

Staff engagement within the NHS is a journey not a single event

Mohammed, R.

RCPATH Foundation Fellow

INTRODUCTION

Healthcare is a people profession. Around 1.6 million staff in the National Health Service (NHS) in England provide care to one million patients every 36 hours [1]. Trusts with highly engaged staff have better patient satisfaction, lower patient mortality and staff depersonalisation, better financial performance and staff feel more valued, respected and supported [2].

Although many NHS institutions know that staff engagement drives health care quality, it is often unclear what measures are most effective to improve staff engagement in the long term [3]. Today, engagement has become something of a buzz word tagged on to various initiatives to increase workforce morale; a short-term perk is introduced, with diminishing returns over time, until another is required. Engagement metrics, such as staff motivation, recommendation and contribution to improvement feed into the NHS staff survey and are used in analysing data. Some Trusts, however, have found success in a more measured approach to improve staff engagement: a dissection of the employee journey to analyse the various touchpoints, their cumulative influence on perceptions, and the ultimate impact on engagement [4]. This is supported using real-time feedback from staff to management to inform and drive improvements in employee experiences.

Here, I provide a local commentary of staff engagement within the NHS, discussing key human resource and working environment barriers and enablers.

THE EMPLOYEE JOURNEY

The employee journey may be described as the sum of a series of events, or “touchpoints”, that are based on an individual’s perceptions of a particular experience, including any preconceived notions, feelings and/or social interactions [4]. These experiences then shape an employee’s attitude, which evolves into behaviours and eventually influences culture and outcomes [5]. Thus, the employee journey is composed of multiple touchpoints which altogether shape their engagement. Furthermore, employees won’t just have one, linear journey – each one has a different lifecycle, with various starting and ending points.

One journey may begin during recruitment, where experiences with job postings and interviews can influence decisions on accepting or rejecting an offer. Throughout the employee lifecycle, experiences of onboarding, ongoing training and development, appraisals and recognition and even exiting a job can all direct staff attitudes and behaviour, ultimately impacting engagement (Fig 1).

