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October 2019

# Getting the employee experience right

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Delivering a great customer or user experience has become critical to achieving competitive advantage in today's digitally-driven economy. It also plays a vital role in building business-enhancing employee engagement and productivity for organizations, especially as companies seek valuable growth in tight labor markets. We heard from both employees and employers about the struggle to improve employee engagement, even as investments in pay, benefits, and other drivers have increased. This valuable employee feedback has given us a new perspective as we heard about the challenges of daily work experiences in addition to the content of workplace programs, practices, or relationships.

Employees' ability to get work done efficiently, to collaborate effectively, and to contribute to meaningful work kept resurfacing during these conversations—all elements of the overall employee experience. Most employees say their workplace technology experiences seldom match their more positive experiences outside work, so employers are also challenged to design and consistently deliver a great employee experience through technology as expectations are high and continue to rise.

But what does employee experience really mean or look like? What drives a great employee experience for people? How can organizations effectively measure the overall employee experience and continuously enhance it to increase attraction, retention, and engagement? These are questions we sought to explore using **Alight's Workforce Mindset® Study.**

## Why focus on employee experience?

While the link between employee engagement and performance is clear, organizations continue to be challenged to drive meaningful increases in employee engagement. This is especially difficult at the individual employee level as many drivers of engagement are not always readily impacted by what the organization controls. Some drivers are impacted by changes in the labor and competitive markets, others by changing social and political dynamics, and still others by an individual's innate characteristics. In a recent Harvard Business Review article by Chamorro-Premuzic, Garrad, and Elzinga, study results show that a significant portion of variability in engagement can be predicted by an individual's personality.[1] The proposition then is that, to increase the overall engagement level, organizations can just hire people who have a more "engageable" personality. Fortunately, the article further illustrates the potential downsides of this narrow strategy to improve engagement and related organizational performance. What these findings and other observations do show is that an individual's engagement is a complex mix of their personality, capability, organizational fit and environment—both inside and outside the company.

So what are leaders supposed to do? Of course, some factors, such as external forces and personality traits cannot be controlled. For organizations to succeed in the future, they must optimize the available engagement from each employee by first optimizing a key workplace facet: the overall employee experience.

## What is employee experience?

The day-to-day, week-to-week, productivity-enabling experiences—both digital and physical—that build on each other over time make up the overall employee experience and can optimize employee engagement and related behaviors. Engaged employees are 6 times more likely to be having a great employee experience than those classified as nearly-engaged. By focusing more directly on the employee experience, organizations can align those experiences to their desired customer experience and overall corporate brand. Clear alignment between internal and external experiences is appealing to younger employees who not only value this alignment, but actively seek companies that fulfill on the promise of doing so. (For more on what Trendwatching has labeled Glass Box Brands, **www.trendwatching.com/quarterly/2017-09/glass-box-brands/.**)

With this in mind, Alight Solutions sought to understand the current state of the overall experience and what drives it through our latest Workforce Mindset® Study. The results reveal that a great employee experience is best expressed as one that fulfills a person's needs and inspires his or her spirit. With a nod to Maslow, a great experience must fulfill important needs around appropriate total rewards, safety and respect, and opportunities to contribute and grow with support and encouragement from those one admires. But a great experience goes one step further to include purpose-driven cultures of energy, aspirational values, and the ability to collaborate and connect not only throughout the organization, but with its customers and outside communities.

### *Engagement versus experience*

Engagement is the measure across a set of behaviors (being an advocate for the company, having a strong desire to stay, and contributing full, discretionary effort) combined with an individual's personality, motivation and market context. The employee experience is the collective set of day-to-day work interactions that enable them to contribute their value fully and efficiently, express their authentic selves at work, and connect with people they respect and enjoy while contributing to a meaningful overall corporate brand and purpose.

Further, the overall experience can be broken down into the employment lifecycle—the journey of pre-hire, hire, onboarding, learning, performing, exiting, advocating/returning and retiring.

## Measuring the overall employee experience

To design and improve the overall employee experience, it has to be measured. Building on existing interviews, focus groups and user experience research, we wanted a simple, standardized, and quantifiable measure that organizations could use consistently. In the Workforce Mindset Study, we tested several different survey items and combinations to measure the perceived overall employee experience. Ultimately, we settled on a composite of items to obtain an overall employee experience score (EXS); this composite incorporated ratings and expectations as they provide stability and predictive appeal.

