

# Listen to Your Employees or Lose Them

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**T**he pandemic triggered a reckoning at the heart of the employer–employee relationship. Employees fundamentally shifted their goals for work and life, asking for greater flexibility in a work environment that supports their ability to take care of their families, along with real opportunities for growth and development, and work that carries meaning for them.<sup>1,2</sup> More than 47 million U.S. workers quit their jobs in 2021 alone, and the movement is not over.<sup>3</sup> Recent studies show that a large share of the workforce is watching for new opportunities, whether they are passively looking or actively applying.<sup>4</sup>

Organizations have also realized how essential a productive and engaged workforce is to business success. Companies struggling to fill and retain talent in mission-critical roles are seeing serious business needs compromised, from manufacturers experiencing a break-down in their supply chains due to a lack of trained talent, to restaurants unable to open due to a lack of workers.<sup>5,6</sup>

It's critical for employers to understand why so many workers are leaving their jobs, and what they are looking for in the future. In what Pamela Stroko, vice president of HCM

transformation and thought leadership at Oracle, calls The Great Realignment, workers are making clear that they want an employee experience that values their skills, time, and aspirations for work and life. Simply put, employers know they need to put employees first, and treat them as partners in defining the employee experience of the future. Now, employees have a strong voice and choice in what will bring them to an organization and incentivize them to stay, and employers need to be ready to listen.



Future-forward companies are waking up to the critical need to focus on employee experience, with 92% of companies identifying it as a priority according to Willis Towers Watson.<sup>7</sup> As organizations strive to improve employee engagement, productivity, and wellbeing, listening to the workforce is critical. Not only is listening in and of itself a crucial part of employee experience, but the stakes are also high to make sure companies are investing in strategies that actually reflect what employees want and need, and not merely what company leaders think they do. To avoid the blunder of giving workers a ping pong table or a happy hour when they really need childcare support and help managing their workload, organizations need to listen, synthesize, and act.

Employers have tried-and-true tactics for listening to their workforce, such as annual surveys, town halls, and one-on-one performance reviews. But in a future of work that's marked by rapid and continuous change, listening needs to keep pace and employees agree: 87% of workers believe their employer should do more to listen to the needs of their

workforce.<sup>8</sup> The only way an organization can get a clear pulse on workers' thoughts and feelings about their employee experience is to develop an always-on approach that includes action and consistent communication. Involving employees in this way builds trust and shows that their feedback matters.

Employers that use continual listening to drive decision-making are making a key investment in employee experience by putting the power in the hands of employees to determine what fulfillment at work can mean for them. These companies stand to see payoffs in the form of stronger recruitment, retention, engagement, and productivity.

Here are four steps HR leaders can take to ensure their listening efforts cultivate a high-quality employee experience.



The **employee experience** covers a worker's full journey with the organization, from recruitment and onboarding to interactions they have with the company after departing.<sup>9</sup> **"It's about being in an organization and having a seamless experience of what it's like to work there,"** says Pamela Stroko, vice president of HCM transformation and thought leadership at Oracle.

# 1. Understand the link between listening and organizational health

Most people know from personal experience how rewarding it feels when someone truly listens. It's the same type of validation employees feel when their employer listens to them.

Feeling heard is so powerful that it can impact companies' bottom lines. Listening is one important driver of employee engagement, and data shows that when employees feel engaged in their work, the business benefits.<sup>10, 11</sup> That engagement comes in part from continual

communication—achieved through listening activities—that enables employees to feel heard and as a result more invested in their job or the organization.<sup>12, 13</sup> Seven in 10 respondents to a Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey said employee engagement was “very important to achieving overall organizational success.”<sup>14</sup> Organizations with high employee engagement are more than twice as likely to have above-average success than those with lower levels of engagement, Gallup found.<sup>15</sup>

Better retention is another reason why employee engagement is tied to business success. Workers whose jobs deliver a positive experience are 16 times more engaged than those who are stuck in a negative experience, and they are eight times more likely to want to continue working for their employer, McKinsey found.<sup>16</sup> Companies who actively listen to and engage with their employees can reap the benefits for years to come, whether in the form of retention, improving the bottom line, or increased productivity.



## 2. Overcome the limits of conventional listening

Even organizations that understand the link between listening and their bottom line may struggle to create an effective listening strategy. A survey conducted by The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that despite employers spending an average of \$2,420 per employee to improve the employee experience, just 13% of workers said they were fully satisfied with their work experience.<sup>17, 18</sup> With the stakes even higher to enhance the employee experience, employers looking to improve their approach to listening should consider the limitations and advantages of common listening tactics.

