Organizations have long recognized that focusing on the customer experience is vital to the success of the company. While the emphasis on the workforce experience has gained traction in recent years, it still lags behind. With the US unemployment rate dropping to 3.6 percent in May of 2019, its lowest since December of 1969,\(^1\) attracting and retaining talent is becoming increasingly difficult—and more important—in a tight labor market. Top performers left unsatisfied can cause major disruption and challenges within organizations.
In today’s competitive talent landscape, organizations need to execute a top-grade workforce experience. Deloitte’s approach to workforce experience centers on the recognition that it is an organization-wide priority and can be cohesively and holistically designed by looking through four experiential lenses; personal, organizational, physical, and digital. In this post, we’ll discuss the first cornerstone of the workforce experience, “Personal Experience.”

Deloitte defines the personal experience as the focus on opportunities to create personal connections and build mechanisms that create a high level of purpose and meaning between workers and the organization. At the core of any human experience is the desire to belong and feel connected with others and to contribute to something of significance and value. While this may sound like a tall, existential order to deliver on, there are tangible ways organizations can design a powerful personal experience, and they essentially boil down to two primary components: (1) personal connections and (2) purpose and meaning.

**Personal connections**
Collaboration tools and technologies have no doubt made it easier for us to connect with our colleagues across different geographies and time zones. The increase in remote work has its clear advantages in enabling individuals to balance their work and personal lives. But there are unintended consequences as well. In his book, Back to Human, Dan Schawbel explains that “despite the illusion of 24/7 connection, in reality, most workers feel isolated from their colleagues, their organization, and their leaders.”

In support of this notion, the Loneliness Index found that more than half of Americans lack meaningful interactions throughout the day. This has a real and substantial impact in the workplace. According to Darcy Gruttardo, director of the Center for Workplace Mental Health, there is a direct relationship “between loneliness and productivity and absenteeism.” Furthermore, isolation in organizations can hinder productivity and suppress creativity.

The power of meaningful connections can often get overshadowed by new technologies and an emphasis on productivity and efficiency. In the place where we spend the majority of our adult lives, it behooves organizations to understand the true nature (and costs) of how employees interact and connect with one another.

How then, in a society dependent on technology, can we create a workforce experience that nurtures an enduring relationship with the organization and is social in nature? How can organizations create a personal experience that meets our needs at a human level?

At a leading data company, leaders elevate human connections through the organization’s employee wellness program. Throughout the organization’s 100+ locations, a variety of social gatherings—ranging from volunteer projects to painting parties—are held to enable the workforce to bring their whole selves to work and cultivate connections within and across the organization.

A large, global insurance company takes a multipronged approach to build bonds within its workforce, including implementing an organization-wide initiative to stimulate relationship-building among team members, encouraging cross-functional collaboration, creating structured mentorship and coaching opportunities, and launching employee resource groups to provide employees with continued support.
There is no-one-size-fits-all solution. Building a connected culture necessitates a tailored approach. An organization needs to tap into how best to foster lasting connections among its workforce that align with its unique culture and values. To that point, all organizations should seek employee feedback to empower them to shape their own experience.

The workforce experience is bottom-up, where the workforce, not the organization, is the focus of the experience. To bring workers to the center, we need to include them in the conversation.

Additionally, organizations need to reflect on how tools and technologies encourage (or discourage) workforce connectedness. How can they be leveraged to contribute positively to efficiency and productivity without negatively influencing the day-to-day human touch of the personal experience?

**Purpose and meaning**

The personal experience is also defined by the meaning we derive from our work and feeling connected to the larger purpose of the organization. In Daniel Pink’s New York Times bestseller, Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us, he identifies that our desire for purpose—the ambition to contribute to something of importance and meaning—is one of the three key elements that drive human behavior (along with autonomy and mastery). Similarly, a LinkedIn study revealed that 49 percent of employees would give up part of their compensation to stay in their position with an added sense of purpose.

In case you weren’t convinced just yet, in a survey conducted by Workhuman’s Research Institute, 32 percent of survey takers responded “My job – I find the work meaningful,” when asked why they stay at their company. There is no shortage of statistics highlighting the importance of purpose and meaning in the workplace. But what does it actually look like when employees find their work meaningful?

Wharton Management professor Adam Grant identified that employees in a university fundraising call center saw, on average, the amount of time spent on the phone double, and weekly donations increase from $411 to $2083 after simply having a 5-minute interaction with the scholarship beneficiaries. The mere reminder of the outcome of their work reminded call center workers of their larger purpose and consequently had a direct influence on their performance.

A large technology firm adopted a similar strategy. It identified that, after its software developers met with end users in person, they were able to relate to them better and were more motivated to create an interface with the end user in mind.

Amy Wrzesniewski, a professor of Organizational Behavior at the Yale School of Management who focuses on how people find meaning in their work, demonstrated that nurses who shifted their roles from task master to "patient advocate" were more satisfied and more effective in their jobs. Their job was no longer defined by a list of responsibilities, but rather was directly linked to the purpose of the organization, which is providing patient care.

Finding opportunities to connect the workforce to the customer can be immensely powerful. Enabling the workforce to empathize with their customers can establish a meaningful connection between them, their work, and the purpose of the organization.

Just as with building a culture of connection, creating mechanisms that provide a high level of purpose and meaning for the workforce requires a customized and thoughtful approach. But here are some universal tips that can get organizations started:

1. **While it may sound obvious, regularly communicate the mission and purpose of the organization.** The workforce needs to have a clear understanding of the goals and values guiding the organization. Leadership and frontline managers should be continuously reinforcing why employees are showing up to work every day.

2. **Express how each worker’s job fits in the big picture.** This is of particular importance for frontline managers. Employees can often find their day-to-day work filled with seemingly rote and tedious tasks. It’s up their managers to help them realize how these tasks contribute to the organization’s mission.

3. **Involve employees in decision-making.** While certain decisions are best left to the top brass, and it is not always feasible to include everyone in the process, identify opportunities to include others when possible. Having a say in organizational issues can provide employees with a sense of control and establish a strong bond between them and the organization’s purpose.
In summary, organizations need to approach the personal experience with the appreciation that all humans have an innate desire to feel connected with others and to be part of something larger than themselves. To cultivate an authentic personal experience for employees, employers should focus on how to foster a culture of connectivity in a digital world and create meaningful work that ties closely to the purpose of the organization.

Authors

Jannine Zucker  
Principal  
Deloitte Consulting LLP  
jzucker@deloitte.com

Maribeth Sivak  
Specialist Leader  
Deloitte Consulting LLP  
masivak@deloitte.com

Gabe Stavsky  
Consultant  
Deloitte Consulting LLP  
gstavsky@deloitte.com

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