Results show that about one-quarter (23%) of employees in the U.S. are experiencing a truly great overall employee experience while another 22% are having at least a good one—this leaves over half of U.S. employees facing bad (32%) or to the extreme, awful (23%) experiences. Clearly there is work to be done to improve the score from a mere 23%. Knowing the overall EXS is a good starting point for making improvements.

### *EXS by segments*

| Segment | Overall Employee Experience Score (EXS) |
|---|---|
| U.S. population overall | 23% |
| | |
| Centennials | 37% |
| Millennials (both emerging and established) | 23% |
| Generation X | 25% |
| Baby boomers | 19% |
| | |
| Hourly | 21% |
| Salaried | 25% |
| | |
| Utilities/Telecommunications | 26% |
| Healthcare | 26% |
| Manufacturing & energy | 25% |
| Financial services | 24% |
| Technology | 23% |
| Retail & wholesale trade | 18% |
| Media, entertainment & leisure | 16% |
| | |
| Engaged | 48% |
| Not engaged | 5% |

## What drives the overall employee experience?

Understanding the current state of the overall employee experience is valuable, but in order to make improvements, we need to understand what drives it. Most important is to understand how leaders, managers, corporate functions, and companies overall can impact that perception. We tested many different survey items in the study to measure perceptions of potential impact areas identified from the many qualitative research studies, secondary research, and observations with our clients' employees.

Using the analyses of the study data, we found six key dimensions that drive the overall employee experience. Three of these—career, collaboration, and contribution—focus more on the fulfillment of needs, while the other three—culture, cause, and connection—focus more on the inspiration of the spirit. These are the six dimensions (6Cs) of a great overall employee experience.

A recent article in the Harvard Business Review by Goler, Gale, Harrington and Grant[2] shows that the researchers found similar results of one company, Facebook. They identified career, community and cause as primary employee desires, which give us further confidence in our findings. Our results, as compared to Goler et al., identified additional drivers of the employee experience at play, likely due to the more diverse population and a larger set of measures in our study.

Let's take a closer look at the 6Cs of a great employee experience.

- **Culture.** The quote "Culture eats strategy for breakfast," most often attributed to Peter Drucker, appears to be important when it comes to the overall experience. Culture as a driver of the overall experience centers mostly on the collective—on how the organization's values (specifically articulated or not) are demonstrated by leaders and people, how leaders support a positive culture, create a sense of energy and excitement within the company and quickly act to expel negative behaviors.

- **Career.** This dimension is more focused on the individual and relates to an organization's authentic support for employee work and life goals, plentiful and variant opportunities for professional *and* personal development, strong and demonstrated managerial support for personal success, and how much voice an employee feels he or she has in decisions that matter.

- **Collaboration.** In today's highly dispersed work environment, the ability to work together and across boundaries has become a critical factor in successful innovation and service delivery. Not surprisingly, this dimension incorporates the ease of collaborating with others and the ability to effectively share valuable information. Somewhat more surprisingly, how a company talks/acts internally and what it does/says externally is also a key part of this dimension. This result points to an underlying theme about the importance of authenticity and transparency, both among coworkers as well as between the employee and organization's external value proposition.

- **Cause.** The overall experience is heightened by the level of passion employees feel toward the purpose or mission of the company and how well their personal values align with what they experience, see, or hear as indicators of the company's values. Having pride in the products and services the company delivers is also an important part of the cause dimension.

- **Contribution.** People want to contribute value and be productive, and be recognized for that contribution. This perceived ability to contribute fully is central to a great employee experience. But the ability to fully contribute can often be challenged by obstacles within the workplace — mainly a perceived lack of, or effective access to, enabling and integrated tools, technology, resources or information to do their best work. Further, having a physical work environment that not only enables them to contribute (and likely collaborate), but also provides reinforcement and alignment to the desired culture is a key part of this dimension.

- **Connection.** The fact that the impact analyses identifies and highlights this dimension is likely unsurprising. It is measured by only one item: "I genuinely enjoy spending time with my coworkers." Any experience, be it the employee or customer, is better when it involves people with whom connections can be made, sometimes on a deep level but always honestly and respectfully.

Though all six dimensions impact the making—or breaking—of an overall employee experience, the U.S. employee population represented in this study highlighted the importance of culture, followed closely by career and collaboration. The order and magnitude of these dimensions on the overall experience will vary for different companies, different departments, and even different situations, but by measuring the overall EXS and the key dimensions, priorities for improvements can be identified and improvements set into motion.

