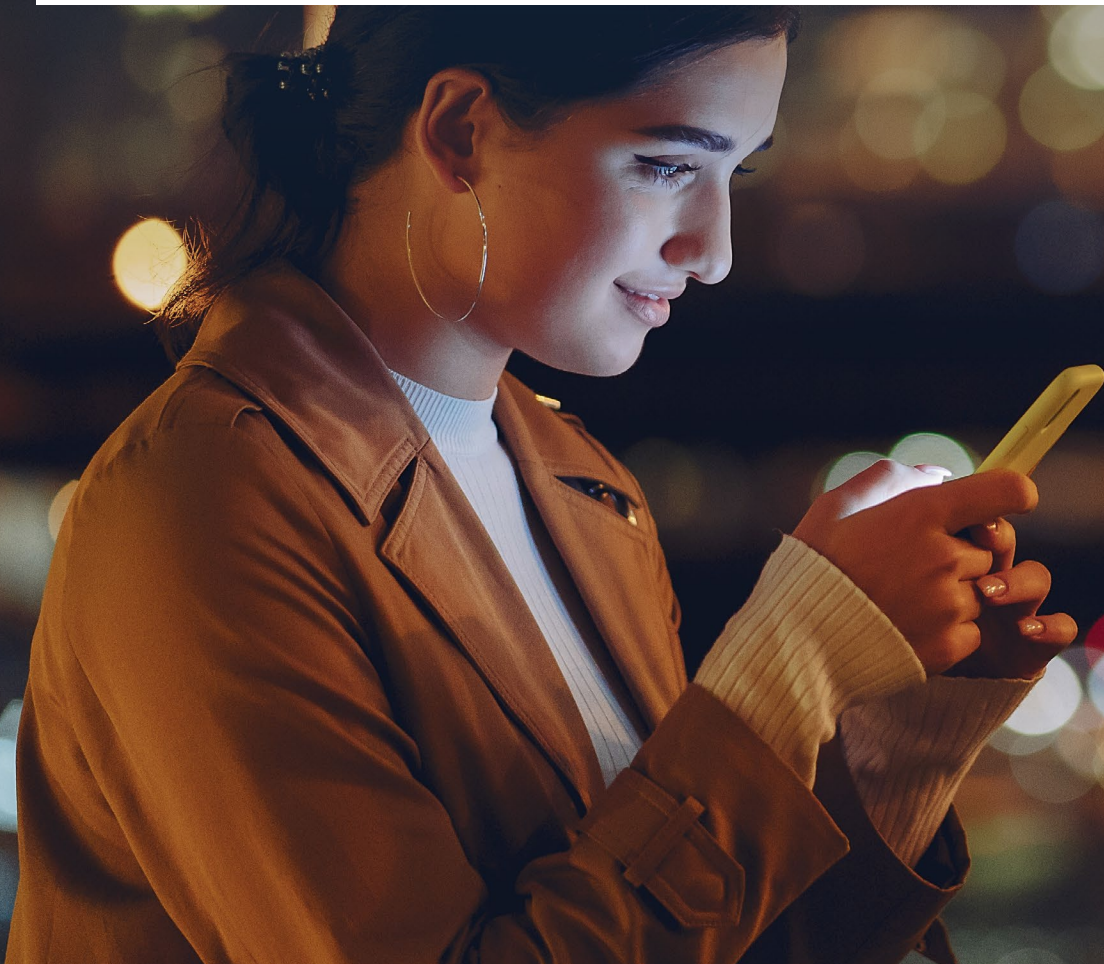


maru/

The experience & insights platform

EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE AND ENGAGEMENT

MEASURING EMOTION,
THE MISSING DIMENSION.



Do you know how your employees really feel? Emotion is the missing dimension in employee engagement and satisfaction research

*I've learned that people will forget what you said,
people will forget what you did, but people will
never forget how you made them feel.*

— Maya Angelou —

Ever get the feeling something is missing?

You know your staff experience and engagement scores. You've been tracking them for years and been struggling to step change the score or it may even be declining. You're clear on the challenges of pay, communication, and work/life balance. What you wrestle with is "why?" Why are our employees still not satisfied even though we've taken action on these issues? What are their emotional needs?

When you get employees together in a room and directly ask them why and how, you tend to get rational and obvious platitudes. People say they want more pay, balanced workload, and improved communication. Of course, this is true, but it can't be the entire story as staff experience and engagement metrics have not significantly increased and labor turnover continues to be a challenge.

