What is employee experience? Your key to talent retention and recruitment

By Sharon Florentine

Employee experience has become a top priority for CIOs and HR leaders alike. In fact, research company Gartner lists employee experience as the third-highest key initiative for 2019 in a survey of 843 human resources leaders, with 51 percent saying it's critical to achieving corporate objectives.

The following guide can help you understand what employee experience means, how it impacts your organization, and how to ensure your organization is delivering a beneficial, productive experience for its workers.

What is employee experience?

Employee experience encompasses everything your employees encounter, undergo and feel as their career progresses through your organization, from initial application to when they leave the company, including their experiences as company alumni.

Because of the wide range of experiences an employee can have at your organization, employee experience is often broken down into common milestones common on the employee journey: candidacy, including the application, interview and hiring process; onboarding; training; development, evaluation and promotion; exiting; and the alumni experience.

Every organization offers a unique employee experience, and because of the wide range of milestones on an employee journey, employee experience can vary from day to day. Moreover, while employee experience is not the same as culture, engagement and/or employer brand, says Denise Lee Yohn, a brand leadership consultant and expert writing for Forbes, all these can contribute to tactics and strategies that improve employee experience and help define the mission and values of an organization.

Why employee experience matters

How an organization handles each milestone on its employees' journeys is indicative of the organization's culture and can impact employees' performance and engagement. By getting to know how employees experience these career milestones at their organizations, leaders and managers can better understand how they're supporting their staff and how they can help improve the employee experience.

"From the very first moment someone interacts with an organization, they have an expectation about what it is and what it's going to be like to work there," says Shavon Lindley, CEO at ion Learning. "Whether it's in a job posting, an article, from commercials, it's an expectation. There's almost a psychological contract that's made; every new hire has these expectations, and as the hiring process progresses, the vision starts to take clearer shape. That's why companies try to make that first impression so impactful, to match up with the expectations employees have. Maybe it does match up, on day one. But what happens on day two? Three? Four?"

When expectations aren't met, the psychological contract is broken, and the relationship between employee and organization starts to deteriorate, Lindley says. For many organizations, this loss of trust results in retention issues, as employees look for opportunities elsewhere.

To address these issues, many organizations focus on specific pieces, attempting to shore up the relationship with their employees with "band-aid" solutions such as team-building activities to boost morale or pay and incentive increases, but those can only be temporary, Lindley says, as the fundamental issue is a poor employee experience overall.

"People make judgements very quickly. From the onboarding process, to seeing how managers interact with people, to coworkers — they start pulling these impressions together very quickly," she says. "It comes down to knowing if what is actually happening

matches up with what they thought was going to happen. And if it doesn't, then they're never going to be engaged. Their morale is never going to be high. They'll never be motivated or loyal, because that basic, foundational contract has been broken."

How to measure employee experience

To ensure your organization's employee experience is a positive one, it's important to have a strategy in place for gauging it. While organizations should be asking for feedback at each milestone along the employee journey, there are three milestones where experience is the most critical. If you're just beginning to examine your organization's employee experience, or if you are developing strategies to improve it, start with candidate recruitment, onboarding, and exit.

In targeting candidate recruitment, organizations should solicit feedback from both successful and unsuccessful candidates with the aim of creating advocates for the organization, no matter the outcome of the process, according to CultureAmp.

Next, feedback should be gathered from all new employees joining the organization during the onboarding process. It's valuable to get first impressions and retrospective insights from new hires who've already completed the onboarding process.

Finally, requesting feedback from those who voluntarily leave the organization can help gather insights on how to reduce attrition and improve retention and engagement.

IT's impact on employee experience

While human resources directs and shapes many of the most critical parts of the employee experience, involvement from other areas of the organization, including facilities, corporate communications and IT, is also essential, Yohn says.

Chris Drumgoole, vice president and CIO at GE, sees IT having a significant impact on employee experience, beginning with how IT shapes the experience of acquiring and using technology.

"So many companies emphasize customer experience and work toward making that part of their experience strategy — treating employees like end-users — but we think about it differently," Drumgoole says. "We think about the employee as a consumer of technology as part of their job and their working world."

Instead of focusing on providing consumer-tech applications that remind employees of their coworkers' birthdays or help them schedule team lunches, IT should target "the fundamental piece of what employees need to interact with tech and enhance their working

experience," he says. And that means streamlining the processes and policies that employees must navigate in order to be productive, efficient and effective with technology.

At GE, for example, Drumgoole says, the IT acquisition and support processes were cumbersome, tedious and heavily outsourced. While on paper the metrics were good — number of tickets closed, for instance — when employees were asked about the experience, the reality was quite different.

"Acquiring, managing and learning the legacy systems we had in place was death by a thousand paper cuts," says Jeff Monaco, CTO of digital workplace technology at GE.

So GE went about revamping its employees' IT experience by evolving how employees interact with technology, receive tech support and discover new tools. The resulting MyTech and SmartHelp solutions provide GE employees a modernized, personalized way to view and manage the tools and technologies offered across GE, which has significantly improved employee experience, says Dave Chapman, vice president of digital workplace technology at GE Digital.

Employee experience in the digital era

With digital transformation and the consumerization of IT, employees in every department have become more tech-savvy than ever, and that plays a major role in employee experience, Drumgoole says.

"Employees who aren't in IT are now being asked to do basic coding, develop workflows, things like that. It's forced a much greater openness about technology across an organization," he says.

As such, IT has become mission-critical for a positive employee experience not just from a technical perspective, but from a reputational one, as well. CIOs whose IT departments aren't seen as capable of fixing minor glitches won't be trusted to manage the larger, companywide IT issues, either.

For many IT organizations this means establishing a digital workplace that makes it as easy as possible for employees to get their work done — a mandate that translates to IT being more accessible and open to employees. An organization's IT department should not be just problem-solving people, but people who are there to help employees get better usage out of their technology. A more proactive and forward-thinking IT role is one way to improve overall employee experience, says Carol Rozwell, vice president and distinguished analyst on Gartner's digital workplace team.

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