eBook

THE HEARTBEAT SERIES

The Four Phases of Employee Experience

workday.

INTRODUCTION

What are the four phases and why are they important?

It's the first day of a new job. You've met your new manager and a few people from your team, but you're still nervous. Is the job going to match up with your expectations, how long before you get used to your surroundings, and will you be able to build a career here?

Fast forward a year and it's safe to say you've found your groove. You spend a lot of time thinking about how you can develop new skills and take on other responsibilities. You're keen to stand out and open up further opportunities within your company.

Another year goes by and you've been able to reap the rewards of your efforts so far. Perhaps you've had a payrise and a promotion. You've also been able to take the lead on a few projects that involve different teams from across the business.

It's at this point in time when you start to consider your options. You've enjoyed running your own projects, so maybe management is the right path to take. At the same time, you find a lot of joy in mastering your role, so maybe it would make more sense to specialize.

It could also be the case that you no longer see the career opportunities that you had first envisioned, which is why you start to look elsewhere.

As you can see, the priorities and concerns of employees are constantly evolving throughout their time at your company. Taking a one-size-fits-all approach to employee experience will often mean you aren't able to correctly identify, or effectively address, the issues that matter most to your people – which puts employee engagement, productivity and retention at risk.

Why you should split employee experience into phases

The employee experience involves so many different interactions and touch points across your business. When you start to visualize the journey an employee takes from the day they join, right through to the day they leave, it is easier to appreciate how their needs evolve. When you break down the employee journey into clear stages, it becomes much simpler to identify the processes that need improving, as well as who is responsible for them within your organization. As a result, you can assign specific actions to different people, which allows you to improve multiple aspects of the employee experience at the same time.

We can take onboarding as an example. While the HR team would be responsible for the overall structure, IT would also play a part in ensuring that new employees have the right equipment on the first day, and the Learning and Development team would provide onboarding-related training to new line managers.

This granular understanding of the employee journey, and the ability to align those responsible for each of the phases, creates more accountability, and allows you to take effective action.

What are the phases of employee experience?

The Workday Peakon Employee Voice dataset contains over thirty-five million data points of employee feedback from hundreds of companies around the world. This has allowed us to identify universal trends in how the concerns of employees change throughout their tenure.

We discovered four distinct stages in the employee journey, each demonstrating the shifting needs of employees from onboarding to exit.

The four phases are Onboarding, Initial Development, Ongoing Development and Retention, and Separation.

Onboarding: ~0-3 months

Most employees are uncertain of their surroundings at the beginning. They want to establish their place in the organization, make a meaningful contribution and build relationships with colleagues.

From the welcome someone receives on their first day, through to their development plan for the first few months, onboarding is the foundation of employee experience. Understanding the experience at this early stage is especially important as low levels of engagement early on have been shown to significantly increase the risk of attrition.

It might be tempting to assume that onboarding “just happens”, but 30% of job seekers have left a job within the first 90 days.

Initial Development: ~3-24 months

After a few months in the company, people are often looking for ways to improve their existing skills and make sure they can have an impact on their team’s output.

For employees, Initial Development is all about mastering their role by developing specific skills, building relationships across the business, and coming to terms with internal processes that affect how they do their job. Most people will do this with an eye on future opportunities, so it’s important to start having initial conversations about growth and development. When you support employees that want to develop within the company, it becomes an investment in the next generation of leaders and knowledge experts.

Ongoing Development and Retention: ~24+ months

Employees that have been in your organization for a few years have already started to advance in their career, and are looking to do so further. By this point they have accumulated enough knowledge and experience that they are some of the most valuable members of your team. They will be keen to know what progression opportunities are available, whether that's a move into management or another role.

The Ongoing Development and Retention phase is crucial. A lack of opportunity could result in employees leaving the business in search of the next challenge. Not everyone in your organization will want to become a manager, so it's important to create opportunities for employees that want to move into other roles too.

Separation: 0-3 months before leaving the organization

No matter how good your employee experience is, there will always be people that decide to move on. Some employees will leave even though they've had a very positive experience with your organization, but there will also be people that leave because of underlying engagement issues.

