

BEYOND THE PING-PONG TABLE: BUILDING AUTHENTIC EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

Based on an analysis of qualitative employee interview data, this study investigates the primary drivers of authentic workplace engagement beyond material compensation. The objective was to identify the non-transactional factors that foster sustained commitment and discretionary effort. The results revealed four interconnected themes: the primacy of meaningful work over perks; the critical role of managerial support in building psychological safety; the necessity of clear career trajectories for growth; and the profound impact of personalized, authentic recognition. The discussion indicates that perks and pay are merely foundational, while true engagement is cultivated through purpose, safety, growth, and feeling valued as a whole person. The conclusion underscores that engagement is a reciprocal relationship, where employees invest fully in organizations that demonstrably invest in their employees' professional and personal value.

Keywords: *psychological safety, purposeful work, career growth, authentic recognition, employee engagement*

INTRODUCTION

The modern workplace has undergone a significant aesthetic and cultural shift. In a bid to attract and retain top talent, particularly from younger generations, many companies have enthusiastically adopted the trappings of the "fun" office. Ping-pong tables, sleek bean bags, gourmet coffee, and free snacks have become commonplace symbols of a progressive and employee-centric culture (Eshehri & Alsoaery, 2023). This movement was born from a genuine desire to break from the rigid, cubicle-filled offices of the past and create environments where people would want to work, not just need to work. The underlying promise was that a more relaxed and enjoyable physical environment would naturally translate into a more motivated, loyal, and productive workforce (Georganta & Montgomery, 2019). However, this surface-level transformation has coincided with a troubling undercurrent of employee malaise. Despite these investments in workplace perks, reports of widespread burnout, record-breaking turnover rates during the "Great Resignation," and the pervasive phenomenon of "quiet quitting" have dominated business headlines (Dilakshini & Kumar, 2019). Employee engagement surveys, such as those by Gallup, consistently reveal that a significant majority of the global workforce remains disengaged, indicating a profound disconnect between the environment employers are creating and the one employees actually need to thrive. This juxtaposition sets the stage for a critical examination of what truly drives a committed workforce (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2018).

This disconnect points to a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of employee engagement. Research in organizational psychology has long suggested that true motivation is driven by intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, factors. While superficial perks can serve as effective tools for initial attraction and may contribute to momentary satisfaction, they are often transactional and fail to address the deeper human needs for purpose, connection, and growth (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2018). The emerging question, therefore, is not whether these amenities are enjoyable, but whether they are sufficient to build the kind of authentic, sustainable engagement that powers long-term organizational success (Suryavanshi & Mandal, 2024). Despite significant financial and cultural investment in "fun" workplace amenities and perks, a great many organizations continue to struggle with cultivating genuine, sustainable employee engagement. The reliance on these superficial benefits has proven to be an inadequate solution, often acting as a temporary morale boost rather than a cure for deeper organizational issues (Petelczyc et al., 2018). This failure manifests in tangible business losses, including persistently high employee turnover, diminished

productivity, and a stifling of the innovation that comes from a truly invested workforce. The cost of this disengagement is not merely operational; it represents a critical failure to harness the full potential of human capital (Georganta & Montgomery, 2019). The core of the problem lies in a strategic misalignment. Companies are attempting to solve a deeply human, psychological challenge—fostering commitment and passion—with largely material and transactional solutions (Zaharee et al., 2018). This approach overlooks the foundational elements that psychological and management science has shown to be critical: meaningful work, psychological safety, opportunities for growth, and authentic leadership. When a ping-pong table is present in a culture of mistrust, stagnant careers, or unclear purpose, it can become a symbol of the very disconnect it was meant to solve, leading to employee cynicism and reinforcing the very disengagement it was intended to alleviate (Plester & Lloyd, 2024). This study aims to move beyond the superficial narrative and identify the key drivers of authentic employee engagement. The primary objective is to investigate the core organizational, relational, and psychological factors that foster a work environment where employees feel genuinely psychologically invested, connected to the company's mission, and empowered to contribute their full selves. By exploring the distinction between transactional perks and meaningful engagement drivers, this research seeks to provide a clear, evidence-based framework for building a culture of sustainable commitment and mutual growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Evolution of Employee Engagement