## Overall EX drivers



**Culture**
values demonstrated

**Career**
support for growth

**Collaboration**
easy to work across teams

**Cause**
connection to purpose

**Contribution**
enabling tools and technology

**Connection**
coworker support
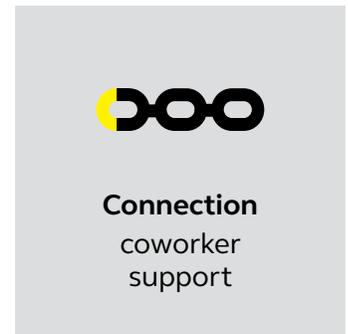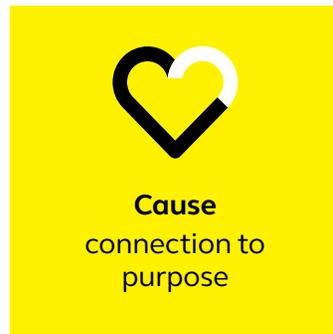
Results from the Workforce Mindset Study show the two lowest items fall into the career and culture dimensions, while the highest fall into the cause and connection dimensions.

## Overall highest and lowest items—by generation

| Strongly agree/agree (high & low in each category shown) | All | Emerging Millennials | Established Millennials | Gen Xers | Baby Boomers |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Career** | | | | | |
| My manager helps me be successful | 46% | 50% | 49% | 43% | 42% |
| I have an appropriate voice in decisions that affect me | 37% | 43% | 39% | 37% | 30% |
| **Collaboration** | | | | | |
| I'm trusted with valuable and relevant information I need or want | 54% | 54% | 56% | 52% | 53% |
| We talk and act internally the same way we talk and act externally | 41% | 44% | 44% | 38% | 39% |
| **Contribution** | | | | | |
| My physical work environment enables me to complete my work effectively | 52% | 48% | 56% | 50% | 53% |
| Processes at this company help me work effectively | 40% | 45% | 40% | 39% | 36% |
| **Culture** | | | | | |
| Leaders consistently demonstrate our values and encourage a positive culture | 41% | 47% | 46% | 36% | 37% |
| There is positive energy and excitement at my company | 37% | 45% | 40% | 34% | 32% |
| **Cause** | | | | | |
| I'm proud of the products/services this company provides | 57% | 56% | 58% | 56% | 59% |
| I feel connected to the purpose or mission of my company | 45% | 44% | 47% | 42% | 45% |
| **Connection** | | | | | |
| I genuinely enjoy the people I work with | 57% | 59% | 57% | 53% | 60% |

Design thinking is human-centered, creative problem solving. It's a way of thinking that empowers people with creative tools, like empathy and experimentation, to address a vast range of challenges.

## Designing the ultimate employee experience

With these priorities identified, one can then turn to tools like design thinking to craft new and/or better experiences to produce the desired organizational outcomes. These outcomes could be related to culture and a plan to articulate more relevant values, or perhaps the aim is to integrate tools to improve collaboration and connection, or focus on technology to unleash contributions more fully.

By applying design thinking and organizing design sprints, organizations can accelerate their timelines to get new experiences into the workplace. Design thinking tools and exercises help to organize complexity and quickly align people and teams to design for the future. For example, a large telecommunications firm identified a breakdown in the recruitment and candidate experience. A diverse team across HR, marketing, and key business functions came together with employees and users to reimagine this experience. They participated in several exercises that integrate with and build on each other, including:

- Developing a 20-year plan (thinking beyond the near term opens up new possibilities more readily)
- Building rapid people profiles, personas, and value maps to ensure deep understanding of the people as well as what the organization delivers
- Mapping the journey from the perspectives of multiple talent personas to identify pain points and opportunities
- Immersing in ideation activities like "How might we?" to help challenge assumptions and reframe ideas
- Using "Fast First Steps" to bring the next action steps rapidly into focus and get moving

