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**Bringing the customer experience to the center of employee experience**

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Organizational renewal and innovation through design
The products, services, technologies, ecosystems, and networks of today are much more interconnected and complicated than ever before. As a result, private and public organizations alike are turning to design to find new ways to create value, manage uncertainty and innovate in a sustainable manner. Design can play a variety of roles on different levels in organizations, with different effects. The Design+ book offers an overview on how design and design thinking can change our organizations, drawing from academic research and company experiences in different industries. We showcase different perspectives and approaches, and hope to inspire you to explore the opportunities through which design can help to renew your own ways of working.


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Bringing the customer experience to the center of employee experience

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Creating great customer experiences requires insights on both customers and the people creating those experiences. Opportunities to connect with customers are a foundation for workplace engagement and can help to infuse work with meaning.
By now, creating superior customer experiences has become a necessity for sustaining competitive advantage. At the same time, many companies are still playing catch-up when it comes to crafting employee experiences. Customer experience and employee experience are connected. In an era when most employees are disengaged at the workplace, customer experience leaders also boast more engaged employees. This translates to the bottom line: employee engagement and experience can double revenue and profit. The reverse can be seen as well: poor customer service frequently causes customers to switch between service providers, affecting the fields of financial services, telecommunications and utilities in particular - necessities which can be invisible when running smoothly and crippling when failing to do so.

So how can one promote engagement and improve employee experience? This is no simple feat. Employee experiences lean on three interconnected environments at the workplace: the cultural environment (the feeling employees get from working in an organization), the technological environment (the tools they use to get their job done) and the physical environment (the actual spaces in which employees work). Factors which influence these, in turn, include:

- Organizational structures and supports, such as incentives, management and human resource programs
- The work tasks themselves and the processes, support tools and information needed to complete them
- Internal interaction with people within and across units and functions, and the organizational culture, as well as interaction and communication with customers and external stakeholders
As such, employee experience is highly complex with no single approach to be found for tackling the entirety of the issue. However, the same design processes that can be used for enhancing customer experiences can be applied to improving employee experiences. These are two sides of the same coin, and instead of examining them separately, particular focus should be paid to designing “touchpoint” interactions where employees and customers meet. We, as people, have an innate need for experiencing connection with others, intrinsically motivating in its own right rather than as a stepping stone to something else we desire (the basic mechanism on which external rewards rely on to coax desired performance). Fostering meaningful connections between employees and customers can be a powerful contributor to designing better employee experiences.
CONNECTING EMPLOYEES TO CUSTOMERS

DNA, a Finnish telecommunications company started in 2001, outlines both customer and employee experience as its top strategic goals. Customer experience has been built as a foundational element of the company’s brand strategy, where the brand is considered built to a significant extent on the actual interactions and experiences the customers have with the company and its services. Brand management and customer experience operate within the same team. As a testament of DNA having made employee experience a top priority in its strategy, it has recently won the Great Place to Work award in large companies in Finland, and landed within the 15 best large companies to work for in Europe\(^7\). To develop the organization to become even more customer centric and build linkages to further enhance the employee experience, DNA nurtures employees’ connections to customers in a number of ways.
1] **Articulate purpose in terms of social impact**

Whether you work in a call center or as a lifeguard, seeing the significance and social impact of your work translates into increased job satisfaction and performance\(^8^9\). However, one should not assume the significance is loud and clear to everyone in the organization - we all benefit from a little reminding. For example, DNA operates in telecommunications, an area where customers tend to have low levels of passion towards their operators, especially in a context like Finland, where network coverage is high and the differences between operators are small. However, telecommunications represents a necessity in modern society where people are increasingly dependent on functioning communications in all areas of life, from using public services, to entertainment, and being in touch with their loved ones. DNA articulates their goal as making the everyday life of their customers simpler and more straightforward, more enjoyable, and productive by providing products and services that are clear and easy to use.

On the other hand, there is the wider social impact of the services. To tap into this aspect of their operations, DNA conducts studies on digital equality in Finland and according to the most recent study, about ten percent of Finns are experiencing digital inequality to some extent. While ten percent might not at first sound like a huge number, when you consider the actual number of individuals behind that percentage, it becomes evident that the human impact can be huge. While old age predictably correlates with an experienced lack of understanding of technology, we should not assume that the experience of digital inequality applies only to the elderly, as, according to the study, even people under 40 report fearing falling behind on technological development.
However, making the overall impact on the company offering on the customers’ lives explicit and visible is not enough. You might still hear someone working in for example technology stating “I don’t have a role in this since I am just writing code and not working with the customers”. While the impact of frontline employees on customer experience is evident and easily understandable, deliberate effort typically need to be placed in making the impact of the work happening backstage evident. Here, visualizations and purposeful reflection on the pathways between facets of the customer experience and individual contributions of employees are useful tools. Making it easy for employees to grasp both the big picture of the impact on customers lives and how their role feeds into it builds a foundation for meaningful work - we all want the time we spend at work to matter, and the social impact to customers can be an important source for motivation in any line of work.

