

A photograph of a man with a beard, wearing a dark blue sweater, holding a baby in a grey and white patterned shirt. They are in an office environment with a laptop and a stack of papers visible in the background. The man is looking down at the baby with a gentle expression.

Deeper Dive into Employee Experience

Recap of April 22, 2020 webcast

Moving from recovery to rebound

The pandemic crisis is a universal moment that matters. We are asking employees to function in new environments, think in new ways and act differently. Doing so, impacts how they experience work and feel about their role and their future; it impacts how leaders show up and, ultimately, it determines how the business pivots and performs. The approach organizations take to balance business sustainability with employee experience decisions will be key to accelerating their path from recovery to rebound.

The employee experience is the sum of all the touchpoints and moments that matter between employees and their employer. It resides at the intersection of a superior customer experience and outstanding business performance. Our research shows that companies with more effective employee experience outperform their peers in the areas of top-line growth, bottom-line profitability and return to shareholders.

Restoring stability is all about putting the employee at the center. There are three employee experience priorities that everyone can act on:

1. **Knowing where your people are on the change curve,**
2. **Being clear as to what matters as you lead the employee experience change,**
3. **Determining how you need leaders to show up.**

Guideposts for the journey

Based on our work, we observe CHROs learning the following lessons as they move towards a reset:

- It's essential to **develop a new muscle** that enables HR leaders to be **ambidextrous** in order to both triage and plan ahead at the same time.
- **One size does not fit** all when it comes to resetting the employee experience. The employee experience will feel different based on where your employees live.
- CHROs must have the **courage to rewrite the rules** in reset. This may involve letting go of sacred cows. For example, one organization made the decision to accelerate changes around their performance management process, which they had debated for years.
- Key to an employee experience recovery plan will be the ability to **see around blind corners** to uncover and address employee needs.

Navigating the change curve

The first step on the journey from recovery to rebound involves plotting where your people are along the change curve and determining where you need to move them on this journey. Organizations might consider holding a workshop to map moments that matter for different employee segments. It's critical to cover the basics: helping your people understand what's happening, being clear on how work is organized, sorting out uncertainties around pay and demonstrating how your organization is going to support people. Next, organizations need to reestablish strong connections with an added emphasis on elements like inclusion, voice, capability and collaboration.

The challenge is that this journey doesn't necessarily follow a linear path. As we plan for recovery and returning to work, we should anticipate that we will still be navigating the change curve in new environments with new restrictions.

An evidence-based model

Willis Towers Watson has developed an evidence-based model demonstrating the factors underpinning a high-performance employee experience. Our research reveals that employees are looking for two fundamental experiences from work:

1. **A sense of connection to people and purpose,**
2. **The opportunity to make a meaningful contribution, and to grow and be rewarded accordingly.**

Along the core pillars of employee experience – purpose, work, reward and people – our research uncovered the 12 components of a high-performance employee experience, which we group into three categories.

- **Essentials.** At the foundational level are the “essentials” – understanding, organization, fair pay and support. These are the components all companies need to get right, but do not necessarily differentiate high-performance organizations.

During COVID-19, the essentials help companies keep the business operating effectively, reorganize work and working arrangements, and provide support to managers and employees. For example, we have seen many organizations rapidly deliver digital communications reminding employees of the resources available to support wellbeing and remote working. This also involves providing managers with additional training and support to clarify their role and their team's role in restoring stability.

- **Emphasis.** At the next level are the “emphasis” components – inclusion, voice, capability and collaboration. These topics focus on personal agency and ensuring employees feel included. Companies that excel in these areas begin to pull away from the global average.

To excel in the emphasis areas, employers need to focus on employee listening efforts. As teams return to new work environments and expectations, formal modes of assessing and understanding the employee experience, like pulse surveys and virtual focus groups, will help employers prepare for return to work stress points, and provide a clear direction and paths for actions. At this stage, it may also be a good time to considering reskilling employees as new ways of working are introduced, and to emphasize inclusion and diversity efforts.

- **Excellence.** The final four components – inspiration, drive, growth, trust – are where high-performance organizations truly excel. These companies inspire connections, and stress mission and purpose. They create a sense of drive through strong customer focus and marketplace agility. These organizations provide growth opportunities to fuel employees' ambitions. And they engender deep trust in senior leadership effectiveness.

What are the practical steps organizations can take to progress from the essentials and emphasis areas to excellence?

Hallmarks of excellence

Moving from essentials to excellence is all about putting in place an employee experience that will drive **superior customer satisfaction and improved financial results**. The excellence stage emphasizes an environment focused on quick, ongoing problem-solving, an open change-ready mindset and continuous two-way listening. This results in an experience where everyone is contributing to the needed change.

Critical to achieving this experience are the change masters. Our research shows that these leaders adapt in an agile way to a changing environment and embrace a human-centric approach.

The change masters excel in the following excellence areas:

- **Inspiring a future vision.** This involves inspiring and energizing employees regarding how the organization is dealing with change.

- **Anticipating customer needs.** Here the change masters maintain a strong line of sight to any changes in customer behaviors and attitudes. In addition, they anticipate products and services that customers will value.
- **Recognizing top performance.** Change masters achieve excellence in terms of work performance while also avoiding a loss in productivity.
- **Embracing an authentic concern for employee wellbeing.** Leaders check in regularly with employees and are empathetic to different employee situations. They also model integrity. Employees feel greater levels of trust in organizations when they see leaders and the business as a whole dealing with all stakeholders with integrity.

Leadership expectations

The overarching expectation of today's leaders is that they will implement needed change, now and into the future, to ensure a sustainable reset. Specific leadership expectations change over time as organizations move from recovery to rebound.

- Expectations during COVID-19. Today leaders are expected to be **crisis handlers** who react to issues as they arise and deal decisively with crisis situations. These leaders make quick decisions and take responsibility for big decisions. Crisis handlers understand what causes the feeling of stress. And they lead others to address challenges head on. Additionally, crisis handlers identify where there are shortfalls between expectations and actual performance, and work with their teams to overcome these gaps.

During the crisis, leaders also need to act as **facilitators**, responding to the needs of others and taking a team-oriented view. They put initiatives in place (e.g., video conferencing efforts) that bring people together and encourage collaboration to achieve team goals.

- Expectations coming out of the crisis. Going forward, leaders are expected to serve as **administrators** who focus on the quality of work while also maintaining high activity levels as well as **change agents** who readily accept new challenges and cope well with uncertainty. These leaders regard change efforts as an opportunity to increase and improve skillsets.

At this stage, leaders are also expected to guide employees in refocusing on core service and product delivery. This involves ensuring new risk management practices are put in place to guide the organization in the event of a future pandemic. Leaders also set clear productivity targets and communicate them well. Throughout, they model company values. Finally, these leaders are expected to schedule time for reflection and review following a period of fast delivery. Given that the pandemic is a defining leadership moment, new leaders will emerge out of this crisis.

Our evidence-based framework provides a new lens through which to view the employee experience. Given that organizations are facing uncharted territory due to COVID-19, it is important to consider what actions you need to take in order to move from essentials to excellence during this journey.

About Willis Towers Watson

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WTW433915/06/20

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