The separation phase is an opportunity to learn more about the reasons people are leaving your organization. In particular, it's about identifying the direct causes of attrition and the organizational changes you need to make to reduce turnover and retain your top talent.

PHASE ONE

Onboarding

From the classroom to virtual learning: Changing trends in learning and development

Onboarding can be considered the honeymoon period of your employee experience. Everything is new and exciting and there are endless possibilities. This is the main reason why new employees are typically more engaged than the rest of your workforce.

Most people are excited to start a new job, but they will also have concerns about meeting the expectations of their manager, fitting in with other people and figuring out how their job will contribute to the success of the wider organization.

The main thing to focus on during this phase is clarifying expectations and making new employees feel welcome. Employees want to understand the values and norms of your organization quickly, which make it easier to navigate unfamiliar social territory. It's equally important to outline the requirements of their role, which helps to reduce fear and uncertainty, and makes their work more meaningful in the context of the company's overall mission.

Why is it important to get Onboarding right?

Onboarding is the foundation. It gives new employees a glimpse into what it's really like to work somewhere, and provides them with information about whether or not they made the right decision to accept the job.

A lack of a well-structured onboarding process can undermine your engagement efforts before they've even begun. 30% of job seekers have left a job within the first 90 days, citing company culture and the day-to-day job not meeting expectations as two of the most common reasons for leaving, according to a 2018 study by Jobvite.

Worryingly, research has shown that 30 percent of organizations take a passive approach to onboarding. Informal approaches to explaining culture and establishing connection may have developed over time, but there is no one in the business coordinating these activities.

What you can do to optimize the Onboarding phase

In order to reduce the fear and uncertainty of starting a new job, it's important that new employees are made to feel welcome, have plenty of opportunities to meet with the wider organization, and have something to focus their efforts on from the very beginning.

Successful onboarding requires collaboration between various departments. HR needs to coordinate with IT to ensure that employees have access to everything they need on the first day. Microsoft surveyed new starters and found that little things can make a big difference, like having a working computer and access to email as soon as they sit down.

The same survey also found that employees who meet with their manager in the first week have a larger internal network and collaborate more with their team. This leads to a greater sense of belonging and increases the likelihood of someone staying at the company.

Meeting employees on a one-to-one basis is the perfect time to outline a 30-60-90 plan, which sets concrete goals and milestones to help someone adapt to their role during the first 30, 60 and 90 days of a new job. This gives new employees the chance to make consistent progress and develop their self-confidence in an unfamiliar environment.

New employees also need an opportunity to establish relationships with other people in the organization. This contributes to a feeling of psychological safety, which is "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking." In other words, people feel comfortable enough to ask questions, share their ideas and voice concerns.

You can assign new employees a buddy, who can act as a bridge to other people in the organization and share information that might not be available through more formal channels. At Salesforce, managers select buddies based on personality, chemistry and fit. Buddies provide an additional source of support during an uncertain time, and help new employees to build cross-departmental relationships and develop lasting friendships.

PHASE TWO

Initial Development

Once new starters have established themselves in the organization, their focus will shift to developing the skills they need to master their first role. This makes it the perfect time to speak with employees about their career ambitions and outline a clear growth plan.

Initial Development is all about investing in your employees, which will ensure that people are able to meet the demands of their job and excel in the long term. For those who aspire to more senior positions, it's a way to provide the skills and training that will set them up for future success.

The impact of technology also means that employees will be concerned about staying relevant in a rapidly evolving job market. In particular, developing a mix of hard and soft skills that will ensure they're prepared for other opportunities further down the line.

When you invest in your employees, you're investing in the people that they want to become, not just a future business asset. This genuine concern for their personal and professional development will pay dividends in the form of loyalty and commitment on the job.

Why is it important to get Initial Development right?

While engagement levels aren't typically as high as during the first three months of a new job, engagement is still comparatively higher during the first two years after an employee joins your organization. That doesn't mean you can take a hands-off approach to these employees though – especially if you want to stay competitive. You need to be proactive about training and development so that your employees feel valued and can adapt to any changes in their role or your business.

