The rise of employee experience & the decline of company privacy: when the whole world works in the same room

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"We are losing privacy at an alarming rate. We have none left"
John McAffee, founder of McAfee Anti-Virus company

"Publicity is justly commended as a remedy for social and industrial diseases. Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman."
Louis Brandeis, former US Supreme Court Justice

Employee experience is currently one of the hottest topics in human capital management. There are many ways to define employee experience, but in general it reflects a desire to make people's work more engaging, enjoyable, fair, inclusive and rewarding. Employees have always wanted their jobs to be enjoyable. But in the past organizations did not seem to care much whether people liked their work. What has changed that is making companies focus so much attention on giving employees a positive experience at work?

I believe two things are driving attention on employee experience. The first is just a continuation of the longstanding focus on improving employee engagement. Research has shown employee engagement influences a range of critical business outcomes such as customer service, employee retention, and business growth.   What employees experience at work directly impacts their level of engagement. As companies face increasing pressure to improve engagement, providing employees with positive work experiences is becoming more important.

The second, and to me more interesting force driving interest in employee experience is the digitalization of work and its impact on company privacy. In the past, companies could hide bad work experiences within the four walls of the organization. Employees might be paid unfairly by their company or treated abusively by their supervisors, but only the company and employees knew what was happening. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, employees can safely and quickly share information about their work experiences with anyone and everyone inside and outside of the company. Thanks to digitalization, unfair company pay levels, abusive manager behaviors, and poor company practices are shared widely and openly on the web through sites like PayScale, GlassDoor, and Layoff. Bad work experiences can also go viral and significantly damage a company's employer and consumer brand. It is likely that eventually nothing companies do to employees will be done in private.

There are risks associated with decreased levels of company privacy. One of the biggest is punishing companies who are trying to fix bad employee experiences. For example, imagine a company feels it has problems with unfair treatment of minorities. An obvious first step to addressing this is to measure employee experience to understand the nature of the problem so it can be solved. But many current laws are set so the company would be punished simply for acknowledging it has a problem. As a result, companies may actively avoid measuring any aspects of employee experience that might make them look bad in the eyes of the court. Companies should not be punished for admitting the need to improve their employee experience. This is like punishing a student for admitting there are things they need to learn. Companies should be held accountable for failing to actively monitor employee experiences and for not taking meaningful steps to address issues that are causing unfair or abusive experiences.

Loss of privacy is often voiced as one of the biggest concerns related to digitalization. But loss of privacy can also create positive outcomes. Improved employee experience is one of these outcomes.   Digital connectivity enables transparency, transparency drives awareness, and awareness encourages action and accountability. In general, the more transparent the workplace, the better the employee experience.   The worst abuses of employees occur behind closed office doors and secured factory fences under the veil of privacy. I look forward to living in a world where all employee virtually work alongside one another in a single, highly visible, well-lit and sun-filled room.