These are just a sampling of tools and exercises that can be used and may be effective depending on the particular experience, context and desired outcomes. It's important to note that these tactics can be easily implemented in a short amount of time and create the foundation for ongoing iteration.
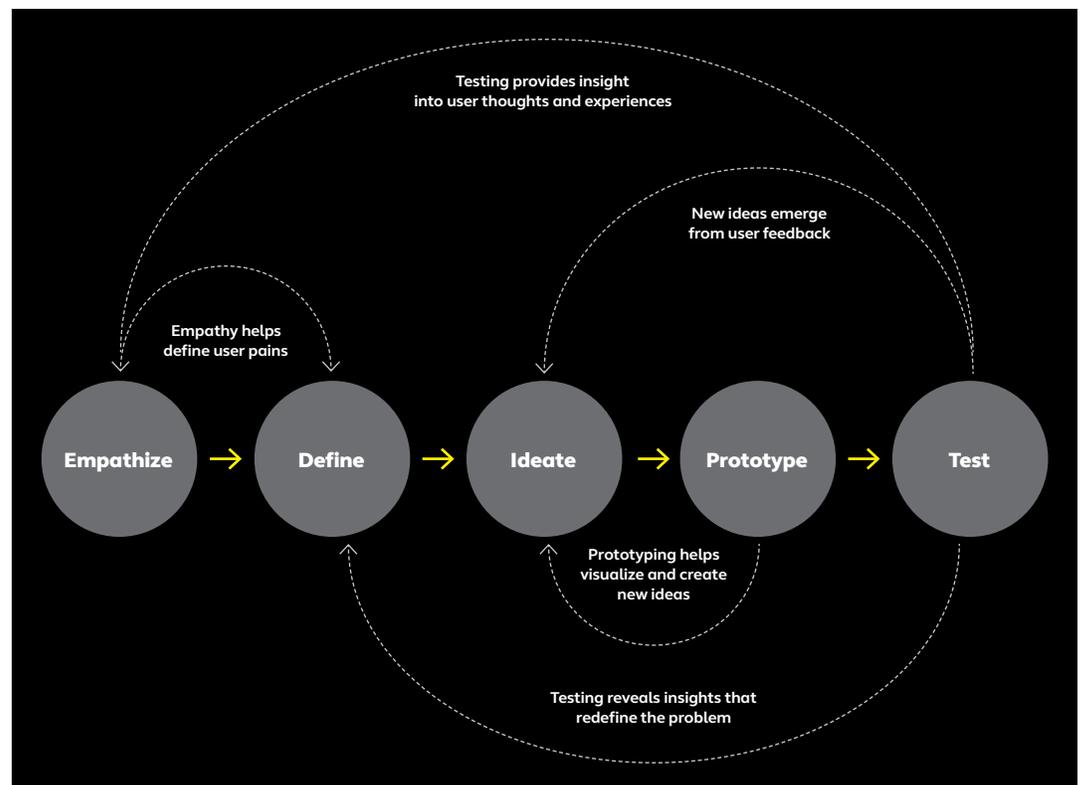
A **value proposition** describes the expectations between a company and its primary audience. It is a promise of value to be delivered. It is also a belief from the customer about how value (benefit) will be delivered, experienced, and acquired.

The value proposition should be "ownable," compelling, differentiating and authentic to the organization and believable for the audience.

An **employee value proposition** (EVP) describes the expectations between a company and its candidates and employees. The fact is that every company has one; it just may not be designed with intention or proactively articulated and expressed effectively.

## Bringing the employee experience to life

Once you've measured the overall experience, identified and quantified the drivers, and applied design thinking to craft new or enhanced journeys within the experience, it's time to deliver. But it's important that those experiences are delivered in line with your employee value proposition and expressed within the context of your brand and your organization's overall purpose.

eBay, a multinational leader and pioneer in the ecommerce space, had just gone through a brand refresh and wanted assistance incorporating this change into the employee experience while making the brand promise real for its employees. Partnering with Alight, eBay developed and launched a creative strategy to bring its EVP— "Live Uniquely You"—to life through experiential brand activation and a compelling photo experience. The launch expressed their new brand attributes while allowing employees to see themselves in the campaign. eBay is now incorporating and connecting those attributes into key employee journeys within the overall employee experience to reinforce who eBay is as a company and its EVP.

Brand
experience

**Candidate
impression**

Interactive

External

THE
BRAND
TRIANGLE

**Employee's
behavior**

Internal

**Company's
values**

Deliver
brand promise

Brand
promise
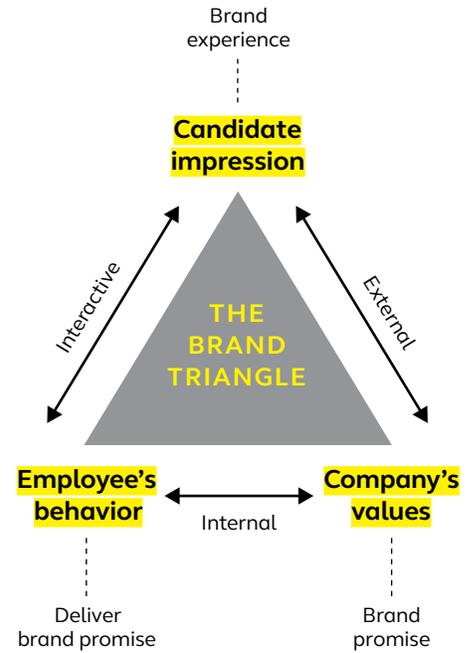
*Purpose-driven and aligned experiences matter*

