



Is African Engagement Poised for Take-Off?

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Emergence Growth, a partner of Global Business Solutions, recently published the results of its fifth annual Africa Employee Engagement Survey. The research from over 600 organisations across Africa has been used by many HR professionals across the continent to improve working conditions and employee performance.

Although Africa engagement scores are higher than developed global economies such as those in Europe and North America, what is of concern is that Africa has plateaued from an engagement point of view. This may indicate that the benefits of engagement have not yet been understood by most African organisations. The number of employees who are not engaged (21 percent) or who are disengaged (9 percent) tends to mirror other continents. These research results should however be seen in the context of disappointing economic growth in Africa during 2016.

Attraction & retention of key skills remains biggest challenge

Attracting and retaining employees who have the critical skills needed by business continues to be Africa's biggest challenge in 2017. Real employee engagement happens when employees are maximising their discretionary effort, leading to increased performance. If Africa continues to ignore the need to reward the performance of employees who "go the extra mile," engagement levels will continue to plateau, at best, or worse will drop. Companies will need to redefine their employee value propositions to balance the economic, technological, demographic and social challenges ahead.

The drive to comply with Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value requirements carries the risk that companies abandon rewards-based remuneration structures in the belief that they must simply pay everyone the "same". Experience proves that this is a surefire way to demotivate (and even lose) your hardest working employees and will definitely lead to reduced outputs and lower overall performance. It is for this reason that Emergence Growth and Global Business Solutions have partnered to assist clients with pragmatic solutions that ensure their need to comply does not stop them from applying fair differentiation in their remuneration and rewards structures that encourage high performance.

Time to change!

The fundamental talent imperative for Africa is to "make engagement happen." Forward-thinking companies can win the talent battle in the short-term by solidifying and promoting their reputation. People want to work for "exciting" companies. Employers who take engagement seriously will win the competition for talent and come out tops in overall business results. They can achieve this by cultivating strong, healthy and engaging cultures that are driven by positive performance orientation and leadership excellence. Something has changed recently in the African workplace that companies have never encountered before. In the past, people

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accepted a job and stuck with it, largely without complaint. Because they received a paycheck and some benefits, they accepted it as their lot in life. Workers did what leaders told them to do, and many felt rather unattached to their job. Command-and-control leadership was, and still is, the only way leaders are taught.

According to Gallup, that scenario does not reflect the realities of today’s workplace. Employees choose careers for more than a pay cheque; they want a sense of purpose. They see their jobs and their lives as being closely integrated and so 21st century employees look for, and stay with, companies that emphasise their development. They expect managers to go beyond the role of boss and serve as coaches, engaging in ongoing conversations that are aimed at maximising their strengths. Employees do not want communication and progress conversations relegated to once-a-year performance reviews that are primarily focused on what they’ve been doing wrong.

On the upside, Africans are natural coaches and should easily make this transition. But first they need to shake off the old-style command-and-control leadership structures of their patriarchal and colonial past.

Linking passion with performance

If you think about an organisation’s employees as a well-oiled, high-performance machine that drives a company’s progress; full engagement can be achieved by ensuring that the technicians are given the tools necessary to ensure the machine continues to run optimally. More engaged employees operate at a higher performance level and are therefore more productive.

HR executives globally are aware of the connection between passionate employees and business performance, which is why employee engagement is a high priority. According to a Society for Human Resource Management survey, employee engagement is at the top of all organisational concerns.

Africa cannot be viewed as a single entity in terms of employee engagement. Significant regional differences in engagement scores occur across the African continent. These differences are shown in the table below. The biggest drops in engagement scores occurred in East Africa and West Africa. Dramatic drops in engagement scores are often indicative of the “do nothing” approach.

Organisations that conduct engagement surveys (often designed by inexperienced consultants or in-house HR employees with little or no experience in engagement survey design) may get positive results that are in fact distorted and misleading. These organisations then believe that their house is in order and do nothing. This creates the perception that leadership does not really care and therefore cannot be trusted.

Compounding this problem is the perceived mismanagement by public-sector officials of social structures and the economy, which inevitably negatively affects the workplace. HR leaders need to be aware of these situations, as they invariably impact the lives of employees and their families.

Region	Engagement Score				
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
North Africa	Not surveyed	Not surveyed	71	68	Insufficient data
East Africa	74	75	82	75	65
South Africa	68	73	72	68	72
West Africa	Not surveyed	68	87	82	50
Southern Africa	70	66	62	68	69

Employees demand recognition of performance

Each aspect of employee benefits has a different level of importance for employees. The table below shows the top three benefits.

Element of Pay	Level of importance
Salary	98%
Performance bonuses/incentives	96%
Performance-related increases	95%

While Emergence Growth was not surprised that salary came in tops in terms of importance, what was surprising is that for the first time, performance-based incentives and performance-based increases ranked second and third.

For many years, Africa has performed well in the so-called soft-wired areas, such as token gifts and funeral insurance, but has performed badly in the hard-wired areas, such as performance feedback and links to pay. As global multinational corporations enter local African economies with large wallets of dollars and euros, they will inevitably meet the expectations of pay-for-performance and will attract the top talent.

While certain elements ranked higher than others, organisations across the African continent should not take their focus off the total employee value proposition, as this is important to future engagement scores and the ability to attract and retain key talent. An increasing number of employees are demanding that their performance be recognised, both in terms of financial incentives and increases. As the workforce profile changes (an increased number of Millennials in the workforce), there will be greater pressure on organisations to reward performance and initiative. Organisations are well-advised to implement incentives that speak to the younger workforce.

Talk to us about how you can benefit from the combined expertise and experience of Emergence Growth and Global Business Solutions to not only comply with Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value but to ensure your business is maximising its potential to recruit and retain the very best skills and high performing individuals in the market.

Kind Regards

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