2] Show in addition to telling when it comes to customer insights

Organizations today have ever increasing amounts of data on their customers, their preferences and behavior. Analyzing a varied and massive body of data yields insight into customer behavior that can fuel innovation and continuous improvement of products and services along with an ability to measure their impact on customer experience. However, this type of extensive data can result in perceiving the customers in terms of facts and numbers. Designers and user researchers typically function as the advocates of the voice of the customer, with multiple tools at their disposal for making the customer experiences tangible, understandable and relatable – or to develop empathy, as we often call it in the present rhetoric. However, this also leads to designers and user researchers acting as gatekeepers of the customer experience and, at worst, can lead to the detachment of other personnel from it.
Personal experience tends to be more memorable and convincing than just throwing around numerical data or even rich and illustrative descriptions. Face to face interaction and meeting specific individuals rather than relying only on an abstract conceptualization of customers can promote both commitment to addressing customer needs and motivation at work. At DNA, design and customer insights activities are not left to the experts alone, even when these activities are conducted by partners. The design and customer insight at DNA strive to involve other personnel in customer research interactions, be they interviews, observation or co-creation workshops. It is worthwhile to always bring along someone who is new to the design approach or has little contact to the customers. In many organizations, it’s worth targeting efforts to inviting mid-managers along in particular. Unlike front line employees who tend to gain plenty of exposure to customers in any case, or top management, who can have an easier time seeing across separate units and functions in an organization, mid-managers tend to operate “deep in the organization”. As one expert in technology development at DNA remarked in a recent case: “I’ve known that ten percent of the customers turn their modem off when they are not using it, but this was the first time I actually met such a person face to face.” Being able to take the perspective of the customer can fuel creativity, and empathizing is much easier when you’ve seen struggles and improvements with your own eyes. Such experiential understanding of customer needs can energize making changes in the processes, structures and resources of the organization to improve touchpoints between customers and employees.

3] Encourage proactivity through managing the threshold of participation

Customers are ultimately the beneficiaries of employees’ efforts, yet most organizations are filled with various “back office” positions in which there is little or no contact with customers. Think of ways in
which you can ensure that everyone in the organization has some contact with the customers, whether it involves going out into the field or bringing a customer inside the organization. At DNA, employees in all positions are required to listen to customer calls and make a field trip to a DNA store as part of learning at work. This helps to keep everyone grounded to the realities customers are facing, as well as keeping the articulated purpose of making the everyday life of customers more enjoyable, easy and productive fresh in the minds of employees in all corners of the organization. This type of exposure to the voice of the customer is a low threshold and does not require any special skills from the employees, as opposed to, for example, running a workshop involving customers.

Managing the threshold of participation and the resources required is important for the longevity of the efforts, as facing the customer can also be intimidating for many employees. Employees invited to join user research and service design in customer interviews at DNA are prepped for the situation and have the role of note taker their first time, with the designer being responsible for being in the driver’s seat.

Once employees are aware of the needs of customers and the impact their work has on customers’ lives and have some experience in gathering customer insight, we want to empower employees to act on the insights they have gained. Designing new workplace experiences is very much dependent on co-creation. In addition to having design and customer research specialists, it can pay off to teach some basics to everyone in the organization. At DNA, specific projects purposefully act as deeper dives into creating customer experiences for cross-organizational teams, where the participants engage in a range of design activities over a whole process of service design. Many aspects of a human-centered design approach are typically challenging for non-designers, such as making sense of the observations and data to
create actionable insights, along with the overall mentality of accepting the uncertainty inherent to the approach. This type of involvement benefits from support in terms of reflection along the process, with transparency on the rationale behind different activities. In addition to these types of projects, DNA also runs a weekly customer insight and service design “clinic”, where anyone in the organization can reserve a time slot for getting advice or consulting from the design team on gathering customer insight or using service design methods - whether the target is improving products, services or the employee experience at the company.

**Going forward**

Just like customer experiences, employee experiences hinge on a number of touchpoints with people, tools, spaces and processes inside and beyond the organization. Design thinking can be used to improve the innovation process for new products and services; organizational design to promote integration across disciplines, functions and units. The physical environment can be developed in how it supports collaboration and connects to intangible values; while management and organizational processes can stimulate, support and reward the types of behavior the organization wants to see from employees. While this can seem like a daunting list to work through, the employee side of the experience coin cannot be neglected without adverse effects on customer experiences. Rather than shying away from the challenge, invite all hands on deck to pursue a holistic and continuous development of employee experiment. Bringing customer experience to the heart of creating meaningful employee experiences is one of the ways to pursue this goal.
References:


