Three essential steps of improvement for better employee experience

- Bas Stroeken,
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The time is right for IT to start leading employee experience for their organizations.

We live in an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world. This is directly impacting the way employees look at their employers. Some of the questions that are going through people's minds are: Am I in the right industry? Does my company value me enough? What is my organization's purpose?

VUCA is making employees uncertain about their commitment to employers, which has led to a phenomenon now called the **"Great Resignation"** — a growing group of people missing true engagement in their jobs, experiencing discontent, and continuously looking at the neighbor's greener grass.

This whitepaper is based on Atos' extensive research conducted between 2018 and 2022, wherein we aim to shed light on why the employee experience (EX) is so important and why companies struggle to provide a great EX. We will also share insights and key success factors that can help organizations create an employee-centric mindset that defines and delivers a great employee experience.

Organizational challenges in changing times

It is increasingly challenging for companies to remain successful over time. In the old days, a change of more than five positions on the Fortune 500 list would create headlines, and the traditional title to their articles would say something like, "Rank of top 25 Fortune 500 companies very similar to 15 years ago."

These days, significant change happens much faster, potentially degrading a company's relevance almost overnight. Organizations struggle to attract and maintain talent, outpace competitors with successful innovation, be nimble and agile in their operations, and put their employees at the center of what they do.

There is a direct relationship between the Great Resignation (according to The Microsoft Work Trend Index, 40% of people worldwide are looking to change jobs) [1] and the great discontent driven by a non-employee-centric mindset. According to a 2021 Gallup study, 41% of employees worldwide "experienced a lot of worry during their workday" and 43% experienced a high daily stress level. [2]

Although the vision which drives how organizations define EX will vary, one of the top priorities is always minimizing worry and stress for their employees.

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Numerous factors impact a company's performance, but people or employees are always at the root of these factors. A company's ability (or lack thereof) to fully engage its employees, make them feel valued and respected, treat them fairly, and allow them to come to full fruition is a major component. Yet, companies often lack an integrated approach to dealing with employees and are unable to deliver the experience employees want, from the interview phase to the final offboarding and every step in between. The gap between the statement in an organization's annual report — "Our people are our greatest asset" — and reality is often shocking.

Taking the perspective of employees is often referred to as "becoming employee-centric." It demands that a company examine the employee experience — which is designed as

products or services consumed by its employees — in typical use cases such as the interview process, collaborating with team members on innovation, or in simply booking travel or logging expenses.

Gartner defines EX as "the way in which employees internalize and interpret the interactions they have with their organization, as well as the context that underlies those interactions." [3]

It is evident that IT's share in delivering employee experiences is already significant and set to grow further. As employees look for a pleasant, predictable, hassle-free experience, IT is perfectly positioned to have a larger voice around the EX table by delivering specific value in the areas of scalability and consistency.

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So, what would a great employee experience look like, and what would the results be?

The greatest employee experience: What if we could _____?

Although challenging, there is a way to define, design, create and maintain great employee experiences. Organizations that win Great Place to Work or similar awards are typically leading the pack. While this will not guarantee that all your talented employees will stay with you forever, it at least addresses the key arguments driving them away from you.

The elements that make a great experience, however, cannot be defined up-front, or from some ivory tower. In line with one of its founding principles, EX requires an interactive and iterative dialogue with employees, such as through co-creative Design Thinking workshops. The needs and requirements of employees will vary per situation, with differences that have origins in demographics, culture, digital literacy, functions and potentially many more.

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The five tenets of an employee-centric workplace

In our work, we have found many common threads for creating an enhanced employee experience. The top five are listed below:

- **Employee at the heart** – The experience conveys a strong sense of empathy and is clearly designed with employees in mind. Furthermore, the focus is on outcome, experience, digital literacy and tender loving care.
- **Transparent** – Providing end-to-end clarity on steps, outputs, timing and the roles of the various stakeholders involved will deliver trust and make employees feel respected.
- **Fair** – Like the need for empathy, employees must feel that the demands on them are fair, requiring an equal investment of time and effort compared to other relevant stakeholders.
- **Efficient** – Many interactions are compulsory and not meant to be fun (think logging hours and recording expenses). Employees deserve easy, intuitive, fast, foolproof experiences.
- **Fast help** – If any help or support is required, employees want it on the spot, intuitive and do-it-yourself where possible, immediately available to address any potential roadblocks head-on.

Imagine if all your key employee interactions not only lived up to these ideals, but went further to address the needs and wants of a specific target audience (or persona). The net effect would be that employees feel empathetic to their employers, respected, and "seen" as a human being, which leads to a greater employee commitment to your company and increased engagement. In turn, this leads to improved collaboration, better innovation, happier customers, higher profitability and so forth. In short, it is not so difficult to envision that there may be a direct link between improving EX and, ultimately, shareholder value. As Jacob Morgan observed, "Companies that invest in employee experience are 4x more profitable than those that do not." [4]

Unfortunately, many companies have not yet come to grips with Forrester's view that "once a luxury, DEX is now a necessity." [5]

**"Once a luxury,
digital employee experience (DEX) is now a necessity."**

What is preventing companies from creating an EX mindset?

While the path to an optimal employee experience is not rocket science, most companies are not delivering a great employee experience, and even worse, many are not actively pursuing one. In our research, we found that organizations struggle because delivering the optimal employee experience requires strong collaboration between functions across the company, focused on achieving a common goal.

Today's reality is that functional silos still exist. In many cases, it results in a fragmented approach to processes — with employees often referred to as users, who then become the victims of processes or experiences that were designed to meet corporate, legal, quality or other objectives. It's almost as if the prevailing view is that employees are an unfortunate inconvenience and that it would be easier to run the business without them.

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Developing an employee-centric mindset requires guts, and most departments currently lack the experience, knowledge and bravery to step up to the plate to address this. At the risk of generalizing, it could be said that HR departments typically lack the authority to impose their will on others in the organization. IT is seen as an inside-out thinking department concerned more with costs and stability than growth and value, and the business generally feels superior to HR or IT — requiring all its energy to deliver the numbers.

In essence, the result is that employees get a one-size-fits-all solution, whose primary beneficiary is not the employee itself but rather a corporate department (see side note).

So, where silos are a serious root cause, there are three other main aspects that prevent the creation of great employee experiences.

- Talking about soft skills in big organizations is often difficult. Delivering great employee experiences requires an authentic interest in understanding the people impacted by processes or interactions. How do they feel? What fears or needs do they have? Do we extend enough trust, warmth or respect? Here's an interesting fact: According to Gartner, only 20% of employees go to IT for help solving business problems.[6]

- Delivering great employee experiences requires an iterative process. It's unlikely that you will deliver a great employee experience on the first attempt. An inquisitive learning mindset or culture is needed, where knowledge is treasured, insights are openly shared and mistakes are fully accepted as part of the learning journey.

- EX sponsorship must reside at the highest level of the organization, typically with the CEO. Governance cuts across various functions and covers too many aspects to fall into the realm of one functional area. After all, the CEO oversees the full chain of events, where great employee experiences lead to more engaged employees who ultimately deliver shareholder value

The value of personas

Many organizations still talk about users. Users are consumers of IT (or apps) who only need to be instructed about which button to push and when. EX promotes a mindset shift from users to employees, considering the 3 P's — people, places, and platforms. Furthermore, it promotes a shift from a one-size-fits-all and towards tailored solutions and services for specific groups. By segmenting an organization's population into personas, drawing up profiles, and defining moments that matter, we can begin to improve and tailor such that EX is truly being impacted in a positive way.

Atos EX Maturity Scan

With these challenges still present in many organizations, how do organizations know where to focus and what key success factors must be considered to drive this change?

