

GLI EVIDENCE CHECK™ / ISSUE 05

Is Employee Engagement the Same as Flourishing?

What research suggests about involvement in work, employee well-being, health, recovery, and the limits of engagement data.

FREQUENTLY OVERSTATED**THE EVIDENCE-BASED ANSWER**

No. Employee engagement and flourishing are related, but they are not interchangeable. Engagement primarily describes a person's connection to work. Flourishing reflects a broader pattern of positive functioning.

The Short Answer

Engaged employees tend to experience their work with greater energy, involvement, enthusiasm, or commitment. These are important experiences, and research generally associates work engagement with favorable individual and organizational outcomes.

But engagement does not provide a complete picture of whether employees are flourishing. A person may be committed to the organization, absorbed in meaningful work, and motivated to contribute while also experiencing chronic exhaustion, inadequate recovery, poor health, strained relationships, or conflict between work and the rest of life.

Engagement matters. It simply does not measure everything that matters.

THE BETTER QUESTION

What does engagement reveal about employees' relationship with work, and which important dimensions of flourishing does it leave unmeasured?

What Employee Engagement Means

Employee engagement does not have one universally accepted definition. In organizational research, work engagement is commonly defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption.

Vigor refers to energy, persistence, and willingness to invest effort. Dedication includes involvement, enthusiasm, pride, inspiration, and significance. Absorption refers to concentration and being deeply immersed in work.

Other models examine employees' emotional connection and commitment to their work and organization or the workplace conditions that support involvement. Leaders should understand what a particular instrument measures before interpreting its score.

What Flourishing Means

Flourishing is a broader concept describing positive functioning across important areas of life. Frameworks differ, but commonly include positive emotion or life satisfaction, meaning, relationships, engagement, accomplishment, health, vitality, autonomy, and growth.

Some models focus primarily on psychological well-being. Others include physical health, financial security, character, close relationships, or material stability.

A USEFUL DISTINCTION

Engagement asks how someone relates to work. Flourishing asks how well someone is functioning across a broader range of human needs and experiences.

Engagement and Flourishing Overlap

Engagement and flourishing should not be treated as unrelated. Engaging work can contribute to well-being by providing meaning, strengths use, learning, supportive relationships, competence, autonomy, accomplishment, belonging, and practical resources.

Work engagement is also positively associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, proactive behavior, and aspects of mental and physical health. These relationships help explain why engagement scores often move in the same direction as measures of well-being.

But correlation does not make two constructs interchangeable. Engagement can contribute to flourishing and provide evidence about part of the employee experience without representing flourishing in its entirety.

The Engaged-but-Strained Employee

A person may remain proud of the work, committed to a mission, absorbed in important projects, and reluctant to let others down while also experiencing exhaustion, poor sleep, inadequate recovery, work-family conflict, or declining health.

Engagement and burnout generally move in opposite directions, but they are not perfect opposites. Person-centered studies have identified engaged-exhausted and burned-out/involved profiles in which meaningful involvement coexists with substantial strain.

Engagement Is Not Workaholism

Engaged employees are generally drawn toward work through energy, interest, dedication, or meaning. Workaholism includes a compulsive internal pressure to work and difficulty disengaging even when continued work is unnecessary or harmful.

THE LEADERSHIP TEST

Is this employee contributing with energy and meaningful choice, or continuing because the culture makes rest, boundaries, or reduced availability feel unsafe?

Why Organizations Over-Rely on Engagement

Engagement is associated with outcomes organizations care about, including performance, retention, absenteeism, safety, customer outcomes, and organizational citizenship. Engagement surveys are familiar, comparatively easy to administer, and often supported by clear benchmarks.

The problem begins when engagement becomes the organization's primary or only indicator of employee well-being. A high score can create false reassurance if leaders do not also examine exhaustion, recovery, workload, health, psychological safety, fairness, belonging, autonomy, and sustainable performance.

