The Definition of Employee Experience

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Inspired by my recent podcast conversation with Kevin Green from [Circal](#), I thought I'd write some thoughts on how you define employee experience given the amount of conflicting information on the subject. The podcast isn't out yet but will be soon so watch this space! In the meantime, you can listen to previous [Circal](#) podcasts musing the world of HR with some great guests.

I was also prompted by reading a recent white paper on the subject and seeing that Microsoft has introduced a new product called Viva. Both chose a narrative focused on the digital transformation element of employee experience. But, is employee experience only about digitizing processes, making information accessible via an app, or introducing new ways of working through digital capability? Sure, that could be part of improving the employee experience but it doesn't touch the core of what employee experience (EX) is really about.

The foundations of EX are grounded in the discipline of good design which is where user experience (UX) emerged from, many years before EX was ever conceived. The [Neilsen Norman Group](#) defines UX as:

> "User experience encompasses all aspects of the end-user's interaction with the company, its services, and its products."

What is key here is that user experience is not considered just in terms of a website or the user interface of a digital product which is how it can often be interpreted. It's the holistic understanding of all those interactions a user may have with a company, its products and services. This doesn't mean digital interactions only but any interaction on a user journey that will make the user form a perspective of the company and its brand. Don Norman is quoted by [Interaction Design Foundation](#) as saying:

> "No product is an island. A product is more than the product. It is a cohesive, integrated set of experiences. Think through all of the stages of a product or service – from initial intentions through final reflections, from first usage to help, service, and maintenance. Make them all work together seamlessly."

In terms of employee experience, this means considering how you are viewed by external professionals because if they chose to apply for a job with your organisation, it's likely they know your brand or

they've checked your website to see who you are. They are already forming their 'initial intentions' before applying so EX needs to start before the recruitment stage. Likewise, those 'final reflections' are what an employee leaves with when they offboard but will stay with them long into the future.

Another core aspect of user experience is how an experience makes a user feel. Whether they are delighted by the experience or left feeling disappointed or frustrated if they didn't receive the value they were hoping for. This is where perception and expectations are important to understand and establish with users. As Don Norman says in The Design of Everyday Things:

"Experience is critical, for it determines how fondly people remember their interactions."

Capturing how people feel during their interactions throughout their employee journey should fundamentally be at the centre of employee experience. If you are making assumptions about what employees want and not identifying their needs during pain points in the process, then you're not really embracing EX. Digital tools can be helpful in measuring how people feel in these moments but if you're unable to translate that into an overall experience along with analogue, human, cultural and environmental interactions, then you're missing parts of the puzzle. In HR, we tend to measure behaviours through factors such as engagement, performance and wellbeing to name a few, but we rarely measure emotions to understand the contextual dimension of the behaviours we see at work. How is trust, motivation and feeling proud of working for the organisation assessed through their journey?

Before employee experience came customer experience (CX), which was in turn derived from UX too. Perhaps because we often think of users as customers and we think of our brand from a marketing perspective, the definitions of CX have been closer to the definitions of UX. Gartner defines customer experience as:

"The customer's perceptions and related feelings caused by the one-off and cumulative effect of interactions with a supplier's employees, systems, channels or products."

It refers to perception and how customers feel throughout all interactions. However, if you compare this to definitions of employee experience, here's what we find:

McKinsey - "We define EX as companies and their people working together to create personalised, authentic experiences that ignite passion and tap into purpose to strengthen individual, team and company performance."

CIPD - "Employee experience (otherwise known as employee engagement) is the result of all the interactions an employee has with their employer. It's a specialised field which focuses on creating a great working environment for organisations to get the most out of their people."

Josh Bersin - "The sum total of all the touchpoints an employee has with his or her employer, from the time of being a candidate (active or passive) to becoming an alumnus or alumna."The varying degree of definitions on EX is endless so it's not surprising that many are still confused about what it actually is. Is it the literal sense of the word 'experience'? Is it mapping journeys and trying to identify all interactions? Is it about making everything digital? I guess it's all of that and none of it at the same time. The language in these definitions can often feel intangible for HR professionals.

If you want to embrace employee experience, start simple. You don't need to digitise everything. You don't need big budgets. You don't need to surface every single interaction. You don't need to engineer it. You don't need to worry about what others are doing in delivering experiences as it's about your employees and your context. It's not employee engagement nor employee satisfaction although there are links.

Begin with asking people questions. Find out what problems they experience. Identify which interactions are the most painful for employees and focus your attention there. Ask how they feel during those moments and why so you can define the problems. Then, co-create simple solutions that you can test easily, get feedback and iterate. The problems will be driven by your context. You will realise the value when you measure again and see if they feel differently about that interaction. Replicate and you'll be starting to impact their experience.

If you can increase a positive emotional connection between your employees and the organisation, it will change their perception, how they feel and ultimately improve their employee experience. The problems and solutions should be defined by your employees, not HR or the organisation. **If you want to maximise value, start with the moments when your employees connect with your customers.** It's harder than it seems but if you keep asking, listening, collaborating and learning, you'll be building a culture that will deliver great experiences.

The post "The Definition of Employee Experience" was first published by Lara Plaxton **here**
https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/definition-employee-experience-lara-plaxton/

About Lara Plaxton

Recently co-founded GotDis, a platform for students and graduates to share their dissertation 'blog-style' for others to learn from their knowledge and help promote their potential.
An experienced HR professional who is passionate about understanding people in a business context; both employees and customers to create more meaningful, valuable experiences. Fascinated by the future of work and how an agile mindset, design thinking and digital technology can enhance the workplace to break down silos, work more collaboratively and foster innovation in order to drive the right behaviours.

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