

Engaging workers as consumers

TECHNOLOGY HAS TRANSFORMED THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMPANIES AND CONSUMERS. SO WHY DON'T MORE ORGANIZATIONS USE IT TO BETTER ENGAGE WITH EMPLOYEES?

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ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN JAY CAUBAY

IT SEEMS ALMOST everyone is focused on digital transformation.¹ And while the shape and scope may differ by organization, the potential benefits of implementing intelligent workflows, mastering data, adopting platform approaches, and a seamless experience are becoming increasingly apparent and well understood. That especially applies to consumers. Recommendation engines underpin websites, not only empowering us with information, but often improving our customer experience, increasing sales and satisfaction, and fostering engagement and loyalty.² Similarly, organizations such as Netflix are leveraging broad data sets to better meet our needs, not only when it comes to recommending movies and television shows we may like, but increasingly for the development of original programming they know we want.³

All of which begs the question: If technology has transformed how companies interact with customers, can it do more to revolutionize their relationships with the workforce? After all, workers share the same basic marketing-funnel journey: We consider opportunities, evaluate potential companies, commit to working for an organization, and the company then either earns our trust and loyalty, or we seek a better opportunity. Yet, if digital strategies are not thoughtfully implemented, rather than encouraging deeper engagement with organizations, in many cases the opposite happens. Efforts to incorporate technology into the workplace often cause insecurity and anxiety rather than improving the experience, with communications technologies, in particular, creating an “always on” environment that can contribute to burnout, loneliness, and feelings of isolation.

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Firms should understand the full employee, just as marketers have learned to understand and address the full individual. While it can be argued anxiety, burnout, and loneliness are personal considerations, these generally have meaningful *professional* ramifications for business and human-resources leaders. They can lead to undesirable attrition, decreased levels of engagement, and lower productivity. The good news is many of the strategies leaders can adopt to foster greater employee engagement are right before their eyes. It’s possible to draw from consumer best practices and human-centered design to identify digital transformation techniques and strategies to improve the workforce experience and mitigate the potential negative effects of technology in the workplace.⁴ Additionally,

by recognizing workers—like consumers—do not all have the same needs⁵ and using the power of predictive analytics, enterprises can understand employees individually to diagnose and identify intervention situations.

A transformed customer experience

While we often hear about the negative ramifications of social media and, to a lesser extent, consumer use of technology, there are notable bright spots. We today have exponentially greater and easier *access to information and services*, with the growth of online retail a prime example. Online sales of non-food items soared to 24.1 percent in December 2017, from 11.6 percent five years earlier,⁶ in line with the increasing convenience around both avoiding crowds and parking, and frictionless access to information allowing greater insight into products, services, and prices to aid decision-making.

While technology has made it easy to do things such as shopping and working remotely, humans are, by design, social beings who desire relationships.⁷ Technology has opened multiple *communication channels*, redefining the nature and scope of relationships available. For instance, video technology has allowed the quality of interactions to become richer, enabling deeper and more personal relationships to flourish. In the customer–firm relationship, this same wider and richer communication net enables individuals to make valuable connections with other solution providers that otherwise would not be possible or feasible, and also build relationships with everyday brands and their parent firms.⁸

This has also enhanced consumer–firm relationships in terms of *enabling customers* to interact with products and brands and have a say in what a product or product experience should look like. Recent examples include Chick-fil-A’s co-creation of online content via its Cow Campaign,⁹ and Monopoly’s online voting poll that

it used to determine new board pieces.¹⁰ Co-creation has been found to not only increase consumer engagement and brand value, but also identify new product innovation ideas and ultimately create a competitive advantage.¹¹

Finally, one of the brightest spots in social media has been the way it's facilitated *community-building* among previously unconnected populations. People have found others like them via digital platforms—whether they share interests, hobbies, or even rare diseases—and formed networks and support groups.¹² Likewise, consumers have been able to move beyond building relationships with brands to now build brand communities composed of other product users, and celebrate stories and shared experiences with these like-minded passionate brand advocates. Technology has removed the limitations of distance and time.

Overcoming technology-related anxiety

Before pushing to better engage workers using these consumer-based practices, companies should address a factor that may hamper success: technology-related anxiety. It persists at a societal level¹³ and with many workers,¹⁴ manifesting primarily in two ways: indirectly, through the perception technology may change or eliminate jobs,¹⁵ and directly through the emergence of our “always on” society.

INDIRECT ANXIETY: A ROBOT WILL REPLACE ME!

Research has shown that 60 percent of all occupations comprise at least 30 percent of activities that are technically automatable, based on currently demonstrated technologies.¹⁶ The potential for this disruption, and the unease many workers may feel about their ability to adapt, can be a significant stressor for many. While some of this stress is unavoidable, organizations can help mitigate some

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of it through better communication—using digital tools.