Employees are telling you what they are thinking. What's lacking is how they are feeling.

Emotion is the missing dimension in employee experience and engagement research. It is a valuable component you can add to your insight for a more holistic understanding of your employees' experience at work and what an ideal experience would really feel like, as this paper explains.

At Maru we use our unique software to identify, measure and direct the employee response to emotions. Our unique IP is embedded in our software so that it is now possible to measure emotion and its impact at scale. This use of our software capabilities in combination with traditional measures unlocks new insights which lead to better employee experience outcomes.



People are puzzling

We say one thing and do another. Despite saying pay is important, when employees leave, they say pay was not the reason, rather a new opportunity to learn and grow or lifestyle change. We see this say/do gap because most employee experience and engagement research uses rational questions, which trigger obvious, post-rationalized answers, but are missing the deeper human, emotional needs which people either cannot or will not tell us in traditional question/answer research.

People are puzzling, exasperating, and intriguing. That's why obtaining a deep understanding of their employee experience is such an exciting challenge.

To drive new insight on how to really connect with employees, we need to triangulate the truth. We need to understand three things—how people:



Feel



Behave



Think

It's now well established in behavioral science that our emotions prime up to 95% of our behavior. If you only rely on stated attitudes typically seen in research surveys, you are missing a large part of the picture of why people do what they do. It's why Maru has developed software with the ability to passively capture System 1 reactions.



Measuring what people feel, behave, and think

Understanding what people do is not too difficult. Employees are very good at giving us an objective description of what happens day to day at work along with stated attitudes about rational “hygiene factor” issues.

However, this approach using stated attitudes and post-event descriptions of what happened, doesn’t capture the complete picture because they only reflect our public-facing opinions and our conscious associations. They represent what people believe they think. The limitation of this approach, as Nobel laureate and psychologist Daniel Kahneman wryly quipped, is that “We think far less than we think we do.”

When we utilize all three lenses—how people feel, behave, and think—we have a more holistic understanding of employees. Not only do we have more opportunity for insight, we can also begin to close the disconnect between what people say and what they do. Best of all, we don’t lose any of the traditional employee tracking metrics. The additional perspectives just unlock more understanding, for better employee experience outcomes. This is a win-win for clients who maintain their legacy metrics and tracking data, but through our platform also gain new insight on how to improve their scores and performance.

The adventure begins

In this paper, we aim to inspire you to develop a deeper understanding of how employees really feel about their experience at work. We’ll look at a case study that reveals how measuring all three aspects provides greater insight into employee engagement. We also dig into why feelings are so important and the implications for how we measure and track employee satisfaction.

WHY EMOTION MATTERS

Recent advances in psychology have greatly increased our understanding of how people process information, make choices, and incorporate their experiences into their life. Parallel developments in neuroscience are also providing a better understanding of how our brains work. The better we can grasp these advances, the more effectively we can harness employee experience research that creates value for the organization.

At Maru, we believe it is essential to combine established measures with new techniques, each embedded in our software to create this holistic understanding of the issue. It's why our platform development has been guided by experienced researchers ensuring the wide set of software capabilities capture a holistic view of both stated attitudes and our fast, intuitive emotional response that we are either unable or unwilling to say in established question/answer research.

Early work on biases and heuristics, most famously by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, highlighted the role the

unconscious plays in our decision-making. In later years, Kahneman embraced a metaphor for the dual conscious/unconscious modes of thinking first developed by the psychologists Keith Stanovich and Richard West. The metaphor refers to these two mind modes as System 1 and System 2.

SYSTEM 1 operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control. The operations of System 1 are often associated with doing things "without thinking." A great motto for System 1 would be "Just do it."

SYSTEM 2 allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations. The operations of System 2 are often associated with the sense of choice, agency, and concentration. "Here comes the judge" would be an appropriate motto for System 2.

