



Expert report

Seven ways to improve employee experience

Introduction

Today's working environment is more diverse than ever which, in turn, means the workforce's expectations of work are changing.

People want to feel excited, empowered and like their time is not only valued, but being spent wisely. With such a competitive employment climate, employees increasingly expect an engaging and enjoyable work experience, often with the desire to be in charge of their own careers and timetables.

In response, rather than focusing narrowly on elements such as employee engagement and culture, organisations are developing an integrated, holistic focus on the entire employee experience. They are recognising they must re-imagine every aspect of work, from recruitment and job evaluations to collaboration, reward structures and the workplace itself in order to attract and retain talent in a tight labour market.

Mark Brinkler, a senior HR executive and HCM director at Oracle, says employers now face a workforce profile that is expanding, maturing and evolving all at once.

"In some cases, you may have workers from three or four generations in an organisation and how a company recognises and copes with these demands is key," he said. "It is not just about Generation Z but respecting the whole organisation's profile. For companies to win in this space, and attract and retain the best people, it needs to be respectful and understanding of these dimensions."

According to AON's *Benefits and Trends Survey 2019*, more than half of UK employers now actively define and measure their employee value proposition (EVP) – a benchmark of the value employees receive from their role, encompassing financial and non-financial reward, culture, development opportunities and more. For them, the next competitive frontier will be won or lost on employee experience.

But what does that really mean in practice? Is the "employee experience" just another buzzphrase or does it have a scientific basis to it? If so, what do employers need to do to give their organisation a competitive edge?

In this expert report, People Management Insight and Oracle, explore seven common themes and offer tips for building positive employee experiences.

>50%

more than half of UK employers now actively define and measure their employee value proposition



1 Treat your employees like they are customers

Employers who acknowledge that their employees are just as important as their customers will know that treating the former like the latter – as the organisation's first and foremost "customer" – will ensure external customers receive the absolute best that a company has to offer. When the workforce is happy, feel their needs are being met and that they are empowered to do meaningful work, the business will thrive, because a positive experience means increased engagement.

But it isn't a vacuous phrase – it is a measurable concept and can wield quantitative and analytical power, as well as qualitative clout.

As customers and consumers themselves, employees will have come to expect a high quality of service throughout their lives as technology rapidly develops, and services

become available 24/7 and at the touch of a button. Looking at employees as customers of, for example, a benefits platform will enable HR to optimise its experience of these functions and work more broadly.

Speaking at the CIPD Reward and Benefits Conference, Nicola Wells, global reward director at Unilever, said: "Consumer needs are going to have to be mapped onto employee needs. We hear a lot about the next generation of workers wanting to work in smaller, more entrepreneurial settings, so we have to start understanding the changing things that people want, not what businesses want. Let's ask them."

Not only will asking them what they want nourish their desire to take charge of their own experience and time, it will also ensure they feel valued.

2 Actively investing in your staff is now an expectation and differentiator

While the office environment is an important factor in the employee experience, it's going to take more than offering happy hours, nap rooms or other quirky perks to attract, and retain, a happy workforce in the long run.

Whether through line-manager training, peer-to-peer feedback or more formalised routes of capability, development is crucial. Brinkler said: "The dynamic has now changed. Employees expect, and now demand, companies invest in them and equip them through experiences or capability development programs. Recognition by companies of its role and being upfront about

it is all part of the employee engagement experience. Selling and marketing this can be hugely beneficial and a real employee engagement opportunity."

Oracle's university – the trusted provider of Oracle Cloud and on-premise software training and certification – and its investment in training and development offers a prime example of this. At the university, all training is delivered by an elite global team of Oracle experts and is made available in multiple learning formats for any time, anywhere training.



3 Invest in employee well-being

According to the CIPD's 2018 UK *Working Lives* survey, 24 per cent of employees said their job negatively affected their mental health, one in five (22 per cent) reported feeling exhausted at work and one in 10 (11 per cent) said they regularly felt miserable.

As a result, the CIPD's key recommendation was that: "If policymakers, employers, trade unions and employees themselves are to focus on a single dimension of job quality, it should be well-being."

And businesses are starting to do just that. With one in four UK adults experiencing a mental health problem each year, according to mental health charity Mind, employee well-being has rightly crept to the top of the business agenda over the past few years – not only because it is the right thing to do, but because there is a clear business case.

