

A photograph of a man in a blue plaid shirt listening intently to a woman whose back is to the camera. The man is holding a pen and looking towards the woman. The background is a blurred office setting with a whiteboard covered in yellow sticky notes.

Employee Experience in 2021 and Beyond: Listening at Scale

joshbersin

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Employee engagement has been an HR topic for decades. We've been measuring engagement with long surveys, debriefing executive teams with elaborate presentations, and analyzing data along different dimensions – all with the intent to move the needle on increasing employee engagement, which in turn makes customers happier and creates better outcomes. But tracking engagement numbers in itself does not help solve problems. Today, it is more important than ever to understand what's behind these numbers, identify the issues people are facing, and take quick action to address them.

As the world crashed around us in March 2020, everything changed. Most companies had to quickly deal with new business models, transformed products and services, remote work, employee and customer safety, children at home, care requirements for sick family members, job security concerns, and changes in job roles. Organizations had to step up quickly to learn what challenges their employees were facing, digest the information, and take action -- and then do it all over again a week or two later. So, leaders turned to listening at speed and digesting and acting rapidly. In doing so, many saw a significant increase in employee engagement. For example, Deutsche

Telekom experienced an increase in employee engagement of 11 points, a massive accomplishment in an organization with more than 210,000 employees. Why? Because people felt they had a voice, felt heard, and saw action.

Recent research into the business impact of pandemic-related organizational responses found that listening to the workforce when making return-to-work plans had an outsized impact on business and people outcomes. In fact, this practice was one of the ten most impactful, exceeding practices such as attestations, remote work programs, or the use of pandemic data to govern workforce strategies. Without listening to employees, any program will fall flat because it will not hit the mark. Read more in our [pandemic response study](#).

Similarly, in our recent study of more than 800 organizations on diversity, equity and inclusion, we identified that of 84 practices to further diversity, listening frequently to the workforce and acting on the insights gained has the biggest impact on business and people outcomes.

The case is clear: listening to employees can have a massive impact on business performance and workforce engagement, but it needs to be done right. Listen frequently, understand what's behind the numbers, and take action quickly and decisively. These practices help identify issues and opportunities, engage the workforce in solving business problems, and create an environment where people feel valued and heard.



Figure 1: The Complexities of Employee Experience

The Changing World of Employee Experience

Employee experience encompasses multiple areas. Employees have many different needs --from getting the tools and space to work effectively to understanding how work aligns with organizational goals and pay to wanting a sense of belonging and wellbeing support. Listening is required in order to fully understand needs and issues and to direct them to the group that can address them. For instance, if technology tools are not adequate for a particular job, IT must provide support. HR responds to issues around pay equity or benefits; managers need to address team-related issues, and executives are on point for inspiring a shared vision.

Before the pandemic, employee issues centered around pay, development, and perks like ping pong tables, free food or bringing pets to work. People wanted to get ahead, both in their personal and professional lives, and universally low unemployment meant that many companies tried to outdo each other in the quest for attracting and retaining talent. The best programs were those that were informed by listening to workforce needs and prioritizing those areas that most appealed to their specific employee populations.

The pandemic changed all of that. As things closed down mid-March, a large number of employees were able to work remotely. Suddenly equipment for working from home, flexibility for caring for at-home children, and fast, reliable wifi became priorities. For others who could not work from home, safety and health concerns exceeded all other needs.

Modeling Customer Experience: A Listening Framework

Employee listening can get very complex. Annual employee surveys are helpful to understand broad issues, but they reflect needs at only one point in time. Studies show that survey responses vary widely based on a person's experience that given day. If an employee is annoyed with coworkers or has an IT problem or a terrible commute, that person will likely respond less favorably to questions posed.

Companies attuned to customer satisfaction don't rely on once-a-year surveys. They segment customers into groups, model their journeys, proactively elicit feedback, and analyze behaviors throughout the relationship. We can accelerate improvements in employee experience by learning from the best practices developed for customer satisfaction.



Figure 2: Employee Experience Before Coronavirus



Figure 3: Employee Experience – After Coronavirus

Just as with customers, we need to develop a continuous employee listening strategy. The annual survey has its place in such a strategy, but it is not enough. Employee needs and issues are continually changing – and it’s up to us to listen and take action on an ongoing basis.

