

Experience: Post-pandemic reset

Focus on the individual as a whole—the role of leadership and technology in creating future experiences



Abstract

It often takes a crisis to bring back focus on what truly matters, and frequently, it is the things we take for granted.

Financial meltdowns, for example, shone a light on the lack of regulation and were followed by tighter controls and the ringfencing of future risk. Post-war rebuilding efforts brought a renewed focus on innovation, re-skilling and reimagining in general, whilst the climate crisis accelerated the narrative on sustainable growth and responsible consumption. More recently, episodes of injustice against individuals, race or a community have amplified the call for social equity, justice and reform.

Similarly, the pandemic has played its part. While devastating and disruptive, the pandemic has been a catalyst for change in areas such as digital transformation, healthcare and education amongst others. The notion of 'experience', or employee experience as we know it, and its implications for the post-pandemic workforce have undergone a significant shift. The reset being the focus on the individual as a whole and not just the part where they are an employee, a holistic systems thinking approach.

To that extent, it makes sense to explore the concept of experience with a contextual lens including the role of leadership and technology in revitalizing future experiences.

A significant shift

One of the most remarkable outcomes of the pandemic has been the focus on the 'intangible', things that we know matter but that we neither measure, nor value, on the same scale as tangible assets. Tangible assets such as physical workplaces are being increasingly replaced by digital workplaces and experiences.

Intangibles such as health and well being, preservation of knowledge, learning, purpose, reputation, trust, sentiment, equity, attention and relationships, amongst others are becoming strategic drivers of value for organizations as they 'build back better'. These factors are also critical constituents to establishing meaningful experiences for individuals and serve as key levers in the acquisition and retention of talent.

A recent report highlights that even though intangible assets are becoming increasingly valuable and critical as drivers of competitive strength in the market, they are often overlooked. According to some estimates, intangible assets account for as much as 85% of the total business value across industries. With the acceleration of digital business models, amplified by COVID-19, this value could increase much further, becoming a major driver of business success.

What is also interesting to note is the shift in the traditional singular lens approach that has often been applied to the workplace and the workforce- to a more holistic, values-based, multi-dimensional lens; and in particular the **reset** in the way we have begun to view experience as a whole.

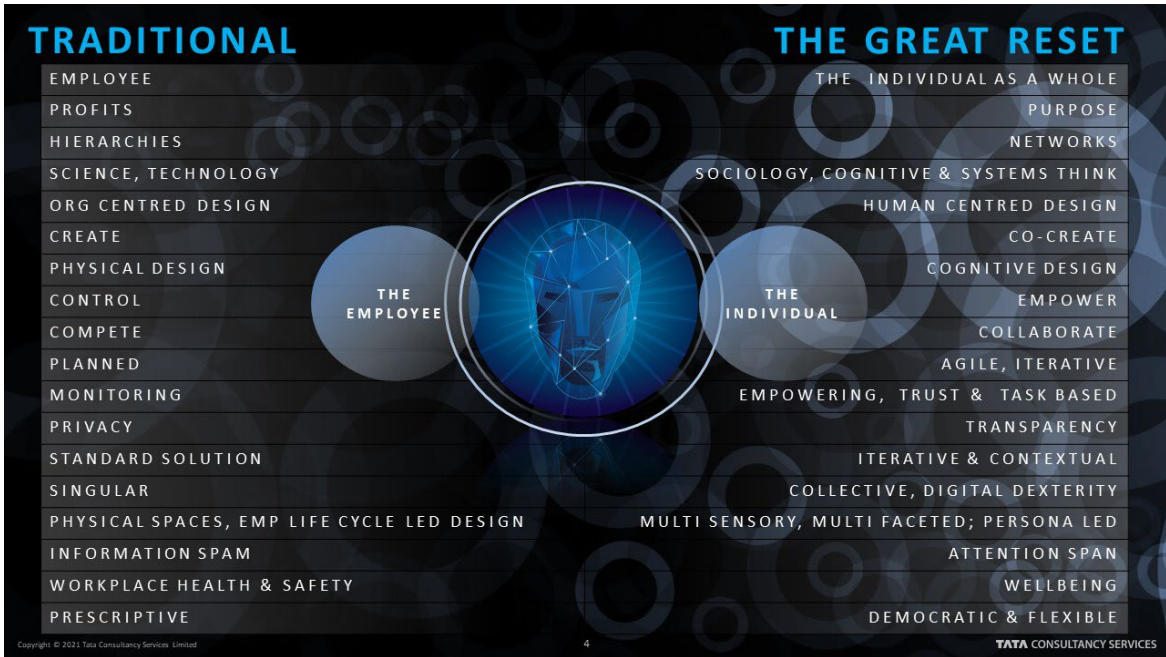


Figure 1: Experience: A holistic, multi-dimensional lens

Holistic experience: The great reset

The pandemic has truly been a ‘crucible event,’ transformative, and resetting what we have known as ‘normal.’ Today, we engage, collaborate, manage our relationships and perform our tasks somewhere between the virtual and physical space, not always a binary but we continue to test our place on the continuum. Boundaries between work and home have been blurred as have competing personal, professional and social personas.

