

Winter 2022 CTDO Perspectives: Bethany Adams

Ryann Ellis: Bethany Adams is the associate director of the graduate programs in human resource development at Villanova University. Her work experience has focused on training and development, HR and OD. Prior to joining Villanova, she spent her corporate career working as a trainer and HR director for Starbucks coffee company and Blue Baker.

Bethany also hosts a podcast called the HRT. We recently spoke with Bethany about the role talent development executives can play in their organizations' employee experience initiatives. So Bethany, some professionals are confusing employee engagement and employee experience. Can you define what employee experience means for most people?

Bethany Adams: Yeah, I love this question because I think that we talk particularly in HR and training and development, we talk a lot about employee engagement and we measure engagement. We have engagement surveys, but we don't dig much deeper in to understand how engagement is a piece of employee experience. And employee experience is really how employees internalize and interpret the interactions that they have with their organization and within their organization and the context that influences those interactions.

So if you think about like customer experience, right, we all have been customers in tons of stores and different places that we go. There's so much that impacts our customer experience, right? It's more than just the products that I walked away with and the quality of that product. It's also my feelings about the brand.

It's also my interactions while I was in the store or online shopping. It's the speed of service. It's how I was treated there. It's all of those pieces that impact my customer experience. Well, the same is true for employee experience. It's my interactions with your website before I even become an employee.

It's the onboarding experience that I have. It's my team. It's my manager. It's the tools and technology and resources that I'm given. It's beyond just my compensation and my benefits. It's how do all of those things create kind of this overall picture of my interactions throughout my entire time with your organization.

It even goes into my feelings of inclusion in the organization and even, right, my feelings of my exit. Right? If I, if I'm leaving the organization, what did that look like? What was my experience with that? Because, you know, we often see employees who come back into our organizations and my experience leaving the first time will impact whether or not I come back the second time or whether or not I tell others to go and work in your organization. So, it's really this continuum of start to finish—everything that goes into how I internalize and interpret the interactions that I have with my organization. And I'll actually add one more piece to this. I could probably go off on a soap box about the difference between employee engagement and involvement.

I think too often we get caught up in engagement because we think, you know, it's the extent to which our employees are committed and motivated by their work, but we forget that a huge piece of engagement actually comes from involvement, and involvement is organizational structure and culture and leadership.

And so if we allow employees to be more involved in decision making and problem solving will we create jobs that allow for engagement. And if I'm allowed to be involved in my job, well, then I'm going to be more engaged by my job. And that's a, that's a piece of experience, but how, how can I be engaged by work that I'm not allowed to be involved in, right?

If I'm not allowed to be involved in the decision-making that impacts my job, well certainly that leads to a terrible employee experience with the work. And then within the organization. Employee experience is just as critical to business success as customer experience.

Ryann Ellis: So, you've identified a lot of the factors of employee experience for us. Just, just right now. Where do you see talent development, learning, other professional development fitting into this picture?

Bethany Adams: Well, so this is, I think, you know, what's so interesting about this is there's a lot of aspects of employee experience that learning is a part of. When we think about development in our organizations and we're, if we're talking about training, you know, training is wonderful because it prepares us for our work.

But how does it also impact the workload and responsibilities that we currently have? I think specifically with talent development, as we think about how to develop talent for the future, we have to be thinking about what stresses and resources we are giving or not giving to employees as we start some of those programs. I also think that there's a lot of opportunity for kind of really creating lasting impact in the inclusion space from our development teams, things like mentoring programs and resource groups, right? These are really how employees start to feel connected within the organization. And they start to really find lasting bonds that make them want to stay.

That has a lasting impact on employee experience that transcends just the development piece, but they take into their teams, their work environment and their own motivation for the work that they're doing.

Ryann Ellis: So, you just mentioned, you know, impact—the term impact. You need to be able to measure that impact. So, can you talk about some of the employee experience metrics that specifically, maybe people working in talent development should keep an eye on?

Bethany Adams: Yeah. So, you know, I think that when it comes to metrics, we, most of what employee experience involves, we're doing a lot of measuring already around our engagement surveys.

