inpulse

Why Emotions Matter

in Employee Engagement

2025

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The Relationship between Emotions and Engagement

Report Overview

This report draws on three years of Inpulse survey data, covering a sample of 56 companies across 13 industries and incorporating responses from 88,000 employees. The Engagement Index (EI) was calculated using [Total number of positive responses] / [Total number of responses] for core engagement questions, while emotional responses were collected by asking employees to select from six positive and six negative emotions when asked 'How do you feel about working at [their organisation]?'. To understand the reasons why people feel each emotion, we asked a follow up free text question – 'Why do you feel [emotion 1] and [emotion 2]?'

To provide a clearer understanding of workforce sentiment, Inpulse groups these emotional responses into three populations.

1. **Positive:** Employees who chose only positive emotions are classified as the Positive population
2. **Negative:** Those who report only negative emotions are classified as the Negative population
3. **Conflicted:** Those who report a combination of both (one positive and one negative) are classified as Conflicted. This classification enables organisations to see not only overall engagement levels but also the emotional balance that underpins behaviour and performance.

This dataset offers a comprehensive lens through which to examine the relationship between emotions and engagement. It further highlights how these dynamics vary by industry, role, and population, providing evidence that emotional experience is a critical determinant of workforce outcomes.

Emotions and Employee Engagement

Emotions are central to how employees experience work. They shape levels of performance, motivation, and retention. Inpulse data shows that when employees report positive emotions such as committed, happy, and valued, engagement scores are significantly higher. Conversely, when employees report negative emotions such as stressed, anxious, or unappreciated, engagement declines, productivity is reduced, and the risk of attrition increases.

Over 1,000,000 (one million!) responses show feeling positive results in a 92% engagement index and feeling negative results in a 22% engagement idex.
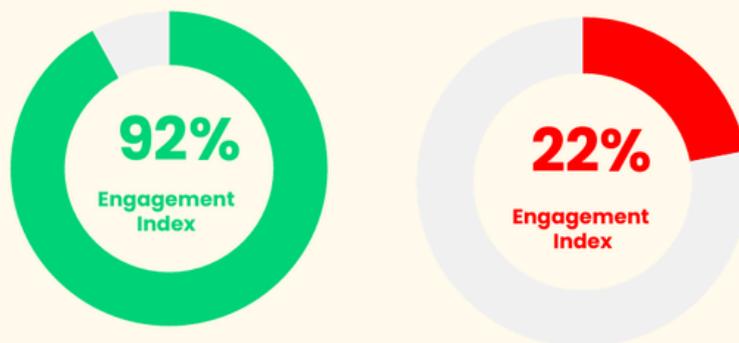
Measuring emotions alongside engagement provides a more complete understanding of workforce dynamics.

It captures not only what employees think about their organisation but also how they experience it daily. This distinction is critical because emotional data reveals mechanisms that underpin engagement outcomes.

Evidence from the CIPD indicates that negative emotions are linked to lower levels of job satisfaction and increased disengagement. Research on emotional intelligence further highlights that workforces with higher emotional awareness demonstrate greater resilience and stronger performance.

Top Positive and Negative Emotions Impact on Engagement

The evidence is overwhelmingly clear

There is a strong correlation between how employees feel and how engaged they are. Inpulse data shows that when employees feel committed, their Engagement Index score is 84%.

However, the emotions that have the greatest positive impact on engagement are feeling valued and happy, with scores of 91% and 90% respectively.

valued
91%

happy
90%
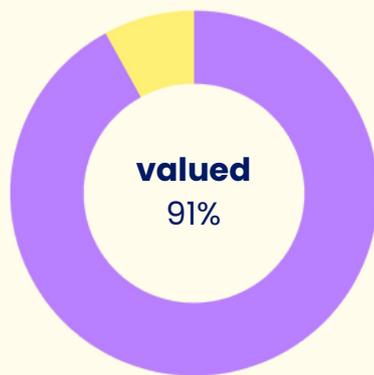
Positive Emotions

valued:
91% engagement

happy:
90% engagement

Analysis of free text responses reveals Employees most often feel valued when their contributions are recognised by their line manager, they feel part of a supportive team, when they receive timely feedback, and when they feel senior leaders listen to their feedback.

Happiness, in turn, is linked to supportive working environments, strong peer relationships, and enjoying the work they do.

Negative Emotions

On the negative side, stressed, unappreciated, and anxious were the most dominant negative emotions.

They were associated with much lower scores for the Engagement Index at 51%, 40%, and 54% respectively.

The top reasons for why people chose these emotions were frequently connected to **workload pressures, lack of recognition and appreciation** from their line manager, and uncertainty about the future.

stressed:
51% engagement

unappreciated:
40% engagement

anxious:
54% engagement

Insight Summary

The data demonstrates that positive emotions are not abstract sentiments but measurable drivers of engagement and retention.

