

## Associate Engagement in Asia: Does One Size Fit All?

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The 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing have been described by observers as a coming-out party for mainland China. As nearly anyone knows today, China is just one of many Asian countries that are rapidly reshaping the global economy.

For organizations seeking to optimize their return on revenue, the topic of employee engagement and its impact on organizational performance is well known. With roots in organizational climate research (Schneider, 1985) and reinforced by service profit chain articles in Harvard Business Review (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1994; Rucci, Kirn, & Quinn, 1998), the topic of employee engagement has captured the hearts and minds of senior executives and organizational psychologists alike because of its important role in promoting organizational effectiveness.

Coupling engagement with linkage research, Kenexa® has identified a significant association between the way that employees describe their work environment and important outcomes such as customer loyalty, employee retention and organizational profitability (Wiley, 1996). Understanding these linkages, therefore, allows organizations to focus intervention efforts on areas that have the greatest likelihood of hitting pay dirt.

As Asia's economy continues to grow, the question of how to maximize productivity in the region will remain important for senior executives, as well as HR managers charged with making it happen. While considerations of supply, demand, quality and logistics have increased significantly in this region, employers are also prioritizing the human element to improve the productivity and build high performing organizational cultures within the region.

In the United States, in particular, substantial research has been devoted to the topic of employee engagement. Today there is general acceptance that this concept (an amalgamation of

commitment, pride, advocacy and satisfaction) is a significant driver of business success.

But what drives employee engagement? In general, the factors that contribute most strongly to an engaged workforce can be boiled down to a few common elements:

- Feeling valued by the organization
- Having a sense that the organization will be around for the long-haul/trust in leadership
- Effective communication (up, down and laterally)
- Career development and/or training opportunities
- A good relationship with coworkers and individual manager

When these elements are present, employees tend to evidence higher levels of engagement, which in turn, is associated with organizational performance. Minor differences do exist; however, the commonalities are generally greater than the differences.

Therefore, as large parts of Asia's economy continue to expand at seemingly exponential rates, one might ask what drives employee engagement in Asia. Are the factors that promote engagement in this region the same as elsewhere in the world? Alternatively, are the drivers within Asia consistent across the continent, thereby allowing us to apply a one-size-fits-all solution to promote engagement across Asia? This is a significant question for businesses with operations in Asia and perhaps even more for the multinationals spanning multiple country and regional boundaries as it helps them identify solutions for heightened performance.

To better understand the answers to this question, Kenexa was able to turn to its database of employee opinions. These opinions are collected annually from millions of employees across the globe, representing a variety of industries, job types, tenures and so forth. By running separate key driver analyses for each of the nine countries

The Most Potent Drivers of Employee Engagement	Australia	China	Hong Kong	India	Japan	Malaysia	Singapore	Taiwan	Thailand
This company values my contribution.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
I believe my company has an outstanding future.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Leaders have communicated vision that motivates me.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
My job makes good use of my skills and abilities.	x	x	x	x		x	x		x
I feel part of a team.	x			x	x	x	x	x	x
I trust leadership of my company.	x	x	x	x	x		x		x
My opinions are valued.	x						x		
In my company, there is open communication.	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
My manager is an outstanding leader.	x	x	x	x	x				

(Australia, China, Hong Kong SAR, India, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand), we were able to compare and contrast their respective drivers of employee engagement.

For an HR manager charged with increasing employee engagement across a multinational organization, the answer might come as a pleasant surprise (or relief). While there were some differences across countries, the findings show that there is actually a substantial degree of similarity. In other words, what really drives employee engagement in China, for example, is consistent with what drives engagement in Australia and Singapore. Based on research conducted from Kenexa's normative database for the Asia-Pacific region, we find that the most potent drivers (those that have the greatest impact on employee engagement) can be boiled down to several common themes: trust in senior leadership; belief in the future of the company and a clear understanding of the future; ability to apply one's skills and abilities; effective communication; and the sense that one is part of a team. When these factors are present and reinforced, employees tend to report higher levels of engagement. Interestingly, these drivers are not substantially different from those that have been identified elsewhere in the world. In the United States, for example, employees generally want to feel that their organization has a promising future, that they are an important part of that future and that they can apply their current skills and develop in an atmosphere of teamwork.

But wait, does this mean that a one-size-fits-all approach to engagement will work across every region? If I am a manager in Bangalore, for example, can I focus on the same issues as my colleague in Beijing? Once again, we can explore this question at the country level by turning to Kenexa's normative database.

When we examine the magnitude of scores (i.e. the percent favorable scores) on the key drivers of engagement across the Asia-Pacific region, we do see substantial differences. For example, ratings of the question, "The leadership of [my company] has communicated a vision of the future that motivates me," ranged from a low of

37 percent favorable (New Zealand and Japan) to a high of 73 percent favorable (Taiwan and Thailand). Thus, while this particular survey question is a key driver of employee engagement in all four countries, we can see that perception of leader communication can vary substantially. Moreover, these results are at the country level so results from a lower level (e.g., organization, department and workgroup) would tend to exhibit even greater variation. The bottom-line message is that while the drivers may be similar, the actual performance (i.e., the magnitude) of those drivers is likely to be much more variable and thus, a one-size-fits-all approach would not be appropriate.

Additionally, there are at least two other factors to consider. First, while "recognition for a job well done" may be equally valued by Japanese and Australian workers, how those individuals would prefer to be recognized may be quite different, and this is as much a country-based difference as a cultural difference. Japanese workers, for example, may be less likely to embrace public recognition than their Australian or American counterparts.

Understanding these subtle differences both within and across regions can make the interventions of HR managers more potent and therefore, more likely to influence employee engagement. A second factor to consider has to do with external context. For example, the differences we see in magnitude of survey responses across Asian countries are not limited solely to the key drivers of employee engagement. Across a variety of survey items assessing different topics, scores from Japanese workers tend to be less positive than scores from workers in Singapore. Thus, comparing one's own organization to country-level norms can provide valuable contextual information to help clarify the meaning of those data.

What are the implications of these findings for organizational leaders and HR practitioners working within and/or across Asia-Pacific countries? Though there are significant cultural differences across Asia, the most potent factors that contribute to an engaged

workforce are more similar than different. Moreover, those drivers are not dramatically different from what is typically seen in other regions around the globe. However, this does not mean that interventions designed at corporate headquarters in Beijing will necessarily apply across all of the operations in Eastern Asia. Instead, scores on engagement and its drivers must be examined on a case-by-case basis. The drivers may not change dramatically, but the magnitude of scores on those drivers can, so a manager should focus his/her attention accordingly. Understanding these nuances will improve the probability that interventions will pay off in terms of higher engagement over time. ■

## References

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