

Why Should You Care About Your Employee Alumni?

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Are you keeping employees engaged after they've left your organization? Or are you overlooking or undervaluing this critical aspect of the employee experience (EX)? Savvy companies are waking up to the unique and tremendous value that their employee alumni have to offer -- and they're deploying programs and platforms to facilitate alumni networks.



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Employee alumni and company-managed alumni networks can deliver benefits to companies in the precise areas that are most valuable to businesses today:

- **Talent acquisition** – Employee alumni can give companies a leg up in the war for talent that is being fought in many sectors these days. Alumni are an excellent source for identifying and engaging potential recruits since, whether intentionally or not, they tend to pre-qualify candidates by applying their knowledge of the company and culture and assessment of a potential fit before making a referral. What's more, alumni are more likely to be considered by prospective employees as a credible source of information about what it's like to work at the organization. Having an

alumni network also conveys to candidates that the company concerns itself with employee engagement, thus making the company an attractive employer. And sometimes alumni themselves can turn out to be prospective employees or contractors.

- **Content marketing and social media engagement** – To attract new customers, many companies are relying less on advertising and traditional marketing and more on content marketing and engagement on social media. These efforts lend themselves well to leveraging employee alumni. Most alumni network programs involve the development and deployment of content such as blogs and podcasts, company news reports, industry research, and even events. While the initial intent of this content might be to provide value to alumni, when alumni share it with their colleagues and on social media, the exposure and value of the content can increase dramatically and create a multiplier effect for a firm's marketing.
- **Networking for resources and referrals** – Given that people usually continue working in the same industry, alumni can be valuable connections into clients, suppliers, partners and other company stakeholders. Through the people they know, alumni can help unlock the knowledge, resources, and access that existing employees may not have or are blocked from. While networking has always been a cornerstone of progress in business, trust in institutions has fallen so low in recent years that referrals from individuals have become even more important.
- **Culture-building** – At a time when only 13% of employees worldwide are engaged at work (source: [Gallup](#)), companies need to use every tool and resource they have to cultivate a healthy, effective, sustainable organizational culture. As noted above, the mere existence of an alumni network can send a message about the priority a company puts on its people. This message is usually not lost on existing employees and can help them view their employers more positively. Moreover, when current and former employees are encouraged to stay connected and support each other, as many alumni network programs and platforms do, it promotes respect, transparency and collaboration in the organizational culture.

Alumni network programs and platforms tend to be most prevalent at companies staffed primarily by knowledge workers, such as consulting firms and media or research companies. But as Swiss-Swedish electric equipment and technology company [ABB](#) demonstrates, they offer value for all types of organizations. ABB relies on its [Alumni Club](#) for re-hire opportunities and prospective employee referrals. Also alumni networks can be valuable to companies of all sizes, not only large enterprises. [Persistent](#), a \$500 million industrial and manufacturing software company based in India, has used its [alumni association](#) to help establish offices in new markets and identify potential leaders among former employees who have acquired desirable skills and knowledge during their time away.

Pearson, the British-owned education content and assessment company, has found its alumni network a vital element in its transformation to a digital and global learning company. The company, which has struggled through business model challenges, employee layoffs and public criticism, launched its alumni program part of its efforts to improve EX, bolster its brand reputation, and advance its mission (helping people make progress in their lives through learning).

Pearson's global alumni network, which is implemented on an Enterprise Alumni technology platform, hosts an alumni database, publishes a job board, gives access to Pearson's research and content, distributes a monthly newsletter, and facilitates on- and offline engagement and connection between alumni and with existing employees. Vice President, Strategic Communications and Operations Brandy Dawson and Senior Manager, Strategic Communications and Operations Duncan Roberts shared with me their learnings on best practices for developing an alumni network.

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Target specific segments of alumni. Roberts reported that they found, "If we try to serve everyone, it's very difficult really to serve anyone." So the company has identified three priority alumni segments based on who they wanted to create the most value for and who, in turn, could create value for the company and others: former leaders who are still shaping industry, former up-and-comers who want to make a difference in the space, and retirees who have been committed to the company mission for a long time. Roberts said by basing every decision they make on the network with these three groups in mind, it gives the program focus and efficiency.

Involve existing employees. Fifteen percent of current Pearson employees participate in the alumni network. Opening the platform to existing employees not only reflects the value the company puts on transparency and integrity which has been of particular importance given the transformation efforts, but it also allows the company to use content for multiple purposes. For example, Pearson's Leaders in Learning podcast, which features lessons learned in leadership and highlights the next big trends in education, is listened to and valued by employees and alumni alike. The company also benefits from improving its EX among employees and its brand reputation among alumni, who in many cases remain industry leaders and influencers.

Measure and track ROI. Dawson reported that her team uses all the rich data provided by Enterprise Alumni to gauge the success of the program. They look at growth in number of participants, participant engagement, sentiment and its impact on NPS, and outcomes including Glassdoor reviews and rehires. These metrics contribute to the business case for continuing and growing the program. In addition, they use this data to adjust the program

and design new features to meet participants' needs.

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Don't worry about helping competitors. Conscious of the war for talent, some employers might be reluctant to invest in a program that, by definition, is targeted to employees at other, often rival, companies – especially when it involves sharing company research and analysis as Pearson does. But Dawson explained, “I don't necessarily think of it as helping a competitor as much as it is as helping to be part of the conversation and be part of the dialogue on education and where education is headed.” Not only is this perspective consistent with the company's mission but it helps Pearson maintain an active, positive presence in the industry. She sees that Pearson's continued involvement with former employees “benefits the whole sector and the whole industry benefits learners.”

Don't underestimate time it takes. Both Dawson and Roberts spoke about how complex it was to set up the network. It is, after all, a digital and mobile platform subject to all the regulatory requirements for data privacy – and they wanted to respect participants' expectations when posting confidential or sensitive information. Plus, the requirements were compounded by its global nature. All of this meant it took more time than expected to stand up the program.

Aim for “progress not perfection.” [James Sinclair](#), cofounder of Enterprise Alumni, reported that Pearson approached its alumni network with an agile approach. Instead of trying to launch with a comprehensive and close-to-perfect program, Dawson and Roberts wanted to test options, evaluate, and then iterate. So they started with a baseline and then conducted surveys, monitored social media, and analyzed engagement data from the platform to build out the program based on their learnings. Sinclair observed that this reflected the company's “true empathy” and desire to engage alumni authentically, not just to use the platform as a recruiting tool. Doing so has “served huge dividends” for Pearson, he said.

Pearson is one of an increasing number of companies using an alumni network as an important element of its EX. How about you? How might your organization engage your alumni employees in ways that benefit them and you?