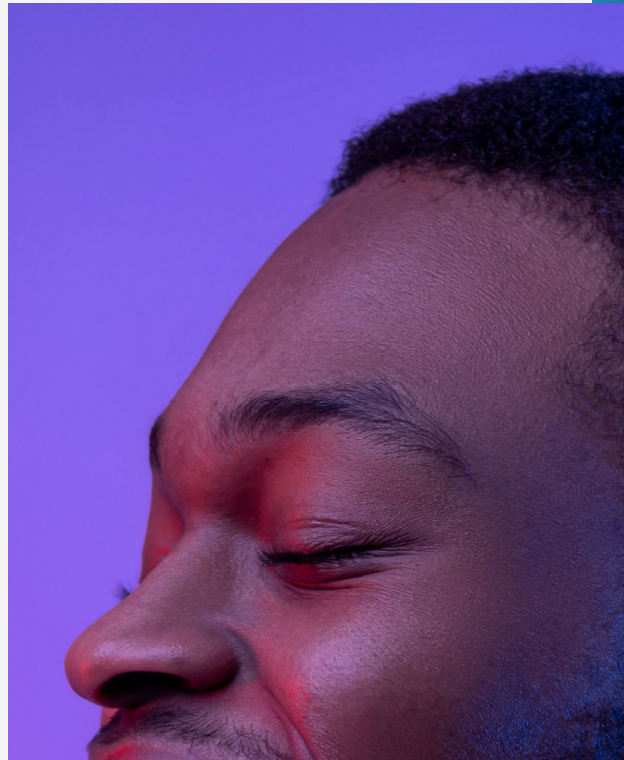
System 1 runs automatically, and System 2 is normally in a comfortable low-effort mode in which only a fraction of its capacity is engaged. System 1 continuously generates impressions, intuitions, intentions, and of course, emotions. In fact, neuroscientific research suggests that as much as 95% of our mental function happens at this nonconscious System 1 level. Only when System 1 runs into difficulty does it call on System 2 to supply more detailed and specific processing to solve the problem of the moment. This accounts for the remaining five percent of our brain function. It is not that our System 2 is lazy; it is just a precious resource that consumes a lot of attention and cognitive power when it is used.

"The division of labor between System 1 and System 2 is highly efficient," Kahneman says. "It minimizes effort and optimizes performance. The arrangement works well most of the time because System 1 is generally very good at what it does: its models of familiar situations are accurate, its short-term predictions are usually accurate as well, and its initial reactions to challenges are swift and generally appropriate."

You don't think about breathing

System 1 is responsible for everything from keeping us breathing, to telling us when to slam on the brakes, and to tying our shoes without thinking about it. Everyone who's ever learned a skill knows that things which require effort today become automatic tomorrow. They are automatic because your brain predicts and prepares your actions using your past experiences. That is System 1 at work.

We cannot shut it off, any more than we can stop our heart or breathing upon command. We can ignore it, as many employee-experience programs do, but it is still there. It is better that we recognize it and think about what that means for the way we conduct employee experience research.



Tapping into System 1

Popular employee experience metrics such as employee satisfaction and engagement scales plug into our logical and effortful System 2 thinking. People are asked to make a slow, conscious, rational report on what is usually an automatic association. But there is an exciting opportunity to add value to these types of employee satisfaction metrics by additionally unlocking the emotional—System 1—aspect of how people answer.

What tools do we have to uncover and understand emotion? It would be fantastic if marketers were able to routinely utilize fMRIs, CT scans, biometrics, and other clinical neuro-measurement tools. However, those tools are expensive, they require esoteric expertise, and they demand physical participation. It's not feasible or desirable to have several hundred employees undergo an fMRI on their experience at work! Measuring emotion requires a true gamified and passive System 1 tool, to unlock how people really feel. If you ask employees for their feeling in a traditional question/answer way, we know that cognitive bias and post-rationalization will provide the logical answer they think we want to hear.

Maru's software platform has a unique, gamified capability that uses images and, through the proven discipline of visual semiotics, the platform is able to decode the images selected in real time to reveal the participants underlying emotions.



Picture this

Humans have always used images to convey how we feel. A uniquely human trait is the ability to conjure up emotions about a particular place, time, or person at will. We not only recall those emotions, but we also actually feel them; we experience the emotions over again, which is core to creating and sustaining memories. We surround ourselves with images that evoke emotions. All that imagery we keep has a bundle of emotions associated with it. While we are not great at telling people how we feel verbally, we are very good at showing people how we feel with images.

More than ninety percent of our brain operates on fast and intuitive visual information, and other information is “visualized” to speed its integration. Our brain processes the 10,000 image-based impressions we experience every day through six semiotic structures: color, shape, physical context, social context, responsibility, and experiential context. Each of these structures contributes to our emotional response to what we are seeing.

We have evolved to quickly formulate an emotional response to what we are observing; for example, is it safe or dangerous? This quick response to visual information guides the behavior that follows.

