

The three things that define a great employee experience

Steven T. Hunt, Ph.D.

Click to follow my posts: www.linkedin.com/in/steventhunt

“Employee experience” has become one of the human capital management (HCM) catch phrases of 2017. There is a lot of marketing about needing to create compelling, consumer-like, engaging employee experiences. But what makes an employee experience good? Answering this question requires defining what we mean by employee experience. Specifically, what are the activities that define the employee experience at work.

The Three Types of Employee Experiences

There are three broad categories of activities that matter for creating a positive employee experience.

- **Dealing with work requirements.** These are experiences associated with mundane activities we often wish someone else would do for us. For example, completing expense reports, logging time, managing travel, or completing administrative forms. These activities are a necessary part of work but they are not fulfilling. No one praises us for doing them well. Nevertheless, we must do them and they can take up a significant amount of time. The experience of “dealing with work requirements” is enjoyable when it is simple, short, efficient and easy.
- **Getting real work done.** These are experiences accomplishing things that matter for our company, our customers and our colleagues. We get praise for doing these things well and are held accountable when they fail. The experience of “getting real work done” is enjoyable when:
 - We work on things that are important. Is our time spent on activities that contribute to something meaningful, or are we doing busy work that adds little value to anyone?
 - We work on tasks that match our interests and talents. Is our time at work spent doing things that we enjoy and are good at doing?
 - We work with people we like and respect. Do we have collaborative, competent colleagues, supportive managers, and polite and respectful customers?
 - We have the tools and resources to be successful. Are we provided with necessary knowledge, training and technology required to do our jobs?
 - Our work does not create excessive conflicts with non-work responsibilities. Are we given resources, flexibility and support so we can fulfill non-work commitments to family, friends, social groups, and ourselves?
- **Building a career.** These are experiences we associate with moving our professional lives forward, developing new capabilities, and fulfilling career goals. This doesn’t necessarily mean moving on to new jobs. It does mean having work experiences that give us a sense of personal growth and achievement. The experience of “building a career” is enjoyable when work gives us a sense of doing new things, learning new skills and growing and developing over time.

All three experiences matter

These three types of employee experiences do not all need to be great for an employee to enjoy their job. Employees often put up with less fulfilling work in the short-term if they believe staying in a job will enable them to achieve longer term career goals. Similarly, most employees have had a lousy experience with their company’s administrative processes but that rarely leads people to quit provided they like the overall work they are doing. On the other hand, any one of these experiences can lead employees to quit if they are exceptionally bad or remain steadily poor over time.

The most frustrating jobs often provide a very good experience in one area but a terrible experience in another. These are jobs where part of us wants to quit but another part feels we should stay on. For example, a job where we enjoy the work we are doing today but have no sense of building our career for tomorrow. Or working for a company where we see future career opportunities but find our current work boring. Or perhaps worst of all, being in a job where we enjoy the work and the direction it is taking our careers, but find ourselves losing hours of time to inefficient, administrative tasks.

I encountered this sort of experience in one of my first jobs. This job allowed me to develop new capabilities doing fascinating work with smart colleagues. The experience of “building a career” and “getting real work done” was fantastic. Unfortunately, the company took months to provide a decent computer and working office chair. This made the experience of “dealing with requirements” miserable. I knew I had a great job, but I could not truly enjoy my work when every day involved waiting for my computer to run while trying to balance in a wobbly chair. I didn’t want to say anything about my poor experiences dealing with work requirements lest I come across as being ungrateful for the positive experiences building my career, so I just bottled up my frustration. This conflict in work experiences created considerable stress. You cannot imagine how relieved I was when I finally received a new computer and got permission to order a new chair!

Employees put up with these sorts of mixed work experiences all the time. Many cope by focusing on the positive parts of their work rather than the negatives. But employees enduring constant conflict across different types of work experience can start to withdraw over time. The frustrating mixture of good and bad experiences saps their energy until they either quit or, even worse remain present at work but cease to be fully engaged.

Creating a compelling employee experience

Many HCM solutions claim to improve the employee experience. The challenge is figuring out which ones will have the biggest impact on employees in your organization. This starts with understanding what the current employee experience is like in terms of dealing with administrative work, getting real work done, and building a career.

The most direct way to get the answer is to ask your employees what their experiences are like now. Take care to do it in a way so they feel comfortable being honest. Employees may be reluctant to criticize their current experiences at work lest they come across as complaining. And remember, just because someone isn’t complaining doesn’t mean they are happy with the way things are.

Another and more powerful approach is to have senior leaders go through the same employee experience as line managers and workers. This is particularly useful for understanding the experience employees have dealing with administrative tasks and getting real work done. For dealing with administrative work, challenge senior leaders to go several months using the same self-service technology that line managers must use to perform administrative tasks without getting help from their administrative assistants. For getting work done, have senior leaders spend two weeks working in a front-line position. Let them experience what it is like to have a line job in the company. If a company’s leaders truly care about improving the employee experience they should be willing to spend some time walking in their employees’ shoes.