

RECHARGING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Management and communication synergy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report details the findings and recommendations from our in-depth phone interviews with 50 CEOs/COOs, HR and communication directors, representing global companies in a broad range of industries and geographies on employee engagement and communication topics.

Employee engagement is almost always driven by the company's CEO, but it cannot be governed by one function alone. Successful organisations need to transition strategic departments like communication and HR from being viewed as support functions to leadership functions.

To adapt to the continual or post-pandemic world, employee well-being will remain front and centre, and will require real ownership: a triumvirate of business leadership, senior HR and communication professionals to work as equal partners. The most agile organisations will succeed but agility only comes if employees are committed, happy, fulfilled and ready to adapt.

Our findings show that efforts at developing and assessing employee engagement programmes are becoming more synergistic and focused. Many companies now have both HR and communication professionals joining forces in creating and bringing to life such programmes. The study reveals that employee surveys and measurements need to be followed by actions to facilitate engagement.

The study examines the impact of COVID-19 on employee engagement and how corporate communication needs to adapt when the majority of the workforce is working from home. The pandemic has accelerated changes in the way people work and urged companies to truly embrace that high levels of employee engagement are a response to effective leadership.

The role of the employee and the broader employer-employee relationship is also expected to evolve. Employees want more professional development opportunities, trust and employee-centric initiatives. Employers are expected to fine-tune their digital communication tools quickly and provide an integrated model of engagement that puts employee's well-being at the forefront.

The best companies do not only understand the importance of culture, they actually take advantage of it. To achieve the type of employee engagement that significantly benefits both multinational corporations and their employees, requires deep understanding of people of different nationality, race, religion, social background, age and education. These differences necessitate a customised approach towards employee engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, involvement in employee engagement has emerged as a priority for communications directors and their departments. Consequently, earlier this year, students from the NTU Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information's Master of Media and Communication programme worked with me and my research associate, Amanda Huan to examine this fascinating trend¹. What we didn't know when we commenced our study was that within weeks, the COVID-19 pandemic would add a gigantic burden to executives in corporations who handle employee engagement. Edelman, one of the world's leading public relations consultancies, its research arm Edelman Data and Intelligence; as well as Mercer, the eminent HR consulting firm, and Marsh and McLennan Advantage joined us in our efforts.

In this study, we interviewed 50 senior professionals from around the world and across different industries to find out their opinions and their companies' approach towards employee engagement. The study was aimed at developing a better understanding of the subject with a particular focus on the roles of HR, communication and C-suite executives in promoting employee engagement practices. The interviews covered a range of topics including conceptual definitions, engagement measurements and evaluation. Business leaders were asked about their views on ownership, communication, drivers and challenges of employee engagement. They were also asked to share their perspectives on the future of the workforce and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employee engagement.

Among the 50 interviewed, 15 were C-suite executives including both CEO- and CCO-equivalents, 13 held leadership positions in human resources, and 22 were senior communication directors. Most of the interviewees (31) were based in the Asia-Pacific region; 10 were based in Europe and the remaining were in North America. There was diversity in the geographies of company headquarters with 17 based in Asia-Pacific, 18 in North America, and 15 in Europe. The interviewees came from a broad range of industries, including pharma, FMCG, financial and professional services, industrial, technology, and education.

We hope the insights from this study will help companies and C-suite executives recognise the role of effective communication in engaging employees and developing strategic plans to involve both HR and communications departments in taking employee engagement to the next level.

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¹ This study was conducted with approval from the NTU Institutional Review Board (Study Reference No.: IRB-2020-01-002).

A DIVERSITY IN DEFINITIONS

We asked the 50 professionals to define employee engagement (“EE”) to understand how different industries, job levels and functions are reflected in their views of employee engagement. From their responses, we see the emergence of two distinct views of what EE means. A number of them described it in terms of processes — “EE refers to the different ways you communicate with employees,” “it’s the two-way communication that takes place.” The vast majority, however, tend to describe EE more in terms of outcomes — “it’s the degree to which employees understand where the company is going,” “it’s about whether an employee feels that he/she belongs to an organisation,” “EE is about employees loving their companies basically.”

It’s about whether an employee feels that he/she belongs to an organisation

To an extent, the role of the interviewees in their organisation may have affected the way they looked at the concept of EE. Communications professionals tend to adopt a more process-oriented view. Handling organisational/internal communications as part of their remit may have influenced their perspectives. Whereas, C-suite and HR executives were largely more outcomes-oriented in their EE views, describing it as the level of commitment or employee experience.

Most interviewees describe EE in more company-centric terms, which is to say that their definition of it tended to be from a top-down perspective, i.e., a “what a company does for its employees.” In contrast, the employee-centric view is when the onus of responsibility for EE falls on the employee instead. The majority of respondents described EE in terms of what the organisation actively does to provide employees with a positive experience and environment. Only two interviewees bucked the norm and defined EE as the responsibility of the employee instead, with one of them regarding it as “the extent to which employees are exerting effort to their work.”

Employee engagement and employee experience are sometimes used interchangeably and the consensus on their definitions still remains debatable. Therefore, during our interviews, we asked business leaders to compare EE with employee experience; we found that the opinions were divided. Some viewed EE as a subset of employee experience and an equivalent number viewed it the opposite way. Some respondents felt that good EE would lead to a good employee experience and thus viewed employee experience as the resulting outcome of EE. Others saw it the other way around — that employee experience is only one aspect of EE and that good employee experience contributes to positive EE. One interviewee saw it as being two halves of a whole — with employee experience referring to the specific touchpoints that an employee has with the company, and EE constituting the active processes that take place with these touchpoints.

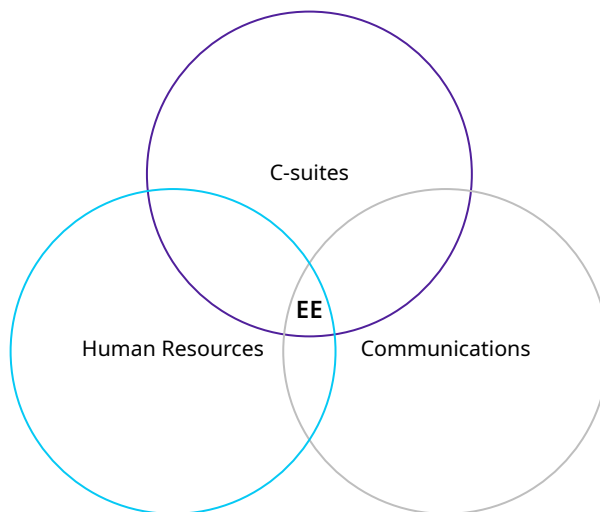
Our discussions with C-suite executives shed light on the disparity in their understanding of employee engagement, which often tends to be a reflection of their functions in the organisation.

