

COX PURTELL
EMPLOYEE ATTACHMENT

Event Whitepaper May 2026



INTRODUCTION



Cox Purcell recently hosted an Insight Session bringing together HR leaders, people managers and talent professionals to explore one of the most underaddressed challenges in workforce management: what happens after a candidate accepts your offer.

Our guest experts Anthony and Selina Sork of Sork HC, presented the science of Employee Attachment Theory — peer-researched, internationally deployed, and directly relevant to any organisation hiring permanent staff.

This whitepaper captures the key themes, insights and audience questions from that session.

SCIENCE

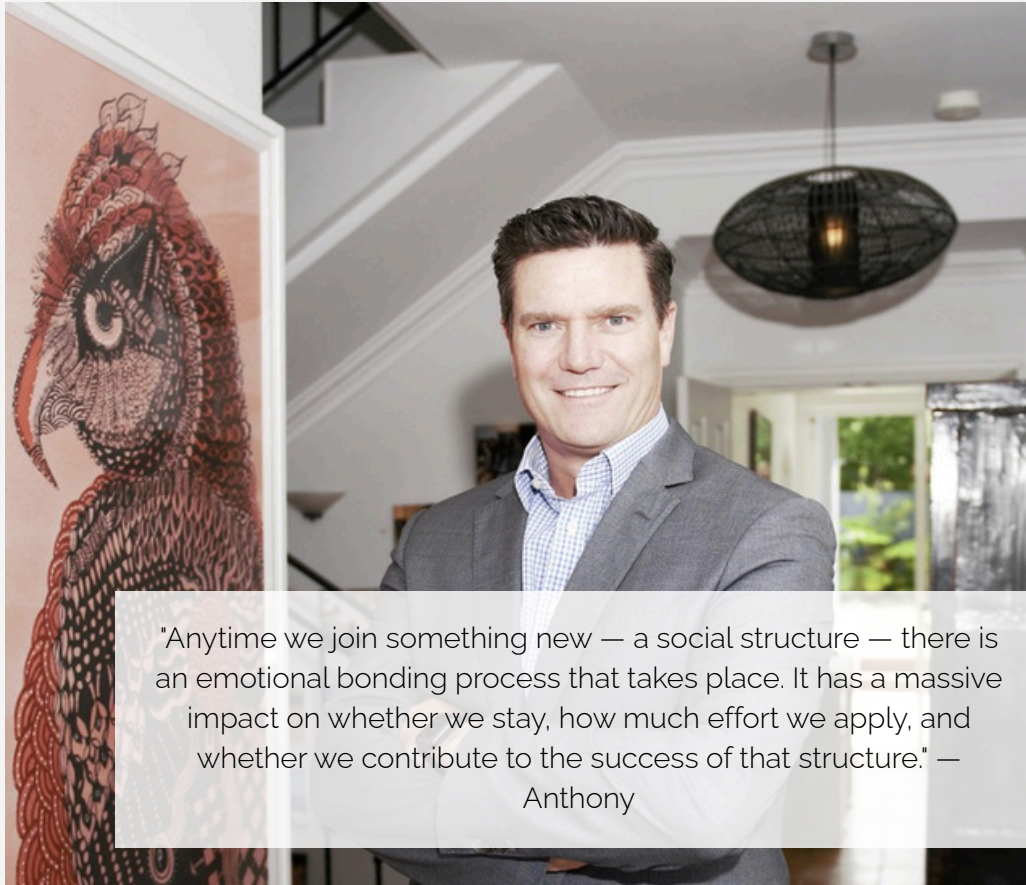
ATTACHMENT

RETENTION

90%+

of employee exits within the first 18 months are attachment related

ABOUT THE SPEAKERS



"Anytime we join something new — a social structure — there is an emotional bonding process that takes place. It has a massive impact on whether we stay, how much effort we apply, and whether we contribute to the success of that structure." —

Anthony

Anthony Sork - Managing Director, Sork HC

Patent holder in Australia, New Zealand & the US for research in employee attachment psychology. 20+ years coaching executives globally. Featured in the AFR, Sydney Morning Herald and ABC Radio.