The Atos Employee Experience Maturity Scan

Today's VUCA world demands quick action with immediate results. While quick impact certainly is a possibility in some niche areas, using accelerators (see side note) to create and maintain an employee-centric mindset is a significant challenge for most companies, akin to a true change in culture. This may be challenging, difficult, unpredictable, prone to resistance and frustrating.

However, it doesn't mean companies can ignore this. Not acting is always an option, but its impact will also be significant: disengaged employees, poor collaboration, high attrition, slow and ineffective innovation, losing market share, diminishing profit and lower shareholder returns.

More about EX accelerators

Accelerators are off-the-shelf solutions that address a specific EX challenge. The challenge remains to integrate these solutions logically for employees, delivering an intuitive end-to-end process flow. To name two examples, Virgin Pulse offers solutions to stimulate employee health and wellbeing; and AppLearn delivers a consistent adoption and support solution across multiple applications.

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Our approach is based on the Atos Employee Experience Framework, which incorporates all fundamental elements that contribute to EX success.

The Atos EX Maturity Scan helps plot a company's starting position on their EX journey. It helps create a baseline and facilitates decision-making around which areas to focus on first. It brings people from various functions together as they discuss its nine elements. Moving towards higher maturity in the model is good, although it is wise to progress at similar speeds on the various elements.
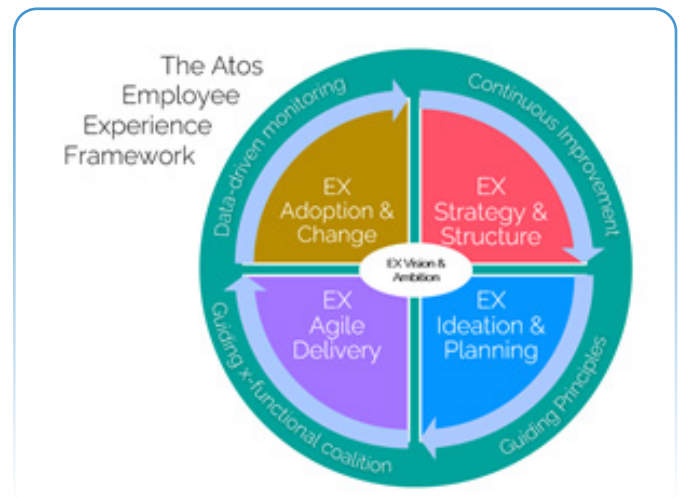
> **The Atos EX Maturity Scan helps plot a company's starting position on their EX journey. It helps create a baseline and facilitates decision-making.**

Here is a quick description of its nine elements:

EX Vision and ambition

A documented view of the point on the horizon that you want to achieve, co-created with employees and stakeholders alike; an example would be "to become the industry's most attractive employer"

EX Strategy and structure

A strategy for delivering on the vision, including the governance structure (such as sponsors, steering committee, methodologies, and reporting) that will enable you to deliver the plan

EX Ideation and planning

The extent to which supporting methodologies like Design Thinking are used to actively structure each step and involve employees continuously

EX Agile delivery

A build and delivery process that prioritizes delivering value using Minimal Viable Products (MVP) to ensure fast learning and iterative improvements

EX Adoption and change

Validates the value creation focus by emphasizing outcomes (not outputs), ensuring that employees "get it" and actively make use of the new functionality

Data-driven monitoring

The extent to which process, outcome and experience data is actively collected and analyzed in order to monitor impact and find new opportunities for enhancement (see side note)

EX Guiding principles

The organization's discussed and documented defining rules that help shape its thinking and decision making; for example, "We prefer fast failure over slow decision-making"

EX Continuous improvements

The extent to which the organization is pursuing a goal of continuously monitoring current operations and seeking ways to define and implement improvement

EX Guiding cross-functional coalition

A group of leaders representing all areas of the business to act as change leaders, walk the talk and speak with one voice on the direction, plan and execution of the vision

The value of data

Data is the new gold, and indeed most areas inside EX can be measured. While challenges exist on the sourcing side (e.g., availability or quality of data) the real value comes from merging various sources, translating data into actionable insights and knowing what questions need answering.

