

Promises in action: The role of employer brand, employee value proposition and employee experience in delivering on psychological contract expectations

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Abstract

The shifting world of work and the resultant impact on organizations has fundamentally changed the relationship between employees and employers. With the reality of changing workforce demographics, gig-workers, nomad work and evolving talent marketplaces placing organizational talent supply processes under pressure, there is a need to evaluate the effectiveness of people management practices to access talent pools. In particular, the impact of employer branding, the employee value proposition, and the employee experience on attracting and retaining talent has to be re-evaluated in light of shifting expectations. We propose that traditional human resource (HR)

practices, which have predominantly been focused on procedural elements of the employee lifecycle, have to evolve to intentionally create more human-centric working environments. This implies incorporating principles from design thinking and service-based design, which positions the human being as the focal point. A shift towards a more human-centric perspective should not be disconnected from the contextual realities of the organization and its objectives while also taking the dynamic nature of the evolving psychological contract into account. The purpose of this article can be described as follows. First, we aim to discuss the psychological contract as the focal point for aligning employer brand, employee value propositions and employee experience. Second, we propose an employee-centric design methodology for human resource practices and third, we illustrate the use and application of this method by applying it to the off-boarding process in a global organization.

Keywords: design thinking, psychological contract, human-centric HR, employee experience

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the (in)effectiveness of modern talent attraction and engagement approaches (Tomcikova et al., 2021). With the rise of hybrid and remote working models, the ability for organizations to attract talent beyond traditional geographical borders has provided an opportunity to redefine how, where, when and by who work should be performed. These changes have also led towards a redefinition of employee expectations regarding flexibility and organizational support, as well as a revised focus on work/life boundaries (Tiry et al., 2021). In response, many organizations have started to explore non-traditional approaches to accessing talent, such as talent exchange programs, gig-workers and crowdsourcing, to tap into talent pools that were previously out of reach. Even though these talent pools provide new opportunities for both the organization and employees, they also lead to increased competition between organizations to attract and retain talent. With talent being more mobile than ever before, within an economy of skills scarcity, organizations need to intentionally shape and construct their value proposition to potential and current employees, to remain competitive and sustainable (Myhill et al., 2021) and more importantly, be able to deliver an aligned employee experience.

In this paper, we propose a more human-centric design approach toward people practices that aligns the employee value proposition, experience and employer brand with the

changing needs of the psychological contract. The authors believe that by adopting a different perspective when designing people practices, this will have a positive impact on the authenticity of the promised employee experience while also bringing organizational impact and value. This article builds upon the work done by Veldsman and Van der Merwe (2022) that positioned a more consumerist-driven approach towards people practices and shifted from the employee's perspective as a customer of people services to the employee as a consumer of people solutions.

The rise of the employee experience movement

As employees experience their careers as being more fluid and self-directed, organizations are expected to provide the transactional elements (e.g., rewards, growth opportunities, and learning) of the employment relationship and an environment that enables and supports the broader career experiences of employees. The ability of the organization to provide authentic, holistic employee experiences is becoming a differentiating factor when it comes to the employer brand and employee value proposition (Yacine, 2021). Authentic lived experiences are essential in balancing the new demands of the psychological contract and the mutual expectations of employees and organizations. Organizations expect an agile and available workforce that delivers sustainable impact, whilst employees increasingly seek career experiences that are meaningful, enhance employability and diversify their skill sets.

The employee experience movement has gained traction over the past decade in response to a need for organizations to build and deliver on their talent brand and to set themselves apart from the competition (Plaskoff, 2017). Employees are now seen as consumers, with choice and a voice. By utilising approaches traditionally reserved for marketing, organizations have adopted a different approach in managing the employee expectations associated with the psychological contract (Yacine, 2021). Even though the intention was noble, most of these initiatives created unattainable expectations of what the experience of an employee should be in relation to a specific employer brand and promise, which has left some employees disappointed after making the decision to join a new employer (Mahadevan & Schmitz, 2020).

Organizations have aimed to compensate by designing stronger employee value propositions, rethinking flexibility and benefits as part of the employee experience and incorporating realistic experience previews of what it is like to work for the organization.

Nevertheless, despite all these efforts, there seems to be a significant lack of practical research that promotes an integrated and realistic approach towards designing employee experiences that are authentic and sustainable for the organization (Gheidar & ShamiZanjani, 2021).

