Designing employee experience

How a unifying approach can enhance engagement and productivity

How IBM can help

Today's organizations need to attract and grow top-performing talent, create engaging social and collaborative cultures, and connect the right people to get work done. IBM solutions combine market-leading talent management and social collaboration tools with the power of workforce science and advanced analytics. We help organizations build impassioned and engaged workforces, and deepen client relationships that can lead to measurable business outcomes. To learn more about the IBM Talent and Change Consulting Practice, please visit ibm.com/services/us/business-consulting/talent-change-management.

Winning employees' hearts and minds

Much as designing customer experience has dominated the thinking of companies competing in today's digital environment, organizations are now reexamining the employee experience. Recognizing the impact experience has on employee engagement and productivity, companies are taking a more comprehensive view of how to influence it. Our research shows that employee experience is an important and complex issue, requiring companies to evaluate the close connection between employees' physical, social and cultural environments, as well as the tools and relationships they need to accomplish work on a daily basis.

Executive summary

The battle for the hearts and minds of employees is played out daily through their workplace experiences. Much as organizations are paying increased attention to winning customers' loyalty, preferences and wallets, they are now turning to creating environments conducive to a more engaged and productive workforce. They are designing employee experiences that not only attract and retain crucial talent, but that optimize individual and collective potential in the workplace.

To better understand the challenges and opportunities associated with this trend, we recently conducted in-depth interviews with more than 30 individuals who had expertise in different facets of employee experience. Interviewees included executives who have employee experience as part of their overall mandates, providers of services and software tools designed to enhance employee experience, IBM subject matter experts and seasoned researchers in this field.

We found that a number of factors shape employee experience, including: the formation and development of work-based connections and relationships, the design and ongoing use of employees' physical work environments, and the tools and social platforms employees use to accomplish work-related activities. Our research shows that organizations can enhance employee experiences through increased levels of personalization, transparency, simplification, authenticity and organizational responsiveness.

Employee experience is created by interactions across **three spheres**: employees' physical environments, their social connections and the work to be done.

Companies use **five strategies** to improve their overall employee experience: personalization, transparency, simplification, authenticity and organizational responsiveness.

Four methods for enhancing employee experience: leverage analytics, understand differentiation touchpoints, build a cross-functional experience coalition and apply rapid, iterative design principles.

For companies looking to improve the employee experience, adopting the employee perspective can provide an important starting point — using data and analytics to identify needs and measure impact on business outcomes. Understanding key milestones in the employee journey can further refine insights into areas where experience may be lacking and what actions can be most effective. Applying a holistic, iterative design approach to change can help ensure that employees see improvements relevant to their work and can set their expectations for continuous reinvention. The human resources (HR) function cannot bear sole responsibility for improving the employee experience; doing so requires a cadre of support from other functions such as marketing, IT and real estate/facilities, as well as leadership from line executives.

Paying attention to employee experience

Organizations are examining employee experience from many different perspectives. Themes that emerged from our conversations with experts include: linking the employee experience to the organization's culture, fostering a collaborative community, and building purpose and value in work. For many companies we spoke with, the enhanced focus on designing meaningful employee experiences has its roots in five important trends:

- *The ongoing war for talent is intensifying, particularly in emerging disciplines.* Organizations across industries recognize that to attract and retain top talent, they need to differentiate themselves. In addition to traditional competitors, companies in other industries are now also vying for employees with in-demand skills.
- *The Millennial mindset is permeating the entire workforce*. As this latest generation has established itself in the workforce, its expectations for workforce flexibility, use of mobile tools and enhanced performance feedback have spread to other generations.
- *Employees are approaching the workplace as consumers*. Individuals want the same experiences in the workplace that they have as consumers, such as having the use of simple, intuitive technology, the ability to rate and share opinions about products and services, and direct access to decision makers.
- *Organizations are recognizing the relationship between customer experience and employee experience*. Many experts from companies we spoke with said that to provide unique, positive customer experiences, they need to create an environment where employees not only feel valued, but are able to perform their jobs effectively.
- *Research continues to show linkages between employee engagement and productivity*. Numerous studies demonstrate that employees who are positively engaged in their work environments are likely to be more productive, achieve higher customer satisfaction scores, produce higher levels of quality, and have lower absenteeism and attrition rates.
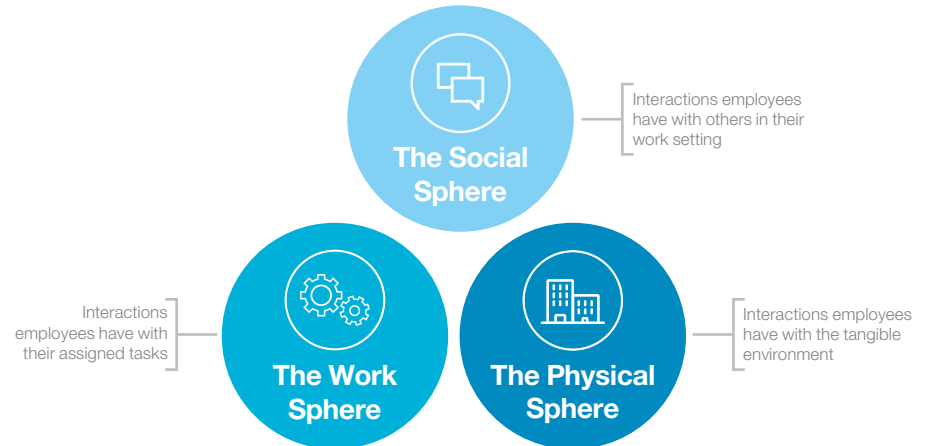
What are the components of employee experience?

From our research, we see employees interacting across three primary spheres: the Social Sphere, the Physical Sphere and the Work Sphere (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Three spheres of employee experience

Interactions employees have with others in their work setting

Interactions employees have with their assigned tasks

The Social Sphere

The Work Sphere

The Physical Sphere

Interactions employees have with the tangible environment

During an employee's work day, these spheres of interaction often overlap, creating six facets of the employee experience (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Spheres overlap to create unique facets of employee experience
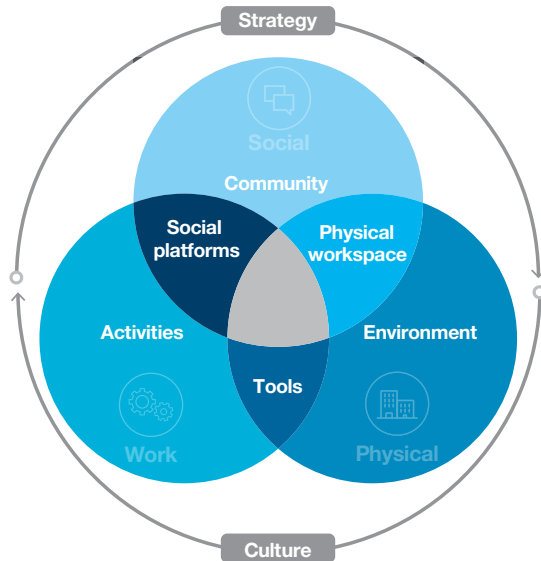
Community

Virtually all of us depend to some degree on interaction with others. It is therefore not surprising that the relationships we create and sustain can influence our individual effectiveness and our perceptions of our organizations as a whole. The goodwill that we generate through these relationships, often referred to as "social capital," impacts a number of important factors — from facilitating cross-organizational knowledge sharing to boosting individual employee satisfaction.[1]

LinkedIn: Extending community across employee populations[2]

LinkedIn has exerted significant effort to developing community through numerous initiatives and programs. Each month, the company holds a theme-based "InDay" focused on fostering a sense of connection within and across individual offices. Employees take part in activities and projects that encourage relationship building and nurture corporate values. LinkedIn also has formed "culture committees" at the site level to foster local community development. The organization extends this sense of community to alumni through specific events to maintain connections to the larger LinkedIn community.

Steelcase: Studying how physical space affects mental states[3]

Steelcase, a leading provider of office environments well known for its workplace insights, has been experimenting with new forms of physical design. Researchers are applying principles from neuroscience to determine how different physical layouts can impact mental states. They have identified three brain modes that require distinct behaviors and settings. In Focus mode, distractions can be avoided through "cocooning" — separating oneself physically from others; in Regenerate + Inspire mode, access to other people and nourishment allows employees to bond and the mind to rest; and in Activation mode, workers can stretch and be physically active.

"By studying the findings of neuroscientists, we're realizing that knowing more about how our brains shape our physical, cognitive and emotional wellbeing is bringing more clarity to understanding human needs in the workplace," said Donna Flynn, Vice President at Steelcase. "We're learning what we can do with all this new science to help people think better at work."

Physical workspace

Throughout our discussions, experts mentioned the configuration and design of individual and team workspaces as a critical component of employee experience. Organizations can enhance their workspaces by providing reconfigurable furniture and equipment to accommodate flexible work teams, communal spaces that facilitate information flow, quiet spaces for concentration and places where serendipitous interaction can occur.

For example, IBM has been developing "design studios," where project teams of designers, business architects and programmers can come together to develop faster, more innovative client solutions. Physical workspace design can also impact employee wellness, as properly designed ergonomics can reduce employee stress and limit physical injury.

Environment

Not only do organizations need to focus on the design and configuration of workplace furniture, but they also need to consider other environmental factors. Ambient lighting, temperature control, noise, ventilation and even office location can notably impact employee productivity and experience. For example, research has shown that human error rates increase when ambient temperatures are set too low or too high for comfort levels.[4]

Tools

Digital capabilities — such as mobile computing and the Internet of Things — have changed the way we access information, tap into experts, make decisions, and ultimately deliver and consume goods and services. Not only have these new technologies changed where we do our work, they have changed the very nature of how work gets accomplished.

With this greater reliance on software-based tools comes a host of issues that, left unaddressed, can increase employee frustration and reduce productivity. The design of the physical equipment that houses the software is key. Is it easy to access and use under daily work conditions? Software design can also have a lasting impact on satisfaction and productivity. How easy it is to sign on to a system? How may clicks does it take to get to the right screen? What is the duration between screen refreshes? Employees expect frictionless and intuitive technology. They want to spend their time doing their work, not figuring out how to use the technology behind it.

Finally, do the tools enable users to address particular preferences or physical challenges? Given the aging workforce and the desire of many companies to provide more diverse, inclusive environments, tools that can accommodate potential visual, auditory and mobility challenges are taking on greater importance.

IBM and Delft University of Technology: Making work more comfortable[5]

Researchers are looking at how technology can help predict optimal environmental conditions based on personal preferences. They are experimenting with sensor-based systems that can recommend and even modify conditions, such as temperature and noise levels, to best suit individual employees. This research seeks to help retain employees by making them more comfortable at work.

CEMEX: Building upon its internal portal[6]

A global leader in the manufacture and distribution of cement and other building materials, CEMEX recognized that its employees were using the internal portal to share and build expertise. The company decided to capitalize on this phenomenon by identifying a goal structure that would accelerate collaboration and content creation. In 2011, CEMEX created a single web channel that was seamless, integrated and available in multiple languages. By 2012, the company documented 35,000 active users of the portal and more than 1,600 online communities.

Activities

A major component of employee experience is the extent to which individuals feel they can influence their work, build mastery and understand their work's overall purpose.