One of the most critical factors when trying to combat anxiety is communicating authentically, sincerely, and with empathy. There is a positive message here: that despite the increasing incorporation of machines into the workforce for much of the repetitive or mundane aspects of work, there's a unique opportunity for humans to redefine their roles in the workplace around aspects that are uniquely human, such as imagination, creativity, curiosity, and emotional and social intelligence.¹⁷ That means the need for the human element, or human skills, is not going away. Of course, delivering this message is a tall task for email communications. However, marketers who embrace *authentic and transparent communications*—sharing the good, bad, and ugly, or showing products in a realistic light—can attest to its benefits, and have even found consumers can subsequently undertake messaging and marketing for them.¹⁸ Deloitte's research into the factors that contribute to a positive employee experience indicate transparency and honesty are typically critical, as is trust in an organization's leadership.¹⁹ In today's virtual environment, with many workers spread across a multitude of locations, leaders can take advantage of robust video technology to allow the tone and energy of their messages to be heard by their workers. Webcasts or pre-recorded videos all bring a depth that can be well suited to calming employee anxiety. The critical point is authenticity needs to truly be, well, authentic, with the

company's overarching philosophy incorporated into the fabric of all its operations and interactions. Online retailer Zappos is an example of a company that has focused on creating a reputation of authenticity with customers and its workforce by interweaving its service philosophy through every aspect of the organization.²⁰ Its call-center team members are given extensive autonomy and decision-making authority to meet customer needs without supervisor approval, with examples including sending get well flowers to a customer's relative at Zappos' expense, and staying on unusually lengthy calls (one even lasted more than 10 hours!).²¹

Once a message has been crafted and developed, technology provides a *multitude of ways* to deliver it to workers. Just look at consumer brands, which engage with us in our morning inbox (usually offering 15 percent off!) and in our social-media feeds, always repeating and reinforcing the same message. Yet often workplace communications are delivered once and through one vehicle. Among marketers, a long-held belief has been that a consumer needs to receive a message a minimum of three times—ideally in different formats—to cut through the clutter, create awareness, and prompt action.²² It stands to reason that firms should put the same multi-message and form-factor thought into internal communications strategies.

DIRECT ANXIETY: LOOK HOW HARD I'M WORKING!

On a daily level, technology has created an always-on culture where workers can feel pressure to be constantly available to colleagues and working at all hours. This can lead to both anxiety and burnout. Compared with 20 years ago, people are twice as likely to say they are always exhausted, according to the General Social Survey of 2016, and close to half of all people say they are often or always exhausted due to work—a 32 percent increase over the same period. Solutions often focus on using technology to create digital boundaries—turning off notifications, limiting newsfeed check-ins, or eliminating screen time.²³ However, the consumer space provides other strategies.

First, time spent on administrative tasks may be reduced by reimagining work through applying advanced, digital solutions with an ease, simplicity, and productivity focus. To maximize sales, many retail organizations have streamlined the online process to an extraordinary degree. From “buy now” buttons to “buy it again” reminders and using cookies to intelligently push ads to prospective shoppers, retailers can remove friction and steps from the buying process. And by providing guidance on popular and highly rated items in a product category while not forcing a decision, retailers try to guide consumers toward easy options, alleviating the effort required to make a purchase decision. Employers can provide easy access to information, offer similar default options, and enable the ability to streamline their most common interaction points with workers, such as onboarding, knowledge and data access, and routine transactions.

Second, organizations can broaden access to information to enable employee self-determination. Just as retailers have made product information available and message boards have organically cropped up, employers can supplement “official” sources of information with employee-driven content. Given the workforce is, perhaps, best positioned to provide perspectives on certain aspects of their experience, offer advice, and answer questions in a way that is relatable (and empowering), employers are wise to create forums for them to do so. While some companies fear negative feedback, they should recognize that criticism is inevitable and demonstrate their confidence in their own talent experience by hosting such open forums—which have the added benefit of increasing the workforce's perceptions of the firm's authenticity.

Finally, burnout can be mitigated by providing a positive and valuable talent experience, tapping into the specific needs most workers articulate around growth and development. Companies use predictive analytics to better understand customers and micro-target them with tailored messages to address their specific needs and situations, as well as to identify opportunities for additional sales and services.²⁴ Similarly, employers can mine information (from

talent surveys as well as operational data) to understand employee preferences and needs and curate a personalized talent experience. For example, workers beginning new roles or starting assignments in a new part of the organization could have information such as learning courses, articles, and podcasts pushed to them to help set them up for success. This data may also help firms identify employees at risk for burnout or the processes and factors that cause it, and intervene before their well-being diminishes—or they leave.

