



Maslow's Need Hierarchy Model Revisited-Effect of Covid-19 and it's Impact on Employee Engagement

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Abstract: *This article discusses about Maslow's need hierarchy and the role of motivation as well as its pervasiveness in business application. During pandemic time, the importance of needs changed thus the focus of attention is on how it changed and which needs are given more priority and which one took a backstage. The chaos that was created due to lockdown got a far-reaching impact on organization performance and prioritization of human needs in business, academics, and various fields of life. In this context Maslow's theory is revisited.*

As priority of needs changed it will be interesting to see how it influenced strategizing employee engagement. An engaged employee is a motivated employee who feels involved and committed, and passionate about his/her work. According to Kahn¹, engagement means to be psychologically as well as physically present while occupying and performing an organisational role. Different theorist discussed about different levels of employee engagement and highlighted its relationship with Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

The focus is on revisiting Maslow's need hierarchy and its impact on employee engagement. Since the priority of needs changed, it will be interesting to see whether employees are still engaged in their work or not. One can find out their level of engagement. HR can work on designing strategies to keep their employees engaged even in difficult times. Various strategies of employee engagement are discussed in this article.

This is a conceptual paper is based on a number of research papers, articles, blogs, online newspapers, and other sources. The purpose of the paper is to evaluate how the priority of human needs changed after COVID 19. Does it have an impact on employee engagement strategy. Should organization revisit employee engagement strategies to improve production of organization and performance of employees.

Key Words: *Motivation, Employee Engagement, Covid-19, Post-Pandemic, Human Resource Management, Maslow's Need Hierarchy, Pandemic, HR.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The year 2020 witnessed the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic which posed an unprecedented health crisis to all humans^{2,3,4}, followed by a long period of Lockdown. It was a period of uncertainty and unpredictability that seemingly would not end. 'Work from Home' arrangements became the best alternative for companies and institutions to adopt. As people became restricted to their homes, they focused on work. This style of work had a substantial effect on interpersonal relations, increased screen time, and decreased physical activity ultimately changing their lifestyle. Subsequently, employees began to lose their jobs, huge salary cuts, or delayed payment of salary in general; such outcomes occurred arbitrarily, regardless of the sector, professional level, or the years of experience the employee had with the Institution.

Priority of human needs changed as people faced job uncertainty, inflation, high work demand, etc. As per the Self-Development Theory, motivation decreases when our need for autonomy, competence, and relationships is not met – three areas that have been "wiped out instantly" by the pandemic⁵. In this paper, we tried to see the impact of the pandemic on the motivation of the employees. COVID-19 has influenced and impacted various areas of employee motivation⁶. This can be reflected while designing employee engagement strategies for the HR of any organization.



Employee engagement is "a heightened emotional connection that an employee feels for his or her organization that influences him/her to exert greater discretionary effort to his/her work"⁴ (conference board, 2006). An engaged employee is "someone who feels involved, committed, passionate and empowered and demonstrates those feelings in work behaviour"⁷. This commitment is not only for his/her work itself but also commitment towards the organization and its vision and goals. Organizations formulate various policies to keep their employees motivated in order to maintain a high employee engagement level. Maslow's Need Hierarchy model is used very frequently in this regard. As we look into this model, the importance of various needs and their hierarchy level has changed in the pandemic and post-pandemic era. It will be interesting to see its impact on employee engagement policies.

1.1 The objective of the study is to revisit Maslow's need hierarchy model in the post-pandemic era and its implication on employee engagement policy.

1.2 Research Methodology :

This paper has been developed on secondary data. Various streams of content are arranged into conceptual essays to offer a fresh perspective⁸. The majority of the information was found in research papers, articles, blogs, and online media during the investigation. Data for COVID-19 are gathered from World Health Organization reports to prepare this article to provide a fresh perspective while designing the employee engagement policy of the organization.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Revisited:

Motivation is defined as "the process of arousing, directing, and maintaining behaviour toward a goal"⁹. The basic premise of the theory is that "people will not be happy or well-adjusted unless they have their needs met"⁹. Maslow's contribution to human psychology can be described as the 'Hierarchy of Human Motivation', highlighting five significant needs suggesting that people are motivated to fulfil their basic needs before moving on to other, more advanced needs¹⁰.