The conceptual foundation of employee engagement is often traced to William Kahn's 1990 seminal work, which defined personal engagement as "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles." Kahn proposed that people are psychologically present and fully invested in their roles when they have meaningfulness, safety, and availability (De Paoli et al., 2019). This psychological perspective shifted the focus from mere behavior to the internal cognitive and emotional states of the employee. Around the same period, Christina Maslach's research on burnout—characterized by exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy—provided the antithesis to engagement, establishing a continuum where engagement represented the positive pole of a healthy relationship with work, marked by energy, involvement, and efficacy (Botting, 2022). This theoretical groundwork paved the way for more applied, metric-driven models that sought to quantify engagement for organizational use. The most prominent of these is Gallup's Q12 survey, which operationalized engagement through twelve actionable statements related to workplace needs like clarity of expectations, having the right materials, and opportunities for development (De Paoli et al., 2019). This evolution marked a significant shift in organizational priorities: from measuring passive satisfaction, a contentment with conditions and rewards, and long-term loyalty, often driven by inertia or a lack of alternatives, to actively cultivating engagement. The new emphasis was on capturing an employee's willingness to exert discretionary effort—the voluntary, extra mile they are willing to go for the benefit of the organization, which is the true engine of innovation and superior performance (Botting, 2022).

The Limitations of Superficial Engagement Tactics

The "perks and pizza" model of engagement represents a well-intentioned but fundamentally flawed interpretation of what motivates employees. While offerings like free snacks, game rooms, and social events can serve as effective tools for initial talent attraction and may contribute to a positive workplace atmosphere, a substantial body of literature confirms their inability to drive long-term retention or deep psychological investment (Abdul Hamed et al., 2025). Research indicates that these extrinsic motivators are subject to the "hedonic treadmill" effect, where their initial positive impact quickly diminishes as employees become accustomed to them. Moreover, when these perks are deployed as a primary strategy, they can be perceived as a substitute for addressing more profound issues like unfair compensation, poor management, or a lack of work-life balance, potentially even breeding cynicism among the workforce (Yunus & Ernawati, 2018).

This limitation stems from the transactional nature of such perks, which stands in stark contrast to the foundations of authentic engagement. Transactional engagement is a conditional, quid-pro-quo relationship where an employee's effort is exchanged for a specific, tangible benefit. It does not inspire lasting commitment or emotional connection (De Paoli et al., 2019). In contrast, authentic or emotional engagement, as conceptualized by scholars like Wilmar Schaufeli, is characterized by a persistent state of vigor, dedication, and absorption in one's work. This form of engagement is intrinsic, driven by a genuine passion for the work itself and a connection to its purpose. It is this emotional and psychological investment that leads to the sustained discretionary effort and resilience that organizations seek, outcomes that no amount of free pizza can reliably purchase (Zaharee et al., 2018).

Pillars of Authentic Engagement

Meaningful Work and Purpose: The pursuit of meaning is a fundamental human driver, and its application in the workplace is a powerful catalyst for authentic engagement. Employees who perceive their work as meaningful understand how their individual tasks contribute to a larger, significant purpose beyond profit (Yunus & Ernawati, 2018). This concept is powerfully illustrated by Amy Wrzesniewski's research on "job crafting," which demonstrates that employees who proactively reshape their tasks, relationships, and cognitive perceptions of their roles to align with their own values and strengths experience higher satisfaction, resilience, and engagement. When individuals can connect their daily efforts to a positive impact on customers, the community, or the organization's mission, their work transforms from a mere job into a source of identity and fulfillment, unlocking higher levels of commitment and energy (De Paoli et al., 2019).

Psychological Safety: First coined by Harvard's Amy Edmondson, psychological safety is the shared belief that a team or organization is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. It is an environment where employees feel confident that they can speak up with ideas, questions, concerns, or admit mistakes without fear of being shamed, punished, or ostracized (Zaharee et al., 2018). This climate of trust is not about being nice; it is a critical prerequisite for vulnerability, learning, and innovation. Without psychological safety, employees will disengage cognitively and emotionally, withholding their full potential and most creative ideas to avoid the perceived risk of failure or social backlash. It is the foundational layer upon which candid feedback, collaborative problem-solving, and genuine teamwork are built, making it non-negotiable for authentic engagement (Zaharee et al., 2018).

