

ENGAGED EMPLOYEES AS LEADERS IN WORKPLACE INNOVATION

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Abstract: Innovations are the key to the long-term survival, growth, and development of any organization. For that reason, all organizations strive to have as much as possible successful innovations that consequently bring many positive effects to the entire economy. This paper points out the importance and role of engaged employees who take a leading role in organizational innovations. Engaged employees give their best effort during the performance of work tasks, try to create new, better ways to perform certain activities through cooperation and exchange of knowledge with colleagues, and try to improve the functioning of the entire organization. With their enthusiasm, perseverance, persistence, and sincere desire to give their contribution to the business of the organization, engaged employees are the important source of creativity and innovation in the workplace. At the organizational level, a significant role in the innovation process has the proposals of engaged employees who truly love their job, the organization in which they work and have the desire to dedicate themselves to additional innovative activities that are not in their job descriptions.

Keywords: engaged employees, leadership, organizational behavior, innovations, human resources, motivation.

1. Introduction

Employees represent the most significant potential of any organization because of their involvement in all processes and activities, from production of products/services to their sales and servicing. They

have the best knowledge about the business processes and activities they perform because they are directly involved in the implementation and therefore, employees can be significant generators of workplace innovation.

By their nature, innovations are the result of a constant search for positive change. They have traditionally been associated with new technical and technological solutions, while in modern times innovations do not have to be physically tangible and can relate to improvements in management processes, decision-making, production of goods and services, different and efficient application of existing working tools, etc. [Brkljač, et al., 2018]

Innovations represent a driver of economic survival and sustainable growth, [Mitrović & Mitrović, 2020] which is why many leaders have become aware that the long-term growth and development of organizations depends on the ability to innovate. [Lukić, 2014] Innovations in organization lead to rationalization in the performance of certain business processes and activities. Innovation as a process of implementation of the idea to a practical solution aims to constantly lead to positive changes in working processes and in the products themselves, in order to meet people's needs, simplify the working process and increase standard of living.

The necessity for innovations in modern management systems of organizations arises from the

speed of changes in the environment, unpredictability, interconnectedness and conditionality of all changes, as well from their impact on many areas of social and economic life. As a result of these changes, the life cycle of technology and products is shortened. Hence, the main tools that organizations use to survive the market competition are changes and adaptations through the ability of differentiating the products and services by innovativeness. Innovative organizations base their business on knowledge and flexibility because they have the ability to respond very quickly to all challenges from the environment. All novelties in management methods are called management innovations and aim to continuously motivate employees to be innovative in the process of performing their working tasks. The constant creativity of employees will continue to be the foundation of the competitive advantage of organizations in the future. [Kokeza, 2016]

The aim of this paper is to show how engaged employees take the leadership role in encouraging, generating, and implementing innovations in the workplace and in what manner employees give their innovation proposals.

2. The role and significance of engaged employees in the process of workplace innovation

In recent decades, great attention of theorists and practitioners has been focused on the concept of employee engagement. Great interest about this topic has led to the emergence of different definitions, but among all authors and practitioners dealing with this topic is a consensus that employee engagement is the key to success of

any organization. [Lukić Nikolić, 2021] Employee engagement represents the complete employment and indulgence of employees during the performance of work tasks and activities on the three ways: physically, cognitively and emotionally. [Kahn, 1990] This concept is the opposite of burnout syndrome (physical and mental exhaustion, cynicism, dissatisfaction, decreased productivity), because it indicates employee commitment, positive energy and performance. (Table 1)

Table 1. Opposites between burnout syndrome and employee engagement

Burnout syndrome	Employee engagement
Fatigue/exhaustion	Energetic
Cynicism	Active participation
Decline in productivity	Efficiency and productivity

Source: [Taris et al., 2017]

Employees who are engaged feel fulfilled, satisfied, happy, included, focused, have a positive attitude towards the organization, become its brand ambassadors, and perhaps most importantly - become generators of workplace innovation. There are some signals by which organizations may indicate employee engagement: the degree of job involvement, the desire of employ-

ees to stay in the organization in the long run, the effort to give their maximum, the effort to fully commit to work tasks and passion for work and business results. [Storey et al., 2008] Furthermore, the leaders of the organizations notice certain differences between engaged and non-engaged employees. Table 2.

Table 2. Key characteristics of engaged and non-engaged employees

Engaged employees	Non-engaged employees
Self-confidence	Lack of self-confidence
Growth	Stagnation
Innovation	Status quo
Commitment	Disinterest
Originality	Lack of originality
Creativity	Lack of creativity

Source: [Federman, 2009]

Numerous researches showed that engaged employees: [Marciano, 2010]

- Propose new ideas;
- Show enthusiasm while doing their job;
- Take the initiative;
- Try to improve their work, themselves and colleagues;
- Constantly exceed the set goals;
- Have the curiosity;
- Encourage all team members to achieve above-average results;
- Overcome obstacles and remain task-oriented;
- Show a high degree of commitment and loyalty to the organization.

