GALLUP

Employee Engagement Strategies for 2026



Your employees are disconnected. Here's how to change that.

The workplace has changed dramatically, and employee engagement hasn't kept up. Shifting expectations, rapid AI adoption and ongoing organizational change have left many employees feeling unclear, undervalued and disconnected from their work.

This guide offers three research-backed strategies to strengthen employee engagement in 2026, each based on Gallup data and designed to give you a clear path forward.

Why Employee Engagement Can't Wait

Employee engagement is a performance strategy that distinguishes high-performing cultures from struggling ones, creating significant economic drag for organizations. Gallup's latest research estimates that disengaged employees cost U.S. organizations **$2 trillion in lost productivity annually**. Globally, that number reaches **$10 trillion.**

When employees are engaged, teams outperform disengaged ones across nearly every key metric. Compared with organizations in the bottom quartile of engagement, those in the top quartile see:

- **10%** higher customer loyalty/engagement
- **14%** higher productivity (production records and evaluations)
- **18%** higher productivity (sales)
- **23%** higher profitability
- **70%** higher wellbeing (net thriving employees)
- **22%** higher organizational citizenship (participation)

- **78%** less absenteeism
- **21%** less turnover for high-turnover organizations
- **51%** less turnover for low-turnover organizations
- **28%** less shrinkage (theft)
- **63%** fewer safety incidents (accidents)
- **32%** fewer quality defects

Use the strategies to strengthen employee engagement and help your organization thrive and prepare for the changing workplace realities ahead.

Note: *The figures above are median percent differences across companies in Gallup's database. High-turnover organizations are those with more than 40% annualized turnover. Low-turnover organizations are those with 40% or lower annualized turnover.*

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STRATEGY NO. 1

Address the Underlying Causes of Employee Detachment

U.S. employees remain emotionally detached from their workplaces, and most are still watching for their next opportunity.

Fewer than one in five employees (18%) are extremely satisfied with their employer as a place to work, and most (52%) are still actively looking or keeping an eye out for job openings elsewhere.

Since 2000, Gallup has used employee engagement surveys to track U.S. engagement through 12 scientifically validated items that capture the daily experiences and behaviors most strongly tied to performance outcomes across industries, measuring employee engagement nationwide.

Among the 12 items that collectively measure employee engagement, Gallup found in February 2026 that:

- Less than half of employees (49%) strongly agree that they know what is expected of them at work.
- Fewer than one in three employees (31%) strongly agree that someone at work encourages their development.
- Only 31% feel strongly connected to their organization's mission or purpose.
- Fewer still (27%) strongly agree that their opinions count at work.

These are foundational issues. Expectations, development, purpose and voice affect employees' ability to perform at their best, and most employees say their organizations are falling short.

Why Employees Are Detached: Four Themes

To understand the persistent gap between what organizations do and what employees need, Gallup recently asked thousands of employees, **"What's missing from your current work experience that would make you feel more connected to your employer?"**

Their responses fell into four themes affecting workplace engagement:

Organizational Culture



Nearly a third of employees describe their workplace as isolated or impersonal, lacking the conditions that help people feel connected to their teams. This is even more pronounced for Gen Z workers (44%) and remote employees (41%).

Connection doesn't happen by default, especially in hybrid environments. It requires intentional design: shared routines, frequent feedback and clarity about how individual roles fit into shifting organizational priorities.

Leadership Transparency



Nearly three in 10 employees say they lack clear, honest or consistent communication from leaders. They want visibility into decisions, the reasoning behind change and space to contribute. In times of organizational change, ambiguity from leadership is one of the fastest ways to erode trust.

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Resource Investment



A quarter of employees say their organizations underinvest in people, pay, tools or staffing. Employees notice when organizations cut corners, and they see it as an indication of how much the organization values their work. Fair compensation, functional tools and sustainable workloads are baseline conditions for engagement, not extras.

Performance Management



Fourteen percent of employees cite a lack of feedback, recognition or development opportunities. Annual or biannual reviews can't replace the ongoing, individualized feedback employees need to meet expectations and keep developing, particularly as the pace of change accelerates.

WHAT TO DO

Use Your Engagement Data to Pinpoint Where Managers Need Support

Every one of these themes takes shape at the team level, and that experience depends on managers. The manager or team leader alone accounts for 70% of the variance in team-level engagement.

Investing in managers isn't a strategy by itself. The value of engagement data is the specificity. Gallup's Q$^{12®}$ — a 12-item survey that measures the core elements of employee engagement — identifies where engagement is breaking down: expectations, recognition, development, connection to purpose. That precision allows you to focus manager development where it will have the most effect.

Gallup's employee engagement meta-analysis finds that when organizations build their growth strategy based on great management, they see better customer outcomes, higher productivity, increased sales and stronger profitability.

These results are reproducible across industries and cultures. Managers who receive best-practice training have seen their own engagement and their team's engagement improve substantially, with management performance metrics improving by 20% to 28%.

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STRATEGY NO. 2

Lead AI Adoption With Clarity

As of February 2026, four in 10 organizations have begun integrating AI into the workplace, yet only 28% of employees use it frequently. Implementation doesn't guarantee adoption.

On top of this, just 25% of U.S. employees say their organization has communicated a clear plan for integrating AI into current practices. And less than half (49%) of U.S. workers agree with this foundational element of employee engagement:



"I know what is expected of me at work."