Large-scale, annual surveys have long been a common mode of listening but are falling out of favor because they **lack timeliness**.<sup>19</sup> The insights captured may reflect problems that have been brewing for months. Additionally, by the time a company conducts the survey and reviews the results, the information may be outdated and thus have limited effect. Employees, meanwhile, may become frustrated by what they perceive as a slow response from the company.

**Survey fatigue** due to survey length or volume can also be an issue. Long surveys take essential time away from employees, and the minutes spent taking them add up quickly.



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Tailoring a listening program to the company's strategic initiatives helps HR equip senior leaders with facts they can use to make sound talent-related decisions.”<sup>20</sup>

**Laura Stevens**  
Vice President Global Strategy,  
Analytics & Employee  
Experience at DSM



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There has to be a certain level of trust on behalf of the employer and the employee to ... ensure that the information that's collected is really for the best intention of both the employee and the company in supporting the employee.”

**Heather Whiteman**  
Ph.D., People Data Enthusiast and  
Assistant Teaching Professor



HR can build on current listening tactics to help employees see the value of the listening process. To encourage more employees to participate in listening activities, HR leaders can offer options that require less of their time such as pulse surveys. Often just one or two questions, this mode of listening lets employees share their thoughts on a topic quickly and easily, and it can be conducted at regular, frequent intervals to understand how employees feel about a certain topic.

Companies may have more success with one type of listening than another, but a successful listening strategy requires deploying a wide range of coordinated tactics that reach all employees, wherever they are, and give them a variety of modes for sharing their opinions and ideas. By providing several avenues for sharing feedback, businesses can ensure they're capturing the full spectrum of insights and data needed for successful strategic decision-making.

Employers looking to get employee buy-in on listening efforts must be transparent about how the company will use the information gathered to drive change. As HR and other

leaders collect data from listening activities, they should emphasize that the **data is for people, not about people**. “Too often, there's a heavy reliance on data about people: turn-over, numbers, assessments, and surveys. But if you start from that question, you miss some of the most powerful parts of data. If you use data for people rather than about people, that's where you start to ask questions that can be informed by information,” says Heather Whiteman, Ph.D., people data enthusiast and assistant teaching professor.

But HR leaders should be careful to not assume they already know the answers their listening program seeks to find. If a company's strategic goal is to improve retention, for example, it should make sure listening includes opportunities for employees to share open-ended feedback about what they perceive as the cause of the retention issues. Employee responses may be surprising. By focusing on gathering data that can help improve the employee experience, HR leaders can set themselves and their employees up for success, while encouraging the open sharing of information.



## 3. Get prepared to deliver a new kind of employee experience

The pandemic changed employees' views about their work and the importance of their life off the job. More than half of workers surveyed by Gartner said the pandemic made them want to contribute more to society, rethink the role of work in their life, and even question the purpose of their job.<sup>21</sup> Psychological safety also became increasingly important. Employees who underwent significant change when they were forced to work remotely but had supportive teams fared better than those with less supportive teams.<sup>22</sup>

Navigating the gaps between what employees want and what employers deliver on critical issues such as purpose and psychological

safety requires consistent listening to build and maintain trust. For example, opinions about the return to office-based work differ dramatically among employees. Some people are eager to return, while others are reluctant to give up the flexibility of working from home or are even fearful about the continued impact of COVID-19. SHRM advises employers to survey their workforce anonymously about their readiness to return to the office—and to set a high threshold for the share of employees who are ready to come back to the office permanently before making any policy changes.<sup>23</sup>

Employers are paying attention to their employees' changing views on work and life.

More than 90% of organizations plan to make employee experience enhancements a priority over the next few years, compared to 52% before the pandemic, the Willis Towers Watson survey found.<sup>24</sup> To ensure those changes align with employees' post-pandemic priorities, employers should consistently listen to find the gaps between what their workforce values in their employee experience and what their organization currently delivers.

Here's how employers can engage their workforce around **purpose and psychological safety**.



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If an organization has a clear purpose that people can connect to, it will be more productive. Fewer people leave. People are happier on the job. They contribute more. There's a sense of psychological safety. There's a sense of fulfillment, the fulfillment being that employees fulfill what they want to do in their lives at work.”

**Pamela Stroko**

Vice President of HCM  
Transformation and Thought  
Leadership at Oracle

**Purpose in their work.** Most employees want a purpose to define their life, and for many that meaning comes from their jobs, McKinsey research found.<sup>25</sup> However, only 15% of frontline managers and employees the firm surveyed said they are getting purpose from their work, compared to 85% of executives. Employees who said they find less purpose in their work reported lower levels of energy and resilience in their lives overall, and less satisfaction, engagement, and connection at work compared to workers who said they find more purpose on the job.