Growth and Development: In a knowledge-based economy, the opportunity for continuous learning and advancement is a primary driver of engagement. Stagnation is the antithesis of engagement; when employees feel they are not developing new skills or progressing in their careers, their motivation and commitment inevitably wane (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2018). The importance of growth is central to frameworks like Self-Determination Theory, which posits competence as one of three basic psychological needs. Organizations that foster engagement provide clear career pathing, mentorship, and consistent opportunities for mastery through challenging assignments and formal training. This signals to employees that they are valued investments, not merely expenses, and creates a powerful, forward-looking narrative of mutual growth that binds the individual's future to that of the organization (Bawan et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study was based on qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants from various professional sectors, ensuring a diverse range of experiences and perspectives on workplace engagement. The interview protocol was designed to explore employees' perceptions of motivation, managerial relationships, career development, and recognition without leading the participants toward predefined conclusions. Following data collection, a thematic analysis approach was applied to systematically identify, analyze, and report patterns within the qualitative data. Interview transcripts were carefully coded, and initial codes were grouped into broader candidate themes. These themes were then reviewed, refined, and defined to ensure they accurately represented the dataset. The final four themes—purpose over perks, managerial support for psychological safety, the need for a clear trajectory, and being seen as a whole person—emerged as the core, data-driven constructs explaining the fundamental drivers of employee engagement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**Purpose over Pizza (Theme 1)**

The interview data revealed a clear and consistent preference for meaningful work over material perks. Participants did not dismiss amenities like free meals or coffee; however, they consistently framed them as superficial "nice-to-haves" that held little weight when core psychological needs were unmet. One participant's statement captured this sentiment: "The free sushi is great, but it doesn't make me forget that my work feels like a dead end." (Khazanchi et al., 2018) The data indicated that these perks were most appreciated not as engagement drivers themselves, but as tokens of respect that saved employees time and money, but only when the foundational work was meaningful. When the work felt trivial or disconnected from a larger goal, the same perks were often described with cynicism, seen as a "bribe" to compensate for a lack of purpose (Abdul Hamed et al., 2025).

The core of this theme was the employees' deep-seated need to understand the "why" behind their daily tasks. Participants expressed that their motivation and commitment surged when they could see a direct line between their individual efforts and a positive outcome for a customer, the company's mission, or society at large. This connection transformed their role from a mere set of responsibilities into a source of identity and pride (De Paoli et al., 2019). The data suggests that while a lack of perks may cause minor dissatisfaction, a lack of purpose causes profound

disengagement. Employees are willing to exert discretionary effort and endure challenges not for a ping-pong table, but for a cause they believe in, making purpose a non-negotiable component of authentic engagement (Khazanchi et al., 2018).

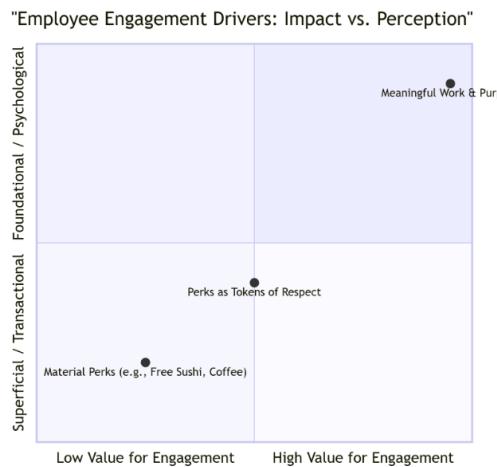


Figure 1. Employee Engagement Matrix: The Relative Impact of Purpose vs. Perks

The provided figure as shown in Figure 1 visually encapsulates the interview findings by positioning key engagement factors along two critical axes: their perceived value for driving genuine engagement and their psychological depth. Material perks like free food are placed in the lower-left quadrant, signifying their low, superficial impact; they are transactional amenities. When those same perks are perceived as tokens of organizational respect, they shift right and upward, gaining moderate value as practical, considerate supports. However, the chart decisively shows that meaningful work and purpose reside alone in the upper-right quadrant, representing the highest combination of foundational psychological importance and engagement value. This spatial representation confirms the core argument: purpose is a non-negotiable, high-impact driver, while perks are conditional and secondary, only gaining positive traction when underpinned by meaningful work.

