Six strategies for creating a digital workplace that supports long-term employee success
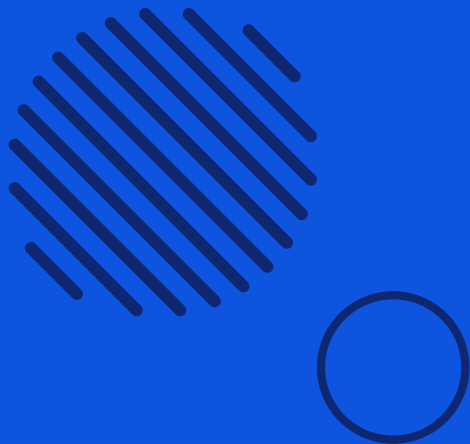
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An effective digital workplace starts with a great employee experience

It's an oft-cited fact that companies investing in employee experience are [4 times more profitable than those that don't](). But that's not the only reason [96% of HR leaders say it's important to create a great experience for employees](). A global pandemic has also turned the business environment on its ear, accelerating the growth of the remote work trend and requiring organizations to make rapid, often creative adjustments to their digital workplace strategies in order to keep the business up and running.

While this shift has largely been successful, with workers theoretically gaining productivity time as a result of no commute or office distractions, there have also been some unfortunate negative consequences. For example, a recent study by SHRM indicates that 41% of workers are feeling burnt out from the stress of having to manage so many conflicting priorities.

The need to focus on the employee experience has unquestionably crossed over from important to imperative, but how organizations should go about successfully enacting lasting change is different than you may think.

> **It took a global health crisis for business and HR leaders to wake up to the fact that when people don't feel safe, supported, or emotionally secure, they simply cannot do their jobs. So now we see that this is a business transformation disguised as a pandemic.**
>
> — *Josh Bersin*

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The role of technology in employee experience success

While technology will, of course, play an integral role in supporting the long-term success of the digital workplace, it also bears some responsibility in creating the frustrating and fragmented experiences employees endure today. And those issues will need to be resolved if true progress is to be made in the digital workplace.

The source of this problem is simple:

1. The well-intentioned approach to creating a robust digital employee experience has historically been to provide workers with best-in-class applications for every aspect of work – HR, IT, finance, procurement, etc. But that means dozens of apps with overlapping goals are all competing for employees' attention, resulting in a siloed experience where each department is supporting the employee experience in a different manner as they all work towards yielding different outcomes.

2. The pointed solutions organizations roll out are often selected with the business need in mind, but with little-to-no focus on the experience of the typical employee using these systems. Because of this, employees waste precious time toggling back and forth between a myriad of complex systems that weren't really designed for them – time that would be much better spent on the meaningful work they were hired to do.

To overcome these issues and create a digital experience that supports the long-term success of both employees and the business, organizations need to refocus their attention on the employee. Putting employee needs at the forefront of every digital workplace initiative is the only way to deliver a consistently excellent experience that reduces frustration, increases productivity, and helps attract and retain top talent.

THE BATTLE FOR A BETTER EXPERIENCE

The User Experience

Business/Department Needs VS. Employee Needs

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Here are six strategies for creating an effective, employee-focused digital workplace

1. Assign formal ownership of the digital workplace experience

There's truth to the fact that employee experience is a team sport and that success relies on bringing the right teams together. But just bringing the right teams or stakeholders together won't solve the experience puzzle if all those teams ultimately go off and try to solve their own departmental problems by implementing technology in a silo. Take this common scenario for example: HR is focusing on employee experience by implementing a new onboarding system, IT is seeking improvements through a chatbot for their service center, and finance is rolling out a new mobile expense tool. Those are three great examples of individual technology successes that ultimately represent one big misstep in terms of employee experience, because they perpetuate a fragmented experience, sapping productivity and hindering employees' ability to focus on high-value work.

To avoid this kind of issue, organizations should assign formal ownership of the overall digital workplace experience - either a role or team unto itself that can own the roadmap for the digital workplace, understand each stakeholder's priorities, coalesce employees' needs, collect user feedback, and more. This will act as the critical glue binding the separate parts of the employee experience together and ensuring that the employee experience and digital workplace vision is delivered and represented equally across all stakeholders.