One method companies can use to help workers see the meaning in their day-to-day tasks is “shaping”, which alters the work environment by providing access to technologies that create opportunities for collaboration

between an organization and its employees.<sup>26</sup> Shaping can apply to expectations for employee experience, daily interactions, and how the experience is remembered. Employers can use listening tactics to determine what kind of shaping technology to implement, and to gauge its effectiveness once in use. By sharing the responsibility of shaping, everyone has a voice and a way to make impactful changes.

Employees also derive purpose from their organization's values. Employers stand to see a 51% drop in absenteeism, 64% fewer safety incidents, and a 29% increase in quality by growing the share of workers—from three in 10 to eight in 10—who say their employer's mission and purpose make them feel their job is important, Gallup found.<sup>27</sup>





**That they'll be heard.** An organization where employees don't feel comfortable voicing ideas risks not only overlooking serious problems but also missing out on good ideas and people. Psychological safety—in which employees feel comfortable speaking up and know that they can take risks and make mistakes—is tied to a host of business benefits.<sup>28,29</sup> One study found employees who spoke up more often were more likely to be excited to come to work and to recommend their company to others as a great place to work.<sup>30</sup>

Yet only a small number of business leaders exhibited behaviors that support psychological safety in the workplace, according to a McKinsey survey conducted during the pandemic.<sup>31</sup> A positive team climate is the biggest driver of psychological safety, the firm found. In a positive team climate, members care about each other's well-being, value all contributions, and have a share of the voice in how the team runs. But only 43% of respondents surveyed said this climate existed within their team. Leaders can shift to a consultative

and supportive leadership style to help foster a supportive environment in their organization, according to McKinsey.

It's critical to remember that leaders aren't only those in the C-suite. Mid-level and front-line managers are essential to building trust with employees by keeping lines of communication open and fostering an environment that provides psychological safety.<sup>32</sup> HR can help leaders at all levels develop the skills needed for employee engagement and provide the support and framework required for a strong listening strategy.

"Listening builds trust, support, and psychological safety," according to Mercer. "When employees know their voice matters, they are more likely to be engaged and committed."<sup>33</sup>

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Trust has changed over the pandemic, and I think our notion of trust has evolved. Today, people are asking 'Am I safe at work? Is my employer taking care of me? Are they helping me take care of my family? Are they providing a workplace I can be confident that if I have to go in, I'm not going to be exposed to the virus?'"

**Pamela Stroko**

Vice President of HCM  
Transformation and Thought  
Leadership at Oracle



# 4. Use your consistent listening strategy to build trust

Whether a company is developing a consistent listening strategy for the first time or fine-tuning its approach, it's critical to embed steps to acknowledge employees' participation in the process and to show how their feedback is resulting in positive change.

Actions like accountability and clear communications are key drivers of trust in businesses, according to PwC, which found that one in five workers has left a company because of trust issues.<sup>34</sup> Employees in organizations with higher levels of trust are more likely to be productive, collaborative, energetic, and have a longer tenure with the organization than their peers with lower levels of confidence.<sup>35</sup>

Involving employees at all stages of listening—from determining outreach methods to deciding how to act on the feedback—can help to instill trust in the process and the organization. Consider these best practices.

- **Think long-term.** Determine what information you need to get, at what intervals, and in what ways. Establish a point person or team within HR to lead listening efforts and ensure clear communication with employees across all departments by explaining what listening initiatives are designed to do, and how the findings will benefit individuals and the organization.



- **Be nimble.** Confirm the individual or group evaluating listening feedback is ready to analyze data and insights as they come in. This allows actions taken in response to employee feedback to be timely and targeted.
- **Provide support.** Leaders at all levels of the organization will need support from HR to understand how to effectively evaluate and act on feedback. Are training programs already in place, or do those lessons need to be developed or acquired?
- **Promote transparency.** Employees are giving companies valuable information. Don't take that for granted. Share the findings of listening efforts, along with resulting decisions and their rationale, in a way that all employees can access.
- **Measure results.** Success looks different depending on the context of listening activities. Before starting, determine the extent of change desired in key metrics such as retention, engagement, or inclusion, and track changes from the baseline.
- **Assess and iterate.** Just as listening strategies should be always on, so should organizations' openness to tweaking the process to better serve your employees and the organization.







# Conclusion

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The pandemic dramatically changed what employees want from their jobs and the value they place on their lives outside of work. As employers strive to adapt in response, listening will be an essential tool to understanding workers' new priorities and goals. But it's important for HR leaders to remember that listening should be more than a one-off activity. By deploying a coordinated program of always-on tactics that reach employees wherever they work, and with a variety of modes to share their opinions, ideas, and pain points, employers are demonstrating their commitment to employees to prioritize the things that are most important to them. In return, employers can reap the benefits of an engaged workforce for years to come.





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