Right? Most organizations are running engagement surveys, either quarterly or biannually or annually. We're asking some really good questions in those engagement surveys that directly tie into experience. The real question is what are we doing with that data? And then what actions are we taking to address those gaps?

I think that within our engagement surveys, we often see questions about satisfaction, satisfaction as a direct link to employee experience. Right? The kinds of questions like: do

you feel supported by your organization? Do you feel supported by your manager or your team? Right. Are you satisfied with your overall work experience?

Those kinds of questions are direct links into experience. The other piece is also that employee Net Promoter Score that we often get, you know, the question, would you recommend your company to a friend? It's just like, you know, would you recommend this product to your friend. Well, would you recommend your friend to come and work at our company, or would you tell your friends and family that our company is the best place to work?

Those are really indicative of how I feel about my overall employee experience. The other piece that I'll mention as a metric and this one's tricky because it's not always a direct link or a direct correlation here with employee experience. But employee absenteeism is one to really pay attention to.

If you are starting to see high levels of absenteeism, particularly amongst your tenured staff, that can be a key indicator of low employee morale, low employee satisfaction and low overall experience. Right now I think we are seeing kind of this mission critical time for many organizations. Going through this great resignation or employees are really contemplating their overall experience in their organizations and is this what I want long term. And so how do we home in on what is that sentiment amongst our employees and how good is their experience? Well, absenteeism is going to be a good indicator. If we start to see changes in those absenteeism numbers, particularly like high-level groups or senior leadership and management, that can be a key indicator for us that there might be a problem.

So, I'm not sure that everyone else in the C-suite sees where talent development has a role in this employee experience continuum. Right? They think about things like pay or they think about things like you know, how you work with your manager, wellness initiatives, etc.

Ryann Ellis: So do you have any advice for talent development executives about how they can maybe boost their role or, you know, show that they have a role to play in improving employee experience within their organization?

Bethany Adams: Yeah. So, I think that they have a mission critical role in employee experience because particularly in senior leadership, right, you are the ones who have a direct impact on just about everything that the experience is. And so it's really not kind of these big, impactful things that we have to do, certainly pay and wellness and all those things that you've just mentioned are a part of employee experience and they are very important, but it's also how appreciated do employees feel on a day-to-day basis?

Right? What kinds of small interactions do I have with my team and my manager? And I think that senior leadership really plays a part because as they start to be genuine about some small interactions, showing value of employees, finding time to show appreciation—those things have lasting impact on experience.

Most of us can remember when someone in senior leadership recognized our work, and that tends to be a really positive change. You know, one of the things that I talk about often with

employee experience is find opportunities to create positive emotion related to their experience with the work. Too often our experience with work is negative, right?

Uh, something's not working or it's not going right. It's the positive things that we remember and they become more salient to us. So, finding times that take opportunities to do stay interviews, you know, asking are the people that we support. What's keeping you here in your job? Like, why are you staying in the work that you're doing?

Because those answers are exactly linked to what kind of experience they're looking for in the workplace. Employee experience is not a static problem, right? It's not something that we can solve one time and be done with. It has to be constantly iterated with changing environments, with changing business strategies.

All the changing circumstances that we have seen, particularly over the last year and a half, it has to be something that we are constantly paying attention to and individualizing and tailoring for individual employees.

Ryann Ellis: And all of that change usually requires some form of learning attached to it, right?

Bethany Adams: Absolutely. Absolutely. I think that we have learned probably more in the last year and a half than ever before. And I think that we're recognizing the importance of training and development as a support for ongoing success in our organizations, because really, you know, what got us through the last year and a half is being able to adapt.

And so all of that adaption came from how we developed our employees for that, that opportunity for the future. So it's a, yeah, it's a, it's a really kind of lasting change for the future. If we focus on development for today, that makes us better for the future.

Ryann Ellis: Perfect. Well, thank you so much for your insights. I think our readers and listeners will really appreciate it.

Bethany Adams: Yeah, thanks for having me. It's been great chatting with you.