The employee experience is a secret weapon in the talent war.

The title of this article could easily bring to mind some infamous words spoken by tennis star John McEnroe: ‘You cannot be serious!’ The HR function in every business, particularly in healthcare, is challenging. Thanks to the dynamic nature of people, daily firefighting and conflicting priorities are generally the norm. In such an environment, it can be tough to fulfil the usual functions of the job — never mind find time to think about the experience that’s being created for employees.

The good news is that trying to dedicate unavailable time to pondering how to improve the employee experience may not be needed. Indeed, it’s quite possible to create a long-lasting connection with employees the same way a business establishes its bond with customers. First and foremost, it’s important to understand two key principles that drive the results: the whole company must be part of the effort, and that effort requires regular, personalized and strong communication. It’s not just something to add to HR’s ‘to do’ list.

Brand + EVP = Trust

For almost every company, success is wholly dependent on its people. This relationship is often understood at the board level, but rarely given the continuous attention, effort and investment to make it truly meaningful. While the board needs to create strong and relevant vision and values, even more, its members need to walk the talk together as leaders of change — rather than figureheads for the cause.

Creating an employer value proposition (EVP) is, relatively speaking, quite easy. In essence, it’s defining what the company stands for, how it should be seen in the marketplace, and why people will want to be a part of it. The harder part is communicating the relevant purpose of these values — including using the right personality to make an emotional and intellectual connection with employees.

‘Convincing’ is the operative word for the intended effect of these communications. Thanks to ready access to information, employees have never been more empowered. They demand authenticity and want companies to respect their needs. It’s not OK for their employer to dictate terms or conditions, and if employees don’t like what they see or hear, they won’t stick around.

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A paragraph in a brochure will ring hollow on its own. What people want from their employee experience is genuine work-life balance — not sweeteners.

In order to win hearts and minds, the EVP has to be experienced at every touchpoint within the company.

Move from silos to shared goals

The HR function can steer employees’ experience of the EVP, but needs help in establishing it: an understanding of what people want, how best to deliver it, and whether or not it’s working. In other words, marketing basics interwoven with internal communication expertise is the way forward.

The big power brands have known the intrinsic connection between ‘customer experience’ and brand loyalty for decades. They understand the importance of meticulously connecting every touchpoint, ensuring quality and service align with their brand promise, and the experience is simple, personal and long-lasting.

Applying this approach successfully in the workplace calls for a working partnership. In order for that partnership to be effective, it must be supported by strong communication across all departments: clinical, medical affairs, internal communication, marketing, information technology, finance, operations, legal, and others.

The responsibility for employee engagement usually sits entirely with HR. While that’s probably where the heart of the initiative lives, the heartbeat must be felt throughout the organization. Unfortunately, this is a challenge that’s too often siloed. Other departments must be actively involved in helping strengthen engagement, or the employee experience will be fragmented: better in some areas, worse in others, with the EVP lost somewhere in the middle.

In the last two years, the employee experience has arguably superseded employee engagement as the hottest HR buzzword. And for good reason. Employee engagement is the end goal, but it’s created through the experiences that employees have every day — the sum of how they feel about every interaction with the organization. It’s clear that engagement can only happen if employees have a consistently positive experience of their workplace environment and culture.
Start with the simple things

There’s no hiding that fact that building trust from a positive employee experience, bolstered by a strong employer brand and EVP, is a sizeable initiative. So it helps to start small and aim big. Success begins with thinking about how to improve HR processes; better communicating certain labor-intensive tasks. A good starting point might also be gathering stronger recruitment results through communicating every reason to join the organization, beyond pay and benefits.

What’s important is to pick a goal and demonstrate value with tangible outcomes, ideally working with another department in the process. From there, the focus shifts, using this experience to help drive further change throughout the business, in partnership with peers from other disciplines.

Chucking stuff at the wall and seeing what sticks won’t cut it. But keeping a watchful eye on the impact of efforts will produce valuable insights that support momentum.

Surveys can be a potent ally for this purpose but most companies don’t use them. When they do, it’s typically an annual employee satisfaction survey that receives a relatively low response. And the results are rarely communicated or acted upon.

In a culture of collaboration and trust, feedback is not only welcome, it’s sought after. As consumers, people can barely complete a transaction without being asked by the vendor, ‘How did we do?’ Consider the experience of ordering from Amazon, booking a cab from Uber or staying at an Airbnb. The quest to assess is even happening more frequently among smaller, local businesses.

Meanwhile, the internal corporate world is largely overlooking this crucial opportunity. Many HR functions still operate on the premise that no feedback is good feedback. Instead, they need to see this exercise for what it’s become: a way to focus on the behaviors they want and need to change in order to stay competitive. When the company pulls together, closing ranks in the mission to create a better employee experience, a victory in the war for talent is within reach.

6 STEPS TO PROVIDING A GREAT EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

1. **Make a good first impression** — communicate an employer brand that clearly and consistently demonstrates the company’s values, personality and culture

2. **Embrace the early days** — use onboarding to ensure employees understand their job role; how it fits within the bigger scheme, why it’s valuable to the company and what they ‘get’ for their contributions

3. **Listen and learn** — informally and/or formally, continually gather insights on what makes employees tick and what turns them off

4. **Get everyone on board** — make sure managers, who are highly visible, act as employer brand advocates and ambassadors

5. **Keep it real** — use data, trends and behavioral insight to personalize and empower the employee experience, tailoring messages to address individual needs and interests

6. **Prove it again and again** — from hire to retire, treat every employee interaction as an opportunity to connect emotionally and intellectually, and communicate with passion, personality and purpose

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Matt crafts messages and creates campaigns that help employers think strategically, emotively and intelligently about engaging their people. His goal for clients is an employee experience that connects the dots between the business, HR, total rewards and benefits strategy.