The employee experience movement originated from three distinct domains of thought. The first school of thought saw the employee experience as a natural evolution of the candidate experience. In alignment with the employee engagement literature, this stream focused on creating intentional experiences and memorable moments along the end-to-end employee lifecycle (Bester & Stander, 2021). The second influential school of thought originated from the technology and digital user perspective and the rise of digital HR solutions (Kristoff et al., 2018). This approach focused on the user experience when interacting with HR platforms and services and naturally extended this thinking beyond the technological interaction to incorporate process and physical engagements. The third school of thought was influenced by marketing principles when starting to build employer and talent brands as a method to attract and retain the right employees (Lowenstein, 2020). Table 1 below demonstrates these differing perspectives and how employee experience is defined within these schools of thought.

Table 1
Defining employee experience (Gheidar & ShamiZanjani, 2021)

Origin Domain	Definition	Reference
Technology and User	A combination of people, process and technology interactions	VMware, 2019
Candidate Experience	The workforce experience as a result of the interactions between the organization and its people	Sage People, 2018
Candidate Experience	The journey that the employee takes within the organization is expressed as the sum of all interactions that the employee has with the organization	Gallup, 2018
Candidate Experience and Marketing	The employees holistic perceptions of the relationship with the employer derived from the touchpoints along their journey	Plaskoff, 2017
Marketing	A personalised set of interactions, processes and content that the employee has with the employer enables them to achieve success	Hamerman & Schooley, 2017

Even though distinctly different in origin, all three schools of thought agree that there is value in personalising employee experiences. A great experience leads towards improved employee attraction and retention, and a good robust experience can lead to higher levels of employee engagement and ultimately, retention (Shenoy & Uchil, 2018). There

is however, disagreement in terms of how the experience should be designed, what the factors are that should form part of the desired employee experience and how experiences should be put into practice to gain maximum impact. As such, the employee value proposition has become a key element that informs the expectations embedded in the employee experience.

The employee value proposition as a conduit to a good experience

The employee value proposition (EVP) has become an important contributor towards the attractiveness of employer brands to the external market. Various definitions of the employee value proposition exist, yet there is agreement among scholars that the employee value proposition refers to:

- characteristics or appeal of working for a particular organization and being associated with the brand;
- the offerings, and set of experiences that an organization promises to employees as part of the relationship which could be either tangible or intangible; and
- the perceived and real value derived by the employee from the value provided by the organization (Veldsman & Pauw, 2018).

The employee value proposition has been shown to have strong links to the employer brand, identity and to social exchange theory (Kumar et al., 2021). Traditionally, it has been based upon the more transactional elements of the employment relationship, such as tangible rewards, benefits and learning. However, for the past few years the importance of the intangible factors such as culture, values and meaningful work has increased. Organizations have aimed to verbalize the promise and benefits of their employee value propositions in comparison to other competitors and various employer brand strategies have flaunted the benefits employees could expect if they decide to join. Programs such as “best company to work for” and social media platforms have given employees a voice within this domain and HR departments' success has often been measured against these criteria.

Employees' experience of both the tangible and intangible aspects of the EVP have become crucial and organizations have spent a significant amount of time to better understand whether the promised EVP has lived up to expectations (Raj, 2020). The challenge,

however, has been strong disagreement on the role that individual employee expectations should play in defining what a “good experience” should entail and the criteria that inform employee opinion. The psychological contract and how it is evolving, constitutes the underlying basis for both the employee value proposition and employee experience and we will expand more on this below.

The psychological contract as the basis of the employee experience

The 1990s saw an increased interest in understanding the psychological contract and its influence on employment relationships. Even though the term was coined by Argyris (1960) and further developed by Levinson (1962), it was not until Rousseau’s (1989) research that the concept gained traction and became the focus of contemporary research. Even though various definitions exist, it is accepted that the psychological contract refers to the perceived mutual expectations that exist due to the nature of a relationship between employer and employee (Coetzee & Deas, 2021). Whilst some expectations are more transactional and articulated, e.g., salary or working hours, other expectations are implicit, often relational and for the most part remain unexpressed. The dynamic and evolving nature of the employment relationship has had a significant impact on the psychological contract (Scheepers & Shuping, 2011). With the rise of gig-workers and other fluid employment arrangements, traditional boundaries no longer seem suitable to describe the nature of the relationship and even less so to articulate the expectations between parties (Sivarajan et al., 2021). This, however, does not diminish the importance of the psychological contract but rather highlights a need to better understand how the expectations contained within the psychological contract are translated to the actual lived employee experience. In this respect, Rousseau and colleagues (2016) highlight the ever-changing and evolving nature of the psychological contract and how various experiences influence the movement from creation (what do we want from each other), to maintenance (are we delivering what we promised), to disruption (lived experiences that contribute or detract value). In turn, this disruption can lead to either renegotiation (what does this look like going forward) or repair (do we want to continue this relationship and if so, on what terms).