Negative emotions are equally important, acting as indicators of emerging risks. By tracking these patterns, organisations can move from observing Engagement Index scores to understanding the emotional foundations that sustain or undermine them.

Emotions and Engagement by Population

Further data reinforces the strong correlation between emotions and engagement when employees are grouped into three populations. Inpulse defines these as the Positive population, Negative population, and Conflicted population

Positive Population (employees selecting only positive emotions)

The majority of respondents, 55%, fall into the Positive population, where the average Engagement Index is 91 per cent. This demonstrates the clear link between positive emotions and high levels of advocacy, retention, and motivation.

Negative Population (employees selecting only negative emotions)

At the other extreme, 25% of respondents are in the Negative population, where the average Engagement Index falls sharply to 36%, indicating significant risks of disengagement, low productivity, and attrition.

Conflicted Population (employees selecting one positive and one negative)

Representing 20% of employees, 'Conflicted' is a particularly important group to examine. With an average Engagement Index of 70%, these employees report both positive and negative emotions. Their experience highlights the fragility of engagement when positive sentiment is undermined by negative pressures. For example, a respondent may feel committed to their job, but feel stressed due to the high workload. Left unaddressed, this group risks moving towards disengagement.

These findings underline that emotions are not a secondary measure but a core predictor of engagement. They provide organisations with a diagnostic tool to identify where engagement is thriving, where it is at risk, and where targeted interventions are most needed.

Top and Bottom Quartiles of Engagement

When the Engagement Index is examined as the central measure, the link between emotions and workforce outcomes becomes clearer. Our analysis shows that companies in the **upper quartile** for the Engagement Index, with an average Engagement Index of 80%, are more likely to have a higher percentage of people feeling positive emotions – particularly happy, committed, and valued.

average engagement index:

80%

These emotions create the conditions for higher performance, stronger motivation, and sustained participation.

average engagement index:

48%

In contrast, employees in the **lower quartile,** with an average Engagement Index of 48%, display a very different emotional profile. Levels of happiness, commitment, and feeling valued are markedly reduced, while negative emotions increase. The percentage of employees feeling stressed rises by 8% points, unappreciated by 6% points, and disconnected by 5% points.

The comparison demonstrates that positive emotions cluster where engagement is high, while negative emotions dominate where engagement is weak. Measuring emotions alongside the Engagement Index, therefore provides a more reliable diagnostic for leaders, showing not only the outcomes of engagement but the underlying emotional conditions that sustain or undermine it.

Emotions by Industry

Inpulse data highlights that industries display distinct emotional profiles, reflecting the different pressures and contexts in which employees work.

valued
24%

- In Construction and Manufacturing, commitment is highest at 42%, and feelings of being valued are also comparatively strong at 24%.
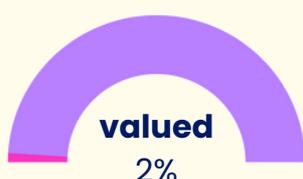
valued
2%

- In the Charity sector, commitment remains high at 40%, yet only 2% of employees report feeling valued, indicating a potential imbalance between commitment and recognition.

anxiety
11%

- Technology employees report the highest levels of happiness at 31%, though this is accompanied by moderate levels of anxiety at 11%.

stressed
16%

- 29% of Professional Services employees feel happy, yet 16% also feel stressed, pointing to a dual experience of satisfaction and strain.

anxious
17%

- The Higher Education sector stands out for consistently high negative emotions, with 20% of employees feeling stressed, 20% feeling unappreciated, and 17% feeling anxious.

These findings confirm that sector-specific challenges shape the emotional climate of the workforce. They also demonstrate that generic engagement strategies are unlikely to succeed.

> Addressing engagement effectively requires approaches tailored to the emotional realities of each industry.

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Managers vs Non-Managers

It is often assumed that managers are more engaged than non-managers. While this is true when looking only at Engagement Index scores, emotional data reveals a more complex picture.