Employees

Stakeholders

Formal Ownership

IT, security, risk, etc.

Comms and Marketing

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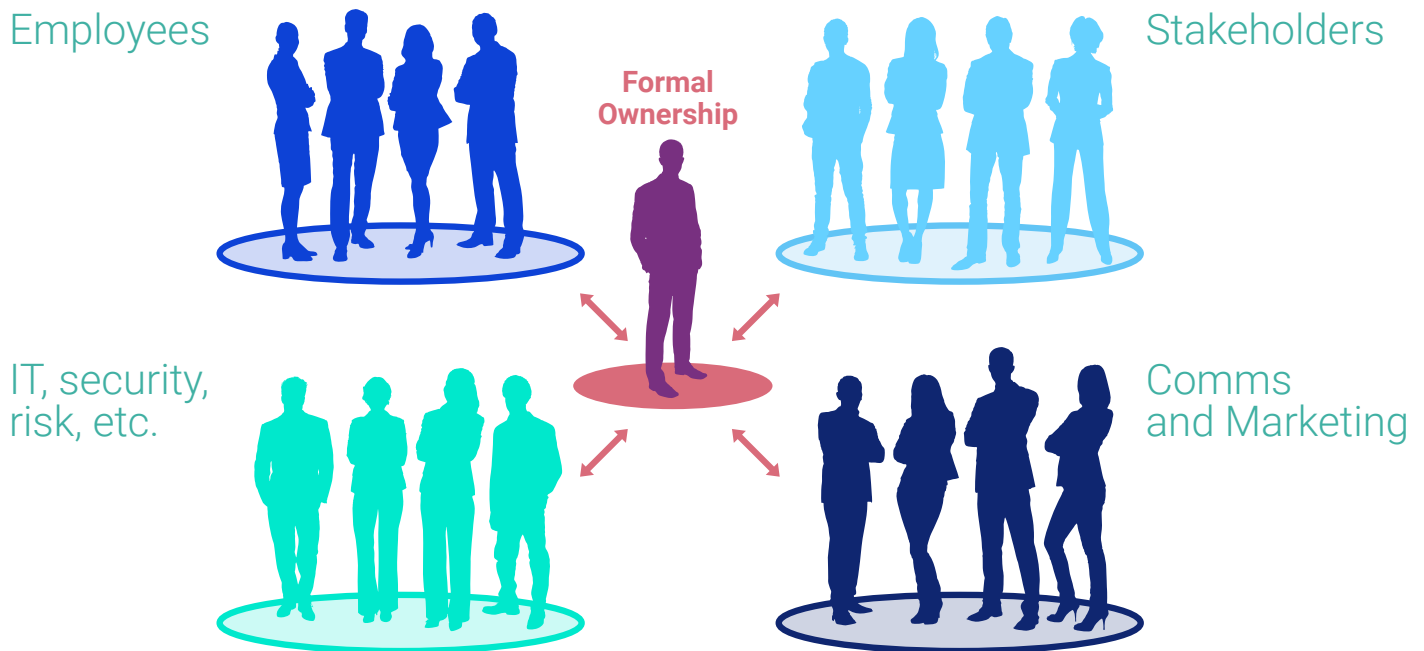
2. Understand your employees and what really matters to them

The first step in identifying opportunities to create a better experience is to understand the preferences and pain points of employees.

This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, starting with mapping out the complete employee journey, starting from the time employees apply to the organization until they eventually offboard. While journey mapping exercises are often considered an HR endeavor, they're actually a meaningful exercise that provides value to all business stakeholders, encompassing all the moments that matter across an employee's holistic experience with an organization. To achieve the best result, approach journey mapping with empathy and a sincere desire to find honest answers to questions like, what are the critical moments of truth for employees, what do employees struggle with, what are their aspirations, and what motivates them?