The five levels in the hierarchy from bottom to top are:

- **Physiological Needs**- are basic human needs such as food, water, warmth, and rest which are critical for human living. If these needs are not met human body cannot function properly. Physiological needs include basic needs such as food, water, shelter, sleep, clothing, and reproduction¹¹. Human basic needs are very important for the survival and sustainability of the human race in society.
- **Safety Needs** –Next in Maslow's hierarchy is safety and security protection and survival from chaotic situations. During the pandemic time, it was complete chaos. Suffering and death all around. People were focusing on how to be medically treated, and the availability of medicines, oxygen cylinders, and ambulances in time. These needs include emotional security, financial security, social stability, property, good health, and well-being. The emphasis on safety needs ensures the survival of people in such situations as protection from war and crime, health issues, etc¹². Above mentioned social disorder or confusion thus disturbs the mental and physiological equilibrium of the person/society concerned.
- **Love and Belongingness** – The third level of need is a social and psychological need as per Maslow's need hierarchy. The need to get emotionally connected to others, for example, friendship, intimacy, love, and being accepted by others (family, society, communities). Love and belonging indicate the need to be a part of a group such as a family, a group of colleagues in a workplace, a friendship, social group among others in society¹¹. This motivates people by giving them confidence in their ability and to contribute to society and organization.
- **Esteem Needs** – These refer to people's strivings to have a positive evaluation of themselves. Esteem needs include motivations for personal achievement and social status^{10,13}. Esteem and prestige needs are usually sought when a person actually feels secure in a group in society¹¹. When people achieve their social needs they focus attention on such matters as reputation, recognition, self-esteem and prestige or self-worth, self-respect, and status, among others that give people strong confidence to participate in activities that will certainly improve their living conditions in their various communities in the society¹⁴. It fulfils two aspects of an esteem need- esteem for oneself (achievement, independence, dignity) and the desire for reputation and respect from others. Fulfilment of esteem needs makes people contribute to society.



- Self-Actualization – It is the fifth level of need in Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs which deals with the desire of people to develop their talents and potentials and use them for the benefit of society. Self-actualization is self-fulfilment-the need to develop a person’s full potential in order to enable him or her to become the best that he or she is capable of¹⁴. Most importantly, it focuses on the development of human potential in order to improve the living conditions of people in various communities in the contemporary global environment.
- To conclude, immediate needs should be satisfied before one will move to the next level of need in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. For example, physiological needs to be satisfied before one moves to fulfilment of safety needs. It does not mean, that physiological needs should be 100% satisfied before one moves to safety and security needs.

Mark Koltko-Rivera revisited Maslow's theory. He mentioned important observation of Maslow’s work and summarized them as follow. Maslow defined ‘peak experience as “mystical experiences, aesthetic experiences, [and] emotional experiences involving nature.”¹⁵ The cognitive activity experienced during peak experience “[goes] beyond or above selfhood;” he called this "Being-cognition." It is a characteristic of the self-actualized individual. Later on, he was of the view that an individual becomes self-actualized, "he is more able to fuse with the world, with what was formally not-self." He renamed as “self-transcendence” which goes beyond or above self-hood. It is another higher motivational level. The implication of Maslow's revision is eloquently stated in Koltko-Rivera's final analysis: At the level of self-actualization, the individual works to actualize the individual's own potential [whereas] at the level of transcendence, the individual's own needs are put aside, to a great extent, in favour of service to others...” in the opinion of Shannon Macintyre¹⁶(2007) Indeed, according to Maslow's final theory, the purpose of life is not to perfect oneself but to transcend oneself by connecting with others. This is a radical new understanding of one of the dominant theories in modern psychology.

