The subjectivity of employee experience:
5 tips for managing moments that matter for some but not others
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Employee experience has become a major topic in human capital management (HCM). This is due to innovations in technology to measure how employees feel about their experiences at work, combined with growing importance of creating environments that attract talent and support workforce adaptability.

One of the challenges to managing employee experience is the subjective nature of experience itself. Experiences that matter a lot to some people may be of little consequence to others. And experiences that some people view positively can be viewed negatively by others. For example, next time you are on an airplane strike up a conversation with your seat mates about whether people should bring pets onto planes. Some people think having a dog next to your feet greatly improves the travel experience, some think it makes it worse, and others do not care much one way or the other.

The subjective nature of experience poses challenges to human resource leaders. What experiences matter the most to people? Where should we focus our efforts to improve the employee experience? And what is the best way to balance the competing needs of a diverse workforce consisting of people who may not all want the same thing? There is no simple way to solve this challenge, but the following five strategies could help:

1. **Stop wasting people's time.** If there is one experience universally disliked across all people, it is spending time on tasks that we feel are unimportant, overly difficult, or inefficient. Collect experience data to find activities that are widely despised by employees as taking too much of their time. Then look for ways to simplify these processes. A good place to start is to critically review self-service process automation projects that were implemented as a way to reduce support costs by forcing employees to do things they may have never wanted to do in the first place. Administrative tasks are probably not the most important experiences to employees, but improving them does send a message that you care about and appreciate people's time.

2. **Use analytics to identify what experiences matter most.** Gartner recently published the results of a Digital Employee Experience Survey that asked employees to rate the relative importance of thirty things people might experience at work. Two things stand out in the study results.
   The most memorable work experiences are not the most common nor the easiest to fix. Work experiences that people remember most are things that have a strong emotional, financial, or professional impact on their lives. The top 5 most memorable "moments that matter" in the study were experiencing discrimination, taking maternity or paternity leave, relocating for work, being passed over for a promotion, and establishing a flexible work arrangement. With the possible exception of discrimination, none of these things happen on an ongoing basis. They are also things that cannot be fixed easily. They require rethinking fundamental concepts around how a company conducts and communicates talent decisions.

   Different employees have very different experiences of work. The study also looked at how "moments that matter" differed based on employee location and age. It was striking how important experiences related to healthcare coverage were for people living in the United States where healthcare is tied to employment. In contrast, experiences associated with healthcare

were not highly important to employees in other parts of the world.   The findings related to age were also interesting. For most age groups, the most important experiences tended to be related to career development. But what mattered most to employees born between 1965 and 1980 were concerns about being discriminated against at work. Two things might explain this finding. First, this age cohort is the first generation where women started to outnumber men in many professional jobs which created greater awareness of gender equity problems. Many people in this cohort may also be encountering ageist experiences due to companies focusing attention on the much larger generation of employees born after 1980.

The Gartner study calls attention to the sorts of experiences that have the biggest impact on employees, and how much the nature of work experiences varies across different employee groups. It emphasizes the importance of examining how much different experiences matter to different people. And the value of getting beyond group averages when interpreting employee experience data.

3. **Build experience management programs around interests not demographics.** It makes sense to tailor experience management programs to address the specific interests and concerns of different groups of employees. But providing different employees with different experiences also creates a risk of favoritism and discrimination. To minimize this risk, avoid building experience programs based on employee demographics. For example, based on the Gartner study it might make sense to create programs to improve the career development experience for younger employees. However, it would be harmful to target these programs solely on young employees. Employees do not have to be young to be interested in career development. Creating a career development program that excludes older employees would be discriminatory. It might also perpetuate age stereotypes about learning and motivation. Instead of focusing on employee age, focus the program on other factors that might be age related but that are not age dependent factors. For example, "career development for employees who recently graduated from college". There are some limited cases where it makes sense to use employee demographics as selection criteria for experience management programs (e.g., improving the work experience for lactating mothers). But as a general rule, creating demographically exclusive experience management programs does not create inclusive company cultures.

4. **Allow people to craft their own experiences at work.** One way to give someone a high-quality work experience is to let them tailor their job to fit their personal preferences. This is embodied by a method called "job crafting" where employees design their jobs in a way that enables them to be effective while simultaneously maximizing their job enjoyment. It can involve things as simple as letting people to pick out their own office chair or as complex as allowing employees to set their own schedules or determine their own compensation packages. Moving away from job standardization does create complexities for companies.   But it is likely to become more common as employees increasingly expect the same sorts of customization from their employer that they enjoy as consumers.

5. **Recognize that some employee's opinions may matter more than others.** The goal of employee experience management is not to make everyone's job easy and fun. It is to create a work environment where employees are engaged, committed, productive and impactful. Some employees are more impactful than others. And things highly productive employees value can be different from their less productive colleagues. For example, high performing employees tend to value access to training or technology that makes them more effective in their jobs. Less committed

employees may emphasize things like office perks that make their job environment more pleasant. Showing preference to some employees interests over others can make certain employees feel less valued and must be done with caution. But no company has unlimited resources to devote to improving the employee experience. It is important to invest these resources where they will have the greatest ROI on company performance.

Employee experience management is becoming one of most innovative and impactful areas in HCM. This is largely due to the creation of tools that can measure what experiences matter the most to different groups employees.   Using these tools to improve experience management programs is critical in highly competitive digital economy. Part of this involves learning how to manage the reality that experiences that matter a lot to some people may not matter much to others.