Managers report higher stress levels, with 16% feeling stressed compared to 13% of non-managers, and a higher percentage of them report that workload pressures are negatively affecting their wellbeing (27% compared with 22%). At the same time, non-managers are more likely to feel unappreciated, with 16% reporting this emotion compared with 11% of managers.
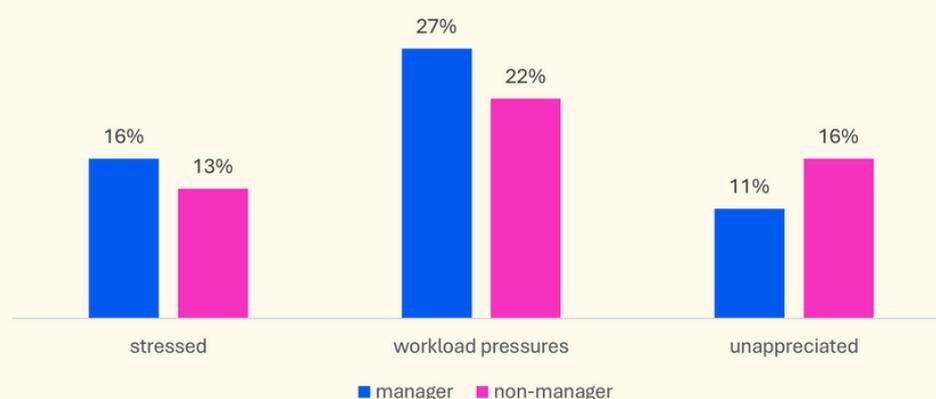
This creates a tension. Managers are already experiencing greater pressure and higher stress, yet they are also expected to provide the recognition and support that non-managers often feel is missing. Without emotional data, organisations would see managers as more engaged overall and overlook the strain that comes with their role, as well as the risks this creates for their teams.

Understanding these emotional nuances is critical. It highlights that engagement strategies cannot treat managers and non-managers as identical groups. Managers need support to manage their own stress and wellbeing if they are to create the conditions for recognition, trust, and motivation in their teams. Non-managers, meanwhile, need consistent recognition and appreciation to prevent disengagement. By measuring emotions alongside engagement, organisations are able to uncover these insights and design interventions that strengthen resilience at both managerial and team levels.

Limitations of Traditional Surveys

Traditional surveys focus on employee attitudes, but this approach is limited because it does not capture the underlying emotions that shape behaviour. Attitudinal data alone cannot reveal the early indicators of disengagement, such as stress or feeling unappreciated.

It cannot explain how specific emotional states, such as stress, act as triggers for behaviours like underperformance or exit from the organisation. Nor does it provide the basis for human and empathetic conversations between managers and employees, which are essential for building trust and commitment. By relying solely on attitudes, organisations risk overlooking the deeper emotional mechanisms that drive workforce behaviour and ultimately determine levels of engagement.

Emotional Analytics

Traditional engagement measures capture attitudes but overlook the emotional drivers of behaviour.

Inpulse Emotional Analytics addresses this gap by systematically combining quantitative and qualitative data. Employees are asked to identify their emotional state and to explain the reasons behind it. AI-enabled analysis then classifies these emotions and narratives into dominant themes, allowing organisations to observe patterns at scale.

By linking emotional experience with engagement, wellbeing, performance, and culture, this approach moves beyond descriptive reporting. It provides a diagnostic lens that reveals the mechanisms through which emotions influence workforce outcomes. The result is a framework that not only measures sentiment but also supports leaders in identifying the conditions under which engagement can be strengthened and sustained.

Best Practice for Turning Insight into Action

Inpulse data shows that:

engagement rises by 44% points when employees feel supported by their line manager.

Gallup attributes 70% of engagement variance to manager behaviour.

These findings underline the central role of managers in shaping workforce experience.

The Engagement Maturity Model

The Inpulse Engagement Maturity Model provides a structured framework for translating these insights into practice. The model outlines the progressive steps organisations can take to embed engagement, moving from ad hoc activity to systematic, manager-led ownership.

It emphasises shared accountability between HR and line managers, practical mechanisms to build recognition and trust, transparent communication tailored to the needs of different workforces, and the design of career pathways and scheduling systems that support wellbeing and performance.

By using the model, organisations can move beyond measurement towards sustained cultural change. It offers leaders a practical roadmap for converting survey data into meaningful action and for building the conditions in which engagement, resilience, and performance can thrive.

Predictive Emotional Analytics

AI-enabled predictive analytics is set to redefine the future of engagement. By modelling patterns in emotional and engagement data, organisations will be able to anticipate disengagement before it takes hold, identify early warning signals for leaders, and monitor emotional wellbeing continuously rather than depending on static annual surveys. This represents a shift from reactive measurement to proactive workforce management, enabling timely and evidence-based interventions.

Conclusion

Positive emotions drive motivation, belonging, and engagement. Negative emotions signal risk to retention, wellbeing, and productivity. Measuring both provides a full picture of workforce sentiment.

Organisations that use emotional data alongside engagement are better equipped to create resilient, engaged workforces. They are also able to respond quickly to risks and implement strategies grounded in evidence.

Inpulse Emotional Analytics provides this capability, enabling leaders to uncover why employees feel the way they do and to act on it effectively.