

Employee Engagement and Experience for The Post-Covid World

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Employee engagement and experience is the cornerstone of any Human Resources strategy. Everything HR leaders touch – from the hiring process to performance reviews and succession planning – relates to the experience of workers. Therefore, HR carries the heavy burden of ensuring job satisfaction, which is the key to retention.

The pandemic accelerated change and put a spotlight on cracks in the traditional workplace. Companies recognized they could have all remote or hybrid structures, which brought a new set of challenges when it came to engagement.

If there was ever a time that employers could rest on their laurels, it is over. Workers have been quitting their jobs in droves in what is known as the Great Resignation. As a result, many industries are facing a historic labor shortage, not to mention record-high inflation. HR leaders are looking in the mirror to assess what is going wrong with both recruiting and retention.

In addition, Generation Z is joining Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers in the workforce. It is the first time that four generations are collaborating in the workplace. Gen Z has its own set of expectations that is turning employee engagement on its head. Now, nothing will ever be the same.

Recruits and employees have leverage. Reckoning with what the world has faced over the last two years requires a solid team that can work well together. Therefore, the first step in this journey is re-engaging employees and reshaping their experiences to transform work culture. Essentially, HR leaders are redefining the very concept of work.

They are leading the charge by emphasizing their renewed commitment to employer brand and specifically their employee value proposition (EVP). They are aiming to do more than shout from the rooftops what they think employees and recruits want to hear. Instead, they are digging into available data and listening to workers to make significant change. Their new mission is to treat employees like customers to win them over, make them loyal, and ensure they contribute to the team's success.

Engaging with a Hybrid Workforce

Employee engagement is a top priority of Human Resources. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 4.3 million Americans quit their jobs in January 2022, which continued a trend that began the previous year. McKinsey reports that employees who express they are having a positive experience at work have 16 times the engagement level of others, and they are eight times more likely to stay at the company. As a result, engagement and experience has taken on a new level of importance.

At the same time, however, the game has changed. The pandemic sparked the realization that some jobs could be done exclusively from home. During the week of March 9, the average office occupancy rate across 10 large U.S. cities was only 40.5%, which was still the highest since December, according to Kastle Systems.

"We recognize our employees really appreciate having the flexibility to manage work and life responsibilities. A hybrid approach means they have the best of both worlds - connection and flexibility."

**Todd Reeves
SVP, People Operations & Technology
Expedia Group**

Many employers are opting for hybrid options. Facebook, Google, Apple, and Microsoft have all brought employees back into the office for at least some time each week. Others have gone all remote or are at least giving employees the choice to work exclusively from their homes. During the pandemic, people moved. Companies hired those in distant lands. Today, some workers are living in faraway places and can't easily return to company headquarters.

Engaging people across geographies, time zones, and computer screens adds another layer to the challenges of HR leaders. Expedia is going hybrid and views this as an opportunity.

Opening the Lines of Communication

Like many HR leaders, Reeves emphasizes active listening, which refers to the practice of asking employees what they think and need and then acting on it. Surveys, focus groups, or one-on-one meetings between managers and workers are ways to facilitate opportunities for active listening.

The conversation is not limited to middle management. Senior executives and the C-suite have a role, too. At Atrium Health, for example, executives conduct what they call "rounding." A pair of senior executives visit employees in departments outside their reporting structure. They bring a cart of treats and bottles of water, and they talk to the workers about their individual experiences. They ask about what they can do better and how they feel about their jobs.

In the next step, the executives debrief one another about what they have learned. Then, department heads try to solve any problems, recognize stand-out employees, and track any issues that require more concentration.

"It's really changing the tone of the conversation and how people are engaged at work," says Vishal Bhalla, SVP Chief Human Resources Officer and Chief Experience Officer at Atrium Health. "Now, that is engagement!"

Companies are aiming to be more transparent to gain trust. During the pandemic, organizations including IBM, began having leaders answer employee questions regularly. Sometimes, they must be honest about limitations. For example, Bhalla knows compensation and benefits packages are a big draw for top talent. Many workers express a desire for higher pay in those “rounding” conversations.

When Bhalla's team starts brainstorming and someone brings up higher pay, he explains that they are already paying as much as they can afford. So, he asks them to innovate, think outside the box, and find other ways to show they value employees.

Showing Empathy and Care

As workers allowed their colleagues into their homes via Zoom and shared their fears during the pandemic, they sought the right mix of care and confidence in their leaders. Now that people can process all that has happened, they don't want to go back to the old way of doing things. They expect empathetic leaders who take a vested interest in the welfare and wellbeing of individual employees.

HR leaders often repeat the saying that people quit managers, not jobs. In fact, Gallup reports that 70% of variance in team engagement is determined solely by the manager. Therefore, these demonstrations of care can help employers stand out. It is a future of work trend that is taking shape now.

“I believe there is going to be a shift to focus more on overall employee wellbeing, which takes a more holistic approach to how an organization engages its people,” says Timothy Olaore, Director of Leadership Residency and Internship Program at Adventist Health and a Speaker and Producer at Mr. Meaningful Work. “Companies will start integrating policies and practices that incorporate physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and financial wellbeing. Leaders will need to become well-versed in how to recognize which wellbeing

factor – or combination of factors – individuals on their team are experiencing and refer them to the appropriate resource. Ideally this resource is within the organization, but it very well may exist externally."

Case Study on Retention

A case study from University Federal Credit Union (UFCU) certainly bolsters this idea of focusing on the individual and personalizing the Human Resources experience for employees. While many employers were trying to win the talent war, UFCU aimed to retain the employees it already had.

