



By understanding the six A's of employee experience, leaders can design an engaging program that yields maximum business impact.

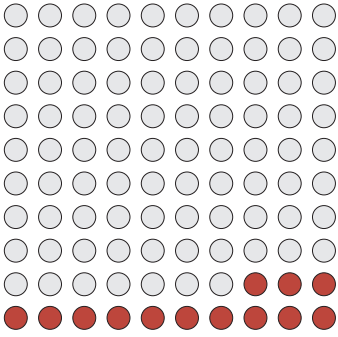
The Six Dimensions of Employee Experience That Drive Impact

By Amir Poonsakvarasan
and Lauryn Gordon

As an employee, have your expectations of your company shifted since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic? As an employer, are you having to find innovative ways to attract, engage, and retain your workforce? For most business leaders and employees, the answer to both questions has been an unequivocal “yes.”

The nature of the pandemic’s attack on our most basic needs — safety, health, well-being, and the ability to support a family — has shifted the “contract” between employees and employers. While some businesses have scored favorably with their workforce by creating a supportive and flexible work environment that focuses on employee well-being, others have not been as successful.

In much the same way that the current real estate market tilts decidedly in favor of sellers, 2021 has proven to be an “employee’s market.” At the time this article was written, the United States had 9.2 million job vacancies according to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics.¹ Furthermore, over the last one and a half years, employees have enjoyed the benefits of dynamic schedules and working remotely from “anywhere,” and they expect to see these benefits stay. As things return to pre-pandemic times, employees are not just asking their companies to continue these policies, they are demanding it — or they’re looking for companies that offer more of a balance. The result is a seismic shift in the workforce. According to data presented by associate professors Alexander Bick (Arizona State University) and Adam Blandin (Virginia Commonwealth University), 37 percent of those employed when the pandemic hit are no longer with the same employer a year later. About 26 percent work elsewhere, and 11 percent are not employed.²



13%

ONLY 13 PERCENT OF EMPLOYEES IN THE STUDY REPORTED BEING FULLY SATISFIED WITH THEIR EXPERIENCE.

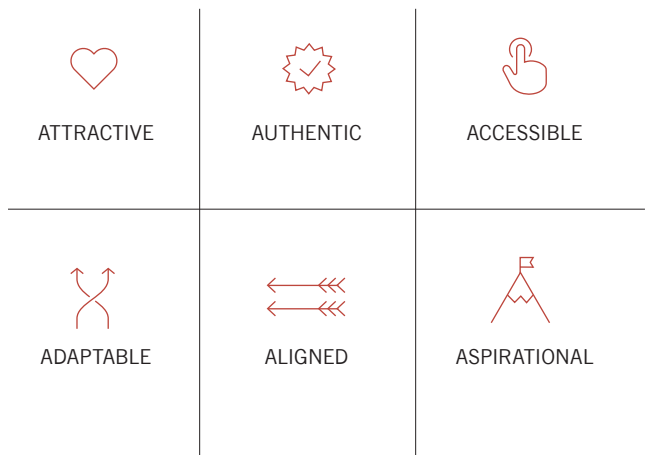
Businesses have taken note. Far from sleeping at the wheel, companies have increased their spending on employee experience. In 2019, that figure was roughly \$2,420 per employee, according to a Gartner study.³ Typically, investments have been made to drive flexible work policies, workplace redesigns, and professional development opportunities. But while researchers have found that organizations see a boost in effort, productivity, and retention when they meet employees' expectations, the ROI from such initiatives continues to disappoint: Only 13 percent of employees in the study reported being fully satisfied with their experience. The misalignment between employer and employee expectations still exists.

That's one of the big reasons why employee experience has become a strategic business imperative in the wake of the pandemic. Business leaders recognize the value of a strongly engaged, passionate workforce and are feeling the pressure to elevate their organizations' customer experience — even while contending with disruptive technologies and the residual waves of a global pandemic. They know that employee experience isn't just about creating an environment to satisfy employees. It is a catalyst to drive business objectives, focus on quick-win and high-impact opportunities, and create value for stakeholders and customers.

How can today's leaders design a highly engaging, differentiated employee experience that gets at the heart of what employees care about while also driving business objectives? As part of a two-part series, we will first break down and define the key dimensions of employee experience. In our subsequent article we will walk through how one organization's focus on employee experience was a catalyst for driving their digital transformation strategy. Let's begin.