Engaging workers like consumers

Most organizations already have at their disposal the tools critical to building external relationships—using them internally just requires thinking differently. Here are some broad actions employers can consider as they attempt to digitally transform their internal organization to alleviate anxiety, improve engagement, and build communities:

- **Belonging.** Consider offering workers the flexibility to form online communities organically based on shared interests, whether that be professional interests or personal passions. Employers can draw from consumer marketing strategies for guidance on how to direct and encourage communities, such as Sony’s PlayStation “Countdown to Launch” initiative, which uses new content to generate excitement and communities around the launch of new games.²⁵ This notion of self-directed, organic communities can be critical; in this type of environment, workers are more likely to feel that they can be their authentic selves at work, leading to higher engagement and performance.
- **Connection.** Leverage technology to remove geography and time zones as barriers to connections among employees and teams. Positive stories from social media often focus on how friends are better able to maintain and strengthen relationships across the globe. Technology can allow colleagues to better maintain relationships



over time and space, creating a stronger attachment and loyalty to their co-workers and allowing them to have the social interactions they desire. As a side benefit, these long-lasting ties can also enhance the informal development and capabilities growth of individuals who may be better able to share knowledge across teams.

- **Authenticity.** Connections can be meaningful... or superficial. Expressing an enterprise’s values or taking a stand on a potentially controversial issue can be a step toward creating a more meaningful connection. Consider the recent decision by a popular sports apparel company to feature a controversial sports figure in its advertising

campaign, or the longstanding policy of a large restaurant chain to remain closed on Sundays. While such moves can be polarizing, the loyalty and engagement they create may well be worth it in the long term. Likewise, for companies that truly want engaged workers who feel fully embraced within the organization, providing and encouraging an environment of authentic two-way sharing is important. So often—at least historically—workers feel they need to toe a party line or water down what they say. Many also feel bombarded by corporate-speak rather than what’s really going on. While organizations should obviously vet and wordsmith external communications, there’s value in speaking plainly and honestly—both internally and externally.

- **Deep relationships.** Use technology to enrich communications with more vibrant media, such as audio and video. Just as traditional advertising is losing ground to more innovative and creative forms of messaging, workers are likely to find nontraditional and more interactive forms of work communications a welcome change from emails or terse instant messages. Audio and video chat can enhance the quality of social interactions, enabling workers to form deeper personal relationships with one another, conferring meaning and depth to their relationships, and reducing loneliness.
- **Broad interactions.** Let technology act as an *indirect enabler* for a wide range of experiences organizations want to deliver to workers to help

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address anxiety and other potentially adverse consequences of the virtual world such as detachment and loneliness. Just as consumers love recognition, consider the same for worker accomplishments around both big and small moments that matter—such as promotions, the first 90 days after onboarding, or completing a project. Technology can deliver recognition seamlessly, immediately, and (if appropriate) publicly. And if it’s easier to recognize and show appreciation for one another, it’s probably more likely to happen.

- **Micro-targeting.** While great strides are currently being made by some enterprises in better connecting with workers via the development of personas (for example, manager, high potential, new hire, executive, contingent worker),²⁶ one-on-one relationships are still required, and technology can help. Just as companies embrace micro-targeting strategies with consumers—to the extent that consumers may feel marketers know them better than some of their closest friends—firms can utilize technology and predictive analytics to better understand and communicate with individuals or teams.

Parting thoughts

Technology is here to stay, and employers have an opportunity to embrace and incorporate its benefits internally as they have externally. Best practices from the way digital has transformed the relationship between companies and consumers have the potential to guide that journey, increasing engagement, well-being, and ultimately firm success. Yet there are some important considerations to remember.

First, unless companies eliminate anxiety associated with technology, even the most wonderful digital transformation strategy may fall flat.²⁷ Second, messaging strategies are just as important as implementation strategies. Further, companies should put the same level of thought and effort

into internal communications as they do external communications. Third, the experience should be across all channels with physical opportunities mixed with digital—just as it is for consumers. And finally, organizations should understand the importance of choice and individual preferences. Workers should be guided toward digital transformation without foisting it upon them—they need choices and guidance, but get to have the final say.

Lasting transformations take time. Revolutionizing engagement between companies and consumers didn't happen overnight, and it wasn't without hiccups and hurdles. But recognizing the fundamental nature of the employer-worker relationship has changed—and, with it, the workforce social contract—allows companies to embrace the opportunities presented by digital technologies and again rewrite the psychological contract that underpins how we all spend a large part of our lives. ●

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