The structures are so powerful that we can take a static image and elicit the same emotions repeatedly and predictably. Since what we are taking in as visual information changes rapidly, our brain is constantly using the six structures to provide a perpetual stream of emotional feedback. Our System 1, pattern-seeking construct is subconsciously assessing any visual data so that we are feeling what we see, and we behave in accordance with that emotional feedback.

The Maru platform has unique software applications that can be used in a survey for a visual semiotics exercise. Each participant simply selects 10 images from a choice of 200, to create a “collage” that describes how they feel about their employee experience or organization. These 200 potential items are randomly selected from among an image bank of over 10,000 items, which have been validated in over 50 nations, over multiple decades. This approach has been proven to be free of the cultural response bias that is so obvious in rating scales. Using the image collages, we derive the emotional signature of the employee experience.



IMPROVED INSIGHTS ON ENHANCING THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

The workplace has undergone rapid change over the last two years. Enforced public health lockdowns created an army of homeworkers, that shattered the myth of “attendeism” at the workplace with employees proving they could operate flexibly. At the same time, employees have and will constantly examine their priorities and workplace satisfaction has never been more important to drive employee retention, productivity, and the synergy that engagement delivers.

In this context, we utilized the Maru platform to instantly access 1,000 U.K. office-based workers (often fusing home/office working), across a range of different-sized organizations (from <100 to >1,000) in February 2022. To reveal a holistic view of the employee experience, we deployed a variety of our feel, behave, think solutions including our unique Emotional Signature software capabilities in the Maru platform that are rooted in smart System 1 thinking capturing employees’ unconscious feelings, as well as their stated attitudes about what it feels like at work. This establishes both rational drivers of the employee experience, but also unlocks a System 1 pathway to the underlying emotional needs that are acting as heuristics, driving future behavior, loyalty, and engagement.

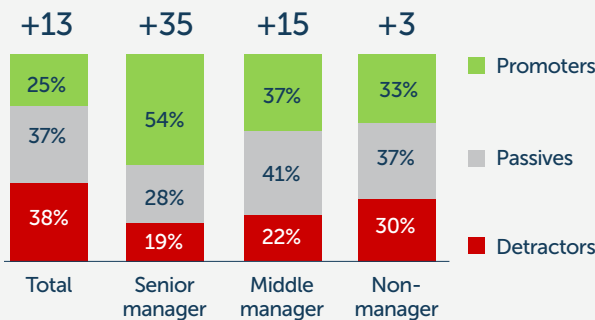
Think Metrics

Traditional employee satisfaction and advocacy metrics (shown below) paint a mixed picture, but a consistent pattern that many employee experience tracking programs see—that there is huge headroom opportunity to improve.

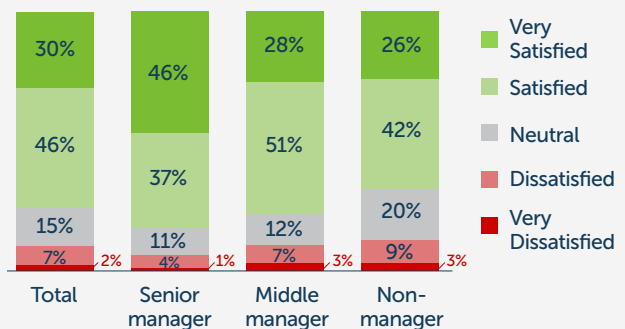
One consistent theme is that nonmanagement-level employees are both less likely to recommend friends and family to work for the business and have lower employee satisfaction. Thirty percent of non-managers would not recommend their company and 32% are not satisfied at work, so it's hardly surprising that labor turnover statistics are high with 41% of businesses reporting increased staff turnover (CIPD outlook 2022).