Our discussions revealed a number of factors that influence successful completion of work-related tasks. An understanding of how the task fits into the work-unit's goals and the larger organization's mission, possession of relevant knowledge or expertise, access to additional information or experts as needed, and availability of timely feedback – either from managers or automated systems — can significantly shape the employee experience. As Daniel Pink, author of *Drive*, has noted, "The science shows that the secret to high performance isn't our biological drive or our reward-and-punishment drive, but our third drive — our deep-seated desire to direct our own lives, to extend and expand our ability and to live a life of purpose."[7]

Social platforms

Increasingly, companies are using internal social platforms to support organizational innovation, expertise location and knowledge sharing, and to help employees connect to others across the globe. These social platforms provide a common environment where employees can find relevant insights. What's more, the analytics derived from the use of these tools can help identify hidden pockets of expertise or emerging employee morale issues.

For social platforms to truly influence employee experience, a number of issues must be considered. Organizations need to create a critical mass of users to sustain the necessary level of content and attract other users. Also, they must establish rules of engagement that clarify what can be said and how the organization intends to use data shared on the platform. Leaders need to publically support the use of the platform and recognize those who make substantive contributions.

Strategy and culture

An organization must consider each of these six facets of employee experience in light of overall business goals and culture. The business goals and objectives of a software company may be quite different from those of a retailer, while the culture of an entrepreneurial startup may differ from that of a large multinational corporation. For a hospitality company, the need to provide high-quality guest services may serve as a guiding principle in the design of employee experience; for an oil company, the emphasis may be on occupational safety. Clearly defining these underlying tenets is necessary to designing experiences that not only match the needs of the individual, but are aligned with organizational priorities.
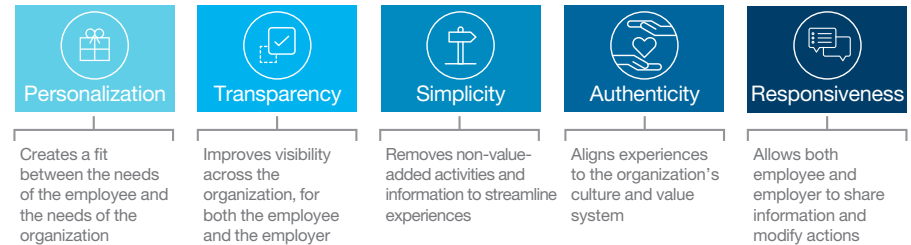
Likewise, once a company defines its strategy, it must help ensure that leadership behaviors, people practices and management systems — formal drivers of organizational culture — consistently support the employee experience. Informal practices matter too; if the culture is fear-based or hierarchical, employees may struggle to collaborate on open, social platforms.

Influencing employee experience: Five practices

From our discussions with experts, we have identified five practices that organizations are using to create more effective experiences (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Five practices to create more effective employee experiences

Personalization	Transparency	Simplicity	Authenticity	Responsiveness
Creates a fit between the needs of the employee and the needs of the organization	Improves visibility across the organization, for both the employee and the employer	Removes non-value-added activities and information to streamline experiences	Aligns experiences to the organization's culture and value system	Allows both employee and employer to share information and modify actions

Personalization

Work is rarely a one-size-fits-all proposition. We find many companies recognize the importance of balancing the needs of the organization with the unique characteristics of individuals and work groups. Therefore, they are looking for ways to tailor the employee experience to address both requirements. From a social perspective, this could include enabling employees to develop profile pages on a collaborative platform that draws on data from the company's HR systems as well as from data on an individual's self-identified interests. At the physical level, this could include empowering individuals to configure their work areas to match both their work requirements and their personal tastes. Another example is personalized learning, which is geared towards an employee's specific learning objectives based on job performance and personal career objectives. Personalization can also involve the configuration of various digital tools to adapt to unique user needs.

