

The Engagement Recession is Here and Managers are Already Feeling the Drag

2 months ago



Organisations are feeling the operational impact of “the engagement recession”, according to global talent solutions partner [Robert Walters](#)’ Talent Trends 2026 guide. The new research shows that 85% of UK managers say this next phase of “quiet cracking” is eroding business productivity, with over half (57%) saying their teams are struggling to manage the fallout.

“Quiet cracking” is a term that gained traction over the past year to describe employees who continue to deliver in their roles while feeling disengaged and demotivated. The latest findings suggest its effects are now compounding at team level, leading to systemic performance risks.

Gerrit Bouckaert, CEO, Recruitment at Robert Walters, says, “We’re seeing quiet cracking move from a personal issue to an organisational one. For managers, the engagement recession is one of the hardest challenges to address because the signs aren’t always obvious. The gradual breakdown of team performance, like projects taking longer to complete, fewer ideas being put forward in meetings, or more time spent on unblocking work that used to run smoothly, can easily go unnoticed.

“Left unaddressed, that subtle shift can reshape overall team functionality, putting additional pressure on managers and creating performance gaps that are far harder to close over time.”

Problems with engagement are already widespread across UK workplaces, with Gallup’s [State of the Global Workforce](#) revealing that only 10% of UK employees report being engaged at work.

Employees feeling the strain

When asked how a disengaged team member affects their performance, 60% of professionals say they would notice and a fifth (21%) say they would feel less motivated.

“This helps explain how the engagement recession takes hold,” adds Bouckaert. “Many employees may feel like they’re coping, even when someone around them is disengaged. In practice, that often means taking on extra responsibilities or compensating for checked out colleagues, which keeps work moving in the short term but shifts the burden across the team. Managers usually feel that change later, when reduced momentum and uneven performance start showing up at scale.”

According to the Talent Trends 2026 guide, organisations that get ahead of this trend will be those that treat engagement as a leadership responsibility embedded into daily management rather than something measured periodically. This includes identifying early behavioural changes, addressing workload pressure regularly, and providing clearer direction so employees understand their priorities and progression opportunities.

“Engagement doesn’t collapse overnight,” Bouckaert says. “It breaks down when pressure builds faster than support and when people stop seeing how their effort connects to wider business success. Leaders who take the time to listen to workers and clarify expectations will be far better placed to avoid the engagement recession.”

The findings form part of the Talent Trends 2026 guide, which draws on Robert Walters’ global market insight across recruitment, outsourcing and talent advisory, supporting organisations as they navigate evolving workforce expectations and leadership challenges. Download the full Talent Trends 2026 [guide here](#).