

What makes an engaged employee?

Trait Emotional Intelligence as a predictor of employee engagement





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Introduction

Imagine you are at a workshop. The trainer presents passionately and effortlessly. She is willing to go the extra mile to make the workshop a wonderful experience. She doesn't see the time passing by and it's obvious that she loves her job. This trainer is a good example of an **engaged employee**.

Engaged employees are willing to put in **effort** into their work, feel **enthusiastic, proud** and **inspired** in their jobs and feel that **time passes quickly** as they are fully **absorbed** and **concentrated** with their work. Engaged employees have a **positive work-related state of mind** (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Engaged employees have lower chances of leaving their companies, are more satisfied with their jobs, and perform better than their non-engaged colleagues (Bakker et al., 2005; Saks, 2006; Xantholpoulu et al., 2008). Because of this, engaged employees can **help an organisation maximise profits** (Hill & Birkinshaw, 2012).

Engaged employees clearly bring positive individual and organisational outcomes. In fact, the cost of disengaged employees was valued at \$350 billion in 2017 in the US (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017). Consequently, **companies are spending hundreds of millions of dollars on employee engagement programs** (Morgan, 2017).

The **problem** is that **only 15%** of employees report being **engaged worldwide** (Gallup, 2018). Companies have tried to tackle the disengagement problem and one popular solution has been to provide a multitude of perks to their employees. **Perks** such as massages, free lunches and cinema tickets might improve engagement scores in the short-term, but they **don't improve employee engagement in the long-term** (Morgan, 2017).

WHY DO ENGAGEMENT LEVELS REMAIN SO LOW DESPITE ALL THE INVESTMENT IN KEEPING EMPLOYEES ENGAGED?



Part of the answer may be that **employees themselves are naturally more or less dispositioned to feel engaged at work.** Could the way that we personally understand, control, and manage our own, and others' emotions play a role in our engagement levels? Recent (but very limited!) research has shown that employees with higher Emotional Intelligence report higher levels of engagement (e.g., *Akhtar et al., 2015*).

Considering the extremely low numbers of engaged employees and the vast amount of money that is being spent on engagement interventions, understanding why and how employees are engaged is very much needed.

DOES EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE PREDICT EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT LEVELS AND IF SO, WHICH...

...SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF ONE'S EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE PREDICT HIGHER LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT?



The Thomas study:

Overview

306 employees in the UK completed the Thomas Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue) and the Thomas Engage questionnaire. We tested whether a global score of Emotional Intelligence as well as the individual facets of Emotional Intelligence (outlined in the table below) predicted engagement scores.

TEIQue measures (Petrides, 2009):

GLOBAL TRAIT EI	High scorers perceive themselves as...	
WELLBEING	Self-Esteem	...successful and self-confident.
	Happiness	...cheerful and satisfied with their lives.
	Optimism	...confident and likely to 'look on the bright side' of life.
SELF-CONTROL	Emotion Regulation	...capable of controlling their emotions.
	Stress Management	...capable of withstanding pressure and regulating stress.
	Impulse Control	...reflective and less likely to give into their urges.
EMOTIONALITY	Emotion Perception	...clear about their own and other people's feelings.
	Emotion Expression	...capable of communicating their feelings to others.
	Relationships	...capable of having fulfilling personal relationships.
	Empathy	...capable of taking someone else's perspective.
SOCIABILITY	Social Awareness	...accomplished networkers with excellent social skills.
	Emotion Management	...capable of influencing other people's feelings.
	Assertiveness	...forthright, frank, and willing to stand up for their rights.
INDEPENDENT FACETS	Adaptability	...flexible and willing to adapt to new conditions.
	Self-Motivation	...driven and unlikely to give up in the face of adversity.