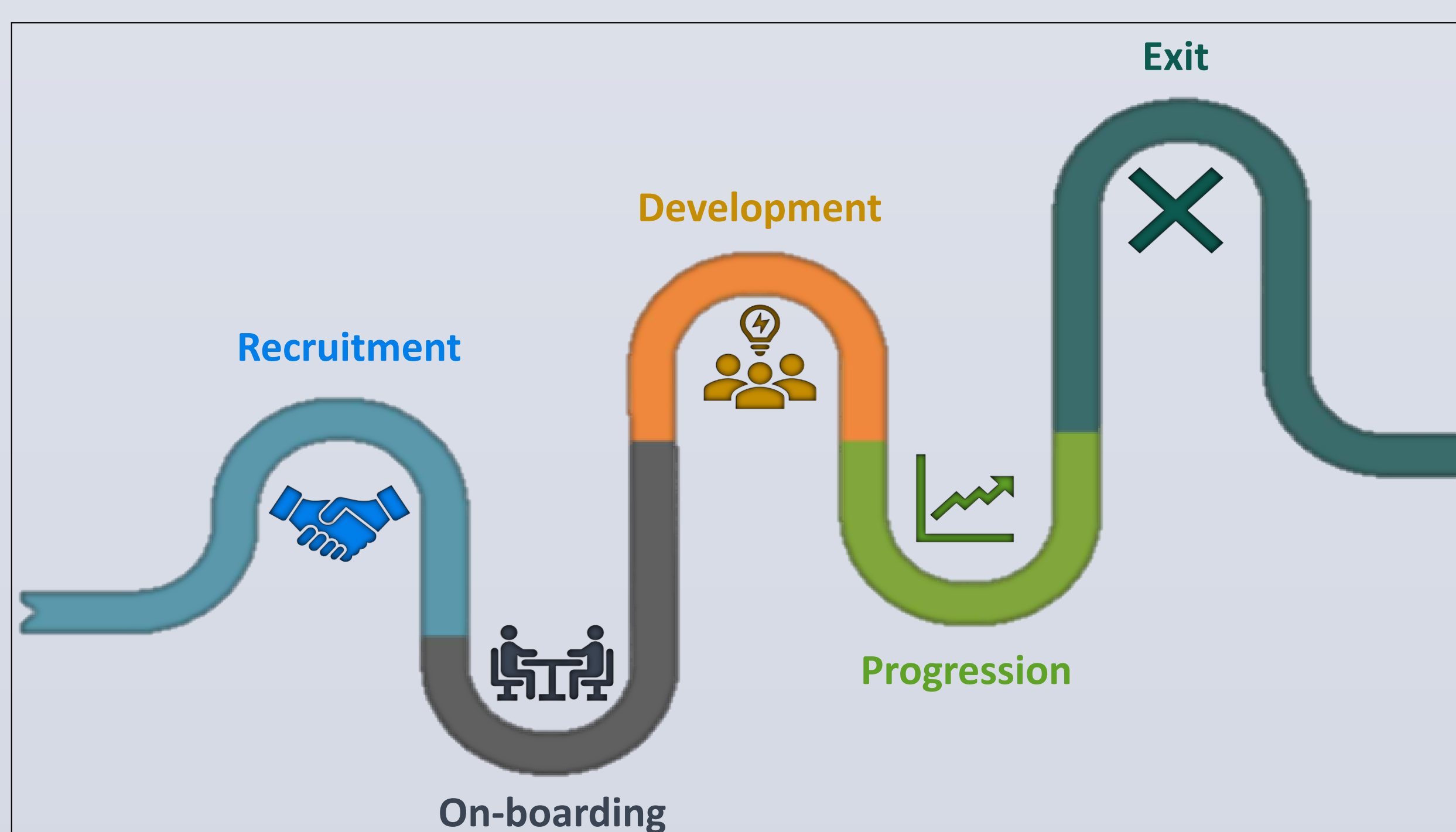


Fig 1: Example touchpoints throughout the employee journey.

References

1. Collins, B. (2015). Staff Engagement [online] The King’s Fund. Available at: https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/publication_file/staff_engagement-feb-2015.pdf.
2. The King’s Fund (2011). Improving NHS Care by Engaging Staff and Devolving Decision-Making [online] Available at: https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/publication_file/improving-nhs-care-by-engaging-staff-and-devolving-decision-making-jul14.pdf.
3. West, M. and Dawson, J. (2012). Employee engagement and NHS performance. The Kings Fund. Available at: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/default/files/employee-engagement-nhsperformance-west-dawson-leadership-review2012-paper.pdf>.
4. Maechler, N., Neher, K. and Park, R. (2016). From touchpoints to journeys: Seeing the world as customers do. [online] McKinsey. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/ourinsights/from-touchpoints-to-journeys-seeing-the-world-as-customers-do>.

UNDERSTANDING THESE TOUCHPOINTS

A siloed focus on individual touchpoints misses the holistic, cumulative experience of staff across multiple touchpoints, multiple channels and over time [4]. The first step in improving these experiences is for management teams to encourage a dialogue with their employees. These connections with frontline staff enable management teams to empathise with employees and understand how their staff experience the NHS day to day.

However, understanding what employees want is not a one-time event. The NHS annual survey doesn’t provide ongoing results on how engaged employees feel, what they expect and what they value, especially as only 49% of employees respond (Table 1). The 2020 NHS staff survey shows poor engagement nationally and so a culture of open communication coupled with effective feedback is required to identify, understand and prioritise the key touchpoints affecting engagement.

Metric	Result	YoY Change
Overall staff engagement	7.04 / 10	+ 0.7%
Enthusiasm for their job	73.0%	- 1.8%
Look forward to going to work	58.7%	- 0.8%
Effective communication between managers & staff	43.4%	+ 3.1%
Belief that managers act on staff feedback	34.9%	+ 1.4%

Table 1: NHS staff survey results within ‘engagement’ [6]

TARGETING THESE TOUCHPOINTS

An important step in redesigning employee experiences is a needs-based segmentation of staff; cross-sections of employees with similar values, behaviours and motivators may have similar wants and needs and should be targeted together.

There should be a systemic shift away from purely top-down decision-making where management decisions are diffused to staff, in favour of more collaborative and bottom-up approaches where staff have adequate information, resources and trust to identify and solve problems themselves, in a culture embedded with mutual respect. Each autonomous decision represents a positive employee experience, which cumulatively leads to a culture where staff hold themselves and each other accountable for improving care.

The final step of a staff engagement strategy is implementing any changes across all the touchpoints. These new experiences must be designed such that they are long term, realistic and have meaningful impact. The solutions should be treated like any new innovation; after the initial test period, there is a continuous and transparent loop of testing and iteration, before they are validated and scaled.

CONCLUSION

Senior leaders must recognise that these touchpoints are all intertwined. Hence, management targeting isolated touchpoints is ineffective. Even if individual experiences are varying levels of “OK”, it is the cumulative impact of multiple touchpoints over time which really affect staff behaviours and outcomes [7].

Before implementing staff engagement strategies, leadership teams must employ feedback processes to learn what matters most to employees, and managers must foster an engaging and supportive working culture with aligned values between teams, departments and across institutional boundaries. Although staff engagement cannot be mandated, it can certainly be ignited.

References

5. Albarracín, D. and Wyer, R. (2000). The cognitive impact of past behavior: Influences on beliefs, attitudes, and future behavioral decisions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(1), pp.5-22.
6. Nhsstaffsurveys.com. (2018). [online] Available at: http://www.nhsstaffsurveys.com/Caches/Files/P3088_ST17_National%20briefing_v5.0.pdf
7. Knight C, Patterson M, Dawson J. Building work engagement: A systematic review and meta-analysis investigating the effectiveness of work engagement interventions. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. 2016;38:792-812.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Elizabeth Law (ImproveWell) and Naeem Ahmed (Selfless) for their support and guidance, and the Editorial team at the International Journal of Healthcare Management for the publication of the Commentary.