Employee satisfaction and advocacy metrics

Likelihood to recommend working for company



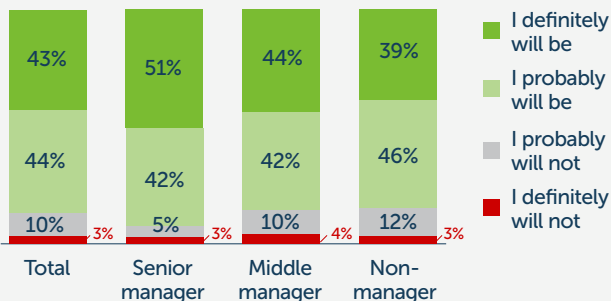
Overall experience at work



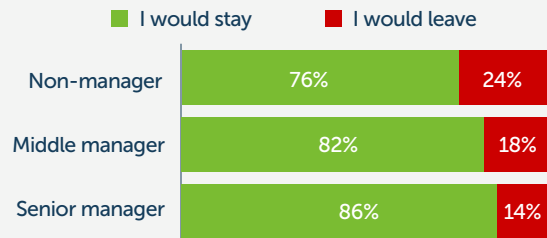
Further analysis reveals that the problem is deeper than the metrics indicate, with a proportion of employees being “unhappily loyal” in their job. By this, we mean there is a gap between their stated loyalty and likely behavior if they could start over at a new employer.

Stated versus derived loyalty

How likely to be working for this company one year from now?



Would you stay or leave if you could start a similar job with a new employer of your choice?



When asking office workers if they would be working for their current company one year from now, very few (3%) said, “I definitely will not.” Compare this to when we asked if they could start a similar job with a new employer of their choice, then nearly a quarter (24%) of non-managers would choose a new employer.

These “unhappily loyal” employees are a major risk for employers relying on staff retention to help offset their recruitment/vacancy issues and illustrate a deeper employee discontentment that is hidden by traditional satisfaction metrics.



Stated attitudes

When we look at stated attitudes elicited through open text questions where employees are free to type their own answers, we observe that top of mind, obvious and rational issues are offered by employees, such as pay. We asked two questions; the first about what employees found most motivating at work and the second about what could be better and most improve motivation at work.

We used the Maru platform text analytics software, powered by machine learning and natural language processing, to identify themes from the answers. What becomes apparent from questioning employees is that they are always going to say they are not paid enough—no one wants to appear irrational, so traditional questions will always elicit the obvious answers.

Theme	Motivating	Improve
Team/Colleagues	29%	4%
Salary/Pay	20%	30%
Flexibility	9%	6%
Workload/Hours	4%	7%
Management	4%	4%
Training/Development	2%	5%
Communication	1%	4%

However, when answering about what they find most motivating at work, employees stated that working with their colleagues or teammates was the most motivating aspect. This is an insight which we will see later is an important element in increasing engagement and productivity, beyond the obvious aspect of absolute pay.

“The interaction with my colleagues... working and achieving with a group of fantastic people, who support each other.”

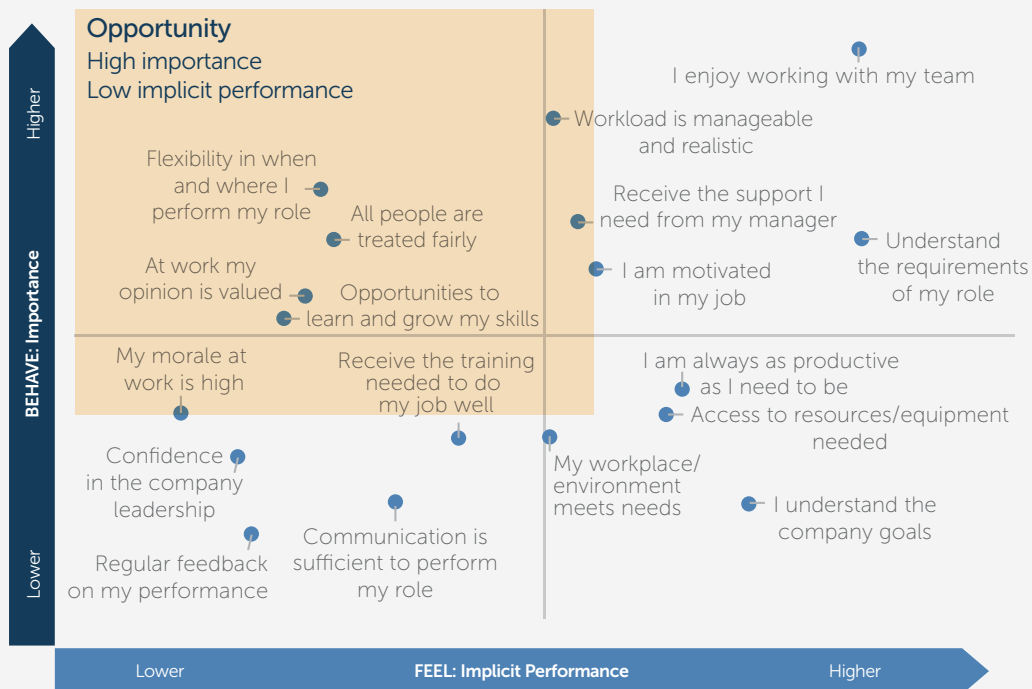
“The salary needs to keep up with inflation or we are effectively taking a pay cut which is demotivating.”