UNDERSTANDING THE SIX DIMENSIONS OF EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

Employee experience (EX) is the culmination of everything an employee does and observes throughout their tenure with a company. It starts during recruitment, when an employee first engages with the company, and continues through the employee life cycle, eventually ending with offboarding. It can also include ongoing communications and engagement opportunities through an “alumni” network. Employee experience touches the physical, technological, and cultural aspects of the employee journey, and it encompasses these six key dimensions:



1. Attractive

An attractive talent brand and company culture pulls employees in during the recruitment process and has the potential to retain them for years. This first EX dimension focuses on designing and curating a desirable and engaging work experience, whether it be in the office, at home, or out in the field. Company culture—and the shared set of attributes that span all facets of the work environment—is the thread that ties everything together.

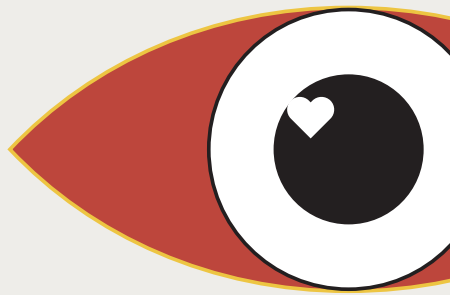
As the war for talent intensifies, the employer brand has surfaced as a strategy enabler, positioning organizations to attract and retain segments of the workforce critical to delivering on business objectives. Like a Unique Value Proposition used to communicate the differentiating attributes of a product, Employer Value Proposition, or EVP, seeks to define how a company identifies as an employer. EVP is composed of both monetary and non-monetary benefits, like compensation, employee development, company culture, and, more recently, workplace flexibility. Also, increasingly important is the company's impact on the community at large through environmental, social, and governance priorities. When well articulated and aligned with the needs and expectations of target demographics, an EVP can be a powerful talent attraction tool.

How can leaders tap into this dimension?

Have you ever looked at a “Best Places to Work” list? Which companies consistently rank in the top five to ten each year? What reasons do their employees give for selecting them? It usually comes down to a strong

attraction to join and a powerful employee-employer connection. And while you don't want to simply replicate the top companies — what employees value most about their company may not resonate or align with your company's mission, purpose, and strategy — it's important to fully understand what attracted employees to your company and why they stay — or why they don't. By engaging employees in targeted focus groups or leveraging feedback tools, like employee surveys, leaders can identify drivers of attraction and engagement across various workforce segments.

Employer review platforms, like Glassdoor and Indeed, are also valuable tools for engaging employees and candidates in anonymous feedback as well as sharing a glimpse into life at your company. These tools help you access important insights on how candidates engage with your company compared with your talent competitors.



2. Authentic

Authenticity boils down to the level of comfort, trust, transparency, and vulnerability shared between an employee and employer. Do employees believe that you're being “real” with them, or does the monthly town hall meeting feel overly rehearsed? When an executive proclaims, “We are family,” do they back it up in a meaningful way—for example, do they provide team members with the flexibility to work through a personal hardship? Showing appreciation and recognition also demonstrates authenticity by aligning values with actions. Research shows that the average American spends 30 percent of their time at work—a number that's on the rise as remote work becomes the new norm and blurs the boundaries between work and home life. Having invested so much time, employees want to feel appreciated for their contributions beyond a paycheck and annual bonus.

Lastly, the racial and social unrest over the last year has made diversity, inclusion, and equity a business imperative—and has emphasized authenticity as an EX-dimension. Employees who feel the need to alter or mask their true selves at work also mask their strengths and creativity. Meanwhile, employees with high levels of workplace belonging are more innovative, productive, and engaged. They are also more likely to recommend their companies as a great place to work.

How can leaders tap into this dimension?

Authenticity is one of the more challenging dimensions to tackle because it hinges on the behaviors and practices modeled by each leader, from the top down. To establish authenticity

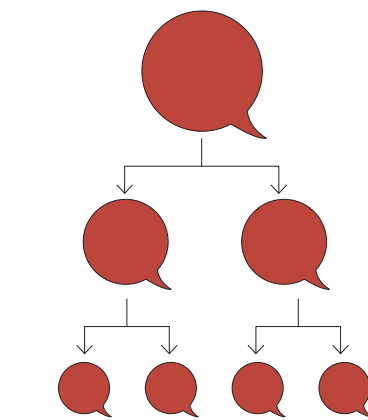
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RESEARCH SHOWS THAT THE AVERAGE AMERICAN SPENDS 30 PERCENT OF THEIR TIME AT WORK—A NUMBER THAT'S ON THE RISE AS REMOTE WORK BECOMES THE NEW NORM AND BLURS THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN WORK AND HOME LIFE.

and trust, executive actions must align with the company's purpose, vision, and values. Use listening mechanisms like short, targeted pulse surveys that focus on engagement drivers (learning and development, total rewards, and psychological safety) to regularly seek feedback from employees, open the lines of communication, and help identify where misalignments exist. For example, you may be talking about diversifying leadership in your organization but learn in a survey that minority employees don't feel as if they have an opportunity for advancement. You can now use this feedback to identify and address biases in your talent and performance review processes or promotion and hiring practices.