Selina Sork — Director & Co-founder, Sork HC

Background in corporate affairs, communications and psychology. 10+ years executive coaching experience. Specialist in leadership behavioural impact.



SECTION 1: THE SCIENCE BEHIND ATTACHMENT

Where It All Began

Attachment theory has its origins in the animal kingdom. Nobel laureate Konrad Lorenz demonstrated that many species form a biological, instinctive bond with their primary carer — a process called filial bonding. This was later applied to humans, with decades of research showing that the same bonding mechanism shapes how we attach to every social structure we enter: family, school, sports teams, workplaces and beyond.

From One-to-One to One-to-Many

Traditional attachment research focused on primary caregiver relationships in early childhood. Sork HC extended this framework to recognise that the same bonding mechanism applies across all social structures — including the workplace. They term this Social Structure Attachment.

The Research Foundations

Attachment theory draws on a deep body of scientific research spanning more than a century. Three key figures established the framework that Sork HC applied to the workplace:

John Bowlby Attachment Theory

Proposed that humans have an innate biological need to form close emotional bonds with a primary carer — and that the quality of that bond shapes all future social behaviour.

Mary Ainsworth The Strange Situation

Demonstrated that attachment styles can be observed, measured and categorised — proving that the quality of bonding follows predictable patterns.

Harry Harlow Contact Comfort Studies

Showed that attachment is driven by emotional safety and comfort — not material provision. Employees attach to how they feel, not what they receive.

Key insight: The strength of the emotional bond formed in a new social structure directly determines whether a person stays, how hard they work, and how meaningfully they contribute.

THE NEUROSCIENCE

The Neuroscience

Attachment is not a feeling — it is a biological event in the brain. Three brain structures and four neurochemicals govern how every new employee scans, interprets and responds to their new workplace environment:

Amygdala: Continuously scans for social threat. In a new workplace it is hyperactive — evaluating every interaction. Perceived exclusion, inconsistency or disrespect triggers a stress cascade that directly inhibits attachment formation.

Prefrontal Cortex: Moderates fear responses and enables trust, social reasoning and cooperative bonding. Psychological safety activates it; perceived threat suppresses it, reverting the employee to self-protective behaviour.

Hippocampus: Encodes the emotional context of early experiences into long-term memory. Positive first-120-day experiences become the brain's reference frame for 'what this place is like' — persisting for the entire tenure.

The four key neurochemicals in play:

Oxytocin: The bonding molecule — released during positive social connection. The manager's warmth, consistency and care directly stimulate oxytocin release in the new employee.

Cortisol: The threat hormone — elevated when the employee feels unsafe, excluded or unsupported. Chronically high cortisol actively prevents positive attachment bonds from forming.

Dopamine: The reward signal — surges when expectations are met and efforts are recognised. Each positive interaction in the first 120 days makes attachment literally feel good.

Serotonin: Status & belonging — rises when an employee feels respected, valued and included. Falls when they feel overlooked, and with it, their motivation to remain.

Why this matters for managers: Primary carer behaviour is not a soft skill. Every interaction a manager has with a new employee either builds or erodes the biological substrate of attachment. This is a neurochemical event — not a feel-good program.

THE EMPLOYEE LIFECYCLE

Attachment is one stage in a broader employee journey. Understanding where it sits — and what comes before and after — helps organisations see the full picture of what shapes your employer brand and your people's experience.