Analysis of Challenges Posed by COVID-19 and post-pandemic Effect on Maslow’s Needs Hierarchy

The pandemic has changed the prioritization of Needs. Human needs can be basic needs and growth needs. During the pandemic time, basic needs became more prominent as compared to growth needs. People were losing jobs, many made huge losses in business, whereas others lost hopes of having no future. Uncertainty about income was prevailing. Physiological need has occupied a major part of people’s lives. Fulfilling the needs and survival struggle has become of prime importance. Money has become the prime importance to fulfilling basic needs (food, water, medical bill, etc). In Figure 1, we can see physiological needs occupy a major area of focus as compared to Figure 2 (which represents Maslow’s need hierarchy).

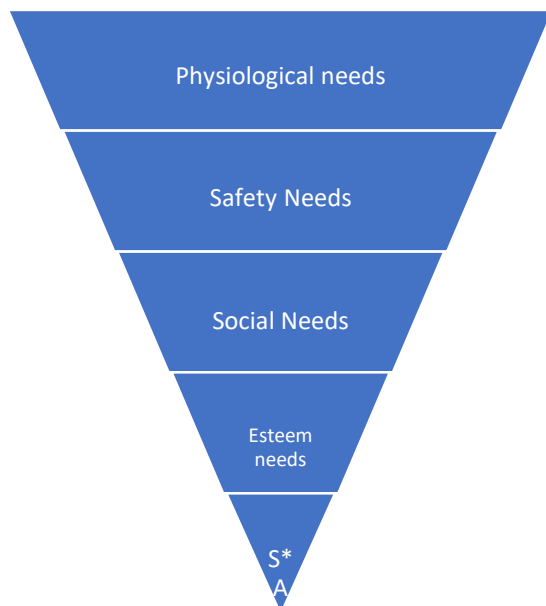


Figure 1
 Prioritization of human needs in pandemic and post-pandemic era
 *SA- Self Actualization

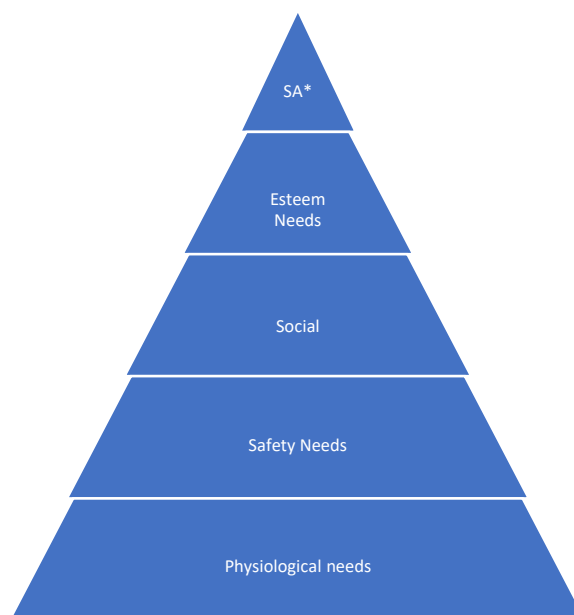


Figure 2 – Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs



In the post-pandemic era, the financial situation of people has not yet normalized. The financial position of the business has not yet recovered. Those who lost their jobs and those who were unemployed are still struggling and are trying to get a regular job so that they can manage their lives.

Safety and security needs as described by Maslow includes job security, security of property, family and social stability, protection, order, etc. During the pandemic time, **health safety** has become of prime importance. Treatment in terms of medicines was not clear though later period it was developed. In the family, death has created havoc. Health safety in terms of medicines, vaccine, hygiene, availability of oxygen cylinder, and the travel ban was the major steps to be taken to ensure health safety. In order to attain **job security**, people focused on cognitive needs - gaining knowledge, increasing, and broadening the scope of understanding, nurturing curiosity, working on consistency and predictability, etc. Acquiring degrees, certificates, skills, or knowledge that can help them to retain their jobs. For people who are fortunate enough not to worry about physiological needs, their focus is on how to protect themselves from infection, stay safe, and keep their families safe. Right now, also corona is spreading in some parts of the world. People are reverting back to the same mode of protecting themselves from this pandemic.