An effective listening strategy should include active forms of listening (such as through surveys, interviews, and focus groups) and passive forms (such as with organizational network analysis or sentiment analysis).

Listening at Scale: Key to a Successful Listening Strategy

On the surface, listening to employees may seem easy. After all, organizations have conducted surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews for decades. But in today’s complex and ever-changing business environment, listening is complex. Large organizations have many employees in many different locations with varying job positions. For example, a well-known healthcare company has over 300,000 employees in thousands of locations and in many different job roles. Companies operating in multiple countries such as Manpower Group need to translate surveys into different languages. Listening at scale still matters, even for smaller, more localized companies. The

pandemic has surfaced so many different issues that the sheer number makes listening complex. M&T Bank, for example, has conducted as many as 15 pulse surveys since March to listen to employee issues and concerns.

We define listening at scale as the development of a strategy that can handle the number and complexity of all employee needs and issues using various listening channels and then rapidly analyzing feedback data in order to take appropriate actions quickly.

Technology is at the heart of listening at scale. It’s hard to believe that just 20 years ago, we had to make do with paper surveys distributed via snail mail. Employees then filled out the surveys by hand and mailed them back to a central location where responses were tallied and analyzed. Today’s technology makes it possible to gather employee feedback and engagement data much more quickly, effectively and efficiently. Platforms like Perceptyx can handle complexity and scale with ease. Dashboards, mobile-enabled surveys, natural language processing, machine learning and data visualizations are just some examples of how technology can help make employee listening better, faster and cheaper - and accomplish better outcomes.

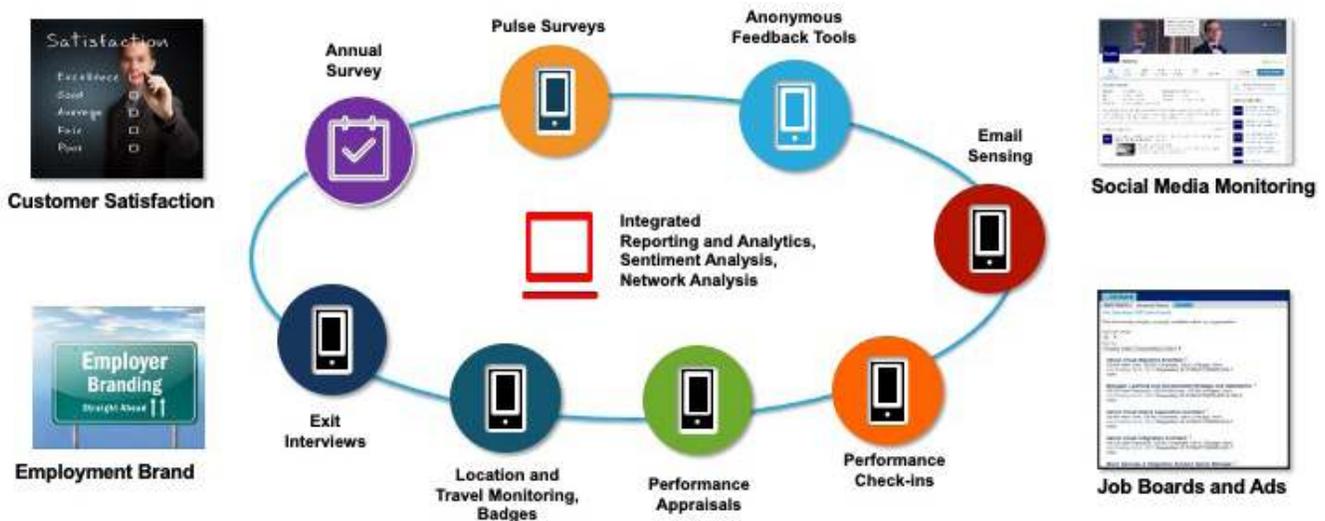


Figure 4: An Employee Listening Strategy

Technology plays an important role in scaling employee experience, and there are many different options on the market. If you are an HR leader and find the market hard to understand, you're not alone. It's challenging to cut through the hype of providers that promise a solution to all things related to employee experience and to decipher what you truly need.

Considerations for Employee Experience Technology

So how can you make sense of all of these technologies? What does it take to find the right one for your organization? Given the many options, it's important to focus on what's most critical to you.