Intersecting behavior and emotion

To add another layer of insight on how to improve the employee experience, we took several common elements that are often included in employee experience tracking. For each of these, we undertook two exercises; the first used a choice-based exercise to identify the most important aspects to employees. Our platform utilizes a technique that reflects how we make decisions by asking employees to trade off which aspects are most and least important when compared, uncovering the true drivers of behavior. These scores are plotted on the vertical axis below.

The second exercise asked if employees associated each aspect with their experience at work, using one of our System 1 capabilities which captures response time to unlock the most implicit, emotive aspects for employees. This uses a technique called Implicit Association Testing (IAT) which is a well-established method in psychology to understand the fast, System 1 response. These scores are shown on the horizontal axis. The results provide an intersection map of behavioral drivers overlaid with emotional performance.

A map comparing the derived importance of employee experience to implicit performance



The area highlighted in orange is useful for organizations wishing to focus on areas of opportunity for improvement, as they are of above average importance to employees but are not implicitly associated with their current experience. Here we can see that flexibility, fairness, and development are key areas to focus on. The fringe of the orange areas also have important aspects such as morale and motivation.

Interestingly, team bonding is an area that is both important and scores highly and is common in employee feedback as people seek to support their colleagues.

Understanding their role is also an area that performs well so basic communication and management is mostly already in place. Lastly, there is an observable pattern of importance where the top half of the map is populated by factors that have a more direct impact on the individual employee, whereas in the bottom half there are more corporate level issues such as confidence in leadership and company goals.

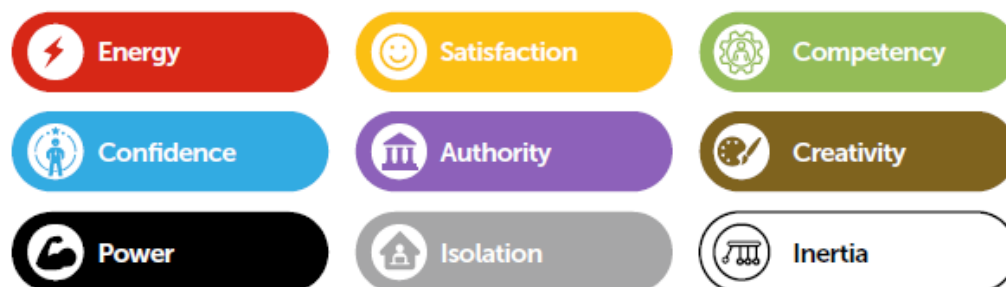
While this analysis tells us the "what" it is not effective at revealing the "why" and the "how". Asking employees directly will only elicit rational, obvious answers that tell you what they think you want to hear. To uncover a holistic view of employee needs and wants we need to also have a lens on the deeper emotional response to the employee experience, to provide new insight that can build on what is already known to help develop improved engagement, productivity, and retention.

Painting a better picture

Our unique Emotional Signature software capability uses the principles of visual semiotics to reveal the intuitive, System 1 emotions that prime employee behavior and attitudes. Emotions humanize the metrics and scores so often presented in employee feedback, to paint a richer picture of what the employee experience really feels like enabling engagement with and action from the feedback.

Survey participants simply scroll through a set of images (from our database of internationally validated visuals) and select 10 images that represent how they feel about their employee experience, versus the ideal or improved situation. This gamified exercise frees up people from slow, rational responses to paint a richer picture of what the employee experience really feels like and where the gaps are relative to the ideal.

We use the images selected to identify the key emotional associations and make the analysis easily digestible through nine primary segments (shown below) and then decode the individual emotions.



RESTRAINED AND STRUGGLING OR JOYFUL AND EMPATHETIC?

The current signature

The Emotional Signature of the current employee experience is characterized as a sense that employers are trying to be supportive (co-operative emotion) which is comforting (content), but employees feel at best a lack of personalization (typical) to their needs and at worst a feeling of unchanging and restrained circumstances (restrained).

This creates negative emotions of weariness and subdued opportunity (struggling), despite feeling competent to achieve potential (capable).