**62%**

**78%**

**63%**
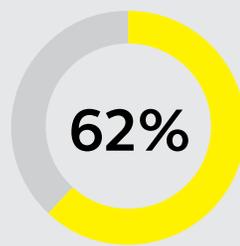
62% of Millennials say it is important for them to be known for making a positive difference in the world[3]
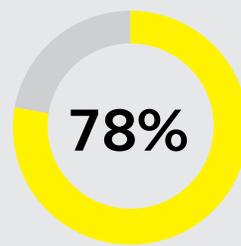
78% say it is important that the values of the business Millennials work for match their personal values[3]
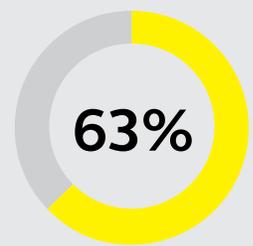
63% more Millennials say the primary purpose of business is "improving society" rather than "generating profit"[4]

## The power of proposition alignment
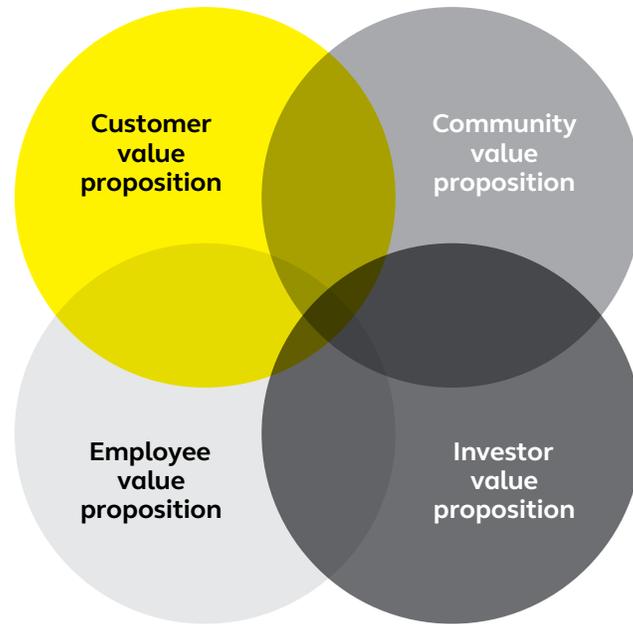


This white paper is based on data and provides new insights and ideas from Alight's 2018 Workforce Mindset Study.

**For more information, download Alight's 2018 Workforce Mindset Study here:**
ideas.alight.com/latest-resources/2018-workforce-mindset-study

Employees that see authentic, consistent, and positive connection and alignment among key value propositions—customer, employee, community/society, investor/owner—are more likely to be engaged. In fact, they are 8.5 times more likely to be engaged employees.[5] When an employee experience reinforces how the company expresses their brand and value, employees are also more likely to advocate for and recommend their company to others, especially to customers and candidates that companies so desperately seek to achieve desired growth.

Through a short set of workshops and related exercises, organizations can often build or reestablish a desired alignment of values, a powerful and differentiating set of propositions, and an appealing and compelling expression of not only what the company is about, but also how the overall experience is designed to deliver it.

The overall employee experience, including its design, delivery, and overall expression, will be key to driving greater attraction, optimal engagement, authentic alignment, superior competitive advantage, and related business performance over time. How is your experience shaping up?

## Considering your employee experience design

So you're ready to evaluate the employee experience at your organization and make adjustments as necessary. Here are some key questions to get you started.

- What do candidates and employees think of your overall experience and what drives that view most?
- What are the biggest pain points for your most critical roles or segments within your organization? Why?
- Considering your business strategy/model, what should your desired employee experience look and feel like?
- How aligned is your employee experience with your critical value propositions and corporate brand?
- How well are the digital tools within the employee experience matching consumer-grade experiences and expectations?

**Sources**
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2  https://hbr.org/2018/02/people-want-3-things-from-work-but-most-companies-are-built-around-only-one
3  Kantar Futures/American Express Study 2017
4  Deloitte Millennial Study 2018
5  O.C. Tanner 2018 Global Culture Survey