities that offer clear pathways for career progression.

Finally, Explorers we interviewed are most engaged when leaders offer them a supportive environment and a balance between autonomy to experiment and guidance for career growth. As mentioned by one of the explorers we interviewed, what keeps them engaged at work is *“the friendliness, the open-door policy, and the support, if the management saw*

*a project and they are convinced, they will support you, you will get 110% support, and we are empowered to speak to the management.”*

### ***Contributors***

Contributors, who already have work experience and have engaged on a career trajectory, are energized by work that challenges them to learn more. As such, they are sensitive to opportunities for continuous learning and diversity in their tasks. While typically Contributors have often gained reputations for being good at certain tasks and are therefore cast in roles that their manager feels will allow them to excel, they are far more engaged when given a variety of challenges, including some strategic involvement. One of the contributors we interviewed contrasts being cast in set roles (at which one is good) to being offered varied opportunities for learning: the engagement felt when offered opportunities to *“The level of diversity of topics and initiatives I deal with, it is not a routine work that what would kill your spirit...”*

It is crucial to acknowledge that challenges can only foster motivation and engagement under optimal conditions, encompassing a manageable workload, appropriate role fit, and alignment with the employee's skill set. When these elements are absent, high demands can quickly become demoralizing, leading to burnout rather than growth (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). This highlights the importance of a nuanced understanding of employee needs and capabilities, ensuring that challenges are appropriately calibrated to promote development without inducing undue stress (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Moreover, Contributors have an advanced appreciation of teamwork and aim to provide a meaningful contribution to their teams or functions. As such, the work environment for contributors is ideally one that fosters appreciation, collaboration, and a sense of community, in which contributions to the team and organization are respected and rewarded. Contributors exposed to such work environments are not only more engaged, but also likely to stay longer in an organization, as one respondent said: *“I’d say it is mostly the team and the boss and the way he manages. Really, you don’t feel you need to go somewhere else.”*

Lastly, Contributors appreciate leadership that grants them professional autonomy, and rewards and respects their contribution. One Contributor we interviewed shared why their leader made them feel empowered and engaged: *“because we all sit at the same table; we have full authority”*.

### ***Impact Pursuers***

Impact Pursuers are driven by the impact their work could have for the organization, as well as by a wide scope of responsibilities. This includes shaping the organizational strategy and direction, having broad geographical scope, and/or leading sizeable teams. As mentioned by one of the participants we interviewed, their high level of engagement was purely *“a genuine opportunity to create change for the organization and the customers.”*

Impact Pursuers are energized by roles that afford significant decision-making powers and the ability to influence internal as well as external stakeholders. This was evident in one of the participant’s comments when he was reflecting on how his expectations from the organization shifted when he moved to a more senior position: *“I expected more reward, I expected more backing, more authority, (ability to) make more decisions, feeling empowered”*. Another participant also shared that being *“empowered to take decisions”* was a big motivator for him to stay in the organization long-term.

Effective communication is paramount for Impact Pursuers; they expect clear direction, transparent rationale behind decisions, and involvement in the decision-making process.

In terms of their working environment, they prioritize settings that are autonomous and supportive, promoting well-being and professional fulfillment. Uniquely for Organizational Influencers, they value robust human resource policies that support their leadership roles, advocating for fairness, development, and well-being to foster an engaged and productive workforce:

*“Now we have very good HR, looking to implement ground rules, structure and policies, and the impact is very positive, on pay and reward, the leaves, the hiring process, all have very good impact, it all boils down to the fairness.”*

## **Challenges for organizational leaders**

Adopting a career-stage approach to employee engagement, which categorizes employees into 'Explorers', 'Contributors', and 'Impact Pursuers', provides a structured method to address the distinct needs inherent to each career phase. This tailored approach offers a clear framework for engagement initiatives, marking a significant improvement over traditional, generalized strategies.

However, implementing this model in the context of today's diverse workforce introduces several challenges. Organizations need to develop parallel engagement strategies tailored to each group, which can strain limited resources such as time, budgets, and personnel. This necessitates a prioritization process, where organizations must evaluate the effort and potential impact of various engagement interventions to make strategic choices about which initiatives to pursue—and importantly, which to set aside.

To manage these challenges effectively, HR practitioners should deploy these engagement strategies in a phased manner. This allows for ongoing evaluation through performance metrics and employee feedback, facilitating necessary adjustments in resource allocation to optimize outcomes.

## **Conclusion & practical implications**

Despite these challenges, the value of a nuanced, career-stage approach is substantial, particularly in its potential to foster a more inclusive and caring workplace environment. By acknowledging and addressing the unique needs and motivations at each career stage, organizations can create a more engaging and supportive work experience for all employees, irrespective of their career phase or background. This tailored approach not only promotes a sense of belonging and care among the workforce but also aligns with the broader objective of cultivating a diverse and dynamic organizational culture where every employee feels valued and supported.

Considering the workforce diversity through a career stages lens is vital for fostering an inclusive and supportive work environment. This recognition allows organizations to address the unique challenges and needs of employees at different career stages, while allocating resources and design interventions that not only meet the immediate needs of their workforce but also foster sustained engagement and productivity over time. This strategic approach enhances employee retention by making individuals feel valued and supported in their career development. It also strengthens talent management practices, ensuring organizations have a continuous pipeline of equipped employees who are

engaged and willing to take on critical and more complex roles, thus mitigating risks associated with talent shortages and turnover.

Overall, our research suggests several actionable interventions for organizations that want to adopt a career stage perspective. For employees at the "Explorer" stage, HR practitioners should focus on engaging them through:

1. **Learning and development interventions:** Implement structured onboarding, mentorship programs, and skill development workshops to facilitate rapid learning and growth.
2. **Job crafting initiatives:** Encourage employees to personalize their roles by aligning tasks with their interests and passions, fostering a sense of ownership and fulfillment.
3. **Career pathing workshops:** Offer workshops to help employees explore potential career trajectories within the organization, providing clarity and direction for their professional journey.

"Contributors" in an organization thrive on opportunities that allow them to deepen their expertise and enhance their autonomy. To support this, organizations can offer:

1. **Job enrichment and enlargement:** Expand job responsibilities to include more complex tasks or projects, providing opportunities for skill utilization and growth.
2. **Stretch assignments and secondments:** Offer temporary assignments in different departments or projects to broaden skill sets and perspectives.
3. **Targeted recognition programs:** Implement recognition programs that specifically acknowledge and reward the unique contributions of tenured employees.
4. For "Impact Pursuers", engagement programs should expand to include strategic planning, organizational impact, and people development. HR practitioners could support them with:
5. **Leadership development Programs:** Invest in comprehensive leadership development programs that address the specific challenges faced by leaders at different levels.
6. **Executive coaching:** Provide one-on-one coaching to support leaders in developing their strategic thinking, decision-making, and people management skills.
7. **Leadership roundtables:** Facilitate forums for leaders to share experiences, learn from each other, and collectively address organizational challenges.

However, a crucial element in the success of any engagement strategy is the role direct managers play, therefore enabling them should be a priority. Managers should be trained in ways to identify their team members' career stages and in how to provide the appropriate support for each. This includes developing skills in communication for open, empathetic dialogue and active listening—essential for understanding each employee's aspirations and challenges. Moreover, career development coaching, diversity and inclusion training, and familiarity with supportive HR policies and practices are equally critical. These elements will help managers in conducting meaningful and effective career discussions tailored to the developmental needs of their employees across different career stages.

By adopting these tailored interventions, organizations can address the unique needs and motivations at each career stage, promoting engagement by aligning organizational resources and opportunities with the individual career development pathways of its diverse workforce.

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