- **What's your overall employee experience approach and listening strategy?** Before thinking about technology, consider what your approach is to employee experience – and what listening architecture supports that. Where do you understand employees well and where are there gaps? How do you get continuous insights about issues and opportunities the workforce faces?
- **What does success look like?** Once you know have determined the primary drivers for your search, identify how you will measure success. Costs, faster insights, deeper analysis, and increased action planning are all important considerations, but how will you know if your employee experience is improving?
- **What capabilities do you need the solution to provide?** Identify what must-haves you need in a technology solution or platform. For instance, if you're looking for a platform that combines all different data points into one view, a point solution might not be right for you. If your company is complex – in terms of size, employee groups or topics, for example – you'll need a solution that easily scales.
- **Is the technology easy to use and useful for employees, managers and HR?** If employees don't find the technology easy to use and useful, adoption will lag. Today, employees expect consumer-like, mobile-first experiences that they can use wherever and whenever they want. Similarly, if managers don't get easy-to-understand insights that trigger the right actions, you won't see needed improvements in the employee experience.

Area	Where Scale Is Needed	How Technology Can Help
Collecting information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different countries and cultures • Different roles requiring different questions • Many different needs and issues • Frequent pulses • Different listening channels • Surveys consistent with corporate brand • Easy-to-complete surveys regardless of medium 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automatic survey translation • Provisioning questions based on job/ role • Adjusting items quickly • Fast turnaround time • Integration of all channels • Configurable custom branding • Mobile/ adaptive design to support all users
Analyzing information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generating insights on trends and correlations • Identifying drivers of specific outcomes • Analyzing sentiments and comment themes • Identifying differences by demographics • Speed and efficiency of analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leveraging algorithms and visualizations • Advanced statistics embedded in calculations • Natural language processing capabilities • Configurable, visual heatmaps • Machine learning and algorithms
Distributing insights and taking action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distributing insights to managers and employees • Facilitating action planning discussions • Sharing company-specific resources for action planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager and individual dashboards • Downloadable presentations and templates • Integrating with LMS and other content systems

Figure 5: Listening at Scale

- **Does the technology provider serve as a partner, not just a vendor?** A key to your success and satisfaction is finding a partner who will support you on an ongoing basis – not a vendor that disappears after implementation. Ideally, look for a provider that has worked with companies of similar size and in similar industry segments. A good partner can help you create new value for employees while also saving costs, support you on strategic decisions, and grow with you as your needs change.
- **What value have others accomplished?** Check for success stories from companies like your own and be sure to speak directly with multiple current clients. Such conversations will help you get the real-world view of the technology solution, and you may well learn something new about your own population and experience opportunities.

Finding the right employee experience provider can be confusing and challenging, but it is not something HR should put on the back burner, especially now. With the world of work changing rapidly, it's more important than ever to scale your listening program to understand and respond to the issues people experience.

Conclusion

The pandemic has taught us that listening to the workforce is now more important than ever and drives not just employee engagement but customer experience and overall business performance. If you don't have a continuous listening program supported by technology that helps you scale, now is the time to develop it. Listening at scale is no longer a nice-to-have HR initiative; it's a business imperative that helps enable engaged, healthier and happier employees – and thus happy customers.

American Healthcare Company Uses Technology to Scale Listening across 300,000 Employees

A diversified American healthcare company with nearly 300,000 employees is united around a common purpose of helping people on their path to better health. The company's integrated suite of services includes retail pharmacy, pharmacy benefits management, clinical services, specialty pharmacy and digital services. In an increasingly connected and digital world, the company is meeting people wherever they are and changing health care to meet their needs.

Built on a foundation of unmatched community presence, the company's diversified model engages one in three Americans each year. From innovative new services at locations to transformative programs that help manage chronic conditions, the company is making health care more accessible, more affordable and simply better.

Measuring and responding to colleague feedback is an important part of the company's culture. Senior executives reinforce the importance of the voice of the colleague, learning from colleague feedback obtained in many different forums, and modeling prescribed actions. This leadership commitment has been instrumental to the success of the company's colleague engagement program.