Development opportunities are key to showing your employees that you care about them as people. According to LinkedIn's 2018 Workplace Learning Report, 94% of employees would stay at a company longer if it invested in their career. It may not be the first thing you think about when considering employee turnover, but learning and development has a significant role in retention.

What you can do to optimize the Initial Development phase

While employees are keen to learn, finding the ideal way to upskill your team can be easier said than done. Traditional learning solutions are often one-size-fits-all and don't take into consideration the specific skills that employees need to learn. In the case of classroom-based learning, seminars, or training-days, they can also be extremely time consuming.

In recent years, we have seen an increase in digital learning platforms, which give employees a way to access bite-sized courses that can help them solve a specific problem. This makes learning more contextual, and with the right platform, content suggestions can be tailored to individual employees over time. A variety of content formats will also make it easier to accommodate different learning styles.

This approach fits much more closely with the way we learn new skills in our personal lives. First we identify a problem. Then we go in search of information that can help us solve the problem - which could be a video, blog post or podcast. Finally, we apply our newly acquired skills, which we then reinforce over time as we encounter similar problems.

The number one reason employees don't engage with workplace learning and development is a lack of time. Bite-sized, contextual learning gives people a way to access resources and apply them within a very short period of time, unlike traditional forms of learning.

Another way employees can develop new skills is through peer-to-peer learning. This taps into existing knowledge within the company and is much more cost-effective than bringing in external trainers and consultants.

Peer-to-peer learning can also help to foster better working relationships across the organization and create opportunities for people to move into other roles.

PHASE THREE

Ongoing Development and Retention

While Initial Development is about helping employees to develop the skills that to master their job role, Ongoing Development and Retention is focused on keeping employees engaged.

By the time employees have reached this phase, you've already invested a lot into their progress and they have become key knowledge-holders within their function. This means that the impact of their departure is going to be more severe than at any other point in the employee journey.

Employees that have stayed with your organization this long are a valuable pool of talent for leadership positions. They have market expertise, along with an intimate understanding of how the organization works, including its systems, politics and people.

During the Ongoing Development and Retention phase, you should ensure that your employees have opportunities to advance their career. For some that will mean management, but there are those who might prefer to develop their expertise as an individual contributor.

However, professional growth isn't the only concern. You also need to make sure that employees feel valued. The worst-case scenario is that someone feels that they are a cog in a machine, and repeating the same tasks without any form of appreciation, or any idea how their work contributes to your company's overall mission.

Why is it important to get Ongoing Development and Retention right?

Ongoing Development and Retention is when employees are at their most productive. It's the time to start developing the next generation of leaders and using the existing knowledge of employees to help make the rest of the organization more effective.

These employees have the skills and institutional knowledge that only comes with experience. This makes them a valuable asset when it comes to training others and providing mentorship to newer employees.

The Work Institute's 2018 Retention Report, based on data from over 234,000 exit interviews, highlights a lack of career development as the main reason that employees decide to leave. It also found that nearly 77 percent of turnover could be prevented.

On an organizational level, your business needs to stay in touch with your high-value employees. People need to be reminded that their contribution is valued, and that their role is important for the overall company strategy. Without it, employees can start to feel like they're just going through the motions, which quickly leads to disengagement.

What you can do to optimize the Ongoing Development and Retention phase

Manager involvement is a key aspect of making sure employees are growing in the right direction. Career development conversations should be a regular part of one-to-ones, which requires senior managers to be equipped with the coaching skills to support employee growth.

For those employees that aspire to become managers themselves, you need to provide the mentoring and soft skills that will help them succeed. No one is born with management skills, they need to be nurtured through development programs and the support of senior leadership.

However, if a move into people management is the only way to progress, you can quickly alienate employees that would rather move into specialized roles. To avoid this happening, it's important for your organizational structure to support both sideways moves and development into specialized contributors.

While growth is a significant part of the Ongoing Development and Retention phase, there are also additional factors to consider. According to our dataset, strategy and recognition also play a part in the engagement of employees that have been with an organization for more than two years.