In particular, the timeframe of the employment relationship (short-term versus open-ended) and the performance requirements of the employment relationship (specific

outcomes versus general/non-specific outcomes) are two contractual factors that are impacted most as the world of work evolves (Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni, 1994). This results in four distinct types of psychological contracts that impact the parameters of the employee/employer relationship and the associated expectations to be met.

Transactional psychological contract

The transactional psychological contract typically exists where the employment relationship is shorter-term, with clear expectations of delivery (Scheepers & Shuping, 2011). Whilst no longer-term or implied expectations exist, the mutual expectations of both employees and employers are made explicit and therefore are prone to criticism and negative consequences when either party does not deliver on expectations. When managed well, transactional psychological contracts effectively manage gig-workers and other non-traditional workforce arrangements by fostering trust through explicit expectations and aligned lived experiences. Where the transactional psychological contract predominantly exists, people management practices that are focused on the transactional elements of the employment relationship (e.g., contract workers' onboarding and management, etc.) are critical to ensure clarity around mutual expectations (Liu et al., 2020).

Transitional psychological contract

Where shorter-term employment relationships exist, with less specific associated outcomes, a transitional psychological contract may be in place. Without longer-term employment expectations and clarity on deliverables, there may be a lack of commitment to the organization or a continued psychological contract. The transitional psychological contract is primarily a cognitive state and prevalent where the employer/employee relationship is transitioning or breaking down (e.g., in the case of organizational downsizing, mergers and acquisitions) and is still prevalent in turbulent economies and tough organizational realities. In employment arrangements where this psychological contract is prevalent, a focus on people practices that manage the transition and associated mutual expectations (e.g., exit management) is important to maintain the psychological contract and deliver on expectations that may stretch beyond transactional elements (Ma et al., 2019).

Balanced psychological contract

Balanced psychological contracts are prevalent where longer-term, open-ended employment relationships exist, with clearly defined expectations. Expectations are usually dependent on or linked to the existence and sustainability of the organization in the longer term and employees and organizations benefit greatly from employees who manage their careers in the context of the organization. The rewards and benefits that employees receive are usually linked to the organization's competitive advantage and revenue gain, which encourages sustained learning, development and contribution from employees. People management practices focused on the expected benefits derived from employment arrangements play an important role in managing the balanced psychological contract (e.g., employee value proposition, benefits, rewards and recognition; cf. Tekleab et al., 2020).

Relational psychological contract

Relational psychological contracts are relevant when the employment relationship is open-ended, however, no clear performance expectations exist. This type of psychological contract involves the provision of employment on the organizational end, with employees committing to the organization's needs and interests through a display of loyalty. Management of the relational psychological contract where no formalized employment arrangement exist may be more important when considering people management practices that involve prospective or past employees (e.g., talent acquisition and alumni talent).

Assumptions pertaining to the employer-employee relationship

In existing research, a number of the factors that impact psychological contract expectations are based on the assumption of a permanent employment arrangement. This assumption has to be reviewed with the rise of gig-workers and other fluid employment arrangements, to fully understand how these employment arrangements impact the psychological contract. In particular, as organizations grapple with access to talent, they reposition their employee value proposition to attract scarce and critical skills to the organization, openly advertising and offering benefits to prospective and internal talent. Whilst the employee value proposition remains a critical lever to attract and retain talent, it has become more than simply a transactional articulation of what employees can expect of employers. It has evolved into an explicit promise that includes transactional

and non-transactional factors to current and future employees, which is critical in managing the mutual expectations which emanate from the psychological contract.

Often, the psychological contract translation is driven through the employer brand as the initial promise made and sold to the employee, with the employee value proposition as an articulation of employee benefits flowing from the employment relationship. Both the employer brand and the employee value proposition, therefore, play a critical role in articulating and delivering the desired employee experience, in line with psychological contract expectations.