To gain a comprehensive picture of opportunities and challenges in the employee experience, the company's overall listening framework includes an annual engagement survey, onboarding and exit surveys, and targeted pulse surveys. The company's approach is to understand overall engagement and its drivers through the annual survey, and supplement that information with targeted surveys for specific events or initiatives impacting the colleagues' work experiences. Results are integrated and analyzed for senior leadership to identify both overarching and specific workforce or job family differences strengths and opportunities. Special attention is given to identifying drivers of engagement and the link between engagement and business outcomes.

Significant action happens at the local level. Managers of teams of five or more people receive their results through easy-to-understand dashboards; they then debrief the results with their teams and develop plans for actions. Managers are supported by resources to help them identify the types of actions that can be taken to address certain issues and opportunities.

This bias towards taking action is paying off. Not only do employees complete the survey, but they are actively looking for what actions they can be engaged in to improve the work environment and experience on their team. Consequently, survey completion rates and engagements are both higher than industry averages.

In March 2020, the company, like many other businesses, was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The company moved quickly to understand the impact of the pandemic on its colleagues. It deployed two pulse surveys in March and April 2020 to seek colleague input about topics related to tools and resources for health and wellbeing, remote work, and support for those who continue to work in retail pharmacies and front-line environments. Additionally, the survey included open-ended questions for additional colleague feedback. Just like the annual survey, these pulse surveys saw high completion rates.

With the help of the Perceptyx platform, the engagement team quickly turned survey results around, allowing leaders to take immediate actions. Leaders continued to communicate in weekly reach outs what they were learning from the pulses and how the company would take action —resulting in immediate improvements in colleague sentiment.

In July, the company executed its regular annual engagement survey, with the usual questions supplemented by additional questions on wellbeing. Overall, engagement remained high in 2020, even as the pandemic impacted the work environment in unprecedented ways because colleagues felt the company was listening to their input and took action on it. People felt heard through the pulse surveys and appreciated the quick actions taken to respond to their concerns.

Looking ahead, the team aims to continue to listen, learn and act. "We are committed to our purpose of helping people on their path to better health. As our colleagues continue to play a vital role in COVID recovery efforts and health care innovation, our leaders will continue to listen to the voice of the colleague and take quick action where it matters most," said the company's vice president of talent management.

M&T Bank Checks in Weekly on Employee Experience during the Pandemic

M&T Bank Corporation is an American bank holding company headquartered in Buffalo, New York, with 780 branches in the Northeast and close to 18,000 employees.

As part of the company's comprehensive listening program, the M&T employee experience team of five people manages annual, pulse, and milestone surveys; employee recognition programs; performance management; service awards; and other feedback programs. In 2018, the team selected Perceptyx as its listening partner.

The annual engagement survey is a well-established program that is deeply rooted in the culture of the organization. It is actively supported by the CEO and senior management team and gets a 92% response rate. "We've done around 15 years of surveys, and we've done a lot of great things as a result. People buy into it because they see what we've done and know how important it is to take the opportunity to speak up," said Erin Oliver, employee experience program manager for M&T Bank.

As the pandemic hit, the team decided to use the on-demand tool provided by Perceptyx for conducting weekly pulse surveys in order to solicit input on a variety of topics from employees.

"It was our way to get quick information from employees to see how they were doing, if they were getting the information they needed, what else they needed to be productive," said Oliver.

As the team discovered issues related to remote working, concerns about health and safety, or the changing nature

of childcare, it responded quickly to address issues. Cross-functional teams were built to rapidly review issues and develop solutions. For example, early in the pandemic, employees in the branches were in dire need of protective equipment – such as masks, gloves, disinfectant, and plexiglass. As these needs became clear, corporate services worked quickly to get the needed supplies to the branches and continue to monitor additional requirements.

The surveys found that not everyone working from home had the right equipment to conduct business, so IT provided managers with guidance on how to order necessary monitors, headsets, and other equipment at their discretion.

The employee experience team also posted on an internal site a list of issues that had been identified and addressed through the pulse surveys. This rapid response reinforced the importance for continual participation in order to continually improve work environments.

The company also shared aggregate insights from the surveys with the NY state government to inform return to work, childcare, and other policies.

As the pandemic continues to rage on, the company is now conducting pulse surveys every three to four weeks to combat survey fatigue and help people focus. Recognizing the important role leaders play in shaping employee experience and engagement, the employee experience team is planning to add a leadership survey into the mix.