What is now amply clear is the fact that the employee is just one part of a larger whole, ‘the individual’, who is embedded deeply within the community and society at large.



Figure 2: Experience reset: The individual as a whole and not just the employee

The realization that the individual responsible for delivering to our customers is also perhaps a parent, a home schooler, a care giver, the sole bread winner, a recent graduate in a shared accommodation, an individual coping with financial or relationship difficulties; and incidentally, also happens to be an employee juggling multiple hats with competing priorities.

Experience is the sum total of how each individual perceives, absorbs and 'makes sense of' their professional, personal, physical, virtual, emotional (including sensory and cognitive) stimuli.

What is increasingly evident is that 'experience' now goes beyond the realm of 'hire to retire' and career moments that matter for an employee. It is important that we take into consideration this shift as we commence the task of co-creating meaningful experiences, designing newer organization models and distributed digital workspaces for greater fluidity.

Experience: Implications for leadership

Business leaders who take a holistic approach to experience would do well to adopt a systems thinking approach. Systems thinking as a discipline focuses on complex systems and encourages the viewing of a problem as a whole, taking into account the inter-relationships of its parts rather than just the part itself or an event on its own.

In the reframing of the leadership mindset, there are some key areas of focus;

- 1. The CHRO as a sociologist:** The role of the chief human resources officer (CHRO) is increasingly evolving into that of a sociologist, in their ability to think in 'systems', the ability to view the organization as a living being, dynamic and ever-shifting in terms of context; be it demographics, well-being, behaviors or culture. The future organization needs to be designed for dynamic and fluid structures that are democratic, agile and versatile, lying at the intersection of the employee, the individual, the community and the environment at large. A multi-disciplinary approach will be necessary for CXOs as they explore problems and draw on solutions from outside of their normal boundaries.
- 2. The individual as a whole:** As a first step, leaders need to acknowledge the shift that experience now goes beyond work and moments that matter at work. It is important to appreciate that delivering during the pandemic has come at a great personal cost to a large cohort of employees. To acknowledge this shift would be to acknowledge the multiple limitations that the environment and personal situations have placed on the individual and our ability to alleviate some of the stress by designing meaningful experiences.

At the peak of the pandemic, some organizations have used employee 'prime time' to sponsor activities such as art classes for young children during term break when holiday camps were not an option. These organizations were not only creative in getting the best out of their employees during the most productive periods of the day, but also in designing experiences that were inclusive, acknowledging the roles that their staff played outside of work.

To reimagine experience would be to design holistically, by provisioning policies, structures and systems that are fluid and co-created. This could be in the form of flexible work from home options, revised policies to accommodate the invisible expenses that come from utilizing personal resources (broadband, peripherals, unfit for purpose ergonomics), job share, support for stress and mental health scenarios, choice of work location, and so on. There is a need to provide consumer-grade experiences that are segmented and contextualized for our employees as we would for our customers. A one-size-fit-all solution is no longer relevant.

3. Psychological safety, well-being and motivation are vital constructs to creating meaningful engagement and experiences that impact individuals, work, and organization culture. These intangible assets translate into individual experiences set to drive future value for the post-pandemic organization. There have been endless studies across sectors highlighting the unprecedented level of stress and burn out for individuals during the pandemic and the adverse impact on well-being. The role of leadership is to create psychologically safe spaces for employees to be able to speak freely and bring their whole selves to work, as Amy Edmondson, Professor of Leadership and Management at the Harvard Business School, posits, when she speaks of **psychological safety and 'voice'**.



Figure 3: Holistic experiences, design principles

In remote, hybrid settings, there is a need to be ‘deliberate’ in amplifying voices and providing platforms that continuously tap into the feedback and sentiments of employees. **William Kahn**, also known as the founding father of employee engagement hails ‘voices that are heard’ as an imperative, when considering employee engagement and meaningfulness at work.

Experiences that lead to intrinsic motivation are not necessarily generated by incentives, quite the contrary and represent a significant reset post pandemic. **A recent study conducted by CONE** shows that, “Three-quarters of millennials would take a pay cut to work for a socially responsible company.” The author **Dan Pink** very eloquently talks about motivation being intrinsic, with purpose, mastery and autonomy being the key constructs of motivation- the new operating system for organizations. While mastery has to do with both the ability to acquire deep skills and knowledge as well as the desire to get better at something that matters, autonomy is about the urge to direct our own lives, empowering employees to solve problems. As Amy Edmondson describes it, company culture is powerfully defined by structural frameworks initiated by founding leaders, but companies grow based on the ways their employees embody these systems.