WHOSE RESPONSIBILITIES?

Despite the important role of employee engagement in business performance, where the ownership of EE rests in practice remains unclear. The responses were split evenly between two arrangements: the responsibility (and accountability) of the EE function being shared among different functions including senior management, HR, and/or Communications; or being held only by one function (typically either senior management or HR). In the latter, the other functions would play only supporting roles in EE.

In most cases, either the CEO or senior management or HR would lead the EE function². The tasks involved in leading EE would include developing the strategic aspect of EE and the initiatives to achieve the concordant goals and objectives. Only eight executives spoke about how EE leadership was shared among the CEO, HR, and Communications.

Exhibit 1: C-suites, HR department and Communication department should all be responsible for employee engagement



Source: Interview data

Pertaining to the various roles of the different functions within EE, three types of involvement emerged: leading, facilitating, or supporting. A function that is heavily involved in the strategic aspect of EE (i.e., development of goals and objectives, designing EE programmes) would be regarded as having a leading type of involvement. A function that facilitates would be somewhat majorly involved in EE, typically in the implementation of key EE initiatives (hence, facilitating the EE function). A supporting role, in contrast, would be more hands-off and limited usually to peripheral types of activities (for example, sending internal communication about an EE activity).

² 17 interviewees mentioned that CEOs led the EE function. Two interviewees mentioned that EE was led by their senior management. 16 interviewees mentioned that HR led the EE function.

The HR function typically plays a leading or facilitating role in organisations' employee engagement. This is unsurprising given that the HR department's remit typically involves functions, such as recruitment, compensation, and staff training, that are directed towards employees and their experience with the firm. The communication function, usually plays a supporting role, though there is an increased incidence of them co-leading the EE function. This is especially the case after the onset of the pandemic. On multiple occasions, interviewees spoke about how the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the communications function to the forefront as the need for clear and timely interaction with employees was greatly heightened. The respondents also spoke about how the switch to remote working has increased the importance of internal communications in EE. With companies facing limitations in the way they can actively engage their employees (for example, no workspace gatherings or events), the communications function has become even more important in ensuring that employees feel that they are cared for. Some interviewees spoke about how they are actively shifting the EE leadership role from HR to Communications in light of the revised perspective towards the value of organisational communication.

The CEO plays a critical role in EE and a competent CEO recognises the correlation between good business results and good engagement and is able to facilitate both well. In our interviews, most executives mentioned that their CEOs were heavily involved in EE and playing a leading role. One interviewee said that all EE was driven by their CEO as their CEO "sets the tone, drives the culture, and lives and communicates the values in our company." This notion of the CEO as an embodiment of EE was mentioned repeatedly as interviewees spoke about the importance of having the CEO and senior management "walk the talk" when it comes to EE. Leading by example is key to being the driving force that guides employees' thoughts and actions. When culture is shaped through the CEO's personal touch and conviction, trust among employees increases. However, having an EE programme that is too dependent on the CEO also puts the continuity of such programs (and EE in its entirety) in question during times of leadership change.

For another substantial group, the CEO was slightly less involved, preferring to only provide direction or guidance on EE matters, and in a few cases, the CEOs were not involved at all. To an extent, a CEO's level of involvement seems tied to their personality and the perceived ease of managing EE. One interviewee spoke about how their current CEO was a bad communicator and had decided to not be involved in EE at all. While the involvement of the CEO in EE is usually welcomed, there is also the risk that the CEO becomes overly involved. One interviewee remarked that their CEO was too involved in EE and this came at the cost of their attention to running the actual business.

For some organisations there is a dedicated EE team or resource, and programmes are decided by a taskforce made up of individuals from different functions. One interviewee's organisation opted to have a dedicated EE person placed in every function. That meant that every department, be it finance, marketing, or operations, had at least one employee who was tasked with managing EE. These developments are in line with the increasing prioritisation of EE and the recognition of EE as a multi-faceted issue that is best managed collaboratively by businesses. One professional mentioned that it was perhaps time to create a Chief EE Officer who would be someone that understood business, management, HR, and communications.

THE CHANGING WORLD OF EMPLOYEE SURVEYS

Gone are the days when companies were questioning the need to measure employee engagement; the only question now is how to do it best. All of the business leaders that we interviewed, except for two, said their companies measured their organisation's EE. Measurement is important for a number of reasons. First, it provides organisations with a clearer understanding of the aspects of EE that are working (or not working). Second, as the adage goes, what gets measured gets done — having clear measurements in place ensures that leaders and managers develop and implement EE initiatives seriously.

The frequency that companies conduct employee engagement measurement exercises varied widely. While a substantial number reviewed their EE annually, some undertook reviews on a longer timeline (for example, biannual and 18 months) and others assessed EE on a more frequent basis (for example, twice a year, once a quarter, weekly). One oft-remarked complaint about the frequency of reviews was that the review and follow-up process in itself took a long time and often left some interviewees questioning the meaningfulness of these initiatives.

One executive elaborated on the problems with timing. In their organisation, the annual survey is done in one month with the results out the month after. Focus group discussions are done the month after that to check on results again. The organisation is then focused on the next financial year with performance and compensation reviews for the months thereafter and very quickly the annual EE survey is due again. This interviewee thus questions the purpose of these surveys, especially since they seem to have little bearing or effect on EE for their organisation. This doubt about the efficacy of EE surveys was shared by other executives. One interviewee mentioned that EE surveys seemed to focus more on management than the employees. Specifically, these surveys measure management performance and outcomes rather than employee wellbeing. The fact that EE outcomes are now increasingly becoming a part of senior management's KPIs creates even more incentives for such measurements. Whereas the shift towards making senior executives accountable for EE was aimed at prioritising EE within an organisation (which would presumably lead to a more engaged workforce), its effect might be double-edged instead as the focus of EE outcomes shifts from the employee to senior management.

Another unintended consequence of EE measurement that was brought up was the issue of survey fatigue. Annual surveys are becoming longer and longer in length as companies try to assess a wide spectrum of EE issues including, amongst others, working environment, diversity and inclusion, job satisfaction, work-life balance, team performance, and institutional pride. To tackle this problem, some companies have opted for either less frequent surveys (a major survey every two years) or have decided to break down EE measurement into smaller parts. In fact, a number of business leaders spoke about how their organisations are moving away from the "One mega survey every so often" model to a continuous feedback model. In the latter, employees are asked at regular intervals (it could be time-based, i.e., daily, work-based, or, at the end of a project) to provide feedback on small issues areas. These issue areas could be related directly to the task at hand (for example, asking an employee how they felt about the project timeline) or could be based on themes pre-selected by management (for example, asking

employees about their opinions on CSR in one month and their opinions on diversity in the next month). By obtaining feedback in real-time, this approach helps these organisations deal with issues in a more timely manner and allows them to spot potential issues that may crop up.

This approach is in contrast with the “one mega survey” model wherein management, more often than not, ends up working with data that may be “old” and irrelevant. This move towards a more fragmented measurement model is also favoured by large organisations that are keen to shift or are shifting towards a localisation of EE management and measurement. Respondents who worked in large global firms spoke about how regional and local offices are being given more power and responsibility to manage and measure EE issues, as they recognise that local cultures play a major role in EE. This sentiment of moving away from a “one-size-fits-all” approach in EE was shared by the majority of executives. As one interviewee opined, “good EE is human-focused, not process-based.”

Exhibit 2: Human-centric makes great employee experience strategies

58%

are redesigning their organisation to be more human centric

22%

of employees say HR processes have gone digital/online, but some necessary human interactions were lost

Source: [Mercer Global Talent Trends 2020](#)

Across the board, C-suite leaders also talked about the importance of communicating the results of EE surveys to employees. They found it important to be transparent and upfront about the results of such measurements, even if the results were less than desirable. Even though conducting surveys might be HR’s task, leaders of the company need to be involved and held accountable to show employees that their feedback is being heard and follow-up action is being given priority. They also stressed the need for a two-way communication process and highlighted the importance of making sure that employees know and feel that they have a safe space to provide feedback. Employees should also be told about the follow-up actions that will occur as a result of the feedback obtained and these prospective follow-up actions must be executed. As one interviewee stressed:



The key is to get feedback and act on the feedback. The quickest way for people to feel disengaged is if they feel that they are not listened to

CASE STUDY

Shell: Authenticity and Empowerment

As one of the largest energy company in the world, Royal Dutch Shell (Shell) is no stranger to controversies, and one would not expect the company to be a highly sought-after employer. Yet, its strategy of **authenticity and empowerment** has undoubtedly motivated their people to be enthusiastic and passionate about their work.

Shell **signals its authenticity and openness to communication** by providing a plethora of platforms for employees to engage with management. This personalised approach is organised and facilitated by the Internal Communications unit, as part of an overall communication strategy to move heightened engagement between senior management and the grassroots. The annual Shell People Survey is another channel for conversation between management and employees on critical issues. Importantly, the survey facilitates communication by giving every employee a chance to voice their opinion and play a part in improving the company and the business. It is also an opportunity to identify the gap between aspirations and reality, and provide the agenda for change.

Another key component of Shell's employee engagement strategy is **empowering employees to improve their team's engagement levels**. Recognising that experiences may differ on the ground, Shell also analyses the results of its Shell People Survey at the business unit or departmental level. The human resource department provides guidance and action-based feedback after the survey, but the follow-up actions plans are usually left to teams, departments and business

units to manage. Team leaders and managers are encouraged to communicate their teams' performance in the Shell People Survey back to their team so that frank conversations to understand issues and brainstorm for ideas to improve the situation can take place. Even though some managers may feel that they lack the tools or skills to implement the necessary follow-ups, additional guidance and training by peers, consultants or HR are usually provided. Senior leaders are also incentivised to improve employee engagement because the engagement score is part of their annual KPIs. As a result of its strong commitment to employee engagement, Shell has enjoyed a strong engagement score over the years.

Shell also invests heavily in **technology to ensure that all their employees are engaged, and communication efforts can reach all parts of the organisation**. For example, to drive learning and engagement for frontline employees and retailers, Shell utilises the WorkJam app to disseminate targeted and consistent communication. These employees can also provide feedback and access training through the app. Shell also pays close attention to understanding how employees are faring through training reports so that they can help identify areas for improvement and challenge employees to better utilise their talents.

Employee engagement has been a major theme in the Shell people's narrative since 2005. For the past 15 years, Shell management has consistently emphasised the link between strong employee engagement and strong business delivery in all of their annual reports. To this end, Shell has created an environment where employees are kept engaged because they are heard and empowered by the management.

In terms of the types of tools that are currently used to measure EE, the vast majority of interviewees' organisations relied on surveys. Surveys are the go-to tool for organisations to find out whether their efforts to engage employees are successful. However, they can be riddled with shortcomings that reduce their effectiveness. For instance, the anonymity of surveys does not necessarily guarantee truthful responses from employees. Employees may also use anonymity as a cover to air their grievances and skew survey results to only reflect negative feedback. To address some of these issues, a substantive number of interviewees also relied on qualitative data, opting for the use of focus group discussions and interviews to supplement the quantitative data. A sizeable number of interviewees also relied on other metrics to measure EE such as retention rate, productivity gain, revenue per employee, employees' proactivity, and willingness to participate or initiate activities. Less commonly, other types of information including public opinion data such as Glassdoor scores and reviews are used to assess EE.

COMMUNICATION IN NORMAL AND SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Employee engagement communication is the process of delivering messages from the company leadership on the value of employees, employee programmes and initiatives to the employees. The importance of employee communication, or internal/organisational communication, is widely recognised. It is a powerful tool when used correctly and can encourage better performance, increase satisfaction, and influence employees' mindsets.

The business leaders we interviewed expressed concern over how different functions communicate about EE and how changes and disruptions impact EE communication. A substantial number mentioned that their CEO was involved in EE communication and this typically entailed top-line messaging about organisational and business direction, goals and strategy. Communication surrounding crises, major organisational change, and disruptions would also be delivered by the CEO. Multiple interviewees spoke about the importance of management, not just the CEO, in EE communication. Be it at regional, country, or line manager level, these leaders were also key in EE communication processes, especially since they often interacted more with employees than a global CEO would.