ManpowerGroup MAPS Out the Future with Global Insights and Local Action

ManpowerGroup is a world-leading HR services company; the company finds work for millions of people and connects hundreds of thousands of companies across 75 countries with the skilled talent they need to be competitive.

When the new CHRO joined ManpowerGroup in 2019, she wanted to modernize the system for its large annual employee survey, MAPS. The 84-item global survey is a cornerstone of the company's employee listening approach for its 30,000 employees. The survey provides insights into employee engagement, culture, diversity and inclusion, ethical practices, and accountability. The team chose Perceptyx as its survey partner – a decision aligned with the company's strategy to digitize and innovate.

'We know that while MAPS is a really good source of information, it's a picture in time. So we want to add to this snapshot more real-time data and insights,' said Camille du Fou Grant, global talent manager for ManpowerGroup.

MAPS has been ingrained in the company culture and is sponsored by senior leaders. The company CEO champions the survey regularly. Prior to visiting a ManpowerGroup location, he asks for that country's MAPS results to gather a people-first view of the culture and engagement in that market.

With MAPS, managers can easily see their results using manager dashboards and download presentations for sharing with their teams and facilitating action planning. The ease of use of these visuals has helped fast-track action planning and communication of results. Local actions at the manager level, combined with CEO commitment, helps get a high participation rate of around 80% every year.

While most actions are taken locally, there are always some new initiatives that emerge from MAPS results. For example, as agility scores trended low one year, the company amped up its technology transformation communications and action plan to provide people with better tools and resources to get work done.

When the pandemic hit in early 2020, the company wanted to better understand what was on peoples' minds across the world. It used free on-demand surveys provided by Perceptyx. The surveys queried employees about such issues as company wellbeing support, working from home requirements, and return to workplace planning. "As we all started working from home, the survey information was extremely useful for us to calibrate and understand where there were issues or concerns," said du Fou Grant.

Survey results were communicated globally, but more importantly, accountability for action was driven locally in each country. Overall results were very positive, and that sentiment was shared across the entire company and reinforced in the regions and countries. Additionally, ManpowerGroup could compare its survey results with those of other companies to determine how it stacked up in key areas.

As next steps in ManpowerGroup's employee experience journey, du Fou Grant is incorporating more flexibility and broader survey topics. For example, the company deployed a DEI survey when social unrest issues began to appear in North America and the UK. The team is also looking to build out onboarding and exit surveys, currently conducted locally, into its global listening strategy.

About Josh Bersin



Josh Bersin is an internationally recognized analyst, educator, and thought leader focusing on the global talent market and the challenges impacting business workforces around the world. He studies the world of work, HR and leadership practices, and the broad talent technology market.

He founded Bersin & Associates in 2001 to provide research and advisory services focused on corporate learning. Over the next ten years, he expanded the company's coverage to encompass HR, talent management, talent acquisition, and leadership. He sold the company to Deloitte in 2012, when it became known as Bersin™ by Deloitte. Bersin left Deloitte in 2018..

In 2019, Bersin founded the Josh Bersin Academy, the world's first global development academy for HR and talent professionals and a transformation agent for HR organizations. The Academy offers content-rich online programs, a carefully curated library of tools and resources, and a global community that helps HR and talent professionals stay current on the trends and practices needed to drive organizational success in the modern world of work.

Bersin is frequently featured in talent and business publications such as Forbes, Harvard Business Review, HR Executive, FastCompany, The Wall Street Journal, and CLO Magazine. He is a regular keynote speaker at industry events around the world and a popular blogger with more than 800,000 followers on LinkedIn.

His education includes a BS in engineering from Cornell University, an MS in engineering from Stanford University, and an MBA from the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley.

About Kathi Enderes



Kathi is the vice president of research at the Josh Bersin Academy; she leads research for all areas of HR, learning, talent and HR technology. Kathi has more than 20 years of experience in management consulting with IBM, PwC, and EY and as a talent leader at McKesson and Kaiser Permanente. Most recently, Kathi led talent and workforce research at Deloitte, where she led many research studies on various topics of HR and talent and frequently spoke at industry conferences. Originally from Austria, Kathi has worked in Vienna, London and Spain and now lives in San Francisco. Kathi holds a doctoral degree and a masters degree in mathematics from the University of Vienna.