1

Pre-Employment

Candidate experience
& employer brand

2

Attachment

First 120 days — the
critical bond-forming
window

3

Connection

Sustained engagement
over tenure

4

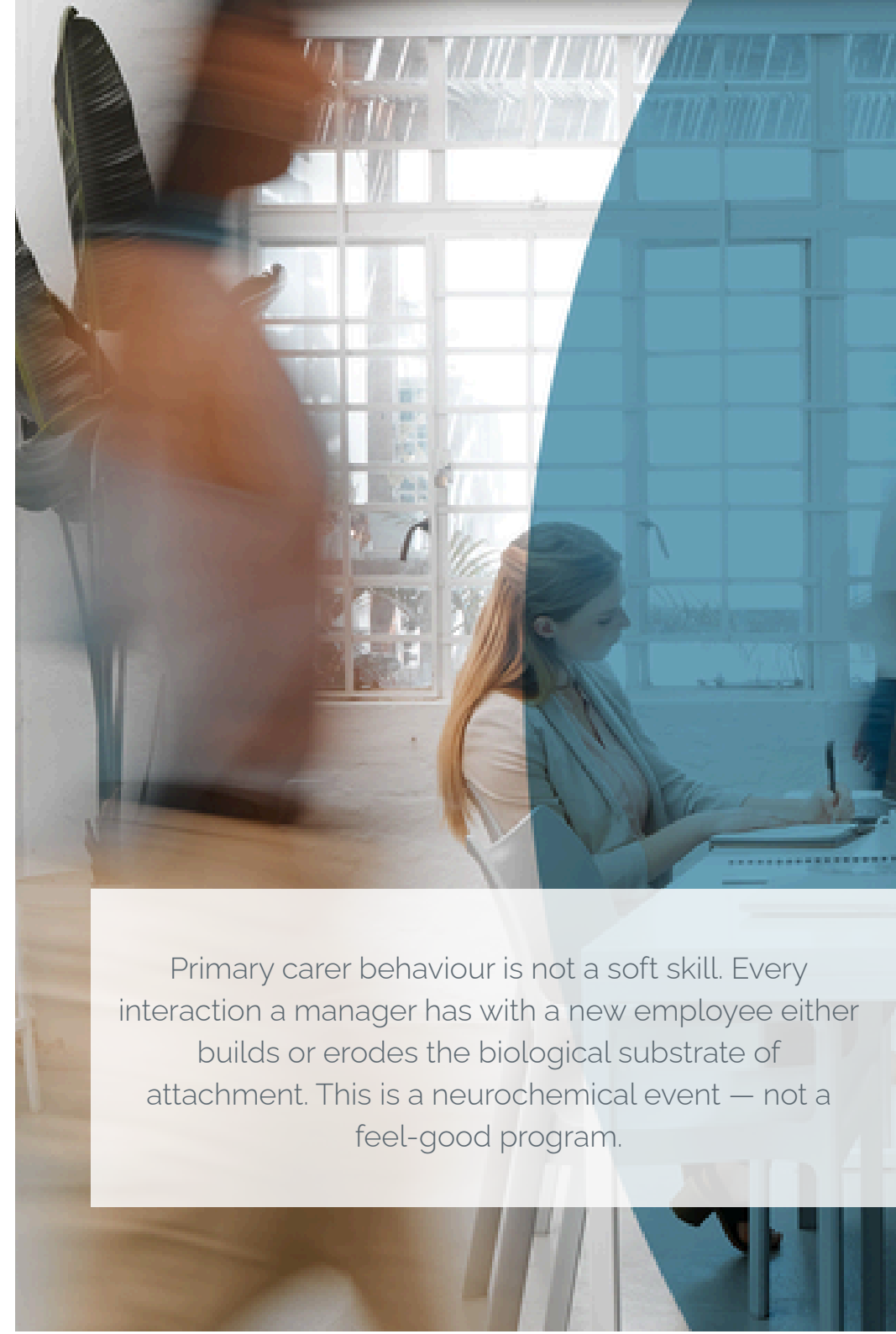
Detachment

The decision to leave
begins here

5

Post-Employment

Alumni influence on
your employer brand



Primary carer behaviour is not a soft skill. Every interaction a manager has with a new employee either builds or erodes the biological substrate of attachment. This is a neurochemical event — not a feel-good program.

SECTION 3: MEASURING & ACTING ON ATTACHMENT

The Employee Attachment Inventory (EAI)

Cox Purtell has partnered with Sork HC to include the Employee Attachment Inventory (EAI) with every permanent placement. Here's how it works:

01
The EAI survey is sent to the new employee at Day 90 — the first statistically valid measure of attachment. It contains 100 items and takes approximately 15 minutes to complete.

02
An EAI Feedback Report is generated instantly via the shcBOND platform and emailed directly to your Cox Purtell Consultant.