Belongingness needs as per Maslow's hierarchy model, were also found to be unfulfilled. Maintaining relationships with family, friends, and colleagues was very difficult. Social media usage was too much. The mental health of people also got affected basically due to isolation, anxiety, and depression. Mental illness cases increased during the pandemic and post-pandemic time. Both adults and students were found to be suffering from mental health issues. Depression, rebelliousness feeling lonely, and not being able to communicate feelings were found to be more visible due to social distancing.

Esteem needs –Next level of need that motivates people (according to Maslow) is the need to achieve success and be recognized by others for your achievements. There was little scope to put much effort into fulfilling esteem needs during pandemic times. More time was spent on the first two basic needs. It is not only about oneself; it is all about the family. Altruism or the act of giving back to others in need was associated with “better life adjustment, better marital adjustment, and less hopelessness and depression”¹⁷. This might be a way to meet one's esteem needs while also giving back to others who are working hard on the front lines of this pandemic

Self-actualization needs: In light of the current crisis, the majority of people are not able to focus on these higher-order needs - being creative about how you can give back to and help others who are struggling.

Was Maslow's hierarchy of needs following a pyramid model? In fact, Maslow expressly advised, “the false impression that a need must be satisfied 100 percent before the next need emerges.”¹⁸. Observation shows that due to unprecedented circumstances, people's priority has changed. Under difficult circumstances, people focus on basic needs and give more time and energy to them. As of now, situations are getting normalized people will go back to the need they were focusing on earlier. For example, assume that in a normal scenario, they were working on Esteem needs, under an abnormal scenario i.e., pandemic, they will start focusing on basic needs (Physiological and safety, and security needs). It is the need for survival. Once the situation will be normal, they will go back to esteem needs. People shift their focus depending on the circumstances they are facing.

People's priority changes depending on the severity of the situation. The question is, if it changes then how employee engagement policies should be designed so that they can motivate employees to work enthusiastically in difficult times? In other words, can we make employees focus on the quality of work rather than the quantity of work? Can we make them motivated to work for the organization under difficult situations? Let us focus on the concept of employee engagement.

Understanding Employee Engagement

Professor William Kahn of Boston University first introduced the concept of employee engagement¹⁹. An engaged employee is “someone who feels involved, committed, passionate and empowered and demonstrates those feelings in work behaviour”⁷. It focuses on the degree to which employees invest their cognitive, emotional, and behavioural energies toward positive organizational outcomes. According to Tower Perrin²¹: ‘Extent to which employees put discretionary effort into their work’. Gallup²² research understands it as ‘Involvement with and enthusiasm for work’; As per Hewitt^{23,24}, it is ‘Intellectually and emotionally committed to the organization’; Sibson²⁵ defined it as Knowing



what to do at work and wanting to do at work. Hay Group²⁶ explains it as ‘stimulating employees’ enthusiasm for their work and directing it toward organizational success’. The more the employees are involved in their work the more opportunities they try to find out. They look for ways to enhance their abilities, they make their work more meaningful. Thus, getting more satisfaction out of their work. It is HR’s effort to design employee engagement strategies in such a way that will lead to highly engaged and high-performing employees.

The employee engagement framework is based on a hierarchy of employees' development needs, like Basic needs, Individual needs, Team, and Growth needs²⁸. This four-level hierarchy is based on four types of employees' performance development needs. It can be represented in the below format:

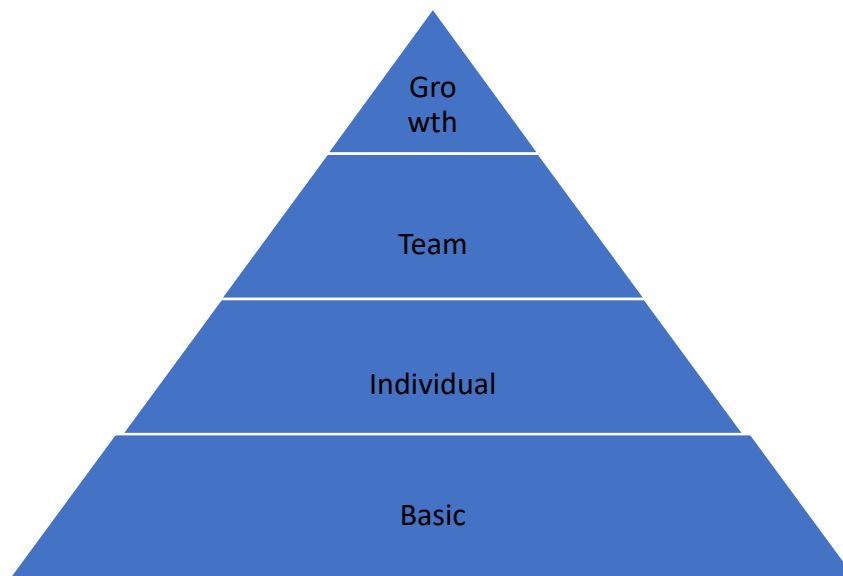


Figure 3 – Employee Engagement Framework

Source: <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/285674/improve-employee-engagement-workplace.aspx>

Basic Needs highlights: employees should know what is expected of them, and have the materials and required skills to perform it.

Individual needs: the opportunity to do what he is best every day, receiving recognition and praise, a supervisor who respects you and cares about the person, and someone who encourages development.

Teamwork: opinion counts in a team, the mission or purpose of the company makes the employee feel that his job is important, and coworkers’ commitment plays a vital role in making the employee feel comfortable and satisfied in performing his duties.

Growth: It is represented by the statement “In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress, this last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow”.

Gallup study²² has tried to survey employee engagement with a questionnaire (12 questions) that corresponds to the Engagement hierarchy (Figure 3). Findings show that engaged employees produce better business outcomes than other employees who are actively/passively disengaged across industry irrespectively of company size and nationality both in good or bad economic times. It was observed only 21% of employees worldwide and 33% in the U.S. fall into the engaged category. Findings further emphasize a significant difference between top and bottom quartile business units and teams in the following criteria as Absenteeism 81%, turnover for high-turnover organizations is 18%, turnover for low-turnover organizations is 43%, quality defects are 41%, customer loyalty/engagement is 10%, in productivity of sales is 18% and in profitability is 23%.²⁸. Gallup’s 2014²⁷ research shows that only 13 percent of all employees are “highly engaged,” and 26 percent are “actively disengaged.” Engaging employees in their work in the organization results in better performance. Towers Perrin survey emphasized that highly engaged employees have up to 19% higher



operating margin, net profit margin, and revenue growth, and 25% greater earnings per share as compared to lower engaged employees²⁷. Watson Wyatt found that highly engaged employees are top performers²⁹.

Three Levels of Employee Engagement as discussed in the Gallup Model of Employee Engagement

There are various models of employee engagement. Gallup’s model of engagement highlights three basic categories viz., disengaged, engaged, and not engaged based on commitment and dedication. The first category of employees who are always dissatisfied and they spread unhappiness in the organization is called **actively disengaged**. For example, they may spread misinformation outside the organization that will damage the reputation of the company. They may not be a team player. The second employee category is **engaged employees**, who can be identified with words like innovation, passion, and commitment. They are committed to their work, give innovative ideas, are connected to the company, and are passionate about their job. They not only contribute new innovative ideas but have the capabilities to turn them into reality. These employees are very optimistic in their outlook and they contribute to creating a positive culture. They are proactive, can anticipate future market conditions, and stay prepared well in advance for the same. It is called engaged employees. The third type of employee is called **not engaged employees** those who are almost fifty percent present in organizations. They are only instruction followers, they do only what is said to be done. They only put in the time but no passion. They are not at all proactive and always wait for the superior for instructions.