4. Equitable experiences: The ownership of ensuring organizational experiences are similar for all individuals is key, and a question that needs to be asked frequently by leaders. Whilst technology platforms play a significant role in creating equity with similar access to tools and features, and the opportunity to perform work from any setting – equity represents much

more than that. It is about **creating conditions that generate similar outcomes for all individuals** – irrespective of levels, personas and social status. Some glaring disparities evidenced during the pandemic have been the lack of access to comfortable seating, poor connectivity in remote areas, lack of privacy to conduct meetings and often the pressure to come on camera, revealing more about our settings than we might have liked to. Having conversations to build awareness by way of training and dialogue would be useful in creating greater equity.

It is a well-known fact that women have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. **A recent BBC article** cites the McKinsey and Lean In survey of North American female employees, where one in four women said they were thinking about reducing or leaving paid work due to the pandemic, citing company inflexibility, caring responsibilities and stress. The survey included some comparative data that laid out the gender gap for parents; while 8% of surveyed mothers had thought about going from full-to-part-time work, only 2% of fathers had. As we design holistic experience in the post-COVID world, the responsibility of embedding equity in strategy falls on leaders as we seek to proactively ring fence the most vulnerable groups and work towards elevating those experiences.

5. Insights over data: Organizations are often awash in data but lacking in insights when it comes to people priorities, as has been cited previously. What also needs to be reset, is the relevance of what we measure. As Donella Meadow, the renowned Systems Thinker, has stated frequently, “We value what we measure”. For example, investments in mental health initiatives alone are not a measure of success for an organization but whether the initiatives are being availed by individuals who need them. Endless yoga sessions or investments in meditation apps or gym memberships can only be measures of intent, effective insights would be to establish whether teams and individuals who are at the brink of burn out are able to avail of these resources, and are adequately freed up by their managers to reinstate the necessary balance and wellness needed for high impact outcomes.

Future of Experience: The role of technology in creating holistic experiences

A lot has been said about responsible technology and rightly so, especially in its ability to bring about purposeful change as we build back better systems and develop future skills and sustainable solutions.

The pandemic has been a crisis of dimensions and as **Paul Polman**, ex-CEO of Unilever, puts it: “What we’ve learnt is that societal health, human health and economic health are related.” This is therefore a unique opportunity for organizations to create progressive, long term, inclusive and sustainable experiences that are to some extent also a reflection of global recovery agendas or calls for actions such as the UN’s Sustainability Development Goals, incorporating elements of well-being, re-skilling, decent work, equity, innovation and infrastructure as we design future systems and structures.

To that extent, it makes sense to explore and consider what makes future digital experiences purposeful and meaningful for the individual, the workplace and society. The future of experience point of view lists out key elements and considerations that are critical in designing the modern digital workplace, with a focus on the post pandemic era.



Figure 4: Future of Experience

We have identified 21 elements that we believe are key in informing holistic future experiences. These lie at the intersection of the individual, the workforce and the society as a whole. An evolving model and a blueprint, where the elements would continue to shift alongside the changing context of individuals, organizations and communities.

Individual experiences

A critical component of designing future experiences would be to acknowledge the individual as a whole, the multiple role identities and competing priorities outside of work. To that extent, the new age digital experience would be human-centric, persona-led and deeply contextual, designed for diversity in terms of demographics, such as the five generations at the workplace and perhaps the augmented human being the sixth, designed for different abilities as well for equity.

With mental health and well-being at the forefront, empathetic design would include nudge, ergonomics and cognitive-led technology, predictive tools, digitally tracked work-life balance measures and comprehensive employee assistance programs. The ability to speak up and be heard is a key element in the democratizing of work including productivity measures designed for outcomes versus presenteeism and surveillance. In summary, individual experiences would need to focus on embedding greater trust, empathy, wellness, and inclusivity.

Workforce and workplace experiences

The **new hybrid workplace** will be contactless and multi-sensory, designed for **individual efficacy, fluid knowledge exchanges, sustained curiosity** and ease cognitive overload. Friction free experiences that serve to ‘cut out the noise’ and capture ‘fragmented attention’, as Adam Grant calls it, will be of premium value. To quote the CEO of Microsoft, **Satya Nadella**, “Attention is the new oil. Attention is scarce, and we’ll never get more of it. Thinking about how we focus that correctly, I think, is one of our most significant opportunities.”

Immersive platforms are set to enhance collaboration and learning experiences and enable multiple users across locations and devices (VR, AR, phone, laptop). Autonomous experiences would comprise of self-directed support through AI and chatbots, empowering employees to solve problems with speed.

Societal experience

As organizations state their purpose and commit to ecological, social and environmental issues such as responsible consumption and equity, it is important that this gets reflected in everyday experiences such as ecologically and environmentally sustainable office spaces, hiring practices that are geared towards reducing bias, and bridging inequities in terms of gender and race.

In conclusion, there is no better time than the present, to take stock of what 'experience' means in the context of our employees and for our organizations. It is critical that we have these conversations now to reframe and contextualize the role of the modern workplace, leadership and technology to create future experiences that are not only foundational in their values but also resilient to help 'build back better'.

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