Pertaining to the role of HR and the communications function in EE communication, most interviewees either had EE communication handled solely by the communication department (typically by an internal communication team) or by the communication department in tandem with HR. This overall trend largely reflects the tendency to allocate the responsibility to the most appropriate skillset. In this case, this means assigning EE communication to the communication function. The communication team plays a significant role in communicating the senior leadership team's key messages, including the company's purpose, mission, vision, and values to employees. This task, which is often underestimated, requires an in-depth and sustained effort, typically involving the use of workshops, coaching, implementation support, and evaluation systems. The communication team also plays a key role in identifying political, economic, and social trends that would impact the business. In instances where both HR and Communication is involved, interviewees often spoke about a clear delineation of the type of messages that were sent by either function. The more operational, policy-centric type of messages (for example, about workplace safety measures, or compensation policies) would be crafted and sent by HR while other types of messages, such as corporate announcements, and achievement-related announcements, would be sent by the communications department. Most saw the HR communication relationship in EE communication as an important, synergistic one.

CASE STUDY

Hilton Hotel: Structured employee engagement programmes and a commitment to improvement

As one of the largest hotel corporations in the world, Hilton employs about 170,000 team members across 170 nationalities and 100 languages. According to its employees, Hilton is also one of the best places to work: it ranked first on the *Fortune 100 Best companies to work for* in both 2019 and 2020. Hilton's success story is the product of strong leadership, deliberate and well-structured employee engagement programs, and continuous monitoring of employee satisfaction.

Christopher J. Nassetta, Hilton's President and Chief Executive Officer, takes employee engagement very seriously. He believes **that employees provide better services to customers only when the employees are taken care of**. In 2010, for example, he initiated a Business Immersion Program that offered senior leaders the **opportunity to experience the back-of-house work and frontline work**. By allowing senior leaders to experience the issues that their frontline staff face daily, they can better empathize and are better positioned to improve employee experience. The immersion practice not only boosted staff morale, but also helped leaders make important business decisions.

Another key element of Hilton's employee engagement efforts is its **structured employee engagement program, "Thrive @ Hilton,"** which encourages team members to bring their whole self to work, to help support everything team members are interested in and obviously, enable them to thrive. Under this program, Hilton offers a range of people-oriented initiatives such as health and wellness programs, training programs, learning programs and more. It is essential to satisfy

team members' emotional needs and make them feel good when they perform well and acknowledge that their efforts are valued by the company. To achieve this goal, Hilton provides guidance to their managers and leaders on how to communicate with employees.

Tracking and monitoring culture is also important in helping Hilton improve employee engagement. Since 1997, Hilton has been using the Hilton Balanced Scorecard (BSC) to track financial and competitive performance along with both customers' and team members' satisfaction and loyalty. BSC performance provides a basis on how to improve strategies and let team members know their roles in the team. Additionally, the results of BSC are aligned with the company's incentive programs. Thus, BSC contributes to a healthy environment that not only measures employee engagement, but also guides employees' behaviours. Hilton also annually conducts a formal global team member survey through which hundreds of thousands of data points on team morale and satisfaction with leadership, among other things, are collected and compiled into a leadership index. This is subsequently provided to Hilton's managers and directors to help them become better leaders. It is of no surprise that the results of the annual team member survey also influence a part of the managers' incentives for the year.

Leadership, structured employee engagement programs and a commitment to improvement through tracking performance has helped drive high levels of employee engagement at Hilton. Hilton not only spreads its positive corporate culture pervasively, but also executes it well through the hierarchy both internally and externally. Only with the right system and the right way of communication can they enable employees to contribute to the development and success of Hilton. After all, it is a business of people serving people.

One interesting point that was brought up by a respondent during our discussions was about how everyone within an organisation was responsible for EE communication. Another interviewee opined that the role of the communicator was less important than the skillsets of the communicator.

Who does the communication is not the question. What is more important is to have someone or a team of sufficient quality to be both a counsellor and a communicator; to know what to say so that key messages not only reach employees but are also understood and accepted

One other distinct pattern that emerged from the interviews was the trend of using an increasing foray of physical and digital channels to conduct EE communication. Whereas EE communication in the past was largely conducted via large town hall meetings, the company intranet, email, bulletin board, and social media platforms; organisations are now diversifying the tools used to communicate as well as increasing the frequency of such communication. In addition to the mega townhalls that senior management typically conducts once or twice a year, both senior and middle management are now using smaller scale townhalls to communicate with employees on a monthly or even weekly basis.

Employees also meet regularly with their managers in smaller meetings (either one-on-one, or in groups) for coffee sessions, cocktails, and business development lunches. This inclination towards smaller-sized engagements is in part due to the recognition that employees come from diverse backgrounds and thus a more customised way of communication is necessary. Organisations are also adopting other tools such as video conferences, custom-built social media platforms and apps, and established social media and messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Yammer to reach out to employees. One interviewee briefly described some of the EE communication that goes on in their organisation. Their CEO conducts a weekly Ask Me Anything (AMA) session while their CCO does weekly video conferences with the different country, division, and brand communication executives. Their country managers also put out weekly videos that update all employees on developments within the company. The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed majorly to this trend with organisations turning to online townhalls and other online initiatives to check in with employees and communicate messages related to the organisation's response to the pandemic.

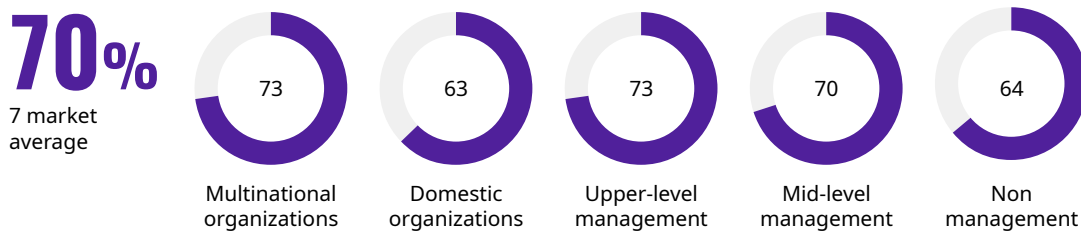
In regard to the special circumstances in which EE communication might change or be impacted, most business leaders, unsurprisingly, mentioned the current pandemic as a gamechanger. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many organisations to ramp up their communication efforts to employees. Most interviewees spoke of the multiple demands that the pandemic has placed on EE communication. On one hand, there is a need to assuage employees in these uncertain times and to demonstrate organisational care and concern. On the other hand, there is a rush to help train employees on new working practices related to working remotely and getting

people onboard with new practices. All of these need to take place alongside the “normal” EE communication. A number of interviewees brought up the notion of overcommunication and opined that with the pandemic, this had become the preferred approach, especially during the first few weeks of lockdowns.