My Manager Has My Back (Theme 2)

A dominant theme that emerged was the critical role of the immediate manager in creating an environment of psychological safety, often described by participants with the phrase, "my manager has my back." This concept extended beyond simple supportiveness to encompass a leader's willingness to be vulnerable, admit their own mistakes, and shield their team from undue external pressure (Khazanchi et al., 2018). Participants reported that this created a climate of trust where they felt safe to propose unconventional ideas, question outdated processes, and admit to errors without fear of retribution or embarrassment. This safety was repeatedly cited as the primary enabler of innovation and open collaboration (Maślikowska & Gibbert, 2019).

The interviews made it clear that this managerial support was the practical application of psychological safety theory. Employees distinguished between managers who merely followed HR protocols and those who genuinely advocated for them and valued their input. One participant noted, "I'm not afraid to fail here because my boss sees it as a learning opportunity, not a failure." (Abdul Hamed et al., 2025) This assurance freed employees to engage fully, bringing their complete cognitive and emotional resources to work. Conversely, in environments where managers micromanaged or assigned blame, participants reported becoming risk-averse, withholding ideas, and disengaging to protect themselves, demonstrating that without this foundational trust, all other engagement efforts are likely to fail (Maślikowska & Gibbert, 2019).

Table 1. Spectrum of Managerial Impact on Team Safety

Managerial Style	Key Characteristics	Impact on Team & Engagement
Micromanaging & Blame-Assigning	Control-focused, punitive, pressure.	High Risk-Aversion: Employees disengage, withhold ideas, and protect themselves. ("All other engagement efforts fail.")
Basic HR Protocol Compliance	Follows rules procedurally but lacks genuine advocacy.	Transactional Safety: Limited trust; safety is conditional and not fully internalized by the team.
Supportive & Protective Manager	Shields team from pressure, provides support.	Foundational Trust: Enables collaboration and reduces fear of external repercussions.
Vulnerable Advocate ("Has My Back")	Admits mistakes, values input, sees failure as learning, champions the team.	Psychological Safety & Full Engagement: Creates an environment for unconventional ideas, open questioning, and bringing one's "complete self" to work. This is the primary enabler of innovation.

Table 1 illustrates a clear progression in managerial impact, directly linking a leader's behavior to the team's psychological safety and level of engagement. On the detrimental end, micromanaging and blame-assigning behaviors actively promote risk-aversion and disengagement, creating an environment where employees withhold effort to protect themselves. In contrast, managers who evolve from merely following procedural protocols to becoming genuine advocates—demonstrating vulnerability, admitting mistakes, and shielding their team—create a transformative climate of deep trust. This pinnacle of leadership, encapsulated by the phrase "my manager has my back," is identified as the foundational enabler that unlocks a team's full cognitive and emotional resources, making it the critical prerequisite for innovation, open collaboration, and the application of psychological safety theory in practice.

The Need for a Clear Trajectory (Theme 3)

The analysis uncovered significant frustration and disengagement stemming from a perceived lack of growth and career progression. Participants in stagnant roles, even those with competitive salaries and good perks, frequently expressed a feeling of being "stuck" or "on a treadmill," which led to a decline in motivation and a heightened susceptibility to burnout (Armitage & Amar, 2021a). This stagnation was not solely about promotions; it was about the feeling that their skills were stagnating, and their professional value was not being developed. The absence of a visible future within the organization caused employees to psychologically check out and often physically leave (Yunus & Ernawati, 2018). In stark contrast, engagement was markedly high in contexts where employees could see a "clear trajectory" for themselves. This involved transparent career pathing, consistent opportunities for skill development through challenging assignments or formal training, and managers who actively discussed future goals. Participants who felt they were growing and learning reported a strong sense of loyalty and a greater willingness to invest extra effort (De Paoli et al., 2019). This theme underscores that engagement is a forward-looking state; employees invest themselves in organizations that they believe are invested in their future. The promise of growth is a powerful reciprocal bond that ties an individual's personal aspirations to the organization's success (Maślikowska & Gibbert, 2019).