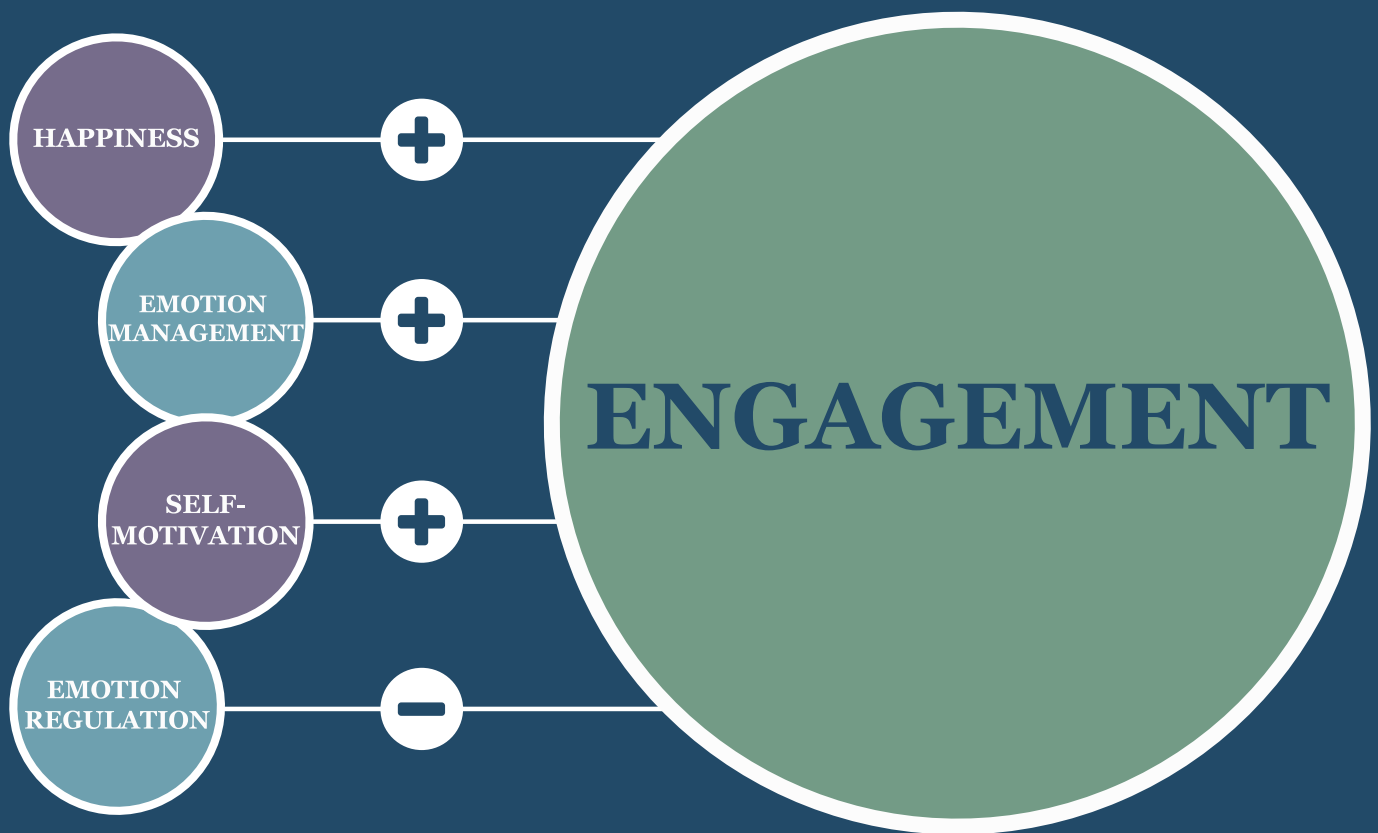


The Thomas study:

Key findings

Analyses showed that **Emotional Intelligence as a whole predicted engagement levels over and above age and gender.**

Delving into Emotional Intelligence, we found that specific aspects of one's Emotional Intelligence predicted engagement:



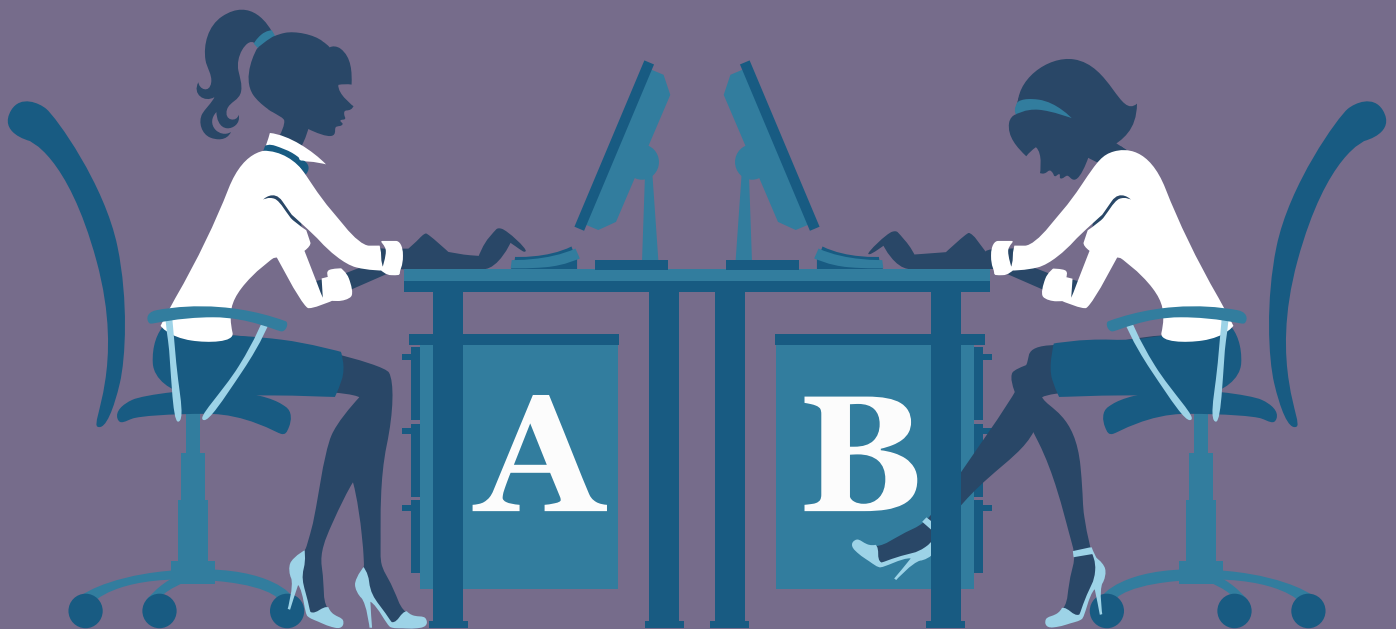
Scorers high in Happiness, Emotion Management and Self-Motivation positively predicted engagement levels. Scorers high in Emotion Regulation negatively predicted engagement, meaning that those with lower Emotion Regulation abilities are more likely to be engaged.



What do the findings mean?

It could be that an **employee's Emotional Intelligence acts as a personal resource that helps deal with all sorts of job demands in his or her work life.** But, what does that exactly mean?

Imagine two employees. Employee A keeps 10 snacks in her drawer, so that if she gets hungry, she can eat a snack and keep concentration and motivation levels high throughout the day. Employee B, however, doesn't keep snacks in her drawer and so if she gets hungry she will remain hungry for a long time, become fatigued, lose concentration and lose motivation.



The snacks in the above example are **personal resources.** **When they are high, the employee will remain concentrated and motivated, but when they are low, they will more easily lose concentration and motivation.**

Having high Emotional Intelligence is like having lots of snacks in your drawer: **High Emotional Intelligence is a personal resource** that helps you deal with job demands throughout the day and helps keep you enthusiastic, focused and absorbed in your work. **This personal resource keeps you engaged throughout your working day** (Durán, Extremera & Rey, 2004; Gørgens-Ekermans & Brand, 2012; Ravichandran et al., 2011).

We also found that different aspects of Emotional Intelligence predicted engagement levels.

HAPPINESS

Employees that report higher levels of Happiness also experience higher levels of engagement. Past research has shown that positive emotions help people build lasting resources such as resilience and life satisfaction. Going back to our personal resources example, **happy people become more engaged not simply because they feel better but because they develop personal resources for living well** (Cohn et al., 2009).



EMOTION MANAGEMENT

Employees who tend to be good at influencing how other people feel experience higher levels of engagement. If you can **manage the emotions of those around you** and you can **create a positive atmosphere** at work, you are **more likely to become engaged yourself** (Shimazu, Shimazu & Odahara, 2004). Moreover, if an employee can **manage the emotions of their manager**, the manager may **reciprocate** by providing more interesting job opportunities with more autonomy, which can then facilitate engagement levels (Uhl-Bien & Maslyn, 2002; Bakker et al., 2011).

But how could you create a positive atmosphere at work? Through **emotional contagion** – when people **mimic** facial and vocal expressions as well as postures and behaviours of those around them, allowing them to **‘catch’ others’ emotions** (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993).

