

Why Your Employee Experience Needs Ethical Design

 An LDS white paper



Digital transformation is changing how people inside large enterprise organizations work, learn, collaborate, and develop.

At the same time, many businesses are pursuing flatter organizational models and pay-for-performance policies that place individual contributions, not hierarchical structures, at the center.

Among the advantages of these new workplace structures is the attraction that self-determined, self-driven participation and development hold for top talent. But to deliver on this progressive new employee value proposition (EVP), companies need to ensure that their digital employee experiences reflect the same values of transparency, trust, and open innovation that their cultural narratives do.

People want to have autonomy over how they work and collaborate, how they [develop](#) in their careers, and how they engage as citizens of the organization. But it's not enough to tell employees that they are free to challenge the status quo and innovate, or that they "own their careers," or that they should grow their personal networks both within and outside the business. They need technologies, opportunity contexts, and [culture](#) to normalize these behaviors and empower individuals to follow through on them in their work every day.

Large enterprises undergoing [digital transformation](#) understand the necessity of investing in digital employee experience platforms to equip and empower people in new [ways of working](#). But the sea change these investments are invoking raises ethical questions for employers, with their implications and challenges for the most part underconsidered and underimagined. Companies sometimes undercut the very cultural values they are trying to promote by creating digital experiences that people perceive as untrustworthy, unproductive, or disrespectful.

Read on to learn what employers need to know about ethical design inside the enterprise – what it means, what's at stake, and how to fuel innovation and productivity through employee experiences that realize the employee value proposition for every individual.



Ethical design – and why employers should pay attention

Gerd Leonard's [five new human rights for the Digital Age](#) define a core set of human rights to guide the ethics of human-machine relationships. While the application of human rights in the consumer space has been widely discussed – perhaps most notably by [Tristan Harris](#) and [The Center for Human Technology](#) – their implications for employees at their jobs have received little attention.

Gerd Leonard's human rights for the digital age are:

- The right to remain natural, i.e., 'merely' biological and organic
- The right to be inefficient if, when, and where it defines our basic humanness
- The right to disconnect
- The right to be or remain anonymous
- The right to employ or engage people instead of machines.

The stakes for protecting these human rights in real-world scenarios are high. They affect everything from our control over our bodies to how we manage our time, make choices, and perceive authenticity and truth.

What's at Stake

| For Individuals | For Communities |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Time and attention• Bodily autonomy• Earning power• Assumptions about transparency and objectivity• Happiness and emotional well-being• How we become aware of options and make choices• Our ability to recognize bias | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learning behaviors• Social networks• Social norms• Cultural narratives• Political outcomes• Socioeconomic stratification• Stewardship of natural resources |

So what does this mean for workers inside the enterprise, and how should employers respond? The implications are broad. They touch front-line workers partnering with robots on an assembly line, executives staying connected in off-hours using their personal cellphones, sales representatives keeping informed about the latest product offerings, truckers using advanced analytics to balance their loads – and everyone in between.

How employees experience design ethics

People using digital technologies at work confront similar challenges to those in their consumer lives: they want to protect their attention, privacy, and data, and to make decisions in their own best interests. But they also face unique challenges in the technologies they use in their jobs. How can they partner with machines in ways that improve their well-being and support their development towards new challenges? How do they balance work and life? Perhaps most crucially, how do they stay relevant inside the enterprise and how do they imagine (and prepare for) their role and purpose in the organization of the future?

For organizations, the discussion goes directly to the relationship they have with their employees and how ready they are to adopt and participate in new work. Employees who feel equipped and empowered to embrace change will do so more readily; employees who feel valued and respected by their employers will be more likely to weather disruption. Most importantly, people need to feel like their digital experiences are predictable and transparent. If employees don't understand if and how their participation on digital channels is monitored, assessed, or leveraged by the business, they will be far less likely to engage. Experience design that is perceived as being unethical impacts not only people's performance and satisfaction, but also business outcomes and the organization's capability to recruit and retain [talent](#). How employees adopt workplace technologies – or fail to do so – can make or break the organization's cultural narrative and ultimately impact how it competes in the marketplace.



Design principles inside the enterprise

In each of the following scenarios and the organizational and work design they imply, we see design ethics in action. Consider how common contexts inside the enterprise can benefit from digital experiences that realize the EVP in people's everyday tasks – and how perceived breaches of trust can jeopardize productivity and employee buy-in to mission-critical values.

1

Solutions should protect that which is uniquely human (e.g., creativity, emotions, imperfections, defined set of work hours) over efficiencies that can be realized through unchecked automation.

What might this look like?

Front-line workers partnering with machines could be upskilled to exercise better critical judgment, make more informed decisions, and work more efficiently – not because machines are replacing them, but because the technology frees them to do the work that is uniquely human. Workers should have a clear picture of their role in the future of the business in order to mitigate common fears that they are partnering with machines to effectively train them as their replacements.

Why does this matter?

Experiences that emphasize the contributions of people encourage reciprocity, loyalty, and emotional alignment to change. Work yields better outcomes when people and machines contribute together, each bringing their unique strengths to the task.