All these effects lead to a number of positive results on the business of the organization, but also on the employees themselves. Those are: [Lukić Nikolić, 2021]

- Lower rate of absence and turnover of employees;

- Lower rate of errors and omissions in work;
- Less theft and embezzlement of employees;
- Less organizational conflicts;
- Less stress in entire organization;
- Higher level of knowledge exchange and cooperation in organization;
- Positive work atmosphere and better work ethic;
- Higher level of employee satisfaction;
- Loyalty and commitment of employees;
- Employees act as brand ambassadors of the organization;
- Growth of satisfaction of consumers and users of service;
- Better reputation of the organization;
- Higher level of innovations;
- Higher flexibility and agility;
- Higher level of productivity;
- Higher profitability.

Leaders and managers have noticed that employee engagement is the key to innovation in organizations. Engaged employees give their best during the performance of their tasks, try to create new, improved ways to perform certain activities through cooperation and exchange of knowledge with colleagues, and try to improve the business of the entire organization. With their enthusiasm, engaged employees represent a significant source for creativity and innovation in the workplace. [Rao, 2016]

In job advertisements there are no requirements such as "the employee must be innovative", "the employee's task is to generate innovations". Innovation is usually a self-initiated, desired, additional behavior of employees that is beyond the description of their work tasks. The process of innovation in the workplace itself implies the following phases: [Kaplan, 2019] (1) recognizing the problem and proposing ideas for its solution; (2) seeking support from the organization and associates who will participate in the implementation; (3) implementing innovation in practice and overcoming all obstacles that may appear. It is evident that for each of these phases it is essential that employees are truly engaged. First of all, when they recognize the existence of a problem, employees must be engaged and

committed to the organization in order to be able to propose and come up with different ideas for solving it. This requires that employees truly love their job, the organization in which they work, and that they have the will and desire to dedicate themselves to these additional activities that are not in their job description. Engaged employees strive to initiate, motivate and engage other employees in order to reach the best possible solution that will be accepted and implemented.

In practice, it is common for many innovative activities to be risky and uncertain, which is why employees will be faced with many attempts and failures before they succeed in innovation. [Lukić, 2014] Having in mind the fact that organizations operate in a complex environment characterized by a high degree of uncertainty, dynamism and turbulence caused by various crisis situations, engaged employees and their innovations are supporting pillar for survival. [Lukić et al., 2020] Therefore, human resource management is a strategic activity that affects the creation of added value and long-term success, growth and development. [Kafadar & Jaganjac, 2019] In order to survive and succeed on the market, organizations need employees who are ready for constant changes, who strive to acquire and exchange knowledge

and cooperate with colleagues. [Lazarević & Lukić, 2018; Lukić & Lazarević, 2019]

The knowledge, abilities and skills of employees need to be continuously developed and improved due to changes caused by technical and technological progress. In the process of developing the competencies of employees, a clear distinction should be made between the competencies of employees who are not on managerial positions and the competencies of managers. The job of a manager is more focused on providing help and support to employees in order to achieve the goals of the organization.

In order to perform such tasks, managers must master key competencies, which relate to: effective methods of functioning of the organization, ability of written and oral communication, creative thinking, conflict resolution, assessment of personnel situation in the organization and career development. Managerial ability is observed from the aspect of continuous learning and through important determinants of its behavior such as: intuitiveness, self-confidence and creativity. The success of a manager depends on his ability to manage his personal skills, to possess knowledge and abilities to use new technologies, as well as to motivate and coordinate

the work of employees. [Mirković, 2012]

3. Traditional and contemporary forms for collection innovative proposals of employees

Intellectual capital represents one of the essential source of organization's competitive advantage due to employee's knowledge, skills and experience which have utmost importance for innovation process especially when employees are engaged in the same organization for longer period of time and possess specific (tacit) knowledge regarding business process and activities. [Lukić et al., 2019] Additionally, intellectual capital is one of the most important factors of development and competitiveness between national economies. The group of developed economies have the highest level of competitiveness measured by global index and they are dominant force in the segment of intellectual capital. Consequently, the outlook of future development should be based on advanced industry of products and services with higher level of added value which will result in measures that encourage development and innovations. [Kokeza & Paunović, 2021]

Bearing in mind the fact that rapid changes in environment significantly reflect on business of organizations

and that those changes are inevitable component of future, leaders and managers are faced with challenge to be innovative. [Ostojić & Dobarčić, 2020]

Proposals of employees are very important indicator of their engagement and degree of innovation. Only employees which are truly engaged have desire, motivation and energy to reveal suggestions for improvement of business operations, products/services of organizations and techniques. The importance of employee's suggestions are personalized in the fact that employees on higher positions hierarchically despite of their highest level of authority and responsibility, lose potential to react quickly and perceive problems and challenges on lower positions in organizations because they do not possess required information and knowledge. [Ljubojević & Lukić, 2020]

Traditional form of collecting employee's proposals realizes through "suggestion box" in which employees put sheets of paper with their proposals, ideas, suggestions and comments. However, the practice did not verified this kind of employee's proposal collecting as efficient enough due to numerous imperfections such as: slow feedback, only few suggestions are really accepted due to the fact that

they are not described and explained in details which make difficult discussion and making statistics regarding number of submitted, rejected and accepted suggestions. Also, deficiency of traditional form of employee's proposal collection is impersonated in the fact that employees which submitted proposals do not often have feedback regarding processing and analysis of their proposals by relevant bodies.

