



# Focus on Candidate and Employee **EXPERIENCE** How to Attract and Retain Talent

BY SHARON HULCE

*I really love what I do for a living, if for no other reason than being able to watch and experience firsthand the new trends in finding and engaging talent.*

With the current rate of unemployment at less than 4%, finding talent has increasingly become the biggest issue employers face today.

The new buzzwords that people are talking about are “candidate and employee experience.” For firms with big organizational development departments, this new phenomenon has taken on some reality and, while not perfect, has resulted in programs that appear to attract the new Millennial worker.

But for the common masses, candidate and employee experience are not even on their radar.

So let’s discuss how those of us who run organizations without massive human resource departments can compete. Candidate experience refers to the process of garnering talent from your unique branding message, starting with how you source talent and continuing through the interview and offer stages. Employee experience starts pre-onboarding and runs



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through the life cycle of an employee in establishing a strong company culture. Let’s unpeel this onion one step at a time.

## YOUR UNIQUE MESSAGING IS KEY TO FINDING TALENT

Our old messaging used to garner talent was about what motivated the Baby Boomer worker—the ability to earn a good wage (even overtime), clean facilities, steady work. Today’s messaging is very different. We must be able to articulate how our purpose, what we produce, or the service we offer can make a difference in the lives of those impacted by the business.

The reality is, money is no longer a key driver in the decision of where to work. Motivators now include having a work-life balance that allows employees to truly “live” while working for your organization, providing challenging work that can keep a new employee from becoming bored quickly and wanting to move on, and empowering employees to do things in a new and/or different way than their previous, potentially less innovative, predecessors did.

Candidate experience is not an easy undertaking. In some cases, putting together new messaging can mean a significant cultural shift, one that requires a leader who will be completely aligned with and committed to the change. Those leaders that have bought into a “people first” cultural transformation for their workplace are winning the war on talent.

## CHANGES COME TO SOURCING TALENT

The process of finding people to interview also has changed completely. Gone are the days when you could place an ad on a post in the company yard or on a job board and tons of qualified applicants would apply.

Passive candidates, which are by far the most attractive candidates to fill an open position, need to be sourced. Communication in the form of an email, text, or social media outreach, with a great message around the company’s story written in a way that stirs the reader’s emotions, will help companies enhance their pipeline with talented passive candidates.

Interviews are being done in a whole new way as well. It no longer makes sense to just “drill” candidates on why they think they are qualified. Because your “purpose” and

your “why” are important to job candidates, your questions should express your culture and allow you to determine if the candidate can integrate into it.

Here are some examples of questions that we ask:

- Mental toughness is important to be successful in our organization. Many times, the simplest of circumstances can derail a project that you have worked tirelessly on. Tell me about a time where you had to demonstrate mental toughness to continue when things got rough.
- While each person in our organization works as a solo producer to hit production metrics and earn compensation, our group either wins or loses as a team. What would you do if you had to make a decision that would impact your own compensation negatively, but ultimately appeared to be the best decision for the team? Explain the steps you would go through to make this decision.

These questions bring out two core values that we talk about when we interview—mental toughness and passion for the company. If candidates do not express these values, they culturally are misaligned and will not integrate well into our organization. Hire for attitude, train for skill.

My final note on candidate experience is about how to create the actual experience a person has before, during, and after the interview. A couple of ideas that we have witnessed are:

**Before the interview.** Businesses that do “candidate experience” well have created material that gets candidates excited to interview with them. One of my favorites is the video Oshkosh Defense (a division of Oshkosh Corporation) created, called “We Are Honored” (on YouTube). This video begins with the normal viewing of the products the division makes—which in this case are very large military vehicles that, frankly, are not very “sexy” to the average worker. Fast forward, and you see several employees of Oshkosh Defense talking and working at their jobs. So far, nothing unique—but here is where it turns to magic! Suddenly, you see these same people holding pictures of loved ones—brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, and war buddies—and the messages attached to each picture create a strong emotional connection at your core. When reality sets in, that their work is saving the lives of those they love, you get “why” they are so passionate

to work for Oshkosh Defense. This one video transformed the interest level of candidates who would interview with the company dramatically.

While this is a great example, sometimes all that's needed is a nicely worded email from the company president telling a candidate how excited they are to meet him or her and a bit about the company's story.

**During the interview.** It is critically important to put your best foot forward during the actual interview. People always compliment our "Director of First Impressions" for the amazing experience she creates for candidates when they enter our doors. This is "game day"—now the "experience" begins:

- Everyone is greeted by a live person, not a phone with an extension to buzz.
- Everyone is offered a beverage.
- No one waits for more than five minutes in the conference room—even if they're early. Someone goes in and keeps them company.
- We let them know ahead who will be in the room and their positions in the firm.
- We tell them they can ask any questions they would like. We will be completely transparent.
- We learn about them first. This is as much about their decision as ours, and we want to know what it is that brought them to our firm.
- The president, owner, or a member of leadership meets with every candidate for at least five minutes, no matter the position. No one can sell a firm better than those who run it day in and day out, and that passion creates the "why" for most candidates. This step is the one most often missed, and one of the most important not to miss because we think other tasks are more important than hiring good people?!
- If we decide to make an offer, we do so within 24 hours. Speed to hire is very real in this market.

**After the interview.** Once an offer is accepted, the final "candidate experience" piece is to send the person a company token, with a letter saying how excited you are that he or she will be joining you.

This can be as simple as a note, but a polo shirt with the company logo or business cards with the person's name and title go a long way in getting the candidate excited and creating that feeling of "I am home."

## CREATING A CULTURE OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

The final stage of the employee experience is about integration into your corporate culture. This is referred to as "employee engagement," which begins with what tends to be the weakest link for most companies—onboarding.

From the first day, employees make decisions about whether they made the right choice of company and how long they intend to stay. I hate this statistic, but the average Millennial stays in their current job on average 18 months to three years. The mentality of "I owe my soul to the company store" is long gone.

Creating a culture of engagement is probably one of the most difficult tasks for most company leaders today. Understanding what keeps your employees motivated and engaged is certainly an ongoing challenge.

The best advice we can offer is to try some "employee engagement activities." Here are a few examples of such activities that seem to be working for our clients:

**Having fun at work.** When you take time to play hard after working hard, it appears to keep the culture fresh and build camaraderie and teamwork among employees. We implemented Office Olympics once a week, where we end at 4 pm on Thursdays to challenge each other to everything from chair races in the parking lot to Silly String fights.

Large corporations can do this within individual departments instead of company-wide, but giving people an outlet to be "people" appears to create cohesive cultures.

**Using social media to recognize and reward performance and personal milestones.** Birthdays, anniversaries, outstanding sales achievement—everyone loves it when the company recognizes them. Letting friends and family share in their successes and celebrations via social media has a lot of traction.

**Giving everyone a voice.** Implementing workshops that mix generations together to understand and come up with creative solutions to the challenges being addressed gives all generations a renewed appreciation for the differences and strengths each brings to the workplace.

**Involving and including families in the employee's work life.** This can include everything from goal setting to community engagement activities. The more the family buys into an employee's work, the more commitment we see from that employee.

**Offering flexible work schedules and work from home.** Not all roles have this possibility, but where it can work, it is a huge motivator.

The bottom line is this: The "experience" you create for your team is one of the most critical components of winning the war on talent. It's the emotional activities, not just the transactions of our workday, that create the "whys" that motivate the next generation of workers. The sooner we embrace this change, the sooner we can win. The only thing stopping you from winning is you. <sup>AQ</sup>

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