What are key design considerations?

- Clear roles for humans working closely with technology, with defined expectations and measures of success
- Creation of feedback channels and opportunities to challenge norms and innovate
- Experience goals that factor people, not just the business or technology

2

Technological augmentation either on or inside the body should not be required as part of the process of doing work unless absolutely necessary – and in those questions, it should be clear why it is necessary. The experience should make it easy to access and control the augmentation, including any data collection taking place.

What might this look like?

A chemist working with dangerous chemicals or equipment in a lab may be equipped with wearable sensors tracking pulse rate, body temperature, chemical exposure, or other factors that indicate risks of injury. It should be clear whether the technology is tracking anything else about the wearer's physical state and how this might be used to assess job suitability or performance.

Why does this matter?

The fear of #WiredorFired policies at work are real, posing a barrier not only to acceptance of augmentation (even if it may be in the worker's best interest), but also to broader applications of technology in the workplace. Anxieties about surveillance, privacy, and work/life boundaries can erode employee trust and negatively impact engagement.

What are key design considerations?

- Impacts vs. value of the technological augmentation under consideration
- Clear understanding of how people's biological, personal, or other private data is being collected and used
- Ability of the employee to opt in or out

3

When possible, people preferences for how to interact with a digital experience should be factored and accommodated. The experience should establish clear expectations about its intended use, desired outcomes, and where people can go for support.

What might this look like?

An [enterprise knowledge platform](#) might connect knowledge workers across businesses and geographies in order to better leverage the collective knowledge of the organization, proactively pushing information to users at point of need. Users should be able to configure the experience based on how, when, and where they work to minimize interruption and maximize helpfulness. They should have a clear understanding of appropriate topics, interactions, and relationships that the platform is intended to support so that it remains relevant and useful to participants.

Why does this matter?

When people know what to expect from an experience, they are more willing and better equipped to navigate it – including interactions they may be less comfortable with, such as unfamiliar channels and relationships. Good attention management helps people feel in control of the experience and confident that they are working in an aligned and productive way.

What are key design considerations?

- Cultural and workforce readiness, including change management and adoption support
- User control over the experience's demand for time, attention, and interaction
- Clear understanding of expectations for how people should and should not be interacting with technologies at work

4

The experience should provide an intuitive onboarding and offboarding experience. It should be easy to leave the experience and unplug, and users should know if monitoring or data retention is taking place.

What might this look like?

Workplace collaboration tools like Slack can keep distributed teams connected and engaged. But they also make it clear to your coworkers when you are online and when you're not. Mobile

apps increase the expectation that employees are always connected. Make it clear that workers aren't expected to respond to messages immediately when they are off the clock, and create an option to hide their status during those time periods. If management is listening in on social chats, make sure every team member is aware.

Why does this matter?

Being able to leave the experience is as important as being able to access it easily. Employees' work-life balance is already threatened by porous boundaries between work and home, and increasing connectivity and building stronger networks makes the necessity of taking time away from workplace tools all the more critical. Employees that are used to over-sharing on consumer platforms, like Facebook, may need reminders of the intended purpose of workplace digital tools.

What are key design considerations?

- Nature of work performed and the technology required
- People's expectations based on consumer technology paradigms
- Platform relationships to other people and systems in the ecosystem

5

People should be able to participate and work anonymously whenever reasonable. If there is good reason for a lack of anonymity, the experience should be transparent about the level the exposure the worker has, the data that is being collected, the reason for the monitoring, and how the data is being assessed.

What might this look like?

Employee participation in an enterprise learning platform might be a factor in their performance and development reviews. Workers that invest time in broadening their skills, regularly upskill for new projects, or actively contribute to crowd-sourced knowledge networks may be rewarded for being more proactive learners. If that's the case, it should be clear to every worker that their participation on the platform is being formally assessed so that they are not unwittingly penalized for low adoption.

Why does this matter?

Experiential transparency is a key component of trust, particularly in experiences that are new or that deploy technology in unfamiliar ways. When people feel that technology is working not only in pursuit of business outcomes, but also from a good-faith position of enablement and

empowerment, they are more likely to evangelize for digital-first work practices. Building credibility through technological enablement also improves job satisfaction and retention.

What are key design considerations?

- Reasonableness and value of anonymous work or contributions
- Employer justification for monitoring and assessment
- Transparency of digital experience intents and outcomes – for people and for the business

Bottom line: design ethics impact your business performance.

The race for top talent is heating up as knowledge, adaptability, and creativity become increasingly valuable in our exponentially developing technological landscape. Businesses' ability to realize their EVP and inspire and retain their people is a critical factor of business success. To keep employees engaged, trust and transparency are crucial counterbalances to efficiency and automation.

For all these reasons, businesses that race to transform their organizations through new digital capabilities must be equally committed to ensuring the ethical integrity of the experiences they create. Good digital experiences can exponentially improve the business impact of technology, culture, and talent investments at every level of the business.