Introduction

The NHS has improved its levels of staff engagement significantly since 2011 when it first adopted a national measure. Compared to the economy as a whole, NHS staff have higher levels of work commitment and better job satisfaction. Despite a slight drop in results reported in 2015 the NHS can be proud of its record of staff engagement.

There are no comparable measures of staff engagement with other sectors, but the indicators available show that the NHS is above average for public services and is at least as good as most large UK companies.

The NHS is unique

Special features of employment in the NHS should be taken into account when comparing staff engagement with other sectors:

- The NHS has a social purpose and many staff choose to work within the NHS for that reason. This means that the service tends to already have high levels of work commitment and motivation. This is also found in the third sector and other public services.
- The NHS is a single service with many different individual employers, staff may feel that they identify with their occupation or the service as a whole more than they do with their individual employer. The level of identification with the employer is highly variable according to the staff survey. Other sectors such as education do have similar issues but this is a particular feature of the healthcare sector.
- As a not-for-profit public service employer, the NHS does not generally address the issues of motivation by use of financial incentives. Unlike the commercial sector, staff may not feel it is appropriate for them to be advocates of their own organisation’s services.
- The hierarchical nature of healthcare has historically limited expectations and practice of staff involvement.
- Unlike most of the private sector in the UK, the NHS has a formal system of collective representation and partnership working with staff side unions. The
staff engagement approaches in the NHS are based on this, unlike the more individualistic non-union approaches found in many USA owned firms.

Engage for Success

The NHS can learn a lot about staff engagement from organisations outside the NHS. The main resource NHS organisations can use is Engage for Success. They are a voluntary movement of organisations and employers that share ideas and experiences about improving engagement.

Their resources are free to NHS organisations because NHS Employers is a supporter of and plays an active role in Engage for Success at a national level. Their regional networks organise events for NHS organisations which are intended to promote sharing ideas, best practice and knowledge. Their website is an excellent source of material about developments in staff engagement outside the NHS.

Other public services

Local authorities have sought to develop and sustain staff engagement programmes within a period of intense financial change.

One of the best known examples of this is the Belief, Excellence and Trust (BEST) programme adopted by Birmingham City Council from 2009.

BEST is a programme based on harnessing the ideas and contribution of staff to improve services. The BEST programme enabled staff to develop and implement ideas for improvement at a local level. These ideas ranged from minor improvements to staff facilities through to major change, such as the use of highway signage. This generated significant savings for the authority whilst maintaining resident satisfaction. A network of volunteer staff engagement ‘champions’ was then developed. The programme has had to be adapted to take account of the major reductions in staff numbers and council budgets since 2012.

Other local authorities which have adopted successful approaches include Essex County Council where staff engagement levels rose during period of major change due to improved communication, use of staff feedback and visible leadership. Staff engagement in the civil service has improved in recent years despite major job losses and restructuring, although the results are very variable between departments. HMRC, the Ministry of Justice and the DVLA have implemented new approaches as part of this organisational change.

Manufacturing

Many UK manufacturing firms have significantly improved productivity through the development of systems to increase staff involvement. Staff ideas are the basis of a culture of continuous improvement where maximum authority is devolved to front line staff. The sectors where this is most widely practiced are aerospace (BAE Systems) and the UK car industry especially Nissan, Toyota and Land Rover. In almost all cases this has been developed alongside partnership working with trade unions.

There are a range of examples to draw on from other manufacturing sectors. For example, the food production company Mars is well known for its unusual and
well established approach on staff engagement with a focus on involvement of production staff.

These approaches are still a minority in UK manufacturing and further examples can be found on the website of the Involvement and Participation Association and the UK Work Organisation Network. The energy sector has also been an area where some firms have adopted engagement approaches to increase productivity in front line operations for example at United Utilities.

**Transport**

British Airways First Group, DLR and London overground have focused on staff engagement in a sector where staff are regularly transferred to new employers as a result of franchising. As a result of this, staff may be disengaged with their employer although they generally identify strongly with their occupation and industry.

**Retail**

Retail stands out as one area where there has been a clear recognition of the benefits of staff engagement and its potential impact on customer experience. The large supermarkets such as Tesco, Sainsbury’s and The Cooperative have well established staff engagement programmes. The Tesco programme ‘Listen and Fix’ encouraged staff to come forward with ideas for in store improvement. Sainsbury’s has regular ‘ask the CEO’ email webinars and in store team meetings to identify and resolve issues. In both cases these initiatives run alongside work on values, supporting team leaders and an emphasis on training and development.

Marks and Spencer has a long standing commitment to staff engagement which has been renewed in recent years with a focus on corporate social responsibility. Marks and Spencer has undertaken research clearly demonstrating the impact of higher levels of engagement on overall store performance.

**Finance**

First Direct stands out as a leader in supporting staff engagement in a call centre environment. The Royal Bank of Scotland has sought to refocus its engagement approach following the reputational damage and major restructuring that took place after the financial crash. A recent BBC TV programme highlighted the maverick staff engagement approach of a call centre organisation in Wales which has the motto ‘happy people sell’. Engagement is recognised as a major challenge in this sector.

**SMEs**

Some of the small and medium sized UK enterprises (SMEs) like Timpson Locksmiths and some family owned firms have a commitment to staff engagement. However such an approach is still unusual in the UK SME sector, although there is some evidence of higher engagement in start-up businesses.
Media and technology

These sectors unsurprisingly put a great deal of emphasis on communication with their largely young workforces and make extensive use of social media as feedback tool. They are also known for unusual engagement ideas such as providing video games in the workplace or measuring engagement by using smiley face stickers which may not be appropriate in an NHS context.

Education

This sector has a mixed record on staff engagement. Teachers and academics have high levels of job commitment but variable levels of identification with their employers. Some academy chains and individual universities have sought to address this via staff engagement initiatives. There is a challenge of fostering organisational engagement without damaging professional identity and bringing together what can be disparate groups of staff in the higher education sector.

Employee ownership and staff engagement

There is clear evidence that employee owned enterprises have a higher level of staff engagement. The most well-known example of an employee owned business in the UK is the John Lewis partnership which includes Waitrose. The John Lewis partnership have a long standing and far reaching model of staff engagement and there has been some discussion in recent years of whether this model could be applied in the NHS.

There are some already existing social enterprises in the NHS providing community services and some examples also in social care. A recent review led by Chris Ham of the King’s Fund looked at the potential for extending this model in the NHS as a means of boosting engagement. Nine NHS organisations have been selected to look at the potential for this and will report back in the summer.

Around the world

Staff engagement is a challenge in healthcare organisations across the world. There are examples of USA organisations which have had success in engaging better with medical staff, Nordic countries have some experience with employee participation and in Canada a new model was adopted in public services following severe budget cuts.

Further information

For more information on these or any of the other examples referred to in this document please contact Steven.Weeks@nhsemployers.org

Examples of staff engagement models mentioned in this document can be found on the Engage for Success website.