03
The report covers all 20 attachment drivers with observations, recommendations and conversation-guide questions. It is not a measure of performance or competency — it measures the employee's experience.

04
The Cox Purtell consultant who managed your placement walks you through the report findings and what they mean in practice.

05
The manager uses the 30-day intervention window to have a structured, two-way conversation and build a joint action plan addressing any low or moderate scoring drivers.

The 20 workplace drivers of attachment

01 Recruitment & Selection	02 Pre-employment	03 Orientation	04 Central Messages
05 Rotation	06 Incremental Learning	07 Accuracy of Job Representation	08 Manager Alignment & Accessibility
09 Business Awareness	10 Performance Objectives	11 Learning Path	12 Reasons for Joining
13 Personal Vision & Career Path	14 Senior Leadership	15 Work/Life Balance	16 Co-Workers
17 Physical Work Environment & Resources	18 Culture & Climate	19 Systems & Processes	20 Safety & Behaviour

SECTION 2: THE CRITICAL ATTACHMENT PERIOD

The First 120 Days

For roles where an employee expects to stay six months or more, the Critical Attachment Period is the first 120 days. During this window, the new starter's brain is constantly scanning, interpreting and responding to their environment — forming perceptions that determine whether they bond with the organisation or begin to disengage.

Timeline

DAY 1 New starter joins	DAY 90 EAI survey sent - first valid measurement	DAY 90-120 30-day intervention window	DAY 120 Critical attachment period closes
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The Four Core Attachment Perceptions

01. Security & Safety

Physical safety environment / Psychological & emotional safety / Financial security / Moral & values alignment / Professional standing

02. Trust & Value

Mutual trust starts at its highest / Erodes if actions don't reinforce it / Effort invested correlates to trust level

03. Acceptance

How quickly does the team welcome them? / Feeling they've earned their place / Manager can accelerate acceptance

04. Belonging

Understanding org purpose & values / Feeling culturally aligned / Wanting to be there long-term / Deeper connection than acceptance





SECTION 4: THE BUSINESS CASE

The Real Cost of a New Hire

Most organisations underestimate the true investment made when hiring. Direct costs are just the start:

\$100K+

Average total investment per new hire (direct + indirect costs)

18 months

Average time to reach break-even on that investment

90%+

of employee exits within the first 18 months are attachment-related

The formula is straightforward: whatever your direct hiring costs (agency fees, interview time, onboarding, equipment, training), double it. That's your actual investment. Lost opportunity cost is real — an empty seat or an underperforming new hire both cost the business.

Two types of Early Attrition

Leaves within 3 months?

You have a **hiring issue**. Either the wrong person in the right role, or the right person in the wrong role. Review your scoping and selection process.

Right person, leaves before 18 months?

You have an **attachment issue**. The bond wasn't formed strongly enough during the critical attachment period. This is where the EAI makes a measurable difference.

"If you do not manage that investment properly and do everything you can to get a return on it — not only are you potentially going to lose that person before break-even, you're in a hole and you have to do it all again." —

Anthony Sork

Key insight: Don't overlook 'Quit and Stay' — employees who remain but disengage are also an attachment problem.

The EAI as a Lead Indicator — Not a Lag Measure

Most HR metrics are lag indicators — they tell you what already happened. Annual engagement surveys, exit interviews, post-induction pulse checks: all collected after the critical attachment period has closed, when the bond is already set.

Lag Indicators

- Annual engagement surveys — too late to intervene
- Post-induction pulse checks — employer-centric, not bond-measuring
- Exit interviews — the bond has already broken
- Aggregate data — individual needs invisible

EAI — Lead Indicator

- Measured at Day 90 — inside the Critical Attachment Period
- Captures what is forming before it becomes a retention problem
- Individual-level — not aggregate data
- 30-day window to act before the bond is set at Day 120

The shcBOND Platform

The EAI runs on shcBOND, a web-based platform developed and owned by Sork HC. For Cox Purcell clients, the process is fully managed:

New employees are loaded automatically; the survey launches on Day 90 with intelligent reminders.

The EAI Feedback Report is generated instantly and emailed to your Cox Purcell Consultant.