Exhibit 3: Employers must continue to communicate and set expectations

Percent of employees working from home who agree

My employer has effectively **communicated** how we are approaching our return to the workplace



Note: The survey sampled 3,400 respondents in seven countries, France, Germany, India, Singapore, South Korea, UK and US between August 23 and August 26, 2020

Source: 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report: Workplace Trust and the Coronavirus

Other special circumstances that would impact EE communication included corporate crises such as scandals, or times of major change such as organisational restructuring and acquisitions. Interviewees also mentioned the 2008 financial crisis and the 2019 protests in Hong Kong as special circumstances. Two executives, in particular, brought up another scenario in which EE communication would be affected: the fight for talent. For one of them, an industry competitor had opened a new office near their corporate headquarters, and they knew that competition for talent would ensue. This led to a rethink in the way they handled not just EE communication, but EE in general, as they fought to keep their staff. For the other interviewee, they see changes to their EE communication being imperative when their employees are headhunted.

COVID-19 AS A GAMECHANGER FOR EE AND THE FUTURE WORKFORCE

The pandemic has brought on a seismic shift in the way people work. For some interviewees, they spoke about how the current crisis has resulted in many changes in the way we work (for example, remote working, split shifts) but are more cautious about whether this will lead to any lasting impact. They expect things to revert to the old normal (i.e., working in offices) once the pandemic blows over. There are others who holds views on the other end of the spectrum who think that the world of work has essentially changed for good and that EE as it is currently conceived will become irrelevant. As one interviewee said, “We will probably need to close the book on EE and start all over again to create a post-COVID-19 EE concept.” By and large, company leaders expect EE to become much more complex and demanding. A major part of the challenge is in engaging employees over a virtual space. For others, it is about re-building trust and reputation. The pandemic has caused employees to reassess their organisations.

Employees are making judgments on their employers based on what their companies did or didn't do during this crisis. Brands will be especially impacted. Some employers will come through this with a worse reputation

Yet others take on more measured stances; they expect the pandemic to have some form of lasting change though not to the point that EE needs to be entirely reinvented. One business leader spoke about how performance management would be the most affected as people move away from facetime to virtual settings.

Some respondents were more optimistic about the impact of COVID-19. For the vast majority, the bright side was in seeing how the pandemic brought people closer together and enabled employees to forge better connections with one another. "People tend to 'club' together more closely under stressful situations... If you ask me, we'll exit the tunnel with a higher engagement than before COVID-19 started," said one C-suite executive. Other professionals talked about how the pandemic has generally made people more understanding and that this in turn has improved company dynamics.

Another major positive outcome that was mentioned by business leaders interviewed was the elevation of the role of communication. As organisations scrambled to adjust to new working arrangements and regulations, communication departments had to move quickly to make sure that information was delivered accurately and clearly. One CCO observed, "COVID-19 requires much more intense communication; communication occurs more often and is more specific than ever before." Communication departments in most organisations functioned as a conduit between senior management and employees. On one hand, they had to develop top-down messaging that was clear and had the right tone. On the other hand, they had to also ensure that feedback and concerns from employees were addressed. One leader remarked that "COVID-19 highlighted the absolute necessity to communicate regularly and honestly... The importance of communicating well to employees is underscored and emphasised."

Exhibit 4: A need for business and employers to step up

78%

Businesses have a responsibility to ensure their employees are protected from the virus in the workplace and do not spread the virus into the community

63%

I would like my employer to share information about the coronavirus at least daily

Source: [Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report — Workplace Trust and the Coronavirus](#)

DRIVERS OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

The two most cited drivers of EE were the conduct and commitment of senior leadership to EE and the level of professional development that was available to employees. Executives across all job functions were quick to mention the importance of the CEO (or the most senior executive equivalent) in EE. The CEO should “walk the talk” and “live” EE. Interviewees felt that it was important for the CEO and senior management to demonstrate a clear commitment to EE and set clear examples of the type of conduct and engagement expected in the organisation. For example, given how COVID-19 situation is impacting the finances of an organisation, if a company had to undertake cost-cutting measures such as salary cuts, such measures should be applied equitably across the board; top management should be similarly affected.

In a recent report by Edelman, less than one third of surveyed employees thought CEO did an outstanding job in handling the pandemic. The same report also revealed that only nearly half of employees in 11 countries thought that companies are implementing safety measures to protect workers and customers.

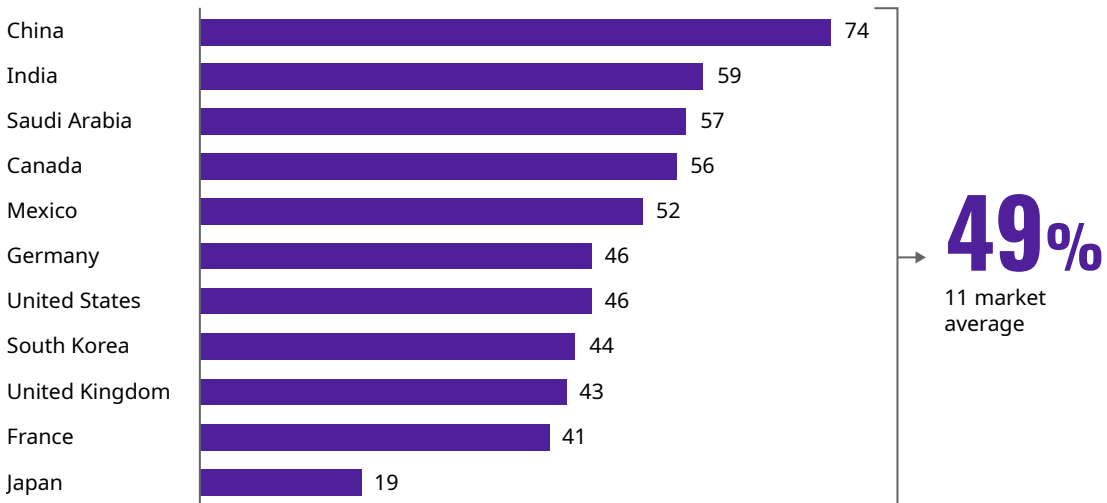
Exhibit 5: CEOs failing to demonstrate public leadership

29% CEOs are doing an outstanding job meeting the demands placed on them by the pandemic