Employers are beginning to see that for their workforce's talent to be fully unleashed, that workforce has to have their basic needs met. The ways of doing this, which overlap with ensuring employees feel valued and cared for, are plentiful and varied.

They range from offering free fruit at lunchtimes to mindfulness sessions, free gym memberships and to the deeper work of creating a supportive, non-judgemental company culture which encourages disclosure and trains its line managers and wider workforce. This culture should be one which doesn't reward the first person to come into the office and the last person to leave, and which values each colleague's unique contributions and skills, regardless of any personal problems they may be experiencing.

As the CIPD's president, Professor Cary Cooper, said: "We're looking for quick fixes. A lot of companies are. They say 'let's do sushi at the desk'. I don't think it's the solution. The solution is the culture of your workplace."

24%

of employees said their job negatively affected their mental health





4 Invest now to save in the long run

If genuinely transforming a company culture for all is a long-term endeavour, investing sooner rather than later in the employee experience is business-critical.

Employees, increasingly, expect organisations to provide a seamless employee experience, all the way through from when they are hired to when they retire. The intensive effort that goes into interviews, on-boarding, orientation and training can no longer be allowed to fizzle out once an employee becomes an established member of the team.

Companies, therefore, need to provide ongoing investment in their people to ensure they get the personal development they expect – indeed, regard as a minimum requirement in an employer.

Organisations who can recognise and create flexibility in their policies and offerings to enable a synergy with life events can really have an impact on an employee's overall experience.

5 Understand the impact of your brand

Make your employee offering a core aspect of your brand rather than an ancillary component. Wrapping it fundamentally into the fabric of your business and its outcomes will reinforce your value proposition and drive home to employees how integral they are.

Indeed, recent research has suggested brand offering is being bumped to the top of applicants' list when scoping out potential employers. According to the 2019 *Employer Branding Insights Report* from Wonderful Workplaces, 94 per cent of 841 candidates would consider an employer's brand when applying for jobs (up 4 per cent from 2016) and 45 per cent of passive job seekers would apply for a job if it was to work for an "amazing brand".

Ultimately, the strength of your corporate brand will dictate whether you can impress talented individuals before they even think about applying for a position.

Jennifer Jackson, senior careers content editor for Wonderful Workplaces, said: "The explosion of content and social media has meant that employers have to be ever more creative in how they target prospective employees, whether it be looking outside their sectors or specialisms, or focusing on transferable skills, rather than a restrictive person specification."





6 Ask, listen, then act

Businesses gather data from a variety of sources – supply chains, investors, stakeholders – in order to optimise those functions and tie its various strands together productively. Since people are at the heart of each of these functions, companies should do the exact same thing for their workforce.

Assuming you know what employees want can backfire, whether financially or in terms of mood and the company culture you're trying to establish. Intuition alone can't always be relied upon – test those assumptions. Opening a dialogue and including them in the process upholds their agency, which as we have established is a core aspect of what employees today expect, and shows them their ideas and perspectives are valuable. Asking them, through regular surveys, will ensure your employee

experience proposition is in line with what employees want and expect.

With asking comes listening. Without the latter, the former is merely paying lip service and is an empty gesture. Therefore, make sure you demonstrate you're listening by communicating what and how you're changing – and the rationale if some things can't be changed right now.

If you want to understand more about what drives your people, look at your highest-performing teams and see what patterns and insights emerge. Apply data science to your people analytics to understand what experiences they respond positively to. Then use that data to build better workforce experiences for your people.

7 Build a diverse workplace for the future – for all

Acknowledging the workforce not only as a cohesive entity for which broader policies can be implemented but also as a group of idiosyncratic individuals with unique needs, will enable you to create engaging experiences for a multi-generational workforce. Progressive companies mould this into its HR and people practices.

The same dual approach and diligence have to be applied to recruitment practices, to attract as diverse a workforce as possible. This, in turn, will pay business dividends. Research by McKinsey & Co examined more than 1,000 companies across 12 countries and found that firms in the top quartile for gender diversity were 21 per cent more likely to see above-average profitability compared with companies in the bottom quartile.

Ultimately, an experiential workplace is about focusing on each person and how they interact

with both the organisation and the people around them. Experiences have always shaped how we view people and whether we want to spend time with them. Employee experience is no different.

The challenge facing HR is to develop an environment that can offer a positive employee experience, a culture that will support it, and the strategies to provide it for existing and future employees.

21%

firms in the top quartile for gender diversity were 21 per cent more likely to see above-average profitability



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