Your Cox Purcell consultant walks you through the results and prepares you for the manager-employee conversation.

Trend Reports can be run on demand — sliced by department, manager, location, age, gender or any demographic — to identify patterns across your new hire cohorts over time.

All data is stored securely on the platform, with survey tracking and status reports available at any time.



Q&A HIGHLIGHTS

Q: Does the EAI only apply to new hires, or also to employees returning from leave?

A: Attachment perceptions reset whenever a significant change occurs — such as a change in manager, role, or return from extended leave (e.g. parental leave). Sork HC offer an internally transitioning version of the EAI to address exactly these scenarios.

Q: What about a new manager inheriting an established team?

A: When a primary carer changes, attachment resets for the whole team. Focus first on the new manager's own attachment to the organisation, then monitor the team's connection metrics over time.

Q: How do you get honest responses? People are afraid of surveys.

A: Anonymity does not equal honesty. What drives honest feedback is an environment where there is no negative consequence for openness. Employees in their first 120 days are actually at their most willing to give honest feedback — that window should be used.

Q: What role does a buddy or peer mentor play versus the manager?

A: Buddy systems are valuable for peer-level drivers, but they cannot replace the primary carer role. The direct manager must own the attachment relationship.

Q: With five generations in the workforce, does attachment work differently by age group?

A: Rather than categorising by generation, focus on the individual. Use the EAI data to see the person in front of you, not a demographic profile.

Q: When someone leaves early, is it recruitment's fault or the manager's?

A: Both matter. If the hire was right and they still left, look to attachment. And don't underestimate the candidate experience — how you treat people who don't get the role matters too.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



The first 120 days are not onboarding admin — they are the attachment window.

Everything during this period shapes whether your new hire stays and contributes, or starts mentally checking out.



Your managers are your greatest retention tool.

Over 80% of attachment outcomes are driven by the direct manager's behaviour. Invest in helping them understand and act on this.



Measure the bond, not just the process.

Post-induction checklists tell you what you did. The EAI tells you what effect it had on the emotional bond while you can still do something about it.



Attachment is individual, not demographic.

One-size-fits-all onboarding misses the point. The EAI creates the conditions for a personalised, meaningful conversation at the 90-day mark.



Recruitment doesn't end at offer acceptance.

Cox Purcell's partnership with Sork HC means every permanent placement now includes the EAI — because great recruitment means protecting your investment well beyond day one.

A COX PURTELL PERSPECTIVE

Recruitment has always been about finding the right person. What this event reminded us is that finding them is only the beginning.

The science Anthony and Selina Sork presented is compelling precisely because it reframes what recruitment outcomes actually mean. A successful placement isn't measured at offer acceptance — it's measured at 18 months, when the investment has broken even and the person is genuinely contributing. Everything in between is shaped by the quality of the bond formed in those first 120 days.

At Cox Purtell, we've always believed that our responsibility to clients extends beyond the placement. That's why our partnership with Sork HC, and the inclusion of the Employee Attachment Inventory with every permanent placement, reflects something we feel strongly about: great recruitment means protecting your investment well beyond day one.

What we bring to every search is over 30 years of specialist knowledge across Technology & Projects, Corporate Support and Government — and a genuine understanding that the people we place are not transactions. They are the beginning of a relationship between a person and an organisation. Getting that relationship off to the right start matters enormously, both to the individual and to the business case.

The EAI gives our clients something most recruitment partners don't offer: a structured, evidence-based opportunity to intervene at the exact moment it matters most. Not after the exit interview. Not after the annual engagement survey. At Day 90 — while the bond is still forming and there is still time to act.

If the first 120 days define your retention outcomes, then the 120 days after offer acceptance are where Cox Purtell's work truly begins.

Sork HC: sorkHC.com | Employee Attachment Inventory developed by Sork HC | Content based on the Cox Purtell Insight Session at The Royal Exchange of Sydney, May 2026

Want to know more?

Every permanent placement through Cox Purtell includes the Employee Attachment Inventory at no additional cost. Speak to your Cox Purtell consultant to learn how the EAI can help you protect your recruitment investment and improve long-term retention.

coxpurtell.com.au



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