

## Proof Point

# THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

FOUR SPECIFIC TRAITS PREDICT HIGH ENGAGEMENT AMONG EXECUTIVES

BY JAMES L. LEWIS, PHD

January 2013

**The concept:**

Occupational engagement correlates to high scores in Korn/Ferry's assessments for Learning Agility, Tolerance for Ambiguity, Empathy, and a Social Leadership Style.

**Used to:**

Identify and hire job candidates for top managerial positions who are likely to have a high level of occupational engagement.

**Measured with:**

Three of Korn/Ferry's psychometrically developed self-assessments: Decision Styles™, viaEDGE™, and the Engagement Architect™.

**Important because:**

Engagement levels have been linked to individual job and company performance repeatedly throughout the psychological research literature. These findings verify that Korn/Ferry's assessments can assist organizations in identifying job candidates who will positively affect the bottom line.

What's the formula for high engagement among executives? After all, that's exactly what companies desire: leaders who go above and beyond, maximize an organization's performance, and are likely to stick around.

It turns out that individuals with a specific mix of traits—Empathy, a Social Leadership Style, Tolerance for Ambiguity, and high Learning Agility—are five times more likely to be highly engaged than other executives. Perhaps not coincidentally, they are also three times more likely to be among the highest paid.

Even résumés loaded with on-target education, experiences, and skills, and lengthy one-on-one interviews aren't enough to figure out who will truly engage—a high-stakes concern when hiring a top-level executive.

Psychologists who study job performance often refer to résumés and interviews as “hard fit” predictors. So many management candidates have excellent indications of “hard fit”; how is a company to choose?

To help answer this question, organizational psychologists have developed many measures of “soft fit.” These size up facets such as personality, social behavior, emotional makeup, adaptability, and approach to problem-solving. Several studies over many decades have shown the utility of such measures in singling out the dynamic, high-impact leaders from among a pool of extremely qualified candidates.

Engagement reflects the extent to which professionals are satisfied with and emotionally invested in their jobs, and whether they will expend discretionary effort for their organizations. Given how crucial that is to individual and company performance, it would be useful if organizations

had “soft fit” measures that could predict which employees and/or candidates were likely to be highly engaged. With this in mind, the Research and Development group at Korn/Ferry International sought to determine whether the firm’s proprietary Decision Styles and viaEdge assessments could distinguish the most highly engaged<sup>1</sup> respondents from among a sample of 952 managerial professionals from the United States, UK, Australia, and Canada.

Statistical modeling yielded clear and significant results: management professionals with high scores on Learning Agility and Empathy (measured with viaEdge), as well as a predominately Social Leadership Style and high Tolerance for Ambiguity (assessed with Decision Styles), were five times more likely to be highly engaged in their jobs than those with other combinations of strengths. Moreover, top scorers on all four measures were three times more likely to be among the top 10 percent of earners.

Companies worldwide have become more attentive to engagement levels and for good reason—it has been linked to job and organization performance repeatedly throughout the psychological research literature. Elsewhere, low employee engagement has been called a “global epidemic” with far-reaching consequences. A recent study by Gallup found that more than 70 percent of the workforce in the United States experiences low occupational engagement, resulting in a nationwide \$300 billion loss in productivity.

So how do the attributes Korn/Ferry identified affect engagement?

Learning Agility refers to an individual’s capacity for novelty and challenge-seeking, adaptability, cognitive flexibility, resourcefulness, and relationship management. Individuals who are highly learning agile tend to score highly on measures of self-awareness, and they place a particularly high value on their experiences in order to make the most of the knowledge they’ve gained in new situations. That behavior appears conducive to engagement.

High marks for Empathy and a Social Leadership Style, which imply that managers have strong communication skills and have forged relationships with coworkers and direct reports, are also contributors to engagement. Tolerance for Ambiguity suggests a personal flexibility that keeps them at ease and effective in the workplace, even as the business climate generally becomes more volatile. They can roll with the punches and stay engaged in their jobs.

---

<sup>1</sup>Meaning those engaged at or above the 90th percentile of the sample. Lominger’s Engagement Architect was used to measure engagement.

---

## References

- Amble, Brian. 2005. "Employee Disengagement a Global Epidemic." *Management Issues* (website) Nov. 16, 2005. Accessed Jan. 14, 2012 at <http://www.management-issues.com/2006/8/24/research/employee-disengagement-a-global-epidemic.asp>.
- DeMeuse, K., G. Dai, B. Eichenger, R. Page, L. Clark, and S. Zewdie. 2011. *The Development and Validation of a Self-Assessment of Learning Agility*. New York: Korn/Ferry International.
- Gallup Consulting. 2010. *Employee Engagement: What's Your Engagement Ratio?* Washington, DC: Gallup Inc.
- Harris, Michael. 2010. *Organizational Culture and Total Rewards: Person-Organization Fit*. Scottsdale, Ariz.: WorldatWork. Retrieved from <http://www.worldatwork.org/waw/adimLink?id=40492>.
- Harter, J. K., F. L. Schmidt, and T. L. Hayes. 2002. "Business-Unit-Level Relationship Between Employee Satisfaction, Employee Engagement, and Business Outcomes: a Meta-Analysis." *The Journal of Applied Psychology* 87 (2): 268-79.
- Markos, Solomon, and M. Sandhya Sridevi. 2010. "Employee Engagement: The Key to Improving Performance." *International Journal of Business and Management* 5: 89-96.
- Nowack, K. 2005. "Leadership, Emotional Intelligence and Employee Engagement: Creating a Psychologically Healthy Workplace." Unpublished manuscript. Envisia Learning Inc.
- Scroggins, W. A., S. L. Thomas, and J. A. Morris. 2008. "Psychological Testing in Personnel Selection, Part I: A Century of Psychological Testing." *Public Personnel Management* 37 (1): 99-109.
- Tett, Robert P., Douglas N. Jackson, and Mitchell Rothstein. 2006. "Personality Measures as Predictors of Job Performance: A Meta-Analytic Review." *Personnel Psychology* 44 (4): 703-42.



### **About The Author**

James Lewis, PhD, is a Director of Research for Korn/Ferry International, based in Los Angeles. He trained as a social scientist and psychometrician and holds an M.S. in statistics from UCLA and a doctorate in educational psychology from UC Riverside.

---

### **About The Korn/Ferry Institute**

The Korn/Ferry Institute generates forward-thinking research and viewpoints that illuminate how talent advances business strategy. Since its founding in 2008, the institute has published scores of articles, studies and books that explore global best practices in organizational leadership and human capital development.

### **About Korn/Ferry International**

Korn/Ferry International is a premier global provider of talent management solutions, with a presence throughout the Americas, Asia Pacific, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. The firm delivers services and solutions that help clients cultivate greatness through the attraction, engagement, development and retention of their talent.

Visit [www.kornferry.com](http://www.kornferry.com) for more information on Korn/Ferry International, and [www.kornferryinstitute.com](http://www.kornferryinstitute.com) for thought leadership, intellectual property and research.