Regular, transparent, and action-oriented communication from the top down is another important lever for establishing authenticity in the employee experience. During times of uncertainty or change, communicating with empathy and compassion, or taking a human-centric approach, helps leaders connect with employees and build a sense of trust and camaraderie.

For example, an executive might say: "This will be tough on us both, but we're in it together, and I'm committed to providing you with the tools and resources you need to get through this." We saw many leaders do this successfully over the last 18 months as they navigated through the pandemic and social unrest. Leaders who communicated early and often, and who acknowledged that they might not have all the answers, received more favorable feedback from their employees. They also reaped the benefits of higher employee engagement and retention and established themselves as leading talent brands.



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3. Accessible

The accessible dimension of EX can be viewed through two lenses. First, we use accessibility to describe the ease of access to the systems, tools, information, and resources that employees use to perform their jobs. If these tools are clunky or difficult to navigate, or cannot be used within the flow of work, they slow productivity and innovation and make it difficult for employees to do their best work.

This also applies to cumbersome or unnecessary internal processes and the way work flows across teams. To an employee, an unnecessarily complicated task can lead to a reduction in productivity, longer work hours, or even a ding on their performance review, which could affect their future salary. This can be extremely frustrating, especially when it feels beyond their control.

At the same time, accessibility also means creating an environment of equality where every employee has a clear and unfettered path to the same opportunities and experiences, regardless of their differences or background. Accessibility in this context can refer to the availability of developmental resources and professional networks, and a clear understanding of how to learn and grow within the organization. Employees who have the opportunities and resources to advance are almost four times more likely to report being happy at work than those who do not. In fact, 90 percent of employees in a recent poll said they would be more likely to continue working for a company that invests in their development.

How can leaders tap into this dimension?

Accessibility comes down to seeing common barriers and friction points through the eyes of your employees. Utilizing journey maps, which explore the employee experience from hire to retire, is a good way to help pinpoint where resistance is occurring and allows executives to isolate and triage the problems. It's critical to look at accessibility in terms of tools, resources (what's preventing me from doing my best work?), and career development (are there real or perceived barriers to my ability to learn and grow within the organization?).

It may seem daunting to do this with all your employees, so start small. What are the critical workforce segments to driving business objectives? How can you make it easier to access what they need when they need it? From there, you can expand the aperture to address the needs of other segments or apply your recommendations to the broader workforce.

Tapping into workforce data is another way to identify where barriers to advancement or underrepresented segments of your workforce exist. Metrics such as "diverse representation in leadership" or "diverse promotion rate" can be telling, especially when compared to labor market availability or benchmarked across your industry. Sharing this data regularly across the business with a clear action plan demonstrates your commitment to transparency and creating an inclusive work environment where equal opportunity is accessible for all.

4. Adaptable

As we saw during the pandemic, employee experience isn't only impacted by time spent in the office. It's also rooted in how work affects our personal lives — and it acknowledges the vast differences in personal circumstances, cultural norms, and working preferences across a diverse, highly global workforce. The concept of work-life balance emerged 40 years ago, but it took the pandemic — with work and life colliding under the same roof — to create a "nowhere to hide" discussion. With boundaries now blurred and employees facing burnout from the "always-on" pull between work and family obligations, employee well-being has become a top issue for managers to address. Adaptability now means empowering employees to share in the decisions about how work gets done and enabling them to care for themselves and their families without fear of judgment.

How can leaders tap into this dimension?

Our experience shows that companies will often spend too much time and overspend on resources to develop detailed policies and procedures that attempt to manage every employee situation and scenario. And while such policies are well intentioned, creating a box for every employee's unique situation drains organizational resources and, ultimately, handcuffs managers to rigid policies. Conversely, organizations that institute basic guardrails for work-life flexibility create an environment where employees truly have choice and the trust of leadership to make the best decision to fit their specific needs and circumstances. Companies that do this well tend to value performance outcomes over inputs.

That said, flexibility is about much more than work-life balance. Companies can also create flexibility in the learning space by making investments in their employees' professional development — specifically, by using stipends and reimbursements to allow staff to study subjects they are passionate about. Doing this also allows the company to both reduce investment in structured, formal learning that takes months to develop and quickly adapt to evolving business needs by adjusting stipends or repurposing professional development money to upskill employees.