Four levels of Employee Engagement as discussed by McCrimmon:

McCrimmon is of the view that creating a culture of engagement in an organization is of prime importance. In his opinion, there are four levels of engagement³⁰. Level 1 is Basic engagement, which focuses on clear direction, supervision, and recognition to create a great workplace. These initiatives will engage employees in their work at the beginning. Level 2 is employees as suppliers of services. This is a proactive approach and emphasizes being creatively engaged with the work and adding value to it. This extra effort by the employees gives them a sense of ownership. Employees are like supplier partners and managers can encourage the feeling of ownership in employees. Level three is engaging leadership. The role of the manager at this stage is expected to be a facilitator, a catalyst, and a coach. Level four is beyond ownership to passion. When people are most about their own ideas then there is a strong undercurrent that gives them a push to work and make ideas happen in their work field. They promote their own ideas, new products, and processes. This passion is the highest level of work engagement in their regular work. In his opinion as the organization passes through the four levels of employee engagement, the gap between dependency and empowerment is reduced. We can say the employee has been completely involved in his work, and thus engaged.

Above mentioned discussion highlights different levels of employee engagement and how to develop them. Strategies to approach employee engagement within the boundary of organizational setup.

There are various models like, the Zinger model of employee engagement, Hewitt model of employee engagement, X model of employee engagement, BURKE / EEI model of employee engagement, Talent Keeper model of employee engagement, Boston model of employee engagement, People profit model of employee engagement, etc. All theories are emphasizing **drivers of employee engagement** and their impact on organizational performance. Zinger’s model of employee engagement emphasizes a pyramid structure. The AON-Hewitt model focuses on business outcomes as a core result and driver of ensuring good employee engagement. According to Kahn, the employee engagement model prioritizes the importance of staff, seeing their strengths reflected in their work roles.

A new model of engagement was presented by Deloitte³¹. They conducted 2 years of research with a sample size of hundreds of employees. The study identified five major elements in employee engagement to build a culture of employee engagement. If applied strategically, it can bring significant changes in employee performance. They are presented in the table below:

Meaningful work	Hands-on Management	Positive work environment	Growth opportunity	Trust in Leadership
Autonomy	Clear and transparent goals	Flexible work environment	Training and support on the job	Mission and purpose



Select to fit	coaching	Humanistic workplace	Facilitated talent mobility	Continuous investment in people
Small empowered teams	Invest in management development	Culture of Recognition	Self-directed dynamic learning	Transparency and honesty
Time for slack	Modern performance management	Inclusive, diverse work environment	High-impact learning culture	Inspiration

Source: <https://www.contactmonkey.com/blog/employee-engagement-models>

Table 1

Maslow’s hierarchy of Needs applied to Employee Engagement. The relationship is represented below³¹