Source: Edelman Trust Barometer Spring Update

Exhibit 6: Business performance — Implementing safety measures to protect workers and customers (percentage)

Doing well or very well



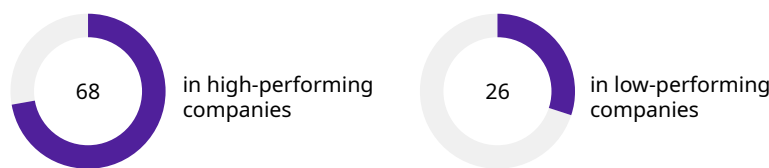
Note: The survey was conducted by Edelman Intelligence and sampled more than 13,200 respondents in 11 markets: Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, S. Korea, UK and US between April 15 and April 23

Source: Edelman Trust Barometer Spring Update

Another important role for senior leadership is in demonstrating genuine care and concern for employees. Business leaders shared that good EE is achieved only when employees feel that they are cared for by their organisations. To this end, senior leaders need to demonstrate empathy and understanding towards employees.

The level of professional and career development that was made available to employees was also a top cited driver. Employees should be provided with the necessary training to be able to perform well in their jobs. Giving employees the opportunities to learn more or expand their skillsets also contributed to positive EE. Providing employees with a clear framework of advancement opportunities or opportunities to work in different functions or offices was also mentioned. These all point towards the notion of helping employees grow and avoiding stagnation.

Exhibit 7: Percentage of employees that agree their unique skills and interests are understood by their employer



Source: [Mercer Global Talent Trends Report 2020](#)

Other drivers of EE that were mentioned repeatedly included clear communication, social connections, and trust. Clear and constant two-way communication is necessary to facilitate good EE. Communication helps in multiple ways. First, it allows the organisation to explain where the company is going and ensure that employees know how they can contribute. Clear communication about what is expected also helps manage employees’ expectations. In this respect, interviewees spoke about the need for transparent, truthful, and “brutally honest” communication. If times were bad for the company, employees expect to be told the truth. Second, employees want to be given a voice. They want to be able to influence, or at least, provide their opinion on organisational direction or plans. Employees want to feel that their opinions matter and that they are listened to.

One leader spoke about how employees might feel overlooked in their organisation in this respect. In their experience, employees’ suggestions were discussed at senior management level but were unfortunately not taken up for business reasons. The employees who provided the suggestions were kept in the dark about the process and outcome. As a result, employees felt they had been ignored. Constant and transparent communication also helps facilitate and build organisational relationships and trust. The presence of relationships (or social networks and connections) provide employees with the feeling of being supported. This in turn drives good EE. Separately, trust plays a key role in EE: employees want to be able to trust their organisation and feel trusted by their organisation.

CASE STUDY

Unilever: Support employees' careers and attend to their concerns

With over 400 brands and more than 160,000 employees, excelling in employee engagement and communication may seem impossible. For Unilever, however, its success in engaging their employees meaningfully can be seen in its high rankings in global employer ranking lists. The consumer goods giant invests heavily in **providing a nurturing and conducive workplace** that enables their people to succeed.

To **boost internal mobility and encourage employees to reach their potential**, Unilever partnered with Gloat, a career development platform, to launch an AI-powered online talent marketplace called "FLEX Experiences", to create work opportunities that were more project-based and far more agile. The platform leverages employees' untapped skill sets, experiences, ambitions, and areas of development to match them to new projects which they may be interested in regardless of their current job scope or geographical location. The transparency of the platform empowers employees to create and define their own career path, discover their personal purpose, and ultimately fulfill their potential. Unilever has also used the platform to **redeploy** over 3,000 employees, especially those whose work have been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, to other areas of work so that they can be kept engaged at work.

Unilever also goes the extra mile to **ease their employees' day to day concerns** so that they can stay focused in their career. Irene

Zhou, the Talent and Organisational Director of Unilever North Asia, points to their China operations as an example. In cities such as Shanghai where many people stress over the high cost of living, their employees can save on housing expenses because of the mortgage discounts that Unilever has secured for them through negotiations with local banks. Furthermore, Unilever offers childcare services near their Shanghai office so that employees can have a peace of mind that their children are in safe hands whilst they are at work. Unilever offers complementary shuttle bus services from most parts of the city to the workplace. Unilever's success in empathizing with its employees' pressures of life and work is reflected in its accolades as *The Best Employers in China* by the Top Employers Institute, in 2016 and 2017.

Unilever has also showcased its **strong and effective internal communication efforts** during the COVID-19 pandemic. CEO Alan Jape was quick to announce a slew of measures to safeguard employees and their families. These measures were cascaded down in a timely manner through existing and enhanced communication tools. From setting up hotlines to address employees' anxieties to providing transportation when public transport was ceased to redeploying employees quickly, Unilever has been largely successful in its efforts to guide employee behaviour and minimise unease within the organisation during times where business-as-usual is no longer an option. Unilever's timely response in supporting its employees enabled it to continue operations whilst repositioning to meet the needs of their communities despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

The importance of recognition was also mentioned during the interviews. Employees that receive recognition for their contributions to the organisation demonstrated higher levels of EE. The type of recognition varies. For some, this amounted to a yearly award that was given out. Others had programs in place that would select certain high-performing employees for leadership or accelerated career programmes. Interestingly, the type of contribution that was recognised also varied. While most relied on the employee's contribution to the organisation's performance, one spoke about how their organisation would "celebrate its heroes — people who have made a significant impact on life, the community they live in, or on other individuals."

Other key drivers of EE included compensation (i.e., whether employees were paid well), diversity and inclusion (D&I) (i.e., whether employees felt that their organisations had good D&I policies), employee involvement in CSR activities, and whether an organisation's mission, vision, and values resonated with its employees. Some interviewees expressed the view that it was difficult for them to point out the drivers of EE as the concept in itself was a nascent one. They remarked that EE was still a relatively new concept in business and academia and thus it remained unclear what the drivers of EE were.

CHALLENGES OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

In terms of perceived challenges of developing and/or implementing EE practices, the top cited was that of culture. The issues with culture manifested itself in different ways. In some instances, executives spoke about the difficulties of implementing EE evenly across geographic borders. What worked in one culture did not necessarily work in another. One executive faced immense difficulties in trying to apply the EE strategy and programme that had been developed in its corporate headquarters in Asia to its major offices in Europe. Another spoke about an acquisition where both the parent and the acquired company were based in Europe, but there were significant enough differences in culture and mindset between the two that led to friction. In other instances, interviewees spoke of the difficulties of managing an international workforce made up of people from diverse cultures.