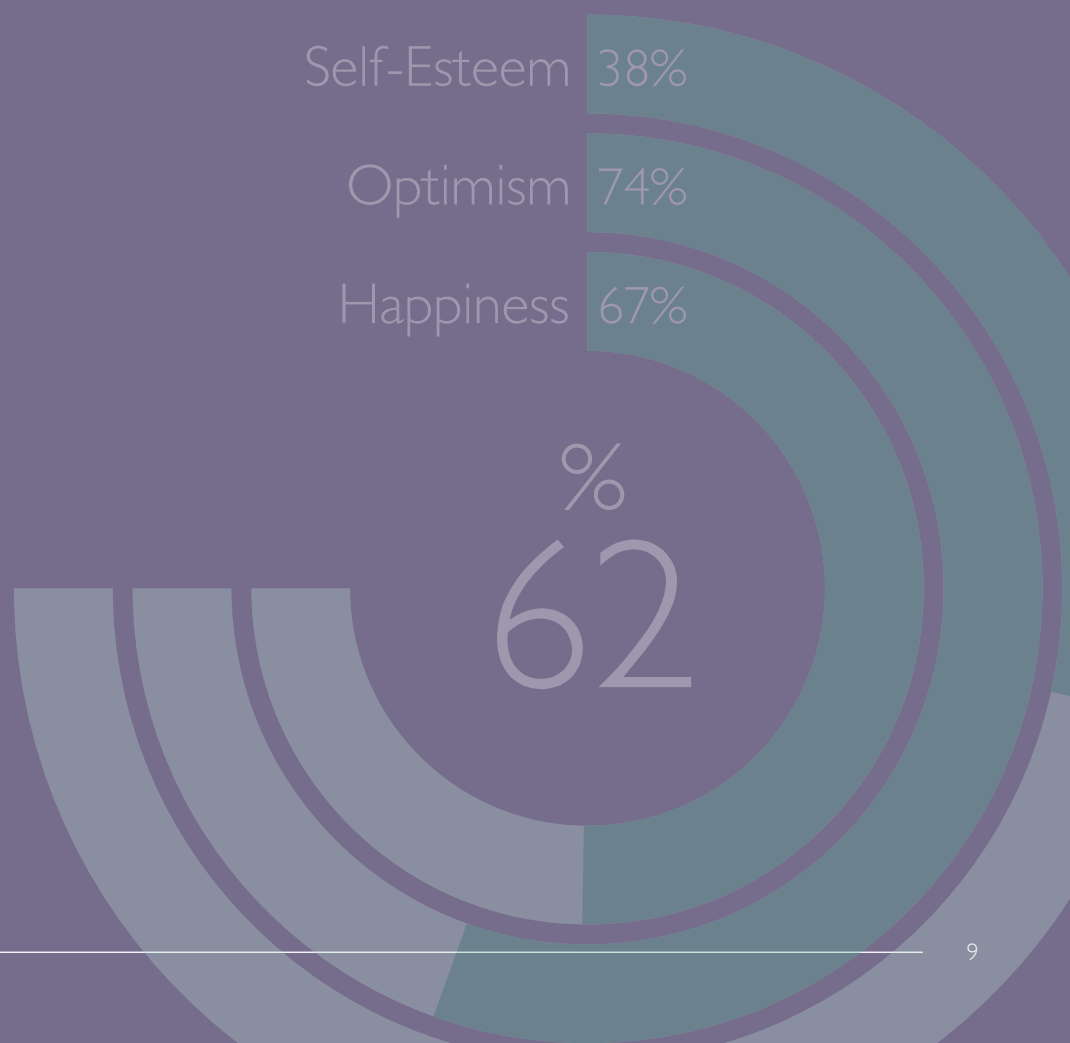
Going back to our personal resources example, **emotion management is a personal resource** that helps employees keep feeling engaged.

SELF-MOTIVATION

Employees that are motivated by an internal need for achievement rather than external rewards such as money experience higher levels of engagement. Researchers have already found that when employees are **intrinsically motivated by meaningful work**, they are more **dedicated in their work tasks** and **feel fully immersed** and **in the zone** (Vandenabeele, 2014; Mills & Fullagar, 2008). This **internal drive** to complete tasks for their own sake is a **personal resource** that facilitates employee engagement.

EMOTION REGULATION

Employees who are less able to regulate their emotions and **experience greater fluctuations** in emotion experience higher levels of engagement at work. Why might this be? An individual with low emotion regulation experiences big fluctuations in emotion – they **feel the high highs and the low lows**. Because of this, he or she **feels the highest highs of engagement** and consequently reports higher levels of engagement.





What are the implications for organisations?

Since higher Emotional Intelligence predicts higher engagement levels, companies could **invest in training Emotional Intelligence** skills to their staff. Training Emotional Intelligence skills has previously been shown to be successful in helping employees deal more effectively with their feelings, decrease job stress (*Oginska-Bulik, 2005*) and enhance mental wellbeing (*Nelis et al., 2011; Vesely, Saklofske & Nordstokke, 2014*).

In terms of Happiness, it is **NOT** ethical nor practical, for organisations to **only hire** happy people to create a more engaged workforce. Instead, **organisations should focus on how to keep employees with lower levels of Happiness engaged**. For example, organisations could improve less happy employees' work environment, their relationships with clients and colleagues and their type of work as well as their workload (*Shier & Graham, 2010*).