Solutions like Nexthink amalgamate all device data for proactive monitoring and pre-emptive solutioning, solving problems before they occur without the employee knowing.

Although the model is relatively new, (as of October 2022) we envision using it as a benchmark in the future where companies can be plotted against peers in their industry. For now, it is a model to help begin a cross-functional dialog about EX inside an organization.

A recipe for EX success

We are convinced that EX growth begins with an honest dialog where employees from different functions share their feelings and ambitions. As an example, let's look at three key success factors based on aspects within the model above.

Success factor #1
Create a guiding coalition

Delivering a great employee experience cannot be done without involving a multi-disciplinary group of people. This truly is a prerequisite for EX success, since most employee use cases span multiple departments — each with their own needs, wants and expectations. As an example, a simple onboarding process for a new hire will at minimum need the involvement of HR for administrative and salary purposes, IT for hardware and software access, facility management for office access, and a hiring/people manager.

Poor EX is often caused by well-intended efforts to improve one part of the employee journey while ignoring others, thereby worsening the overall employee experience due to poor handovers, among other reasons.

A guiding coalition aims to bring the various functions together to align on common interests, understand mutual dependencies, and acknowledge that together their impact will be much stronger. EX collateral like persona profiling, moments that matter, business vision or Experience Level Agreements (see side note) will accelerate the understanding that the only way to achieve lasting EX results is together.

Experience Level Agreements (XLAs)

One all-too frequent occurrence is a situation where Service Level Agreements (SLAs) are green but employee satisfaction is very low (or red). This is what we call the "watermelon effect," where a contractual agreement draws focus to SLAs that may be important but do not make for happy employees.

XLAs ensure we also start measuring the impact of the experience itself, in terms of being efficient, fast and intuitive; in short, employee-centric

The visualization below depicts our belief that there is a logical sequence to this, starting with personas, then journeys, defining moments that matter, leading to a solution design and measuring using Experience Level Agreements.

Here are some top tips on how you can achieve this:

- Invite a guest speaker to talk about employee engagement and EX at a lunch-and-learn session.
- Survey your employees. Ask "How do you feel about…" questions and share the answers with IT, HR, Operations and other centralized teams.
- Contact Atos to conduct an EX Maturity Scan and encourage colleagues to complete it with you.

Success factor #2
Become truly employee-centric

You can't deliver a great employee experience if the company isn't truly focused and intent on becoming employee-centric. The word "truly" is deliberately chosen here, because it requires a healthy obsession with understanding the truth about what drives employees as they move through their working life.

Who are they really? What are their fears or concerns? What do they need to experience flow? How are they collaborating? How inspiring or stimulating is the physical working environment? What is causing stress or draining their energy?

These days, Design Thinking is growing in popularity as a methodology that ensures focus on a number of outcomes in change work (see side note) that are less evident in normal project management.

Why change management is critical

Change and adoption (or Organizational Change Management – OCM) plays an essential role in building EX. It supports the delivery of outcomes and ensures the needs (functional, emotional, adoption, communication, support, etc.) of employees are considered.

Often referred to as TLC (tender loving care) it ensures the necessary amount of love goes into the delivery of new solutions and services!

Engaging employees at every step of the way and seeking to deliver that which has the greatest value from the perspective of business and/or employee are just two examples. One of Design Thinking's principles is empathy — the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. This undervalued competency is a strong example of the mindset change that is required to move the focus away from users and progress towards employees or human beings.

> "... Design Thinking ensures focus on outcomes in change work that are less evident in normal project management.

Here are three ways you can move towards becoming truly employee-centric:

- Segment your employee population into 8-10 personas, profile them, and define moments that matter.
- Cluster all employee insights and share with a central employee intelligence team for monthly knowledge updates.
- Expand the dialog to soft skills, to focus attention on how employees may feel or experience things.