National Australia Bank recognized the need for personalization as it looked to accommodate individuals with disabilities in an effort to increase its labor pool. One of the four largest banks in Australia, serving 12.7 million people, it developed an action plan to increase recruitment of people with disabilities, make all branch sites accessible and foster an inclusive culture.[8] The bank also created a dedicated team of accessibility consultants to support employees with disabilities from recruitment onward.

Transparency

Much as individuals are looking to gain a greater understanding of what goes into their food, clothing, and other goods and services, they are also seeking to understand their own organizations' workings. They want to know how their efforts contribute to larger goals. Social platforms give individuals a forum to raise concerns, contribute innovative ideas and maintain an ongoing dialogue with leadership. Social platforms can also reveal informal networks and identify influence leaders. We are even seeing organizations increase transparency of physical interactions, using the Internet of Things to observe collaboration patterns and interactions with customers.

Companies such as Humanyze are collecting "people" data — from geolocation systems, social signals and face-to-face interactions — with wearable electronic sensing badges.[9] The collected data, which is anonymized and aggregated, can help organizations align internal metrics, adjust structure and resources, and identify operational gaps.

"Klick is doing for its team members what Amazon and Google have long been doing for their customers: using technology to understand and satisfy their needs and preferences."[10]

Leerom Segal, CEO, Klick

One organization that has focused heavily on building organizational transparency is Klick, a technology company that provides commercialization, digital marketing and e-learning services to healthcare and other specialized industries. Klick created an internal, proprietary enterprise operating system called Genome that harnesses big data and social technologies to deliver a personalized and engaging work experience.[11] Klick collects and shares team member performance, project management and other information, and can mine that data to anticipate potential employee needs. It can then provide the output in various ways, from individual feedback to continuously updated scorecards on personalized Genome dashboards.

Simplicity

Many individuals in large organizations struggle with two forces that make the flow of work increasingly challenging. On the one hand, years of mergers, acquisitions and technology changes have turned work processes into convoluted sets of procedures and regulations that contribute to frustration and poor customer responsiveness. At the same time, organizations are bombarded by new sources of data and information that often conflict and lack the necessary context to improve decision making. Even simple activities, such as running an effective meeting, are often complicated by conference rooms equipped with incompatible technology and virtual platforms that freeze at key moments. Simplification efforts, like removing non-value-add process steps, providing easier access to knowledge bases or changing the way information is displayed, can create a more positive work environment.

Authenticity

Many of the organizations we spoke with highlighted the importance of aligning employee experiences to the organization's culture and value system. Organizations can express corporate values in numerous ways, from the physical design of corporate headquarters and local offices, to the establishment of corporate events.

In his 2014 book, *The Best Place To Work*, author and psychologist Ron Friedman notes that organizations should consider how well their workspace design reflects the corporate culture and brand. He suggests, "Organizations that claim a particular characteristic but fail to follow through in their interior design can come across as inauthentic to employees, whose impressions inevitably trickle down to clients."[12]

Clif Bar & Company, maker of nutritious and organic foods and drinks, mirrors its commitment to a healthy lifestyle in its corporate environment. The importance of employee involvement and wellness is reinforced through weekly all-hands meetings that are employee-led, and start with a free healthy breakfast where employees are encouraged to socialize and connect. Some wellness benefits include onsite massage, acupuncture and fitness training.[13]

"We are a values-based company — all the programs and experiences we create reflect those values."

Jen Freitas, Director of People Development, Clif Bar & Company

Responsiveness

Feedback is quickly becoming ubiquitous in our consumer and professional lives. Not only do individuals want to provide input into their working environments, they expect companies to respond to their ideas and concerns. As we highlighted in "Amplifying Employee Voice," a previous IBV study, "By embracing employees' willingness to engage, organizations can work more effectively with an increasingly vocal and dispersed workforce. They can also gain valuable insights — from spotting warning signs to garnering innovative ideas — based on information employees share every day. Organizations can then turn those insights into action to improve organizational knowledge, productivity and performance, and to deepen employee engagement."[14]

Companies are beginning to incorporate responsiveness into their ongoing performance management systems. Globoforce, a provider of social recognition software, gives individuals the opportunity to provide feedback to others within the organization via a mobile app and provides them with rewards for their contributions.[15] The software delivers immediate, direct and visible insights to employees and leadership, and generates a high volume of transactions that can provide data on relationships, productivity and organizational interdependencies.