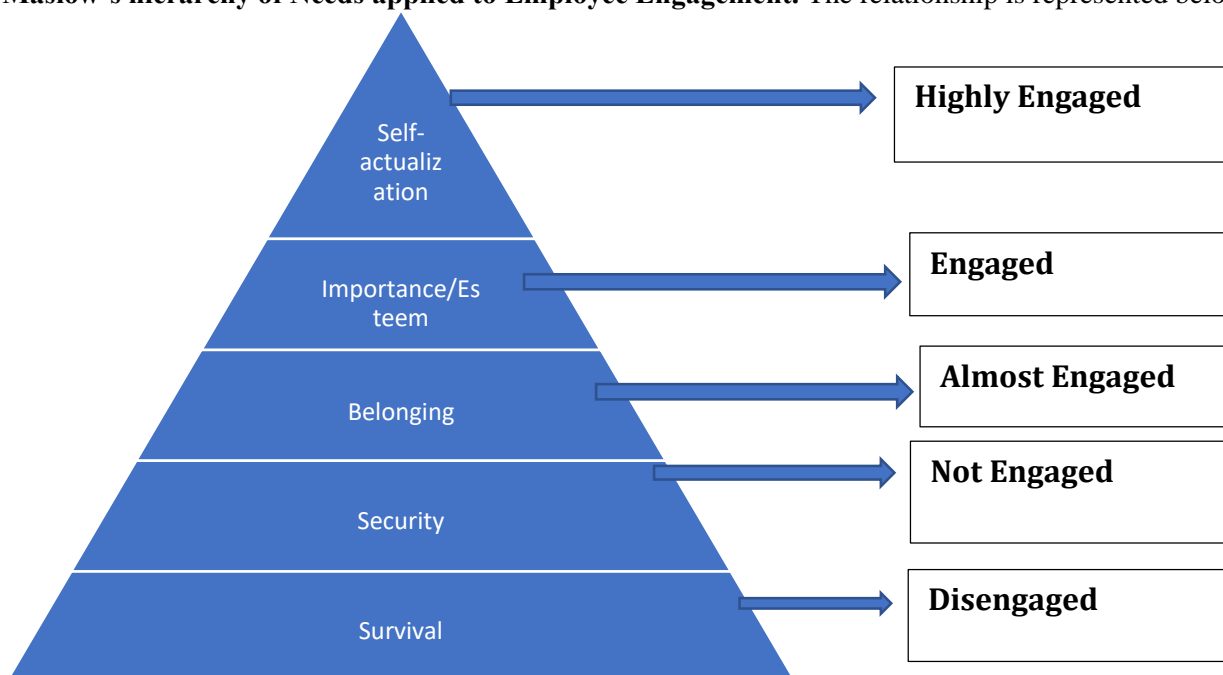


Figure 4- Maslow’s Need Hierarchy and level of employee engagement

This blog defines above mentioned types of engagement described below:

Self-actualization	Highly engaged	An employee is happy to help and inspire their co-workers and will not leave.
Importance/ Esteem	Engaged	Someone who feels they play a vital and important role in the business is more likely to achieve.
Belonging	Almost Engaged	They know that they are part of something bigger in the company but may leave if offered a better opportunity.
Security	Not Engaged	Is looking for new opportunities, and are unhappy with the management and possibly their working conditions.
Survival	Disengaged	They are only working for their salary, are dissatisfied with their job, and are likely to leave the company soon.

Source: <https://www.ovationincentives.com/articles/maslows-hierarchy-of-needs-applied-to-employee-engagement>

Table 2 Maslow’s Need Hierarchy and Level of employee engagement defined

Similarly, to Maslow's Hierarchy, an employee needs their basic needs such as their salary and work conditions to be fulfilled first before reaching high-level needs such as feeling part of something bigger within an organization. Higher employee engagement also means higher employee retention and lower employee churn which cuts recruitment and training costs for businesses.



3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION:

As we have discussed, the priority of needs (as per Maslow's hierarchy of needs) changed in pandemic era as well as post-pandemic era. Financial effect is still continuing. The need for Survival (Basic needs), Security needs and Belonging needs are fulfilled in the present context. Thus, we can say people are almost engaged (as per Deloitte study observation). As far as my personal experience goes, people still are not very comfortable with others. Employees work together. They want to show that they are together. Still, there is an undercurrent of mistrust being there. They do not want to lose their jobs. At the same time, looking for a better job which they will change once they get it. I can say, people are committed to their job but not to the organization. In order to move further, on the ladder, Teamwork will be a significant step. It requires a culture of trust and a positive environment. The leader has a significant role to play in this regard. It should be devoid of organizational politics. Some of the important features to be given more importance are communication, recognition, desire to upgrade skill and knowledge, imbibing positivity in work culture, team leadership, and opportunity to work on passion. Can the organization sincerely work on it? Then only HR strategies will work.

To conclude, the pandemic has a significant role to play in employee motivation. Maslow's hierarchy of needs emphasizes human needs and the basis of their priority. As a lower need is satisfied (may not be 100% satisfaction), the employee moves to higher level needs and it motivates him to work further till it reaches the highest level (as discussed by Maslow). In difficult times like the pandemic, it was observed people were more stuck to lower needs (physiological, security, and safety) and invested more time in them. At that point in time those two needs became more powerful to motivate and continue their lives. As the situation relaxed, gradually "belongingness needs" were gradually getting fulfilled. The effect of the post-pandemic has not yet normalized. Looking at the effect of Maslow's hierarchy of needs on employee engagement, we can say, as the priority of needs changes so also its effect on the level of engagement. An organization needs to realize it and design its strategies accordingly to make the employees highly engaged.

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