To begin, UFCU practiced active listening and reshaped its communications. Executives sent out targeted messages that they delivered in a variety of ways, including blogs, videos, and town halls. Each senior leadership team member wrote five handwritten thank you cards per week and mailed them to employees' homes.

Also, senior leaders sat with call center workers for 90 minutes while they were on the phone, so they could see firsthand limitations of their system and employee needs. HR leaders conducted stay interviews twice per year.

Executives conducted well checks with new hires three to six months into their tenure. Employees checked in with managers at established, dedicated times. Throughout the pandemic, leaders conducted branch visits to give workers who could not work from home a chance to voice concerns and fears.

Beyond this increase in communication and transparency, UFCU showed compassion. The team had opportunities to participate in community service. The employer sent a gift card for \$150 meal delivery to employees, who were struggling emotionally or experienced health issues. In addition, UFCU opened two zen rooms, replete with virtual reality stress reduction tools, for on-site employees.

As a result, UFCU saw its highest employee engagement scores ever and earned engagement scores in the top 2% worldwide, which resulted in winning Gallup's Exceptional Workplace Award in 2021. In addition, the organization reduced turnover by 5% and by as much as 15% in traditionally high-turnover departments.

Engagement is dependent on communication. Employees who receive daily feedback from their manager are three times more likely to be engaged than those who receive feedback once a year or less, according to Gallup. While surveys are still an important part of HR assessment, many

leaders are turning those conversations into more regular one-on-one meetings or small focus groups. Gathering feedback is more of a continuous conversation nowadays.

Another way to show care for individual employees is to promote their career growth and prepare them for the future of work. For example, employees told Expedia that they wanted professional development. In response, the company is building a career hub, where employees can enter the skills they have and the ones they'd like to attain, so they can be matched with coursework, mentors, rotational opportunities, and internal job postings.

"We're also focused on providing coaching and guidance to managers on using our quarterly performance conversations as opportunities to discuss how their employees can continue to grow their careers," says Reeves. "And we're looking at our internal processes, such as how internal candidates apply for and interview for opportunities within the company to make it a smoother and easier experience." This type of integrated learning and development is a trend in HR and one that benefits individuals and the company. After all, helping employees gain skills that they can apply on the job can increase productivity, efficiency, and success. It also helps organizations develop pipelines of talent, so they don't always have to hire externally.

This focus on the individual is evident in how companies are approaching work-life balance initiatives. Some are imposing rules about when workers and managers can send emails or call people. Others allow flexibility for people to go to a doctor's appointment or pick up their kids at school. The pandemic forced employers to realize people had a life outside work, and everyone reprioritized. In fact, 61% of respondents to a Gallup poll said better work-life balance and personal well-being were top considerations when seeking a new job.

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wellbeing. Leaders will need to become well-versed in how to recognize which wellbeing factor - or combination of factors - individuals on their team are experiencing and refer them to the appropriate source.”

**Timothy “Mr Meaningful Work” Olaore
Director of Leadership Residency and Internship Program at
Adventist Health.**

Matching Values

As people’s priorities shifted during the pandemic, they started to think about the legacy they’d like to leave. Many decided that they wanted their work to be more meaningful and for their employers to care as much about their communities as they do their bottom line.

In fact, six in 10 of those changing jobs said they were seeking a better fit between their own and their employer’s corporate values, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer. Certainly, opportunities to perform community service or partner with locals are welcome. But employees want more.

In the wake of George Floyd’s murder and the increase in participation in the Black Lives Matter Movement, employees wanted their bosses to take a stand and use the power of their platforms and pocketbooks to make a difference.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies rose on the list of priorities. More than 40% of respondents to a Gallup survey said they were seeking a diverse organization that was inclusive of all types of people in their next employer.

Employee activism has increased, and workers want to know that their bosses truly have their back. And they are holding them accountable when they don’t. Employees at

many companies put pressure on leaders to stop doing business in Russia when it invaded Ukraine in February 2022, for example.

The point is that recruits and employees want to find a good match with their values. It is forcing leaders to think more critically about the morality and ethics of their business decisions. Once upon a time, corporate entities could be silent or at least appear apolitical. Those days are over. Leaders must contend with internal and external moral dilemmas as they arise or face the wrath of their employees. Doing the right thing is no longer optional.

The Future of Work

When people reference the future of work, many might think about technology like artificial intelligence (AI) and automation. But the future of work is also about how to define work, what the workplace looks like, where and when employees work, and who the workers are.

At the heart of this conversation is employee engagement and experience. After all, it is what sustains teams, sparks creativity, and catapults a business to succeed. The future of work has arrived, and employees are in the driver's seat. They are demanding everything from better pay to more professional growth. They want employers to care about them as individuals and tend to their communities as well.

HR leaders are taking the reins and transforming work. By putting an emphasis on active listening, improved communication, and initiatives driven by feedback and analytics, they are making the workplace employee-centric.

In that way, the customer is being well-served. This is only the beginning because changing mindsets doesn't happen overnight.

"I feel like when companies look at engagement, they see it from the perspective of, 'How can we make the employee feel better about the company?'" says Olaore. "I think the attention needs to be shifted to, 'How can we make the

employees feel better about themselves and how they uniquely contribute to the success of their team and the larger organization?”

Some organizations are already asking this question, promoting the individual, and responding to employee's needs. HR leaders who continue to respond to employees, communicate with them, and respect their time and personal wellbeing will win this great talent war.

Resources

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