

Understanding the difference between Satisfaction and Engagement

...and why both matter for your work climate

Who is this note for?

Leaders and HR professionals who receive Yumodata® survey results and want to *really* understand what the indicators “Satisfaction” and “Engagement” are telling them.

After reading this note, you will be able to:

- Explain in one sentence what satisfaction is and what engagement is
- Understand why they can move in different directions
- Use both indicators to guide concrete leadership action

1. The everyday experience behind the numbers

Think of a time when you felt like this:

*“My job is **ok**. Pay is fair, colleagues are fine, the office is decent... but honestly, I’m just going through the motions.”*

And another time when:

*“Right now work is **tough** – deadlines are tight, days are long – but I care about what we’re doing, and I still want to give my best.”*

These are two very different inner states.

They are the reason why Yumodata® does **not** use one single “employee mood score”, but instead measures:

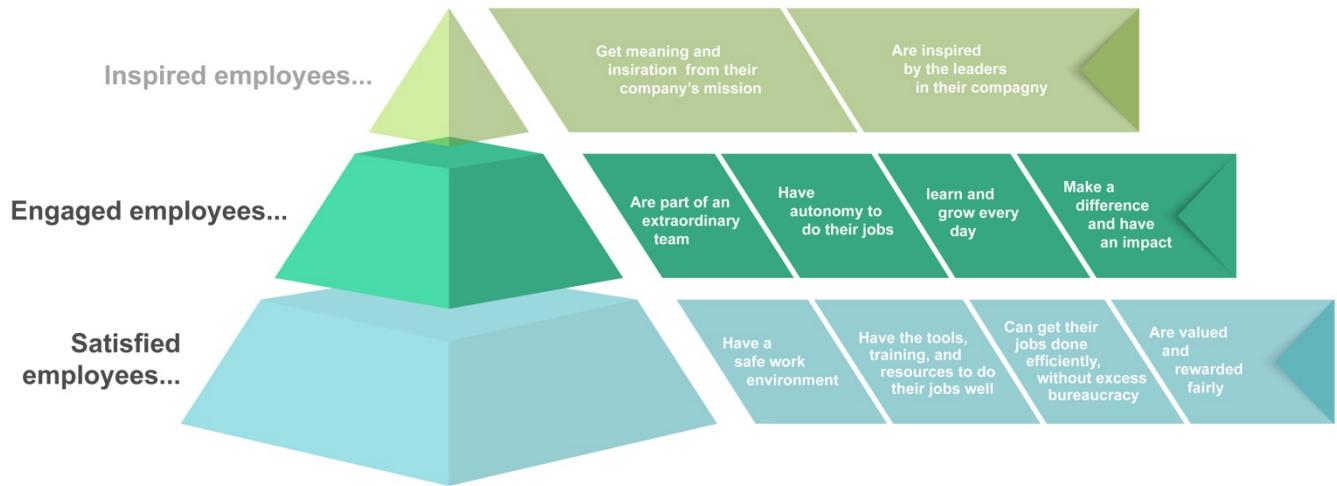
- **Satisfaction** - Am I okay in my working conditions?
- **Engagement** - Do I want to give my best here?

The Yumodata indicators are inspired by the **Pyramid of Employee Needs** introduced by Eric Garton and Michael Mankins in Harvard Business Review (2015). Their work shows that people first need to be **satisfied** with the basics of their job, and only then can they become **engaged** or even **inspired**. That resonated with us.

For Swiss organizations in particular, Yumodata focuses on two levels that are universally relevant:

1. **Satisfaction** – the foundation
2. **Engagement** – the energy and commitment people bring

The Pyramid of Employee Needs



According to a survey conducted by Gallup, only 21% of employees worldwide are engaged at work.

Source : Bain & Co

2. What we measure as “Satisfaction”

2.1. What it means

In research, **job satisfaction** is defined as how positively someone evaluates their job overall - essentially, *how much they like their job*.

In Yumodata, the **Satisfaction** indicator captures whether the **basic expectations of work** are met:

- Is my workload **manageable**?
- Is my pay and recognition **fair enough**?
- Do I have the **tools and information** I need?
- Are processes and IT **workable** rather than constantly blocking me?
- Is the work environment **safe and respectful**?

