

Connecting the dots
IN EMPLOYEE LISTENING

Employee Experience: What it Is and Why it Matters

How to evolve your employee
listening program beyond engagement



Employee Experience: What it Is and Why it Matters

More than 90% of organizations today solicit employee feedback. One of the most commonly used vehicles for listening to employees is an employee engagement survey. This wasn't always the case. For decades, organizations relied on measures of job satisfaction to gauge employee sentiment. Over time, researchers discovered that satisfaction didn't necessarily predict business outcomes. As a result, feedback mechanisms shifted to focus on employee engagement. Employee engagement goes beyond satisfaction or happiness, and is defined at Newmeasures as:

Employee engagement is a feeling of *commitment* and *enthusiasm* for one's work that leads to a willingness to exert *discretionary effort*.

Studies by experts such as [Josh Bersin](#) have shown that organizations with engaged employees are more financially successful. Other impacts include greater employee retention, higher productivity, decreased absenteeism, and improved customer experience.

We are currently in the midst of another evolution – this time moving from a sole focus on employee engagement to more holistic listening programs designed to measure, understand, and improve the entire employee experience.

What is Employee Experience?

The employee experience refers to the overall journey an employee has with an organization throughout their tenure, and all the interactions that happen along the way. It encompasses all aspects of the employee's involvement with the company – from the initial recruitment process to the day-to-day work environment, and ultimately, to the exit process. Company culture, facilities, technology, teammates, and management all shape the employee experience. According to experience management experts at Qualtrics:

From the moment prospective employees look at your job opening, to the moment they leave your company, everything that the workers learn, do, see, and feel contributes to their employee experience.

The concept of employee experience (EX) emerged from the field of customer experience (CX). The underlying assumption of customer experience is that the best customer relationships are emotional in nature and achieved when companies both successfully satisfy a need and make interactions pleasurable. Companies working to improve customer satisfaction increasingly began to understand that functions needed to work in concert to design a positive end-to-end experience for customers as they explore, purchase, and use products and services.

Similarly, the most successful companies are now carefully designing and managing key moments in the employee journey. Employee experience management (EX XM) focuses on optimizing these touchpoints to create compelling and differentiating employee experiences.

Who Owns the Employee Experience?

There is often a misconception that the employee experience is “owned” by Human Resources. We disagree. While the HR department plays a vital role in helping to shape and manage the employee experience, no one group can own it. For example, HR is responsible for recruiting, hiring, and onboarding new employees which sets the tone for the rest of the employee experience. However, senior leadership is the only team who can truly drive organization-wide culture change. Further, frontline managers play an especially pivotal role in shaping how employees operate in their work, grow in their careers, and feel supported through challenges. Let’s not forget how the countless interactions employees have with their colleagues directly impact the daily experience as well.

As organizational focus shifts to better understanding the entire employee experience, functions such as IT and Finance are also becoming critically important. When employees don’t have the technology to do their jobs efficiently, or processes and systems (like time and expense tracking) are laborious or broken, the overall experience suffers.

Employee Listening Beyond Engagement

For your organization to master the employee experience, leadership must continuously listen to employees, understand their needs, and adjust with agility.

Moving your listening program beyond engagement means evolving WHY you listen, WHEN you listen, WHAT you ask about, HOW you interpret employee survey data, and WHO you share feedback with. Keep in mind that each of these factors interacts with the others.

Why Listen

For many organizations, formal employee listening consists of an annual all-employee engagement survey. The results from this survey are often used to gauge how well the organization is doing. In other words, the survey tends to be evaluative in nature. While most leaders do care about making changes based on feedback, the ultimate focus is often the engagement score – whether it rises or falls and how it compares to other companies.

Expanding your listening program from engagement to experience involves reframing the “why” from measuring and evaluating to exploring and understanding.

When viewed through the lens of employee experience, listening becomes less about attaining and tracking a specific score and more about uncovering what we don’t know. We need to learn what is negatively impacting the employee experience and take action to fix it.

In a recent [webinar](#) Matt Evans, Head of EX Product Science at Qualtrics, reminded viewers that employees want to make progress. While benefits and perks are nice, most people really just need their organization to remove barriers getting in the way of their responsibilities. This is one reason why we see the employee experience definition expanding to include the technical and process aspects of work in addition to the more traditional human and cultural elements.

When to Listen

While an annual engagement survey provides an important baseline to measure year-over-year trends, it's important not to stop there. After all, the employee experience is not confined to a single timepoint.