Companies are also gathering input about individuals' perceptions of environmental conditions. CrowdComfort, a startup company in Somerville, Mass., focuses on facilities management through sensor networks.[16] It developed a mobile app that crowdsources information from employees about building inefficiencies and environmental preferences. Employees can report issues on demand from anywhere on the company's campus. Information is visible to all employees, as are resultant actions taken by management, facilities staff and others.

Recommendations: Designing employee experience in your organization

Tune in to the voice of the employee using analytics.

The subject of employee experience may suggest the softer disciplines of employee culture and perception, but enhancement efforts should start with analytics. Your organization can apply similar techniques to gauging employee experience as those you use to measure and evaluate customer experience. Traditional employee HR information, semi-structured engagement surveys and unstructured comments from internal and external social platforms can provide insights into potential solutions to experience challenges. Even the Internet of Things can generate useful data about working conditions and personal wellness. Analytics can help you develop insights about specific segments of the population, identify changes in physical and social environments, amplify employee voice and address issues associated with productivity and tool usage.

Invest in key touchpoints where employee experience has the greatest impact.

Making changes to employee experience often requires investment. It forces you to think about the points in the employee lifecycle that truly make a difference — for employees and the organization as a whole. For some companies, particularly those in traditionally labor-intensive industries, recruiting and onboarding processes have a significant impact on attracting and retaining top talent. These organizations depend on recruiting experiences that reflect the employer brand and are able to rapidly absorb employees into the working environment. For other companies, experiences related to project assignments and career development will more notably impact retention and productivity. Understanding the relevance of different employee experiences, and taking into consideration your organizational strategy and culture, will help you target investment in those areas that are most impactful.

Build an employee experience coalition that crosses traditional silos.
Designing integrated experiences around the physical, social and task spheres requires a multi-functional perspective. In addition to tool design and development, IT needs to provide the hardware and help desk support that makes it easier for employees to perform their jobs. Facilities and real estate services are vital to delivering workspaces that enable individual productivity and collective innovations. Marketing must help amplify and communicate the connection between employee and corporate branding. And perhaps most importantly, leadership at the line-of-business level must oversee day-to-day employee activities and the overall work environment.

Employee experience cannot be delegated to a specific supporting organization; rather, it needs to be woven into the very fabric of your business. In the future, responsibility for the employee experience may fall under the umbrella of a Chief Digital Officer. While many of these digital leadership roles currently cover external customer experiences, it is not too far-flung to imagine them expanding to encompass employee experience issues, as well.

Design employee experiences using rapid, iterative design principles.
Lessons from the world of customer experience point to the value of applying agile design principles to enhancing employee experiences. First, develop a deep understanding of your user population based on quantitative as well as observational data. Second, document the stages of the employee journey, highlighting the physical, social and task-related interactions that occur at each stage, as well as approaches for addressing limitations or bottlenecks. Third, rapidly develop solutions that solve parts of the puzzle over short time periods rather than creating one larger solution that may take months or years to execute. Finally, capture feedback and refine the original solution on an ongoing basis. Applying these principles to the design of employee experience can generate quick successes and prevent larger, more costly challenges in the future.

Ready or not? Ask yourself these questions

- How does your current employee experience affect the attraction and retention of critical job roles within your organization?
- How could improving your employee experience increase productivity within your organization?
- To what extent does your employee experience influence your customer experience?
- Who has primary responsibility for designing employee experience within your organization? How does a person or team bring others together to address employee experience issues?
- What types of analytics are you using to evaluate the effectiveness of your employee experience?

For more information

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