The differences in culture affect both the ways in which employees perceived EE programmes and organisational communication. Several professionals remarked about the disconnect that can occur between cultural values and organisational values. For example, one spoke about how their organisational values were heavily influenced by the national culture in the country where its corporate headquarters was based. While this meant that employees who came from the same national culture could align themselves more easily with the values of the organisation, this proved tricky for their employees in other countries, especially those who came from and worked in countries that held distinctly different values (for example, collectivistic versus individualistic).

The next most cited set of challenges revolved around disruption. This presented itself in two ways. The first dealt with the new ways of working, most notably remote working. While this was accelerated by the pandemic, some organisations had already implemented or were experimenting with flexible working arrangements. The new ways of working necessitate changes not only in the way EE is practised or measured, but in the very way that it is conceptualised. What will it mean to be an engaged employee in the post-COVID-19 era where remote working may emerge the norm?

Working From Home has changed how to measure performance and engagement. Top-performing employees have surfaced concerns regarding how the company would measure who stands out when people are working remotely. Second, organisations will have to develop new EE programmes tailored towards a workforce that is shifting its presence from physical to virtual. While companies anticipate a mixed presence workforce (i.e., some people opting to work remotely, some in office, others a mix of the two) post-pandemic, most workforces look likely to remain virtual in the short term. In this regard, one CEO spoke of the need for companies to learn how to communicate digitally better and in a more personalised manner. Third, both organisations and employees are likely to have to broach the topic of trust once again; employees want to feel that they are trusted to perform well remotely without being intrusively monitored by their employers.

CASE STUDY

Microsoft: Digital Tools and Strategies for Employee Engagement

Microsoft understands why a conducive work culture and environment are important. After all, it faced the dire consequences of ignoring, or even undermining, EE the hard way. Key to its resurgence was the rebuilding of its company culture through deliberate leadership. Today, Microsoft uses what it does best to drive employee engagement — **utilising technology** to connect and understand their employees and improve employee experience.

When Satya Nadella took over the helm as its CEO in 2014, Microsoft had an overly competitive and stifling culture where employee performance was a zero-sum game. Employees were working in a hostile environment where one's good performance was achieved at the expense of another's; no one had any incentives to ensure that others were faring well. With employees not being able to harness their full potential or collaborate productively, innovation and sales of its new and existing products were lacklustre. Microsoft's innovation records and financial results reached an all-time low whilst their tech competitors forged ahead. Nadella recognised the problem and was able to turn the company around, starting with a refreshed mission which focused on empowerment. Microsoft also pushed for other changes — including the streamlining of business operations and workforce realignment — which flattened the organisational structure and united their different divisions under the "One Microsoft" brand. Whilst the company faced criticisms because of the resulting job losses, the restructuring exercise re-energised

employees with a more focused mission and tighter team structure which facilitated information flow, more prompt decision-making and drove innovation.

Digital tools and strategies play a big role in creating a sense of community for the 160,000-person company today. To facilitate **two-way communication**, Microsoft uses Yammer, a social networking tool, which allows employees to share their thoughts and doubts openly; business leaders listen and contribute their perspectives in these conversations as well as receive constructive feedback. Furthermore, the tool allows employees to broaden their perspectives by tapping on the experiences of peers via the Discovery Feed which curates what is current, trending and most important.

Microsoft also keeps up with trends to engage with its employees. Its One Minute to Connect, initiative is about getting employees to **create and share videos** to connect with others, instead of sending email messages. Light-hearted videos have boosted morale — a hilarious father's day video featured some young children trying to guess what their father, a team leader in Microsoft, does at work. Authentic videos which showcases an employee's private life can help co-workers better relate to each other and stay connected, especially during the work from home arrangements in place due to COVID-19.

Whilst there is no sign that Microsoft is resting on its laurels in terms of EE and communication, fierce competition for top talent in the tech industry means it will have to keep improving and maintaining its attractiveness to job-seekers and employees.

The second type of disruption deals with technological change and the adoption of digital tools. Like the first disruption, this has been accelerated by the pandemic. The first challenge lies in ensuring that the workforce can adapt to the technological changes. As employees shift to remote working, companies have had to introduce a whole host of digital tools to employees in a relatively short time. Employees have found themselves having to acclimatise to the new working conditions and learn the new tools quickly. Digital communication is another challenge as organisations shift their internal communication to mostly digital, which brings a danger of de-humanising communication. Some CCOs spoke of how the technology side of things “risks overshadowing the human aspect of communication.”

Another set of challenges mentioned by our respondents pertained to internal organisational factors, specifically, the (de-)prioritisation of EE amongst other organisational activities, the lack of internal collaboration when it came to EE, budgetary constraints, an overloaded EE agenda, and a multi-generational workforce. For the first factor, interviewees talked about the difficulties of making EE a priority. One executive spoke about how the “sheer level of distraction in daily life” meant that it was hard to get the attention of employees. Another concurred and remarked that everyone had “bandwidth issues;” “We’re all just very busy.”

The lack of consensus between departments when it comes to developing and implementing EE between senior and middle management is another challenge. While senior management tended to take the long-term perspective on EE, middle management “care[d] more about short term than long term” which made it difficult to persuade them about EE. A C-level professional found that gaps existed between C-suite and HR department. Yet another struggled to get their communication and HR departments in their organisation to work together.

Budgetary constraints also limit what organisations can do about EE. Some interviewees spoke of the need to balance overall cost and returns in EE or justify the costs and benefits of EE. And with large organisations, it was “difficult to pick topics and areas to improve, given our organisation size, we have about 50 things at any one time to ‘fix’.”

Another challenge that companies faced was in dealing with a multi-generational workforce. Workforces that consist of employees from multiple “generations” would typically require different EE strategies and programmes that would appeal to the different types of employees. One leader said that the difficulty was in engaging older generations as they found those that were younger more receptive to change. That is not to say that organisations would find it easier to engage employees from younger generations. One interviewee found Gen Z employees to be “harder to retain” as employees of this type are typically more socially focused and demonstrate a stronger need to “have the feeling they are participating in setting goals, strategy, etc.”

THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE WORKFORCE

What is the role of the employees in EE and their perspectives about the future of the workforce? How has the role evolved and how employees display their engagement? When asked how employees would display high engagement, going or doing beyond what is expected was commonly mentioned. Other indicators include increments in productivity and efficiency and the display of other soft skills such as boosts in employee confidence and an increased rate of participation and dialogue on the part of employees.