Developing comprehensive employee personas is also a great way to get to the heart of employee needs, especially when organizations take the time to really get to know their workers, shadowing them in their day-to-day experiences to see first-hand where the challenges and pain points exist. Throughout the process, it's critically important to involve employees. They're happy to share exactly what they want and need, so organizations shouldn't hesitate to ask, although it's crucial to follow up with employees on any actions that are being taken to address their feedback, so they know that their input was heard and valued.

By taking these steps, organizations can gain critical insights into the realities of how the digital workplace functions. That kind of information makes it easier to see where, and how, improvements need to be made.

Employee Experience: How employees think and feel during every single touchpoint of their journey through the company.

Journey Mapping

Recruit ▶ Onboard ▶ Develop ▶ Retain ▶ Offboard

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3. Design and deliver experiences, not just services

To deliver the highest levels of experience, organizations should embrace the reality that employees don't care what system they need to conduct a transaction in, they just want a seamless, simple way to get things done and get back to work.

Unfortunately, this runs counter to what has traditionally taken place. Take IT, for example. While tremendous energy goes into providing an array of services that meet employee needs, such as systems for submitting IT help inquiries, services to access work remotely, etc., there's much less focus on the actual experience that those services deliver. It's a critical oversight that can have disastrous results, especially when you consider the fact that this divide between need versus reality has gotten worse over time. The need to deliver functionality has eclipsed the focus on what really matters to employees, and in the end, everyone loses.

" The key issue is that IT remains a very challenging domain that has traditionally required technical rigor over softer skills like human factors, design or empathy for the user. When in doubt, the former was chosen over the latter in order to cross the finish line.

It doesn't have to be that way, however…Take a page out of the customer experience playbook and keep the employee at the heart of each business and technical decision. "

— How Your IT Team Can Design Better Employee Experiences
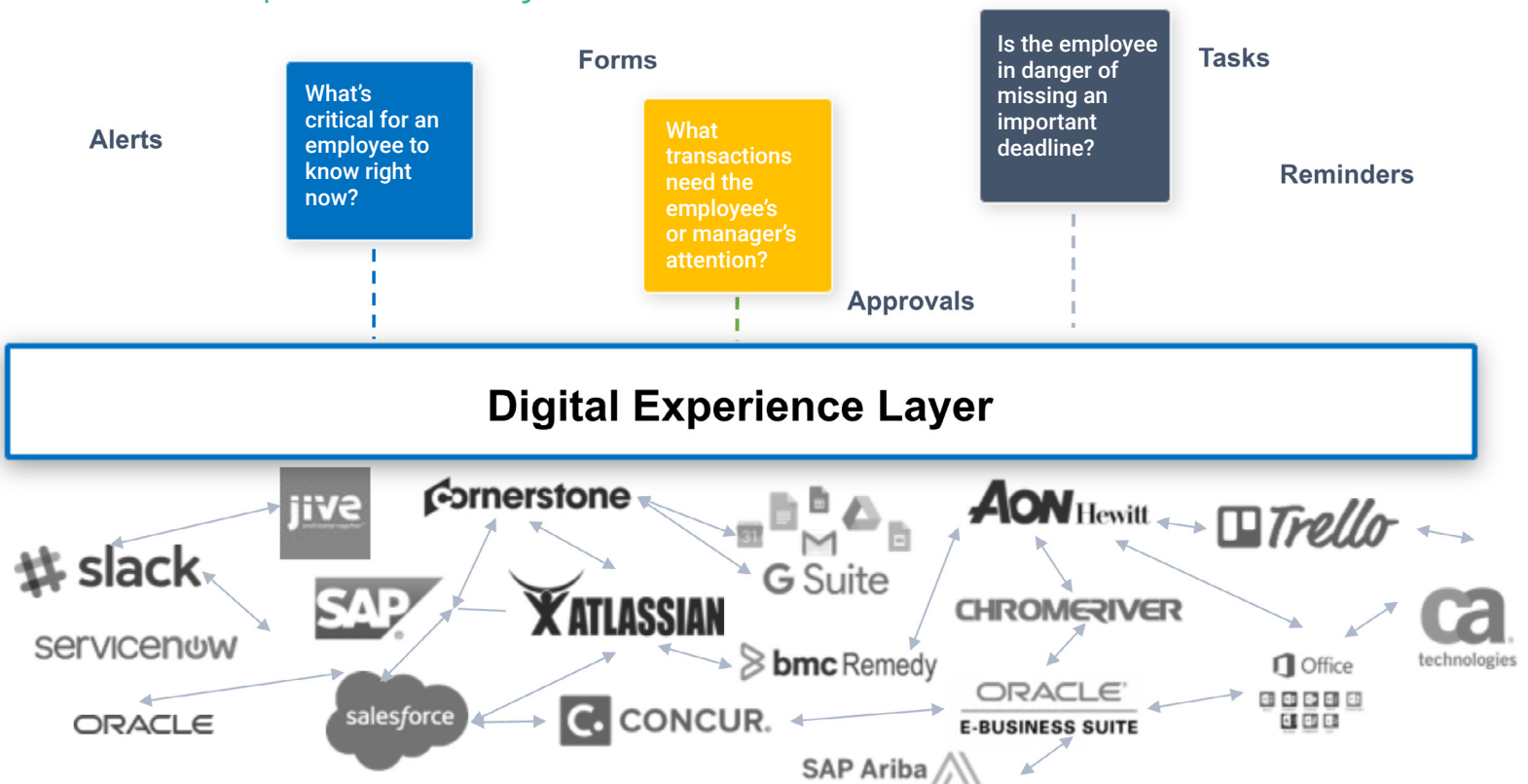
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To eliminate this issue, organizations should consider taking an experience layer approach to technology. A layer above all the systems of record allows the end-user experience to be managed separately, and customized to meet the needs of employees. It also creates a unified experience which makes getting work done easier.