This paints a picture of employers aiming to be supportive, but on too many occasions leaving employees with a feeling of unfulfilled potential. There is also an important insight on the humanization of the impact from the pandemic with people feeling weary and withdrawn.

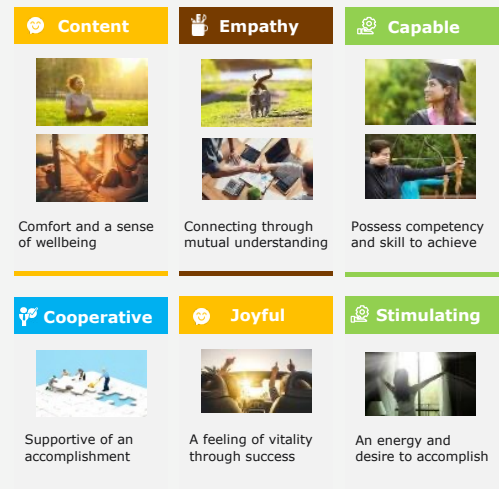
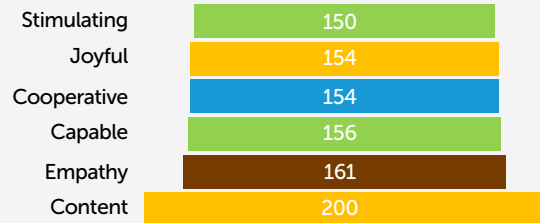
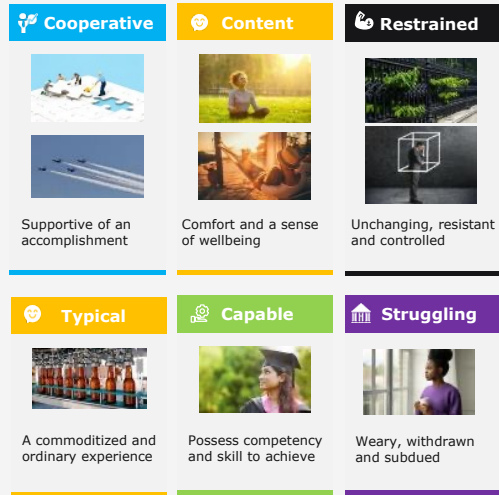
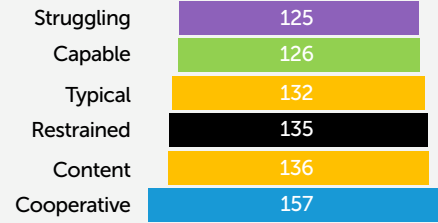
The ideal signature

Contrast this to the Emotional Signature of the ideal employee experience, which provides a superb foundational starting point for identifying opportunities to emotionally connect with employees on what really matters to them.

The ideal employee experience is underpinned by a feeling of well-being (content) achieved through a belief of shared purpose and understanding (empathy) of how skills can enable achievement (capable/cooperative).

This shared connection builds beyond satisfaction to perceived success creating a deeper feeling of vitality (joyful) and desire to achieve and accomplish (stimulating).

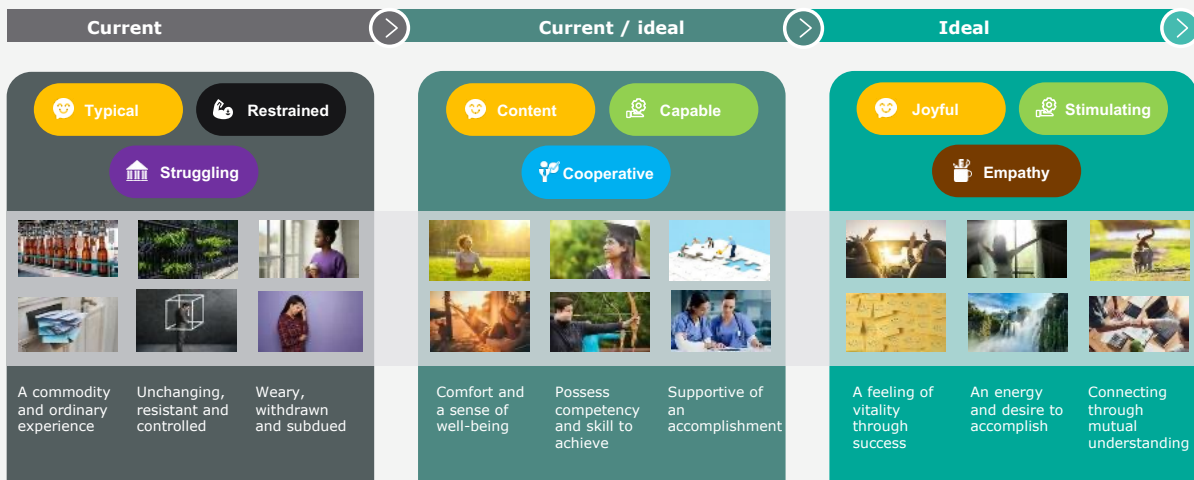
These new emotions make a stark contrast to the current experience, where employees feel a sense of shared belonging and drive to accomplish.