At Newmeasures, we encourage the organizations we work with to design a holistic listening strategy that measures pivotal moments across the employee lifecycle. These touchpoints include what it is like to be a candidate, a new hire, and someone exiting the company. In addition, deploying 360 assessments, pulses, and topic-specific surveys like DE&I and Design of Hybrid Work helps to build an accurate reflection of the entire employee experience and inform key decisions for the organization.

Survey tools give everyone the opportunity to share their opinions confidentially, track progress over time, understand relationships between variables, start conversations, compare against benchmarks, and set goals. However, over-reliance on surveys can cause leaders to miss out on the richness of in-person interactions. Combining survey-based listening methods with informal approaches can bolster the overarching listening program. Focus groups, interviews, informal conversations, check-ins, roundtables during staff meetings, town hall meetings, and open-door policies all provide opportunities to understand the experience your employees are having.

We also need to be on the lookout for things that employees want to tell us – not just what we want to ask about. Understanding the employee experience means providing forums for employees to ask us questions, too. [Ben Granger](#), Chief Workplace Psychologist at Qualtrics, summed this up by saying,

“To truly understand the employee experience, we must ask, listen, and observe.”

The Leader's Role in Employee Listening

While survey teams can facilitate employee listening, it's important not to lose sight of the role each leader plays when it comes to understanding and improving the employee experience. Lee Stroud, principal and president of Newmeasures reminds us, “As leaders, we need to know and lean into what employees are experiencing and understand if there are things that we could be doing differently to support them through that.” Create an environment that values employee opinions, so they feel like they can be honest with you. Initiate conversations with employees and direct questions toward their experiences working for your company. Listen when employees have suggestions or concerns about the workplace and consider what might be possible to change.

What to Ask About

Experts have developed a multitude of models and frameworks in an attempt to capture all the components of the employee experience. Despite some differences in specific terminology and categorization, the following elements are commonly included:

- Physical Work Environment
- Relationship with Managers and Colleagues
- Trust in Leadership
- Technology and Tools
- Career Development
- Recognition and Feedback
- Work-Life Balance
- Benefits and Compensation

When deciding what to ask in each type of survey, it can help to break down the employee journey into major milestones or stages such as:

- Interviewing
- Onboarding
- Growing & Developing
- Exiting

Because employee needs vary at each stage, you will want to vary your survey questions to reflect what matters most at that point in the employee lifecycle. For example, what matters most to a new hire is whether they feel welcomed and have the resources to do good work. A tenured employee on the other hand, is likely to care deeply about whether they have opportunities to develop their skills and advance their career.



When thinking about what questions to ask, remember to explore what friction employees are experiencing at work. And, while you are at it, invite them to share ideas for fixing it!

How to Interpret Survey Data

When it comes to interpreting employee survey results, it is still best practice to start by understanding how engaged employees are and what is driving their level of engagement. This approach enables HR and leadership teams to focus action planning efforts on sustaining successes and making changes in the areas that most influence employee motivation and impact business performance.

As this field continues to grow, researchers have found there are multiple outcomes that warrant attention besides employee engagement. An employee's experience also affects their intent to stay, feelings of well-being, and sense of belonging and inclusion. Josh Bersin says it well in his [Definitive Guide to Employee Experience](#):

“Engagement is an important outcome of a great employee experience, but not the only one.”

As firms have expanded their listening efforts and deepened their analytical capabilities, many have learned that what drives engagement may be different from what drives other outcomes. In other words, an employee can be highly engaged but not intend to stay with their employer (and vice versa). Similarly, a highly engaged employee might be experiencing a low sense of well-being. By listening more frequently and expanding your questions, you will broaden your ability to surface nuances like this within your own workforce.

The fact that various outcomes are impacted by different aspects of work underlines our earlier recommendation to expand what you ask employees. For example, most survey designers do not ask about compensation and benefits as part of an engagement survey. This is logical because while total rewards are important to employees, they do not tend to impact levels of engagement. However, recent research has shown that compensation is often the top factor that drives an employee's intent to stay.

At Newmeasures, we recommend focusing first on understanding and improving engagement and intent to stay. With intentional effort, these scores will often reach a point where they naturally plateau. While continual improvement is still worthwhile, this is a perfect time to begin exploring other employee experience outcomes such as well-being and belonging. In fact, many of our long-time clients have added visual barometers for these outcomes to their survey results dashboards to create a more comprehensive view of the employee experience that leaders can monitor over time.