This approach gives users what they want — a simplified, centralized experience for everything they need to know and take action on - while also allowing individual business units to make the best technology decisions for their needs — a win/win approach for everyone. Employees will be able to get more work done faster and have extra time to spend on the high-value work they were hired to do, while organizations keep existing technology investments and insulate themselves against future technology changes.

The Experience Layer

Alerts

What's critical for an employee to know right now?

Forms

What transactions need the employee's or manager's attention?

Is the employee in danger of missing an important deadline?

Tasks

Reminders

Approvals

Digital Experience Layer

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4. Focus on the modernization of tech, not replacement

Organizations are full of systems that are critical to business success. To reap immediate employee experience rewards, the focus should be on modernizing the experience of those existing systems to increase ROI and adoption. This can be accomplished by using modern application architectures such as APIs and microapps to design consumer-like user experiences for enterprise-grade source systems. Microapps are particularly effective because they make it possible to isolate the specific functionality employees need in complex enterprise applications, such as the ability to submit time off in an HCM system, thereby simplifying the experience and enabling employees to get back to work more quickly.

Leveraging existing data about your employees is another way to deliver the seamless experiences employees expect. Employee data is critical to delivering personalized and contextual experiences and can be used to improve processes across the organization, such as targeting communications to only the employees who need to see them, streamlining help desk workflows, and making proactive recommendations for upskilling initiatives.

5. Implement a multi-experience delivery approach

Successful digital workplaces meet employees where they work and how they want to work. Achieving that, however, requires modern technology and flexible delivery approaches that are intrinsic to a compelling employee experience. Multi-experience delivery should focus on aligning the right information and touchpoints across the right channels. This kind of approach will future-proof the digital experience by supporting new means of communications and touchpoints — handsfree, voice, mobile, etc. — as they become available.

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6. Implement Voice of the Employee (VOE)

There's a simply reality about the digital workplace and the employee experience that's often overlooked: If employees come into work every day and don't feel like they have what they need to succeed at their job, they won't be engaged, they certainly won't have a meaningful experience, and they will probably leave. So, ask them what they need, listen, and act.

Employees are stakeholders, too, and should be viewed as such. To capture their sentiment accurately, so that it can be used to continually improve the digital workplace experience, organizations should create real-time feedback loops, making sure to follow up with employees on any actions that will be taken to address their feedback, so they know that their input was heard and valued.

To find out more about how to get started with your digital workplace strategy, check out this webinar or visit us at workgrid.com

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