Success factor #3
Make learning a top priority

Delivering a great employee experience cannot be done if there is no explicit approach to learning, experimentation, knowledge sharing and accepting failure. The VUCA world makes long-term planning a real challenge, so designing and delivering a great employee experience requires an agile mindset aimed at continuous improvement.

For many organizations, prioritizing learning is easier said than done, because it necessitates a very significant shift in culture towards openness, psychological safety, experimentation and personal reflection. Amplify that by considering not only your current department, but the need to replicate the shift across functions and divisions, and one can see the size of this challenge. For most, this is a change that would require sponsorship at a CXO level.

Once learning objectives are properly defined, it is likely that an ecosystem of partners is needed to deliver on the ambition. Internally, this will require cross-functional engagement and externally, this will involve partnering with universities, suppliers and research agencies. In best-of-class examples, such ecosystems define a safe environment — even for competitors — to share information for the joint ambition to accelerate learning.

Here's how you can do this efficiently:

- Appoint owners of data sources and insight categories and align on what you expect from owners.
- Define learning objectives for specific knowledge gaps, such as Design Thinking or Agile methodologies.
- Set-up communities facilitated by appropriate technology to encourage interaction across functions.

Achieving great employee experiences

To close, we would like to assert that an ongoing effort to improve employee experience is time well spent. Indeed, we argue that there is a direct relation between employee experience and employee engagement, productivity and ultimately, business results and shareholder returns. It is not rocket science; in fact, it is very logical.

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However, the path to a great employee experience requires significant effort and new ways of collaborating inside the organization. It requires a cross-functional effort across the company with strong backing from senior leaders — something often seen as quite daunting — but there is no short-cut, and someone needs to start leading.

We believe the time has come for IT to take the plunge, take the lead and engage all relevant functions in the organization on this journey towards a great employee experience. Others (like HR, business and facility management) could take the lead, but the time seems right for IT to do so — for four main reasons:

- The influence of IT on the employee experience is currently at 30% according to Gartner, and will only grow further in the future.

- There is an opportunity for IT to actively help accelerate business digital transformation (including customer experience) by driving the development of employee digital dexterity.

- EX is the ultimate approach to help rebuild the credibility and satisfaction that many IT departments lack after years of focusing on costs, stability and outsourcing.

- Lastly, IT can create value for EX through digital scalability and consistency of solutions, drawing on essential insights and data skills that benefit the entire organization.

EX is worth fighting for and will require a continued effort over time.

With the right mindset and approach, positive and lasting results are achievable. Why not start today with a self-assessment, plotting your company's position on the Atos EX Maturity Scan? Contact us and we'll set you up for this important first step!

About the author:

Bas Stroeken (bas.stroeken@atos.net) is a part of Atos's Digital Transformation Consulting (DTC) Employee Experience expert team, working across industries in the Benelux and The Nordics. Originally a food industry marketeer at companies like Unilever and Pepsico, he is passionate about ensuring that employees are given a voice and that great EX is seen as an accelerator for personal development and business transformation. His experience in helping clients create and deliver an EX strategy spans from the automotive industry to the public sector and healthcare manufacturers.

Sources:

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[2] Gallup: State of the Global Workplace: 2021 Report (2021)

[3] gartner.com/en/human-resources/glossary/employee-experience

[4] Jacob Morgan, The Employee Experience Advantage

[5] 1e.com/blogs/what-is-digital-employee-experience-dex/

[6] Keynote: The Journey to Digital Workplace 2027 (Gartner 2022)

About Atos

Atos is a global leader in digital transformation with 112,000 employees and annual revenue of c. € 11 billion. European number one in cybersecurity, cloud and high performance computing, the Group provides tailored end-to-end solutions for all industries in 71 countries. A pioneer in decarbonization services and products, Atos is committed to a secure and decarbonized digital for its clients. Atos is a SE (Societas Europaea) and listed on Euronext Paris..

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Let's start a discussion together