Pertaining to the changes in the role of the employee and the future workforce, employers anticipate that there would be a greater variation in the types of employees. Currently, most employees could be classified as permanent staff. Some executives anticipate a greater shift towards what has been referred to as the “gig economy:” “Talent will move towards three categories: contractors, gig workers, and outsourced talent.” This has significant implications for EE — should these independent contractors be engaged in much the same way as permanent staff? How do expectations between these different types of employees differ?

Companies also expect increased demands for more flexibility in the employer-employee relationship. Employees will want more autonomy in the way they manage tasks and will want more opportunities, be it related to internal mobility or cross-functional and cross-divisional assignments and postings. The demand for flexibility is also linked to employees’ desires for their employers to be more understanding or more supportive of the employee as an individual. As one interviewee mentioned, “Employers will need to have integrated HR systems that look way beyond the work side of employees” and this may include identifying areas in the employee’s life (for example, education, children, family) in which the company can provide support. This stems in part to how the boundaries between work and personal life have become increasingly blurred, especially in Asia where employees spend long hours on the job. The resulting effect that EE will have to be handled in a customised manner to account for the different contexts and lifestyles of employees. Organisations will need to be flexible and be open to listening and meeting the different needs of groups of employees. Different people respond to different stimulation and have different concerns and challenges.

The future workforce is also likely to possess very different mindsets. As professionals from organisations that currently employ multi-general workforces would attest, there are significant differences in the way older and younger employees respond to EE. Younger employees (Millennials and/or Gen-Z) prefer value-based employment. The younger generations also display a wider variation in the types of priorities that they have, whereas those from older generations usually have the same set of priorities (for example, stable income, work-life balance).

Millennials/Gen-Z may also consider other issues such as diversity and inclusion, inequality, and/or climate change as priorities. They are also more likely to offer their opinions and have higher expectations of everyone and the workplace. The differences extend to their working styles as well. Employees of older generations are regarded as being more disciplined and loyal to their role but are less adaptable to change, whereas those from the younger generations thrive on flexibility, leading to increased innovation, but also increased temperamentality. The generational differences will impact the way EE is conceptualised and developed and will greatly influence the ways in which an organisation communicates. Millennials/Gen-Z want quick and responsive communication and transparency in decision-making. They are also more likely to question the status quo and press for change.

The latest version of *Mercer's Global Talent Trends* report find that different generations have different career priorities.

Exhibit 8: One size does not fit all. What helps people thrive varies

Gen Z	Gen Y	Gen X	Baby boomers
Opportunities to learn	Opportunities to learn	Recognition	Recognition
Connections with colleagues	Recognition	Opportunities to learn	Work/life balance
Recognition	Meaningful projects	Meaningful projects	Connections with colleagues

Source: [Mercer Global Talent Trends 2020](#)

When asked about the future workforce, some spoke about the idea of purposeful employment and organisations contributing to a social good. Employees increasingly wish to feel that they are contributing to something beyond a business-generating activity. For some leaders, this paradigm shift from salary to purpose has already forced their organisations to rethink their employee value propositions.



The workforce has changed. People don't stay as long as they used to. They need a sense of purpose

Leaders spoke about how they have tried to address this demand for "purpose". For one of them, their organisation has encouraged employees to take on volunteer roles in the non-profit sector and/or participate in the organisation's CSR efforts; "We believe this aspect of EE will become increasingly important in the future." In order to better engage the future workforce, organisations will have to do some serious re-thinking of their EE and perhaps, even look at how "purpose" fits in their business.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Most engagement programs start with a simple question — do people like working here? Over time many programmes appear to evolve to answer a much broader set of questions connected to the culture and identity of the organisation; questions like “are we all connected, and are we all committed?” Leading organisations recognise this transition and start to link their engagement initiatives to the wider brand and values of the company. They understand that the way the organisation talks about itself is critical for building a sense of shared understanding in employees.

- Communication and HR professionals must therefore be aligned with the brand business leaders want to build in order to bring the right messages to life. And, in some cases, HR and communication professionals must be prepared to challenge business leaders to take employee branding and communication just as seriously as customer branding
- High levels of EE are a response to effective leadership. Successful organisations transition strategic units like communication and HR teams from being viewed as “support” functions to “leadership” functions. They become an extension of the leadership capacity and capability of the organisation — developing the systems and processes that enable all managers to bring the depth and quality of people leadership the CEO expects
- Many organisations spend a lot of time and effort collecting data about employee engagement. Advanced organisations have shifted leader and HR mindsets from viewing engagement data as a metric to improve, to a data point to learn from. Experiences at work cannot always be positive — but the way people react to different challenges can teach leaders a lot about the impact of business issues on the workforce. This learning is often the prerequisite to driving change and improvement. Organisations can also make use of emerging technologies to widen their view of employee engagement to consider more real time experience data, and more detailed employee sentiment data. This helps them act on employee engagement in a more continuous and less episodic way

As COVID-19 accelerated, changes in the way we work are already in the making and as we are not certain about what the new normal will look like, management might consider engaging in serious, advanced scenario development exercises.

- First, to look at how the pandemic has developed — and continues to develop — as well as other possible crisis situations the company might face. In addition, develop a variety of strategies, employ war-game techniques to test these, decide on multiple options, and most importantly, employees need to be informed honestly about every step on the way
- Digital transformation is no longer a competitive advantage, but a necessity to compete in both business development and employee engagement
- Care for the community and social purpose are no longer nice-to-haves, but are expected to sit at the core of an organisation’s operational philosophy. At the same time, the well-being of employees has been catapulted to the forefront of strategy
- The current pandemic is offering in-house communication & HR executives, as well as workforce and communication consultancies, a unique opportunity to up their game and increase the relevance of their counsel, and themselves. Communication related to employee engagement and crisis management, should be viewed by the most senior executives as crucial to their corporations’ survival, reputation and future success

As this report shows, it remains true that the employee engagement cannot be governed by one function alone. To adapt to the continual or post pandemic world, employee well-being will remain front and centre, and will require real ownership: a triumvirate of business leadership, senior human resources and communications professionals to work as equal partners of talent strategy and owners of execution. If there is one thing this pandemic has taught us, the most agile organisations will succeed and that agility will only come if the employee is committed, happy, fulfilled and ready to adapt.

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