

Trends and Ideas: The Employee Experience

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped every facet of society. Since 2020, rarely anything has been able to remain the same from pre-pandemic days, especially businesses. Brian Michael Jenkins states in a TIME article that “Pandemics have always frayed the social fabric, disrupted economies, deepened social divides, and intensified prejudices, leaving behind psychological scars” (Michael Jenkins, 2023). Many businesses and organizations are still trying to adapt to this new normal by operating in trial-and-error mode, trying to leverage incorporating old practices and adopting new ones to meet the needs of both employees and consumers. A recurring trend that seems to continue to be at the forefront of business objectives four years later, is how to invest in the employee experience.

Trend: The Employee Experience

Early in the pandemic, businesses faced the great resignation, with many employees leaving their jobs, changing careers, and job-hopping because they felt underpaid, not respected by employers, and saw little to no opportunity for advancement (Parker & Horowitz, 2022). This caused businesses to reevaluate their values and operations, with many of their target audiences of Gen-Z and millennials emphasizing that a business’s ethics and overall practices such as DEI commitment, flexibility in work, and two-way communication determine their loyalty and engagement (Kumar, 2023). Thus, prompting many companies to place employee experience at the forefront of their objectives versus focusing primarily on consumers.

For example, the children's clothing company Primary implemented a four-day workweek to combat the stressors their employees faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Fox, 2022). Julian Lute, the senior strategic advisor at Great Place To Work, believes that at the basic level when an employee is trusted to do their job and have leaders who are fair and respect

them, it can create a positive employee experience (Hastwell & Kitterman, 2022). In fact, employees are four times more likely to remain at a company when there is a high-trust leader, 2.7 times more likely to stay at a company if they feel their work serves a purpose, and 2.2 times more likely to stay if they feel a sense of pride and connection to the company's mission and practices (Great Place To Work, n.d.).

Although great progress has been made toward improving the employer experience, there are still some old habits that many businesses are struggling to let go of. Some examples include return-to-office (RTO) mandates, spontaneous mass layoffs, and lack of fair wages and benefits. These behaviors can make workers feel like more of a liability than an asset to a company and lower morale for current and potential employees. The best way for businesses to ensure the employer experience is positive and thriving is to focus on rooted in six practices: trust, respect, camaraderie, fairness, credibility, and employee pride (Hastwell & Kitterman, 2022). Some ways businesses can implement these practices are through flexible work schedules, committing to corporate social responsibility initiatives such as DEI and transparency, and simply listening to the needs of employees and taking action.

Case Study 1: Wegmans

Employees want to feel integrated into a business's model and seen as a vital element to its success. Wegmans Food Market is a U.S. grocery food chain with over 53,000 employees and was ranked in 2023 as the number one best place to work in the retail industry by Fortune (Great Place To Work, 2024). Wegmans, which is a family-owned company, emphasizes its mission to its employees of "helping families live healthier, better lives through food" (Great Place To Work, 2024). Based on research, their goal is to not only focus externally on the quality of products they sell but to ensure internally, that there is a quality of work and experiences

employees can have. In 2023, employees were surveyed and 95 percent felt connected to the mission, ultimately positively impacting their engagement at work (Great Place To Work, 2024). Furthermore, close to 10 percent of Wegmans's employees have worked for the company for over 20 years (Great Place To Work, 2024).

At Wegmans, they implement tactics that evoke two-way communication opportunities and connections between employers and employees. The goal is to increase listening capabilities to ensure everyone is heard and can comfortably share concerns and ideas. For example, they have a program called "Ask Bob" that allows employees to send the company's senior vice president of store operations, Bob Farr any recommendations about the business and receive a message from him that is personal to the topic (Great Place To Work, 2024). They also have employees complete a "People Profile" as another avenue to learning more about their employees like their hobbies, interests, and goals and ultimately incorporating it into their tasks (Great Place To Work, 2024).

Wegmans is a prime example of why it is important to establish practices that place employees at the forefront of business along with consumers and selling their products or services. It is evident that the employees at Wegmans feel like a valuable part of the business and the company's leaders want to create a dynamic, positive work environment where everyone's full humanity influences business practices.

Case Study 2: Nationwide Employee Strikes

A key element of the employee experience is fair compensation. Fair compensation can determine if an employee feels valued and is being paid what they deserve. In 2023, many employees across industries went on strike for better wages and improved working conditions. From Boeing to the Writers Guild of America to the United Auto Workers, workers set out to the

picket lines to voice their grievances with their employers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 462,000 workers were on strike in 2023, causing the largest work shortage due to strikes in 20 years (Meyersohn, 2023).

For auto workers, their purpose behind striking was for higher wages due to the C-suite leader's disproportionate increase in compensation, growing over 40 percent in just four years (Associated Press, 2023). The six-week strike in Fall 2023 that included workers from Ford and General Motors was resolved when the United Auto Workers Union agreed to a 33 percent wage increase by April 2028 (Associated Press, 2023). For Hollywood writers and actors, the reasoning behind their strike was similar. They wanted competitive wages and improved working conditions in the face of streaming's fast rise not accounting for fair compensation (Sanchez, 2023). Furthermore, they wanted to ensure that with AI being unregulated, there would be clarity for how it would be used within production (Sanchez, 2023). After 146 days, the strike concluded with the demands of both the WAG and SAG-AFTRA unions receiving increased health and pension caps, increased compensation, streaming participation bonuses, safety from AI, and more (Sanchez, 2023).

Throughout history, strikes have proven to be very influential in negotiations between workers and employers. From this, it is important to note that unions play a pivotal part in ensuring worker's needs and demands are met and ultimately holding companies accountable. Gallup stated in a news release that, "Today's striking workers may have a stronger hand in their negotiations than they would have had in the past given today's elevated public support for unions," (Meyersohn, 2023).

Conclusion

So, why should businesses invest in the employee experience? Well, in the simplest terms, when employees feel seen, heard, and fairly compensated, it speaks to a company's best practices and ultimately increases employee engagement. Financially, when the workforce is very engaged, it can increase a business's profitability by up to 21 percent (Great Place To Work, n.d.). It can also decrease the chances of liability because it creates a framework and standard for business practices that impact employees and trickle down to consumers. The employee experience now holds dominance in the world of business and it is up to companies to either listen to their employees to cultivate a positive work environment or ignore them and face public and financial backlash.

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