

Employee engagement and the employee experience

Employee engagement and employee experience are two terms often used in the same breath, and while they are different, both have a place in the work of HR professionals. Trevor Merriden explores both concepts and presents five areas where HR can help drive a positive employee experience.

"Employee engagement", as a term, has been under scrutiny for a long time. In a recent XpertHR survey, which looked at engagement and the employee experience, employee engagement was defined as "a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values, leading an employee to be aware of business context and to work with colleagues towards improving performance within the job for the benefit of the organisation."

Whichever definition is used, let's remember that it's taken organisations a long time to even get to this point. A century ago, when employees went to their place of work, "engagement" wasn't even in their minds, let alone at the front of it. Even when the term first started to be used increasingly in the later 20th century, the focus of engagement was largely on the productivity it could create - a way to get "more from less". The definition of employee engagement has since been defined and refined many times.

To measure engagement is now recognised as a clear necessity for a business, but it has limitations. It only

gives HR professionals a snapshot of the mood of an organisation at a particular point in time; it tells them less about the spectrum of experiences that individual employees either enjoy or suffer, and the factors that ultimately cause them to prosper within an organisation or move on elsewhere. To look at the employee experience alongside engagement gives HR a better understanding.



Key resources

- > [Employee engagement and the employee experience: XpertHR survey 2021](#)
- > [Designing and conducting effective employee engagement surveys](#)
- > [How to set up an employee suggestion scheme](#)
- > [How to increase employee motivation](#)

Employee experience: Change by design

The term “employee experience” is increasingly significant for HR professionals. This sense of experience has grown in importance over time, and particularly during the pandemic, as the employee’s status as a stakeholder in the business has taken a firmer root.

To know the customer experience in any business has long been seen as a necessity for success. Employees increasingly expect to be treated as internal customers if they are to show commitment to their employers in return. The needs of the workforce have therefore come to be seen through the more holistic lens of the “employee experience”, but what does this really mean?

At its best, it means nothing short of the long-term redesign of the organisation, with employees not only front of mind but deeply involved in the development of new working practices. An increased focus on “employee experience” effectively opens HR up to a heavy-duty involvement in organisational design, as a means of generating the change that so many businesses currently need. There must be a “co-creation” between employer and employee across all the key moments of the employee lifecycle, from the starting point of a candidate’s first impressions of a business, through their journey of career development and beyond their shared time together, to how ex-employees, as alumni, feel about the organisation they used to work for.

Pandemic = Fast forward for the employee experience

Both engagement and the employee experience have moved sharply up the HR agenda during the pandemic, according to XpertHR research. And yet the importance of the employee experience has arguably become more obvious over the past two years.

What has become clearer, as the pandemic now (hopefully) recedes, is that high levels of employee engagement, on their own, are not enough for organisations to be sure of retaining their best people. Talented employees may be engaged in their work yet could still choose to move on elsewhere in search of something better.

The market for talent is highly competitive, and the most talented want more. They need to feel deeply immersed not only in tasks but in shaping the design of their roles, the factors affecting their performance and, crucially, the greater purpose underlying their work. Employees want - and expect - to have a great experience through an active influence across the organisation, well beyond the narrow confines of a job description.

XpertHR research showed this in action during the pandemic. The three most common challenges for organisations in maintaining or improving employee engagement and the employee experience were:

- an increased workload, driven by the absence of colleagues through illness and self-isolation;

- a lack of resources, perhaps through misalignments from frequent changes to working arrangements; and
- the switch to remote working, which has caused a blurring of the boundaries between work and home.

Employee engagement clearly came under pressure through all three challenges and addressing this was a pre-requisite for success. For those businesses that handled the challenges best, however, the common factor underpinning their resolution had to be more co-creation with employees in designing a solution to improve their everyday experience.

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Why does this all matter? And what should organisations be doing now?

Why should all this matter to HR professionals?

Research published in 2021 by Josh Bersin -

Employee experience: The definitive guide - showed us that the modern employee experience is driven by many factors. The most significant included:

- a mission and purpose beyond financial goals;
- transparency, empathy and integrity of leadership; and
- a sense of belonging and community.

Handled well, the potential for a positive employee experience is great. Another study, by Jacob Morgan, found that only 6% of the companies he studied are doing a great job at creating employee experiences, but those that do so successfully are 2.2 times more likely to exceed financial targets than their unsuccessful peers, and 5.1 times more likely to engage and retain employees.

What does all this mean on a day-to-day basis? HR will need to show the emotional intelligence and courage to tap fully into the views of employees. Here are five ways (there are many more) that they can do so:

- **Talent Attraction.** The very best organisations must start with candidates as they mean to go on. The quality of communication with candidates, whether accepted or rejected, will be essential for mapping the future candidate's employee experiences.
- **Communication.** Great communication is central to achieving employee-driven change, but it's difficult to do well. The goal of communication must be to capture hearts and minds - and spur employees into committed action. And the pandemic taught us that the frequency of communication will itself need to intensify.
- **Wellbeing.** The pandemic has had few silver linings, but a greater awareness of the importance of wellbeing, and especially mental health, has been one of them. It will be the involvement of employees themselves that will be the key driver in the shaping the future success of wellbeing initiatives.
- **Ethics.** When any business defines its ethical standards, these come to life only when employees take ownership through their daily actions. This will mean continuously seeking their feedback wherever possible.
- **Sustainability.** In 2022, employees want their employer to be committed to the social purpose of an organisation. This will be a major challenge for all employers wishing to attract the best talent in a world of work.

In conclusion

How HR professionals choose to define employee engagement and the employee experience is up to them, but one thing is becoming clear. The two terms are often used interchangeably but really shouldn't be. Both are important, but the meaning of each has diverged in the wake of the pandemic. And understanding this is key for businesses seeking sustained change in a volatile trading environment.

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