

BEYOND THE PERK

The Employee Experience Transformation Nobody Planned

How a crisis exposed the distance between the workplace we furnished
and the working life our people actually had

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August 2020



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Transformation · No. 299

Originally written August 2020 | Re-edited and re-rendered for the WhereBeyond Edition, 2025

"A crisis does not invent an organisation's character; it discloses it."

1. The Laptop in the Spare Room

Consider the person who joined in the second week of April. The laptop arrived by courier the day before; the office they had been hired into was dark, and would stay dark for months. There was no desk to be shown to, no floor to walk, no colleague to take them to lunch and explain — in the way that actually matters — how things really worked. Their induction was a run of video calls with people most of whom they would not meet in the flesh for the better part of a year, if at all. And yet their experience of the organisation in those first weeks was sharper, more consequential and more honest than anything we had ever printed in a benefits brochure.

That is the transformation I want to talk about, because almost nobody planned it. For several years before this spring, employee experience had been the phrase on every conference agenda and pinned to every reorganised HR function. We treated it, mostly, as the design of the workplace and the generosity of the perks. Then, in the space of a fortnight in March, the workplace was removed from the equation entirely — and we began to find out what employee experience had been all along.

The pandemic ran an employee-experience transformation that no one designed, no one budgeted and no one owned. It was executed not by the people who use the term but by IT departments provisioning laptops overnight and by line managers improvising on webcams. And in stripping away the building, it exposed an uncomfortable truth: most of what we had proudly been calling employee experience was employee amenity.

2. What We Had Been Measuring

Before this year, ask a leadership team what they were doing about employee experience and you would hear about the refurbished head office, the collaboration zones and the quiet rooms, the decent coffee, the wellbeing week, the shiny engagement platform with its quarterly pulse. Real investments, some of them considerable, and I do not mean to sneer at them. But notice what they have in common: every one is something the organisation provides, in a place, to people who are present.

I have watched an organisation of roughly six thousand people discover, in a single week, how little that vocabulary was worth. Its most recent engagement survey, taken the previous autumn, had returned a headline it was rightly pleased with — seventy-two per cent agreeing that "I have the tools and resources I need to do my job well." A respectable number. It also described a world that had ceased to exist by the second week of lockdown, when the same organisation found that its remote-access infrastructure could seat perhaps nine hundred people at once. Five thousand others took their turn in a queue for a token, or simply could not work. The survey had measured contentment with a stable past. It had no words at all for the present.

That gap — between what we measured and what people were actually living — is the whole subject. The metric was not wrong; it was aimed at the wrong thing. It captured satisfaction with amenities in a steady state, and told us nothing about trust, resilience, or the daily friction of getting work done when the ground moved under everyone at once. Within a month the same organisation was running an emergency survey it had never needed before, asking questions no one had thought to ask in fifteen years: Do you have a chair? Somewhere to work that is not a kitchen table shared with two children being home-schooled? A connection that holds through a call? These are not the questions a benefits brochure prepares you to ask, and the fact that they suddenly mattered more than any perk should have told us something about how thin our previous picture of the "experience" had been.

3. What the Empty Office Revealed

When the building went, four things that had been hidden behind it became suddenly, brutally visible.

- Trust, or its absence. Organisations that had run on visibility — on being seen at your desk — found they had no other instrument, and it was startling how many had never noticed. Some reached at once for monitoring software and cameras-on-at-all-times; the message received was not "we care" but "we do not trust you," and people are not fools about the difference. Others discovered, almost sheepishly, that their staff worked perfectly well unwatched, and that the presenteeism of the open-plan floor had been measuring attendance, never contribution.
- The quality of the individual manager. Consider two managers with comparable teams of a dozen. One began holding a fifteen-minute call at nine each morning — not to check up, but to make the shapeless day legible: what matters today, who is stuck, who is quietly struggling at home. The other went dark, surfacing only to chase deliverables and forward terse instructions after nine at night. By midsummer the gap between those two teams — in output, in the number of small errors that slipped through, and in the quiet count of people beginning to look elsewhere — was wider than any perk had ever opened. Same pay, same tools, same benefits package. The entire difference was the human being at the top of the call.
- Clarity of purpose and priority. In an office, ambiguity is absorbed by proximity: you lean over, you overhear, you read the room. Remove the room and ambiguity metastasises. Teams that had been carried by osmosis for years suddenly could not tell you what this quarter was actually for.

- The friction of the work itself. The approval that still needed a wet signature. The system reachable only from inside the corporate network. The process that had always assumed you could simply walk to someone's desk. Every hidden piece of operational friction became a lived, daily insult, repeated across thousands of homes.

None of these four is a matter of amenity. Every one is a matter of how the organisation is actually run.

Employee experience is not what an organisation offers its people. It is what it is actually like to work there – and that is the sum of a thousand operational choices, most of them made far from the function that has lately claimed the term.

“We furnished the workplace and called it the experience. Then the workplace closed, and the experience carried on without it.”

4. The Objection Worth Taking Seriously

The strongest reply to all this is that it is temporary. When we return to the office – this autumn, or whenever it proves safe to – the distortion lifts, the campus reopens, the old playbook resumes, and this whole episode becomes a strange interlude rather than a lesson. On that view the experience that matters is still the one we design into the building, and the sensible course is patience.

I take the objection seriously, because it is half right. We will go back, in some measure and in some shape not yet clear. There is real loss in the empty office: the informal apprenticeship, the corridor conversation, the new joiner learning by proximity. The person with the laptop in the spare room is the best argument there is for what an office quietly provides. I am not claiming the building was worthless.

But the objection makes a category error. It assumes the pandemic distorted the employee experience. It did not. It revealed it. A crisis does not invent an organisation's character; it discloses it. The trust or its absence, the manager who shows up or does not, the friction buried in the systems – these were all there before, subsidised and obscured by the daily theatre of the workplace. We simply could not see them, because the building was doing so much emotional and logistical work on our behalf. Walk back into the office and you do not repeal these truths. You merely re-hide them – and pay, again, for the privilege of not looking.

5. What This Obliges Us To Do

If employee experience is the texture of how work actually feels, then it cannot be owned by a single function or discharged by a benefits budget. Three consequences are worth stating plainly.

1. Measure the present, not the past. The annual engagement survey, however handsome its dashboard, tells you how people felt about a world that may already be gone. Supplement it with something fast, specific and current — short, frequent, unglamorous soundings that ask what is actually in the way this week. The instrument this year needed a refresh rate measured in days, not quarters.
2. Invest in managers as the primary interface. For most people this spring, the line manager was the entire employee experience — the whole of the organisation compressed into one slightly frozen face on a screen. Yet management remains the role we hand people as a reward for being good at something else, and then decline to equip. If the manager is the interface, the interface has been chronically under-invested.
3. Treat operational friction as an experience problem, not merely a technical one. The remote-access system that seats fifteen per cent of the workforce is not an IT footnote. This year it is among the largest single determinants of whether work feels possible or punishing. The plumbing is the experience now, and it should be governed as such.

None of this was on a roadmap in January. No one approved a business case for it, no steering group commissioned it. It arrived unbidden and ran itself through every organisation at once — the largest employee-experience transformation any of us will live through, and the only one nobody designed. The least we can do, having been shown so plainly what the term really means, is stop mistaking the furniture for the experience.