What Engagement Measures May Miss

Dimension	What engagement may reveal	What it may not establish
Energy	Vigor while working	Adequate rest outside work
Dedication	Meaning and inspiration at work	Room for other sources of meaning
Absorption	Immersion in work	Ability to detach and recover
Commitment	Connection to the organization	Whether staying is healthy or sustainable
Resources	Whether workplace needs are met	Whether demands remain reasonable over time
Performance	Conditions supporting contribution	Whether performance can be sustained without harm
Well-being	Some work-related well-being	Broader physical, psychological, and social health

Engagement surveys answer the questions they were designed to answer. They become misleading when leaders treat them as proof that employees are healthy, thriving, or able to sustain current demands.

A More Complete Measurement Approach

Measure Engagement Examine energy, dedication, involvement, workplace resources, commitment, or enthusiasm, depending on the selected instrument.	Measure Demands and Conditions Assess workload, staffing, control, predictability, fairness, psychological safety, role conflict, and recovery.
Measure Health and Well-Being Include appropriate indicators of exhaustion, burnout, distress, physical health, sleep, recovery, and work-family conflict.	Measure Flourishing Examine positive functioning more broadly, including meaning, relationships, positive emotion, accomplishment, growth, and vitality.
Examine Patterns Over Time Repeated measurement can show whether patterns are temporary, concentrated, improving, or worsening.	Connect Results to Action Explain what leaders learned, what will change, what requires investigation, and what cannot currently change.

Four Employee Experiences to Distinguish

Experience	Possible pattern	Leadership interpretation
Engaged and flourishing	Strong involvement, health, meaning, relationships, and recovery	Protect conditions supporting sustainable contribution
Engaged but strained	Dedication with exhaustion, overload, or poor recovery	Reduce preventable demands before commitment becomes depletion
Not engaged but otherwise well	Healthy functioning with weak connection to the job	Examine job design, meaning, development, relationships, and fit
Neither engaged nor flourishing	Low connection to work alongside poor well-being or strain	Examine workplace conditions and available support

These are interpretive examples, not diagnostic labels. Individual experiences are more complex, and scores should not be used to infer a particular employee's health.

What Leaders Can Reasonably Do

Define Engagement Clearly State what the organization means by engagement and what its selected measure actually assesses.	Stop Treating Engagement as a Wellness Score Do not interpret high engagement as evidence that employees are healthy, recovering adequately, or flourishing.
Add Complementary Measures Use a focused combination of engagement, working conditions, recovery, health, and flourishing indicators.	Look for Engaged-but-Strained Patterns Pay attention when dedication remains high while exhaustion, workload, absence, or work-family conflict worsens.
Protect Recovery Do not allow enthusiasm, purpose, or commitment to justify chronic overwork or constant availability.	Respond to Conditions Identify which findings require changes in workload, staffing, priorities, control, management practices, or systems.

What the Evidence Does Not Show

- Engagement has little value.
- Engaged employees are generally unhealthy.
- Engagement and burnout always occur together.
- Every highly dedicated employee is at risk of workaholism.
- Organizations should stop measuring engagement.
- High engagement proves that working conditions are healthy.

Questions Leaders Should Consider

1. How do we define employee engagement?	2. What does our instrument actually measure?
3. Which well-being dimensions are absent?	4. Are we using engagement as a wellness proxy?
5. Could committed employees carry unsustainable demands?	6. Do we assess exhaustion, recovery, and workload?
7. Can employees report strain without seeming less committed?	8. How will we respond when results diverge?

THE BOTTOM LINE

Engaged employees are not necessarily flourishing employees.

Connection to the Flourishing Chain™

Within the Flourishing Chain™, engagement may appear as an element of work experience and positive functioning. It should not replace the broader health and flourishing links in the model.

THE FLOURISHING CHAIN™

Leadership > Culture > Health and Well-Being > Flourishing > Sustainable Performance

A workplace can temporarily achieve strong commitment and performance while weakening the health, recovery, and flourishing needed to sustain them.

Key Evidence

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