Regarding Emotion Management, organisations could invest in **recruiting individuals high in Emotion Management** as well as **train** such skills in existing employees and managers.

Combining the Happiness and Emotion Management findings we suggest that organisations do the following for **team building**:

- Put at least one employee with high Emotion Management and one employee with high Happiness in your teams. These **employees could transfer positive emotions** to the rest of the team and increase the team's levels of engagement.

Combining the Happiness and Emotion Management findings we suggest that organisations do the following for **organisational change**:

- Understand how to best manage the Emotional Intelligence of employees to keep them engaged in a time of change. Practitioners can focus on those lower in Happiness and **create job-related resources** for them to be engaged such as clear goals, objectives and social support for the new change.

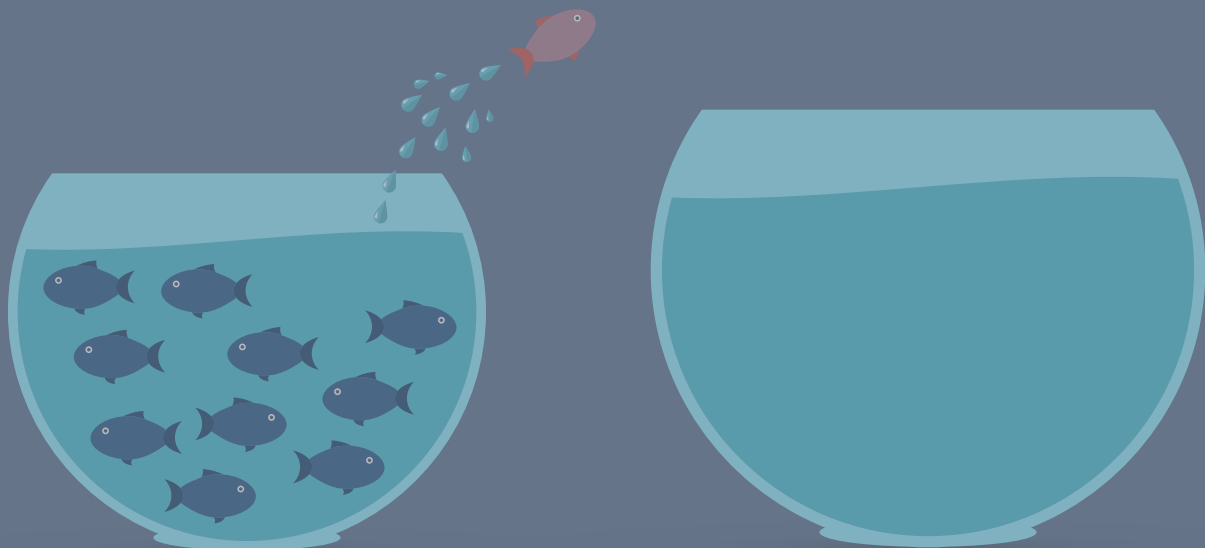
Organisations should also understand how to keep those with high self-motivation and those with low self-motivation engaged. People **high in Self-Motivation will naturally be more engaged**. Organisations should keep these people engaged by providing them with meaningful work and managerial support (*Olafsen et al., 2015*). Those with low Self-Motivation, however, might enjoy the free lunches, massages and cinema tickets more and that's what keeps them interested at work.



Conclusion

Only 15% of employees worldwide report being engaged (*Gallup, 2018*) and the cost of disengaged employees in US companies was valued at \$350 billion in 2017 (*Osborne & Hammoud, 2017*).

So why do engagement interventions such as giving out perks not work? Part of the answer is that **employees themselves are naturally more or less disposed to feel engaged at work** and organisations should **address each employee accordingly to keep them engaged**. The way we personally understand, control, and manage our own and others' emotions plays a significant role in our engagement levels.





Action points

Every person is different. We all have different ways in which we are engaged at work. Therefore, it is important for organisations to know what keeps each person engaged.

If we know the Emotional Intelligence of our staff, we can make wiser decisions on how to manage them, and how to best keep them engaged. Each person is engaged in different ways and Thomas's TEIQue tool can help you decipher exactly how to facilitate each employees' engagement.

- Firstly**, measure the engagement levels of your employees using the Engage tool.
- Secondly**, measure their Emotional Intelligence using TEIQue. By gaining a greater awareness of your employees, **organisations can provide tailored engagement solutions to their employees** based on their Emotional Intelligence scores.



To find out more about this study or how we can help your organisation with employee engagement, contact us on 01628 244 024 or email info@thomas.co.uk

Note: it should be taken into account that the results should not be generalised beyond the UK population as we only used UK data.



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