

Employees want to
feel connected, not
just digitally but
emotionally



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For years, employees were teased with the promise of flexible working hours, offices as collaborative spaces and the haven of working from anywhere. In 2020, COVID-19 accelerated many remote working policies, transforming the way many of us work.

Despite the sudden shift, organizations around the world fared remarkably well, as entire operations swiftly moved online and employees embraced remote working with aplomb. But what businesses soon realized is that while technology closed the physical distance, bridging the communication gap proved far harder.

Leaders could no longer rely on using in-person company meetings as a litmus for employee sentiment. And as personal demands became evermore visible – like childcare and commitments outside of work – workforce wellbeing and mental health became a critical concern.

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Even before the chaos of COVID-19, CEO of SGEI, Shane Green, said that “culture is no longer just a HR thing, it’s a business thing” – signifying the growing importance of culture. But today, his words carry even more worth, underscoring the need for culture to run throughout an organization, with an inherent focus on creating a positive, fulfilling environment for employees.

In this new world of work, to create a roadmap for change, leaders are thinking about employee experience as a series of moments

rather than one large entity. In the process, translating all the physical moments and traditions of physical workplaces to digital moments that still elicit that emotional connection.

Ultimately, as employees increasingly want to feel connected to their business, it’s more important than ever to communicate your company’s purpose and find ways to connect people’s day-to-day tasks with a bigger purpose or goal. Organizations that get this right will benefit not just as an employer, but as a business. After all, culture is certainly no longer *just a HR thing*.

Support employee wellbeing

For all the benefits of increased remote working, a major challenge for organizations has been their ability to support employee wellbeing and mental health. Ultimately, it’s harder to understand how your workforce is feeling and how they’re coping with this newfound environment, because we no longer have the in-person proximity of the workplace.

This becomes even more of a challenge when we consider that since the start of COVID-19, more than half of adults (60%) and over two thirds of young people (68%) have reported that their mental health has suffered – especially during lockdowns – according to mental health charity, Mind. So, what can organizations do to overcome this?

Similar to culture, wellbeing can’t be supported solely by HR. Of course, companies can rollout wellbeing initiatives, support programs and ensure the right infrastructure is in place to help workforces manage workloads and strike a work-life balance. But no single employee is going to need the same support.

Instead, to prioritize employee mental health, enterprises first have to try and gauge exactly how their workforce is feeling, which requires regular communication. But also personalization, to make sure employees are being met with the right support, at the right time. In order to achieve this, we’ve seen the role of managers change tremendously.

Prior to the pandemic, a manager’s role was predominantly to oversee workloads. Today, they’re more responsible for the wellbeing of their team – and there’s an increasing pressure on leaders to be proactive and ensure that they’re going the extra mile, to reach out on a regular basis and engage employees with one-to-one conversations.

It's fair to say that this is uncharted territory for many managers. It's also fair to say that they're coping incredibly well. But is it sustainable? And do managers themselves have the right support in place to care for their own wellbeing? In this new world of work, training will be vital to equipping leaders with all of the necessary knowledge to engage employees and uphold their mental health.

But technology will also have a pivotal role to play, to ease the burden on managers and ensure workforces have access to around-the-clock support, regardless of where they're working. Leveraging emerging technologies and tools, such as employee readiness surveys and employee health screening, will be key to sustaining workforce wellbeing, across remote and hybrid teams.

Upkeeping employee productivity

On the surface of things, many employers report that employee productivity levels are the same as or higher than before the pandemic, as backed up by a number of studies. But if we dig a little deeper to uncover why this may be, is it actually just a case that workforces are working longer hours?

For reasons of job security, or simply being unable to switch off from work, employees are pulling up their proverbial socks and doing superhuman things to upkeep output. But of course, employees aren't superhumans and this approach to productivity is far from sustainable. In fact, it's almost certain to result in burnout and a sharp decline in engagement.

In order to overcome this, there are some tactical approaches that organizations can adopt. For example, we've seen a rise in videocall days, or companies creating no fly zones around replying to emails outside of the traditional 9-5. Once again, however, a degree of personalization is key, particularly in terms of enabling employees to work flexibly.

One way to establish this is giving time back to employees. Since the start of COVID-19, we've taken away this big time vacuum of people travelling to and from the office. So, this time shouldn't be replaced with more work. Instead, it should be sacred and an opportunity for workforces to focus on personal things, voluntary work, or whatever it is that makes them feel fulfilled.

In addition, the onus is once again on managers to lead by example. If staff see leaders replying to emails over the weekend, or heading back into the office full-time, they're likely to do the same. So, be clear in communications and explicitly state that you don't expect people to reply to emails, or follow them into the office.

Trust is also key. If you measure productivity with monitoring tools, it's always going to fail and morale will spiral. Instead, a focus on output is a better solution for all – after all, if the work has been completed and completed well, does it matter how you got there? But above all, upkeeping employee productivity requires a shift in culture, which leads us neatly on to the next section.

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Creating a purpose-driven culture

On your journey to helping employees feel emotionally connected, culture is the lifeblood that runs throughout your organization and underpins every element – from employee wellbeing, to productivity. But culture alone is no longer enough and it must be purpose-driven, to help employees feel like they're a part of something bigger.

In a nutshell, a purpose-driven culture can be defined as the driving force behind the actions an enterprise takes day in, day out. Or the meaning behind the work and the reason your company exists, besides to make money. In an ideal world, this purpose will speak to people on a personal level and align your values with their own.

In defining your purpose, however, clarity and consistency is key. It's important to be succinct so people can grasp and become affiliated with it. But it's equally as vital that it's fed from the top down and lived and breathed by every person in an organization.

Similar to purpose in relation to the customer experience, it's also not enough to simply say you're acting in a certain way. Purpose isn't powerful when it's disingenuous, and in this age of transparency, employees will see straight through it – and more often than not, start considering whether they belong at the company.

And this has only been exacerbated since the start of COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, people were interested in fancy offices, with gyms, free lunches and various work perks. Today, COVID-19 has put us back in touch with that's most important to them, be it family, health, or job security.

In response, as people go back out into the world, they're going to be seeking to sustain importance in their lives, extending to the work that they do. Future generations in particular will be more likely to find jobs that offer a sense of security and purpose.

But of course, challenges arise when we consider our new world of work – how can you convey a sense of purpose and culture to hybrid, dispersed teams? Once again, it must come from the top and trickle down to every layer of an organization. Fortunately, you don't have to do it alone, and technology is a powerful tool to support a purpose-driven culture.

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One such way this is already happening is with the use of workflows, whereby people aren't just bogged down in their day-to-day, because seeing the bigger picture via workflows shows that you really are a part of something larger and a vital piece of the puzzle. Similarly, AI and automation is being adopted at breakneck speed, to remove mundane, manual tasks and free up workforces to focus on more critical and fulfilling responsibilities.

And technology will also be key to reimagining workspaces, be it virtual or in-person, to ensure everyone has the same capabilities to communicate and collaborate, regardless of where they're working. Perhaps most significantly, however, it's technology that is driving the delivery of personalized experiences, to ensure people can maintain a sense of emotional connection.

Insights from:

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Ensuring consistent employee experiences

As we begin to see a hybrid way of working, the challenge will be ensuring this is achieved across both the physical and digital workplace. The key to continuing this success will be leveraging technology and human-centric solutions to support anything and everything from wellbeing, to establishing a purpose-driven culture.

Ultimately this will help you give your employees richer, more engaging experiences across every communications touchpoint, so they are never disconnected and are joined in your company's collective purpose.

Get in touch to see how we can help you reimagine the experiences you deliver to your employees.



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