Rapid AI adoption presents both an opportunity and a risk for leaders focused on engagement. Implemented with intention, an organizational AI strategy can create much-needed clarity about an undeniably disruptive technology. Implemented without care, it can deepen the confusion employees already feel about expectations.

Many Employees Still See AI as Irrelevant to Their Work

As organizations worldwide incorporate AI into their operations, many employees are unsure how it fits into their work. When asked to identify the greatest barrier to AI adoption in their workplace, the top response was an unclear use case or value proposition (16%).

Input from those who do not use AI in their role reinforces that showing the job-specific value and benefits of AI use is fundamental to adoption. Nearly half (44%) of these employees say the main reason they do not use AI tools in their role is that they don't believe AI can assist with the work they do.

Managers Are the Key to AI Adoption

> Employees who strongly agree their manager supports AI use are nearly twice as likely to use AI frequently.

Because of their day-to-day connection with employees, managers are well positioned to advocate for AI by modeling its use, answering questions and showing how it connects to employees' daily work. Gallup data show that manager support has the strongest association with measurable differences in how employees use and value AI. Within organizations that are investing in AI technology, employees who strongly agree their manager actively supports their team's use of AI are:

- **1.7** times as likely to use AI a few times a week or more
- **7.4** times as likely to strongly agree that AI gives them more opportunities to do what they do best every day
- **8.7** times as likely to strongly agree that AI has transformed how work gets done in their organization

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WHAT TO DO

Build AI Adoption Into Your Management Approach

The top barriers to AI adoption in business present real challenges, but leaders can address them with targeted strategies. Gallup identified four AI adoption best practices associated with higher AI usage and stronger evaluations of its benefits among employees:

1) **Communicate a clear strategy for AI integration**. Employees are more likely to engage with AI when they see that their organization has a defined approach, understands AI risks and concerns, and is prepared to address them. This shows employees that AI adoption is intentional and connected to broader business goals.
2) **Advocate for AI use at the team level.** Managers play a vital role in translating the AI adoption strategy into action. By actively supporting AI use, modeling its application and connecting it to the work employees actually do, managers make organizational plans relevant and practical.
3) **Provide role-specific training that maximizes value and reduces risk.** Organizations should design training based on employees' actual tasks and include guidance for secure use. This builds skill and confidence in using AI effectively.
4) **Establish clear policies and guidelines for responsible use.** Well-defined, accessible policies and guidelines give employees the confidence to explore AI's potential while staying within organizational, legal, and ethical boundaries. Strong policies also address safety concerns that often deter adoption.

When combined, these strategies help employees understand AI's value in their own role and build the confidence to use it regularly. They also position managers to give employees the guidance and encouragement to use AI consistently.

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STRATEGY NO. 3

Close the Development Gap Before It Widens

In 2026, 59% of CHROs said talent development gaps are one of their organization's top challenges for succession planning, up five percentage points from 2025. The gap between what organizations know they need and what they're actually delivering is growing fast.

The numbers reflect this on the employee side as well. In 2025, just over half of U.S. employees (56%) said they participated in training and skill development at their current organization.

As AI adoption and organizational change reshape what roles require, most employees aren't getting the development they need to keep up.



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The business case for closing this gap is clear. Based on meta-analysis findings, Gallup projects that organizations could realize an 18% increase in profit and a 14% increase in productivity by doubling the proportion of employees who feel they have opportunities to learn and grow at work.

Why Traditional Approaches Aren't Working

Most organizations still treat development as a series of one-time learning events: annual training programs, periodic workshops, scheduled reviews. But one-time development events don't effectively build engagement. Engagement requires ongoing practice incorporated into how managers interact with their teams every day.

This is where the difference between intention and effect shows up most clearly. Organizations invest in programs, but the development employees actually experience depends on whether their manager coaches them consistently, connects their strengths to their work and holds meaningful conversations about growth.

WHAT TO DO:

Develop Managers to Develop Employees

Employee development depends on managers, and most managers aren't equipped for it. The most effective organizations invest in development that equips managers to:

- coach employees consistently, not just during review cycles
- provide strengths-based feedback that connects to daily work
- clarify evolving expectations and goals as roles change
- hold meaningful conversations about performance and career growth

When managers receive training in coaching and people development, their teams see up to 18% higher engagement, and managers themselves experience 20% to 28% improvements in performance metrics.

The return on this investment compounds because each manager who becomes an effective coach helps every person on their team learn, improve and contribute more effectively.

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Gallup's Approach

Gallup partners with organizations of all sizes to build engagement strategies that scale to their needs.

If your organization is ready to create a future-ready engagement strategy, Gallup can help you:

- **Measure engagement with surveys informed by behavioral science.** Gallup's Q^{12} engagement framework identifies the workplace conditions that affect performance and reveals where leaders should focus.
- **Develop managers who strengthen engagement and performance.** Gallup equips managers through learning and AI-informed insights to become strengths-based coaches who clarify expectations, provide meaningful feedback and develop their teams.
- **Connect engagement to business outcomes.** Real-time analytics and validated tools link engagement data to critical metrics such as retention, productivity and performance.

Learn more about Gallup's approach to employee engagement, or schedule a conversation with a Gallup expert.

START A CONVERSATION TODAY

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