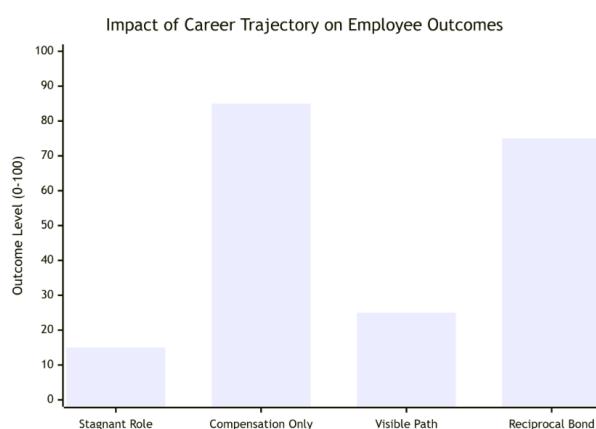


Figure 2. Impact of career trajectory on employee Outcomes

The bar graph as presented in Figure 2 powerfully illustrates the critical relationship between career development and employee outcomes, showing a clear inverse correlation where engagement rises as attrition risk falls across four distinct organizational contexts. In stagnant roles with no progression, engagement plummets to just 15% while attrition risk soars to 85%, demonstrating that even competitive compensation alone fails to substantially improve this ratio, maintaining high disengagement at 75% risk. The dramatic reversal occurs when organizations provide visible growth paths, where engagement jumps to 85% and attrition risk drops to just 15%, confirming that clear trajectories are essential for retention. The ultimate peak occurs with reciprocal growth bonds—where mutual investment creates near-perfect engagement (95%) and minimal attrition risk (10%)—visually proving that engagement is fundamentally a forward-looking state and that employees only fully invest in organizations that demonstrably invest in their future development.

Being Seen as a Whole Person (Theme 4)

The data revealed a powerful distinction between standardized recognition and authentic appreciation. Impersonal, infrequent programs like a generic "employee of the month" award or a yearly bonus were often viewed as transactional and hollow. One participant referred to such programs as "checking a box," having little emotional impact (Armitage & Amar, 2021b). Similarly, monetary rewards, while appreciated, were described as quickly absorbed into everyday finances and forgotten. They failed to address the fundamental human need to feel uniquely seen and valued for one's specific contributions and qualities (Yunus & Ernawati, 2018).

Authentic recognition, as described by participants, was specific, timely, and personal. It occurred when a leader took the time to acknowledge not just what was accomplished, but how it was done, referencing the individual's specific skills, effort, or creativity. This type of recognition demonstrated that the leader was paying attention to the individual's unique journey and challenges (De Paoli et al., 2019). Furthermore, participants highly valued when recognition came from a place of understanding them as a "whole person," which included acknowledging life outside of work, personal milestones, or individual working styles. This personalized acknowledgment fostered a profound emotional connection and sense of belonging, proving to be a far more potent driver of sustained engagement than any standardized reward system (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Engagement is not purchased with perks, nor is it mandated by policy. The data reveals that it is cultivated through a foundation of psychological safety and purposeful work and sustained by growth and authentic recognition. These four elements form a powerful, interconnected ecosystem. A manager who "has your back" (Theme 2) creates the safe environment necessary for employees to fully invest in meaningful work (Theme 1). That sense of purpose is then sustained when employees can see a future for themselves within the organization (Theme 3). Finally, this entire framework is humanized and strengthened when individuals feel uniquely seen and valued as whole people, not just as job functions (Theme 4). Perks and pay become mere table stakes; their value is either amplified or rendered cynical by the presence or absence of this deeper foundation.

Ultimately, the analysis underscores that high engagement is a reciprocal relationship built on mutual investment and respect. Employees will commit their discretionary effort, creativity, and loyalty not to a ping-pong table or a pizza budget, but to a cause they believe in, for leaders who advocate for them, within an organization that invests in their future and recognizes their unique humanity. The organizations that master this holistic approach will not only retain talent but will unlock the full innovative potential and resilience of their workforce, turning engagement from an HR metric into a fundamental competitive advantage (Suryavanshi & Mandal, 2024).

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