A recent [Qualtrics report](#) states, “While engagement has long been a key metric for understanding employee experiences, a larger share of leaders now say they track well-being (66% do so) and inclusion (55%) compared to those that measure engagement alone (47%).”

Examples Of Employee Experience Outcomes

Employee Engagement is a feeling of commitment and enthusiasm for one's work that leads to a willingness to exert discretionary effort. It prevails as the standard of employee listening because it has consistently been proven to be a predictor of business success.

Intent to Stay indicates employees' plans to keep working for their organization for a specific time period. This well-established measure of overall organizational commitment is also used to predict turnover.

Inclusion reflects employees' feelings of equity, sense of belonging, and perception that they can be their authentic selves at work.

Well-being has emerged as a key outcome as leaders increasingly recognize the importance of creating an environment where employees are able to thrive. Well-being is typically regarded as an outcome of work-life balance, organizational and leadership support for mental and physical health, and sense of resilience.

Who Sees the Results

While employee feedback is commonly used for HR and talent management purposes, the potential extends far beyond these groups. Survey results cannot be considered proprietary to any one team. The main job of the employee listening team is to get data-driven insights into the hands of the people who can do something with it.

The emphasis here is on insights, not just data. As Bersin says, "Data helps us discover insights, but data itself isn't an insight. It's what we do with it and how we contextualize it within our business that makes the difference. The job of the people team is to turn a complex mess of data into a compelling story and advocate for specific solutions."

Let's consider the example of onboarding surveys. All too often feedback from these surveys gets a cursory review from the listening team or the onboarding specialists at best. A more effective approach is to step back and decide in advance who will analyze the data, draw out insights, and to plan how insights will be shared with whomever needs to see them in order to remove friction. It's likely that different insights will need to go to specific functional leaders versus senior leadership versus frontline managers for meaningful action to be taken.

What's Next for Employee Experience?

In the coming years, an increasing number of companies will adopt employee experience design (EXD) which means intentionally designing processes and organizational environments with a focus on the quality of the employee experience.

Part of the reason for the increased interest in employee experience is the realization that positive employee experience drives positive customer experience. [Josh Bersin](#) has found that companies who execute a deliberate EX strategy are 2.4x more likely to delight customers and 2.2x more likely to achieve financial targets than their peers without an EX strategy. Similarly, [Jacob Morgan's](#) research has shown that companies purposefully investing in an employee experience strategy outperform those that don't.

Listening tools such as employee surveys are essential to any EX strategy. If we don't have a clear way to regularly check in on how people are doing, their pain points and obstacles, or what resources they need to do their best work, we are forced to guess. Continuous listening efforts bring some measure of objectivity and the ability to track how best to meet the needs of our workforce over time. The teams who own employee listening will also be expected to evaluate whether changes made are leading to the desired outcomes. Tracking organizational data like absenteeism, productivity, and turnover can also help determine if your efforts are having an impact.

Your employee listening approach should be adapting and changing as your organization evolves. Employee listening is moving beyond engagement. Are you ready?

Recommended Reading

- [Employee Experience: A Complete Guide for HR](#) from AIHR
- [Employee Experience: Why Happy Employees Make Happy Customers](#) by Matt Stolpe
- [The Definitive Guide: Employee Experience](#) by Josh Bersin
- [The Employee Experience Advantage](#) by Jacob Morgan
- [The Employee Experience: How to Attract Talent, Retain Top Performers, and Drive Results](#) by Tracy Maylett EdD, Matthew Wride JD, et al.
- [Ultimate Guide to Employee Experience](#) from Qualtrics

About Newmeasures

Newmeasures is a boutique firm of Industrial & Organizational Psychologists with expertise in designing and executing employee listening strategies. Our mission is to help people within organizations listen to one another so they can thrive – both as individuals and collectively. We are passionate about providing white-glove service and tailoring our services to meet our clients exactly where they are.

We believe that employee listening should connect the dots rather than simply checking boxes. By utilizing multiple listening methods and linking EX and operational data (OX), we help our clients gain the insights they need to make informed decisions in real-time. In addition, our offerings include a built-in system of action to support clients in using employee feedback to improve the employee experience in the ways that matter most.

Contact us to learn how we can help you evolve your listening program beyond engagement to help create compelling and differentiating employee experiences.



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