



the coronavirus pandemic:

a defining moment for employee experience

COVID-19 has impacted business across the world like no other event in this generation's history. But as you scramble to meet this defining moment, the spotlight on employee experience is intensified. Unscripted events, like the coronavirus crisis, are what illustrate a company's core values — and you can be sure both your employees and your customers will be watching your actions very closely.

Just a few months ago, we polled senior HR leaders for [Mercer's 2020 Global Talent Trends](#), and found that employee experience topped the list of priorities for 2020. This was not surprising given the talent-led economy, where employers struggled with human capital challenges like attraction and retention.

In just a few weeks' time, however, the tables have turned. The escalation of COVID-19 into a pandemic — followed by a cascade of closures and stay-at-home orders — has sent stock markets crashing and unemployment rates skyrocketing. Companies are rapidly reprioritizing initiatives, and rightly so. It's easy, at a moment like this, to set employee experience (EX) aside as a “nice to have” — to be picked up again in more prosperous times. But allowing EX initiatives to fall to the bottom of HR's priorities would be a missed opportunity.

That's because employee experience will keep happening, whether you attend to it or not.

Our collective attention was first drawn to employee experience during an era of economic boom; but it is far from a luxury. If anything, EX is even more important in times of crisis. The companies who prioritize improving it — putting their effort toward [building a better employee experience](#) — will be the ones best poised for success to weather this storm. While there is uncertainty around the length and depth of the impact, one thing remains certain: you will need your people to propel you forward — reshaping strategies, innovating new products and solutions, and driving commercial impact — when this is over. EX will be a critical tool for fueling your business recovery.

We define EX as the intersection of an employee's expectations, the environment, and the events that shape their journey within the organization. These events are a collection of emotionally charged moments — what we call “moments that matter” — that have an outsized impact on outcomes such as engagement and commitment. These can occur inside or outside of work, and can be both scripted (i.e., planned) or unscripted. The current pandemic, strikingly, impacts moments across all four of those dimensions.

This means that the coronavirus pandemic is more than a moment that matters — **it is a defining moment in both an employee's career and life journeys**. How businesses respond to it will have a lasting impact on employee behavior, their ability to attract new talent, levels of productivity and engagement, and employee commitment.

So how are companies responding to this defining moment?

Many companies are rising to the occasion, seizing the opportunity to both demonstrate core values and reaffirm their commitment to employees. We have seen companies from all industries exhibiting high levels of empathy by paying people who cannot come to work, and by going beyond the legal requirements for paid leave. Many retailers are showing their commitment to employees by investing hundreds of millions of dollars in employees working on the coronavirus front lines.

So what can you do, as an employer, to create a positive employee experience even in times of crisis? Here are four steps to consider:

1

Lead with empathy through listening

Our research shows that 9 out of 10 employees are concerned about the current crisis, and are happy with the response of their companies and managers, so far. Maintaining this will be critical as the impact of the virus lingers on. Take the time to listen to your employees and understand their concerns. Engage them through digital focus groups (online chats), “ask me anything” leader sessions, or pulse surveys. This will help you uncover and address concerns in an agile way, and identify any roadblocks impeding recovery efforts.

2

Address fundamental human needs

Recently, leaders have been focused on more differentiating aspects of total rewards like enhanced wellbeing, rewarding for performance and clarity of career opportunities, but now we must step back to address basic human needs, like safety and economic stability. People are scared, not just for their health but for their jobs. In our digital focus group with employees, 72% of participants told us that organizations should provide more reassurance around pay and continued employment. Behavioral science shows that when our basic human needs are not being met, we engage in tunnel vision – where we cannot focus on anything else until our concerns are addressed – even if it is really important. If these basic needs are not met, it will affect not only your employees' health and wellbeing, but also their productivity and engagement.

3 Communicate, connect repeat

When we asked how employers could help them, [68% of participants](#) in our survey said their organizations should keep people informed with daily updates throughout the crisis. Effective crisis communication means open, transparent, two-way communication between leadership and employees about the impact to your business. Without this, employees are likely to form narratives of their own — often worse than reality. Your communication strategy should focus on workplace health and safety, and also on [business priorities](#) as you manage the disruption. Create a “rally cry” around your business needs, and focus all available energy on solutions to drive both well-being and recovery.

4 Tailor your response to your audience

It's important to recognize that not all employees are impacted the same, and you will likely need to tailor your policies, response and communications to address different audiences within your company. While some employees, such as those who can work remotely may be less impacted, they may be struggling with balancing work with homeschooling and childcare, and dealing with anxiety over health concerns or job security. On the other end of the spectrum, you have those who find themselves out of work, due to closures, quarantines or workforce reductions, who have critical imminent needs for security. Meeting your employees where they are and addressing their unique needs and pain points with the appropriate communication, programs and resources, will be critical towards maintaining a positive employee experience through your recovery.

Diving deeper: 5 potential employee personas to consider



Sarah

“I’m fortunate that I can work remotely – when my kids let me anyway – but I’m anxious about the economic fallout”



Mike

“I provide essential services – so while everyone else is hunkered down, I’m putting myself at risk with my work”



Jacob

“I contracted the virus while traveling for work. I’m concerned for my health and my family’s health”



Roger

“My facility is closing temporarily, and I’m not sure how my family and I will get by in the meantime”



Anna

“I am losing my job. How am I supposed to get a new job when I can’t leave my house?”

In short, employee experience is not about perks — it’s a [mindset shift](#) that puts your people at the heart of what you do. This is not only important in a prosperous, employee-led economy, but also during times of crisis or economic stress. By continuing to commit to EX, you will help to drive better engagement, productivity and commitment of your workforce, and build reserves of good will that will benefit your employer brand long after this crisis is over.

The world is watching how companies are responding today, and that response will have lasting implications on employee behavior. Ask yourself: Is your company seizing the opportunity to balance empathy and economics through this defining moment?

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