The emotional signature unlocks a new pathway of how to drive engagement and loyalty

We can now compare the current employee emotional signature to the ideal to identify where there is overlap and, more importantly, where the white space opportunities are for improving engagement.

This visual roadmap humanizes the metrics so often presented in employee feedback, by providing a window into employees' deeper feelings and emotional needs, going beyond a rational description of what happened through an intuitive framework that leaders and management can relate to.



It is only through utilizing the unique intellectual property which is embedded within software capabilities across our Maru platform that the richness of a holistic emotional and rational understanding is obtained.

Emotion creates a new level of understanding

So, what we have observed from this research, is that the analysis of emotions reveals an entirely new layer of insight that typical employee satisfaction metrics and stated attitudes cannot provide.

Look at the topline metrics and you seem to have 75% of employees satisfied, to which most managers will say, "That's OK," and carry on. But hidden behind the metric, we've demonstrated that one in five non-managers are "unhappily loyal," and that by only relying on stated attitudes you enter a regressive focus on pay, as it's rational for people to talk about pay. However, look beyond this and we see a huge gap between the current and ideal employee emotional signature, but more importantly, a pathway on how to connect with employees based on scientific principles of what drives human behavior.

Relying on stated attitudes from employees will only get you stuck in a loop of pay and working benefits as employees playback the rational aspects because nobody wants to appear irrational. Use a smart, gamified technique that frees up participants from post-rationalized answers, then you humanize the employee experience, revealing new understanding of how to create that secret sauce of engagement and belonging with employees.

Four key take-aways to drive employee engagement

- Does your employee feedback program only collect stated attitudes and post-rationalized feedback? If so, you are likely being played back obvious, rational issues around pay, benefits and communications—all important issues, but not revealing the full picture of how to step change your employee experience metrics.
- Intersecting behavioral drivers with emotions shows us that there are huge opportunities beyond the rational factors to drive employee satisfaction. Specifically, how you bake flexibility, fairness and opportunity into employer values and processes that move the issues beyond how much you are paid.
- New understanding of how people feel can only be gained through innovative techniques that free up employees from what they think you want to hear. Our Emotional Signature insights point to an emotional gap, with unmet feelings of shared purpose and success, a sense of belonging and the drive to accomplish.
- Employers have not yet caught up with the new ways of working accelerated by the pandemic. The challenge for employers is to embrace hybrid home/office working while creating a connected, engaged, and productive workforce through adapting and testing collaborative ideas against the ideal emotional outcomes to see if they hit the emotional sweet spot.



EMOTION ADDS INSIGHT

In the world of employee experience, we've demonstrated that understanding how people feel, as well as what they rationally think, opens a whole new dimension of understanding. It's not enough to simply collect stated attitudes and one-dimensional post-rationalized scores. Think of it as looking into a room through a keyhole, rather than being able to open the door and see the whole picture.

Understanding how employees feel and how to connect with them is also greatly empowering for leaders. Knowledge of people humanizes the data and inspires action in a way a satisfaction score alone simply cannot. Understanding how people feel allows organizations to transform research findings into actions that build and strengthen relationships.

This valuable understanding comes from adding how people feel to the classic measures of how people think and behave. To learn more about how Maru can help your organization capture the missing dimension in your employee experience research, [contact us](#) today.

Let's take your employee experience tracking to the next level!

About Maru Group

THE EXPERIENCE & INSIGHTS PLATFORM

Maru is a world leading CX and insights software and advisory services company. The firm was founded to disrupt the data and insight delivery industry with a combination of software and advisory services delivering data in real time via a unique service model. Maru helps its clients make informed decisions in near real time by combining proprietary software, deep industry experience and access to the best minds in research.

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