Current period in which we are living and working, which is characterized with penetration and massive application of modern technological solutions, gave birth to new ways of employee's proposals collection. One possible way is implementation of modern software solutions that make possible for employees to submit their proposals electronically and to follow their status online. Those solutions provide the opportunity for: commenting of submitting proposals, making additional questions, voting for proposals, defining priorities, choosing proposals which will be realized in practice and rewarding of employees whose proposals were accepted. [Lukić Nikolić, 2021]

In recent years, innovative proposals of employees are related to process of "greening" organizations, i.e. "green" behaviour on workplace with the aim of introduction of

social and environmental focused innovations. Some of the most often "green" behaviours of engaged employees are related to: (1) less printing of documents or both side printing and copying only if it is necessary; (2) commute to workplace by bicycle/scooter or by foot; (3) joint transportation of employees who arrived by car to work and live along the way/close to each other; (4) switching off computers when they are not in the use; (5) switching off the air conditioner at least 30 minutes before the end of working hours; (6) use of own glasses and cups and eliminating plastic ones out of use; (7) working under natural light for as long as possible; (8) consuming drinking water at room temperature instead of refrigerated water to reduce electricity consumption; (9) using stairs instead of elevators to reduce electricity consumption; (10) growing and nurturing plants in the office. [Opatha & Arulrahaj, 2014] Above mentioned "green" behaviours of engaged employees are very useful, because climate changes require quick and resolute response of each region, country, city, organization and individual employee. [Mirković & Lukić, 2018] Furthermore, these green behaviors of employees indicate that innovations are not always and exclusively profit-oriented, but can relate to sustainable development

and ecology, and can be a significant contribution to society as a whole. [Ostojić et al., 2020]

The intention of every organization is to have as many engaged employees as possible, because they are the basis for further development and progress. Therefore, one of the priorities of every leader is to build, improve, but also to nurture employee engagement. [Lukić Nikolić & Jakica, 2021]

4. Conclusion

Innovations are desirable for every organization, regardless of its history, financial strength, number of employees, activity, size and market in which it operates. In practice, innovations emerge in any part of the organization and by any employee regardless of the position he/she is in. Engaged employees represent significant generators of innovations in the workplace. They have a real need and desire to constantly strive for innovations related to improving the quality of products and/or services, improving marketing activities, sales, servicing, overall customer experience and revenue growth. Truly engaged employees take a leading role in the innovation process, remain focused during the process of innovation implementation in the organization, remain persistent when they encounter difficulties,

and by exchanging knowledge and experiences with other colleagues always endeavour to reach the best possible solution. An organization that has a high level of innovativeness encourages employees at all positions and levels, by its

organizational culture, to use their knowledge, competencies and creativity to the full extent. Innovations that are created within the organization bring measurable economic effects in the entire market and in the entire economy.

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ANGAŽOVANI ZAPOSLENI KAO LIDERI INOVATIVOSTI NA RADNOM MESTU

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Rezime: Inovacije predstavljaju ključ za dugoročni opstanak, rast i razvoj bilo koje organizacije. Iz tog razloga, sve organizacije nastoje da imaju što veći broj uspešnih inovacija koje posledično donose pozitivne efekte u celoj ekonomiji. U ovom radu je ukazano na značaj i ulogu angažovanih zaposlenih koji u organizacijama preuzimaju lidersku ulogu u inovacijama. Angažovani zaposleni daju svoj maksimum tokom obavljanja radnih zadataka, nastoje da saradnjom i razmenom znanja sa kolegama osmisle nove, bolje načine za obavljanje određenih aktivnosti i trude se da unaprede poslovanje cele organizacije. Svojim entuzijazmom, upornošću, istrajnošću i iskrenom željom da daju doprinos u poslovanju organizacije, angažovani zaposleni predstavljaju značajan izvor za kreativnost i inovacije na radnom mestu. Na organizacionom nivou, značajnu ulogu u procesu inovacija imaju predlozi angažovanih zaposlenih koji istinski vole svoj posao, organizaciju u kojoj rade i imaju želju da se posvete dodatnim inovativnim aktivnostima koje im nisu u opisu posla.

Ključne reči: angažovani zaposleni, liderstvo, organizaciono ponašanje, inovacije, ljudski resursi, motivacija