Specifically, employees need to have a clear understanding of the company's strategic objectives and feel valued for their contribution. If not, they can quickly feel alienated and without purpose.

Open and transparent communication about the company's direction is one way to keep people aligned. This communication should be to be two-directional so that people have an opportunity to ask questions and clarify their understanding of the overall strategy.

As for recognition, this needs to be addressed at the manager level. The best kind of feedback happens in real-time and is based on a specific outcome, as opposed to generalized praise that happens during an annual review.

PHASE FOUR

Separation

Despite your best efforts, there will always be employees that decide to move on from your organization. For some, their reasons will be unrelated to their employee experience; they may have thoroughly enjoyed their time with your business, but personal reasons have encouraged them to move on. However, there will also be those that decide to leave because of certain issues that were within your control.

Making the decision to leave an organization is rarely easy. Most people will take weeks, if not months to consider their options before handing in their notice. When someone does make that decision, they're often hoping for as smooth a transition as possible.

Even if someone has had a negative experience, the Separation phase should be seen as an opportunity to learn why people are leaving. Handled in the right way, it will help you uncover the real reasons for employee turnover. When you support the people that have decided to leave and part ways on good terms, it can also result in a new lifelong advocate of your brand.

Why is it important to get Separation right?

Current research indicates that the total cost of a departing employee can vary from 50% to 250% of their salary, depending on their role. Taking the most conservative estimate, an entry-level employee earning $30,000 would cost a business around $15,000 to replace in terms of recruitment, training and lost productivity.

It's therefore vital for any business to actively seek to understand and address any underlying causes of employee turnover. A lack of career development opportunities is an obvious one, but often it can be far more complex.

Some employees will leave on better terms than others, but it's essential to create a process that allows for as much honest and open feedback about the overall employee experience as possible.

What you can do to optimize the Separation phase

Most companies rely on exit surveys and interviews to collect feedback from departing employees. This can make it difficult to collect reliable information about why someone is leaving, especially as they happen after employees have already mentally checked out.

The fact that most exit interviews and interviews aren't anonymous can also create issues because it leaves employees less willing to share what they really think. They're more likely to worry about the repercussions of sharing negative feedback rather than open up and provide all the details you need to actually rectify any problems.

The most effective approach to gathering insight into the causes of attrition is to look at how engagement changed in the weeks and months before an employee decided to leave. This will shine a light on the factors that employees may be unwilling to discuss in an exit interview or survey, such as a lack of management support or meaningful work.

Conducting regular engagement surveys allows you to already have this data on hand when your employees announce their departure from your business. Not only does this help to paint a more reliable picture of attrition causes, but it also gives you a way to track improvements in your employee engagement scores throughout your organization to understand the impact of your retention initiatives.

How to visualize your employee experience

Engagement is a multi-faceted concept that can be influenced by age, tenure, experience, location, culture and more. When you're able to visualize the employee journey from start to finish, it allows you to think about the priorities of different people along that timeline.

In order to take the guesswork out of employee priorities, we've created the Employee Experience Cycle, which visualizes each of four phases. This makes it easy to see how engagement changes over time and identify specific areas that need attention.

Instead of trying to make sweeping organizational changes, you can focus in on what really matters to your employees. Being able to tackle each of these phases independently also makes it easier to develop a plan of action, allocate resources to specific projects and create more accountability for improving the employee experience across the business.

Separate onboarding, engagement and exit surveys require a lot of admin, and often the data remains siloed and unused. Employee Experience Cycle uses your regular engagement survey, augmented with targeted on- and off-boarding questions, to provide the insights needed to optimize your employee experience with no additional work.

This "one survey" approach allows you to analyze all your insights in one place, and offers a better experience for users – ensuring higher participation rates and better quality responses.

Workday Peakon Employee Voice gives you a way to apply an iterative approach to your employee experience, which aligns with the fluid nature of an individual employee's journey within your organization.

You can learn more about Workday Peakon Employee Voice and the Employee Experience Cycle at

workday.com/employee-voice

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