These elements are inspired by the foundation of the Bain & Company pyramid: if they are weak, frustration quickly dominates.

2.2. What satisfaction tells you as a leader

When you look at the Satisfaction indicator, you are essentially asking:

“How solid is our **basic work environment**?”

Low or declining satisfaction points you toward:

- Overload or unclear priorities
- Perceived unfairness (pay, promotions, decisions)
- Dysfunctional tools, systems, or bureaucracy
- Lack of training
- Concerns about security or respect

Improving satisfaction usually requires **structural or process changes** - not just nicer communication.

3. What we measure as “Engagement”

3.1. What it means

Work engagement is a more active state. Leading researchers define it as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by:

- **Vigor** - high energy and willingness to invest effort
- **Dedication** - a sense of significance, enthusiasm, and pride
- **Absorption** - being deeply involved in one's work; time passes quickly

In everyday words, engagement is: *“How much of my **energy, heart, and focus** I actually bring to my job.”*

3.2. What drives engagement

In yumodata, the Engagement indicator reflects whether people experience things like:

- **Meaningful tasks** they can be proud of
- **Autonomy and trust** in how they do their work
- The chance to **use and develop** their skills
- **Supportive leadership** with clear direction
- **Strong teams** and collaboration
- A feeling that their work **makes a difference** to customers, patients, citizens, etc.

These are classic job resources in the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, which shows that such resources drive engagement and good performance over time.

3.3. What engagement tells you as a leader

Looking at engagement is like asking: *“Are people **emotionally and mentally on board** with what we’re trying to achieve?”*

Low engagement suggests:

- People don't see the **point** of their work
- They feel **ignored**, under-used, or micro-managed
- They no longer want to **go beyond the bare minimum**

Addressing engagement issues is mostly about **leadership quality, team climate, and meaningful work design**.

4. Why satisfaction and engagement can sometimes move in different directions

4.1. Different parts of the job react to different things

The JD-R model helps explain this:

- **Job demands** (workload, time pressure, emotional strain, complexity) are strongly linked with **stress, exhaustion, and lower satisfaction**.
- **Job resources** (autonomy, support, feedback, learning) are strongly linked with **engagement and performance**.

That means:

- If demands increase (more work, more admin, more pressure, increasing process issues), **satisfaction will often fall**.
- If resources are still intact (good manager, strong team, meaningful tasks), **engagement can remain stable** – at least for some time.

5. Reading your Yumodata results: 4 basic patterns

When you combine both indicators, four typical situations emerge:

1. **High satisfaction, high engagement**
 - People feel **well treated** and **highly committed**
 - Focus: protect and scale what works; keep listening to early warning signals
2. **Low satisfaction, high engagement**
 - People **care and try hard**, but feel under strain
 - Focus: relieve pressure, fix processes and tools, clarify priorities
3. **High satisfaction, low engagement**
 - People are **comfortable but not energized** - "it's fine, but..."
 - Focus: strengthen leadership, autonomy, development, and purpose
4. **Low satisfaction, low engagement**
 - People are both **unhappy and disengaged**
 - Focus: urgent, combined action on working conditions **and** leadership

6. Academic references & further reading

For readers who want to go deeper:

Job satisfaction & performance

- Judge, T. A., Thoresen, C. J., Bono, J. E., & Patton, G. K. (2001).
The Job Satisfaction–Job Performance Relationship: A Qualitative and Quantitative Review. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(1), 80–92.

Work engagement

- Schaufeli, W. B., & Bakker, A. B. (2004).
Job Demands, Job Resources, and Their Relationship with Burnout and Engagement. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 25, 293–315.
- Bakker, A. B. (2015).
Work Engagement. Wiley Encyclopedia of Management.

Job Demands–Resources model

- Demerouti, E., Bakker, A. B., Nachreiner, F., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2001).
The Job Demands–Resources Model of Burnout. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(3), 499–512.
- Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2007).
The Job Demands–Resources Model: State of the Art. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 22(3), 309–328.

Bain pyramid & productivity

- Garton, E., & Mankins, M. (2015).
Engaging Your Employees Is Good, But Don't Stop There. *Harvard Business Review*, December 9.