RESEARCH INDICATES A DIP IN AVERAGE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AROUND TWO TO FIVE YEARS OF TENURE, WHICH MAY SIGNAL A MISALIGNMENT BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS OF THE EMPLOYEE AND THE REALITY OF LIFE AT THE COMPANY.

5. Aligned

As a result of the pandemic, many businesses are making at least some type of investment to improve their employee experience. However, because employee experience encapsulates everything an employee sees, feels, and observes from candidacy to exit, some organizations continue to fall short because of a lack of consistency in the EVP compared with the reality of life at the company.

For example, during recruitment and onboarding, employees often receive a lot of positive attention, enthusiasm, and “high touch” in the form of one-on-one access to leadership, corporate swag, and big promises about professional development and career opportunities. As employees move past the honeymoon period, however, the bright lights may fade. Research indicates a dip in average employee engagement around two to five years of tenure, which may signal a misalignment between expectations of the employee and the reality of life at the company.

Alignment also refers to employees’ ability to connect the company’s mission, vision, purpose, and core values to their day-to-day work. Organizations often write lofty statements about who they are and who they want to become in terms of culture, operating principles, and business strategy. If employees don’t see those ideals lived out in their daily work experience, however, it feels inauthentic. A company that touts the goal of becoming an industry leader in innovation but doesn’t create an environment where employees feel comfortable bringing new ideas and perspectives to the table is acting out of alignment with its company vision.

How can leaders tap into this dimension?

Business leaders can pair journey maps with employee personas to visualize the complete employee experience—from candidacy to exit—through the unique lens of critical talent segments. These maps seek to understand which events engage or disengage employees across the cultural, technological, and physical elements of the work experience. And they are especially effective when created with the oversight of a cross-functional team, often adding valuable perspective that is sometimes missed when solely driven by HR. For example, some companies have commissioned an Employee Experience Committee to regularly evaluate employee experience and ensure that employees have access to the information, tools, autonomy, and environment they need to do their best work in alignment with the company vision.

6. Aspirational

“Aspirational” is the final dimension of EX and focuses on the purpose and future direction of the company. Today’s younger generation of employees—those currently entering the workforce and beginning to rise through the ranks of leadership—are increasingly purpose-driven and expect companies to prioritize environmental and societal impacts over profitability. They want to be tied to something they believe in, and they want to understand how the work they do both drives value for the company and benefits the world around them. They need a reason, other than a paycheck, to get out of bed each day and feel excited about coming to work.

As the pace of change accelerates across the business landscape and companies are forced to continually evolve their strategy, it’s important that employees not only have a voice, but also understand how they fit into the future of the organization. Are there new skills and capabilities that will be required to deliver on long-term strategic objectives? If so, how will the company engage employees in opportunities to upskill or reskill them toward that vision? To be invested in outcomes, employees need to see a future within the organization and understand their role in the company’s success.

How can leaders tap into this dimension?

While most businesses have a vision statement, many do not clearly articulate the vision in a way that resonates with their employees. For an organization’s vision to be embraced, it must be rooted in purpose, well

communicated, lived from the top down, and connected with employees' daily work.

Storytelling is a powerful mechanism to bring the vision to life, allowing employees to see, hear, and experience the path to the future in a memorable and exciting way. Employees should understand their role and how their story connects with the community at large. For example, a pharmaceutical company aspiring to be the first to develop a cure for breast cancer might start by asking employees to imagine a world with more mothers, daughters, and grandmothers—a world in which 700,000 women traded sickness each year for precious time doing their good works. And they might use videos, imagery, and testimonials to evoke emotion and make the women's stories more impactful. Many companies in the medical space also provide employees with regular opportunities to engage with patients who have been healed by their products, which helps drive meaning in daily work regardless of an employee's function or level in the company.

Finally, embedding a company's vision within practices like goal setting, performance reviews, and development conversations is another simple, yet impactful way to connect it to your staff's everyday work. And that helps create transparency and ownership from the C-suite down to frontline employees.

Final Thoughts

The COVID-19 pandemic spotlighted the employee-employer "contract" in a new way. As companies continue to respond and to react to employee needs and expectations, business leaders should forgo the pitfalls of one-off revised policies or initiatives for a more holistic view of employee experience. As a business, how is your employee experience Attractive, Authentic, Accessible, Adaptable, Aligned, and Aspirational? In the second and final part of our series, we will illustrate how a business strategy can be propelled through a well-designed set of EX initiatives that focus on the dimensions we have outlined.

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