The role of the employer brand and employee value proposition in employee experience manifestation: The E-cubed model

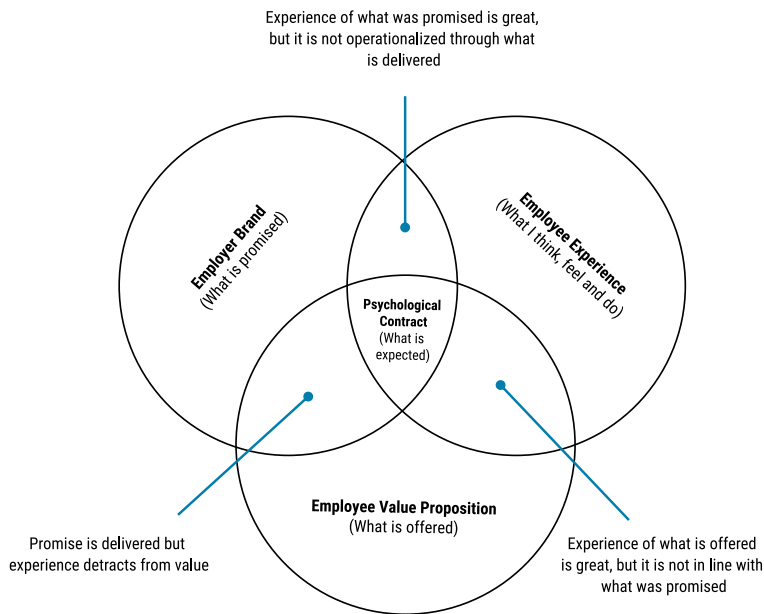
Employer branding is defined as a long-term organizational strategy that aims to manage the awareness of the brand within the external market to attract the right type of talent, whilst also serving the purpose of retaining internal employees (Benraiss-Noailles & Viot, 2021). The employer brand is closely related to the employee value proposition (Browne, 2021); however, the employer brand concept is based upon traditional marketing principles. Instead of targeting the commercial consumer, it is based on positioning the organization as an employer of choice for specific talent segments. Given the changing nature of the workforce, employer branding strategies have become more popular to leverage the organization's consumer brand and reputation in its talent attraction strategies. Internally, the employer brand is utilized to enhance employee engagement and retention by building organizational ambassadorship. When the internal experience of the employee is not in line with the perceived employer brand that was positioned during the attraction phase or that is showcased externally, employer branding loses its potential value to engage and retain talent. One of the most prominent challenges of the employer brand has often been associated with the inability of the internal employee experience to deliver on the promise that the employer brand either sets out upfront at the acquisition stage or proclaims externally. This mismatch between the promised experience and expected value proposition and the actual lived experience has been identified as a contributing factor to employee disengagement and difficulty in retention (Mascarenhas, 2019). Organizations that can provide an appealing brand operationalized through an engaging employee value proposition and delivered through authentic

experiences, have a distinct competitive advantage over their peers. Whilst a compelling EVP is consistently cited in the literature as a core differentiator for organizations and there is some agreement on its definition, in practice, this concept is still largely fragmented and various definitions of the terms exist (Veldsman & Pauw, 2018). In most organizations, the EVP has primarily been diluted to either an unarticulated concept that occurs by “accident” or a “best practice” HR initiative that is mechanistically put in place because it is the “right thing to do.” An EVP removed from the organizational and people strategy and disjointed from employee needs and experience is not a sustainable or worthwhile endeavour.

Aligning the employer brand, employee value proposition and employee experience, cannot be done through the use of traditional process-driven design methodologies (Durai et al., 2018) and requires a more human-centric approach. Human-centric design refers to the application of design thinking principles to place the user at the centre of the approach (Gonen, 2020). The method is based upon the premise of empathizing with the human being, understanding their wants, needs and desires and experimenting with various possibilities to craft a solution. Techniques borrowed from consumer psychology become important perspectives in applying this type of approach, as the focus is no longer only on the process and the “what” but rather to also consider the “why” and the “who” (Veldsman & Van der Merwe, 2022). This approach has been successfully adopted in product and software design and has more recently entered other areas such as customer service, retail and marketing. Durai and colleagues (2018) have also linked design thinking with employee experience and engagement, with a specific focus on the start-up environment. As a result of the changing psychological contract, a more humanistic approach is called for when approaching the employee experience, brand and value proposition.

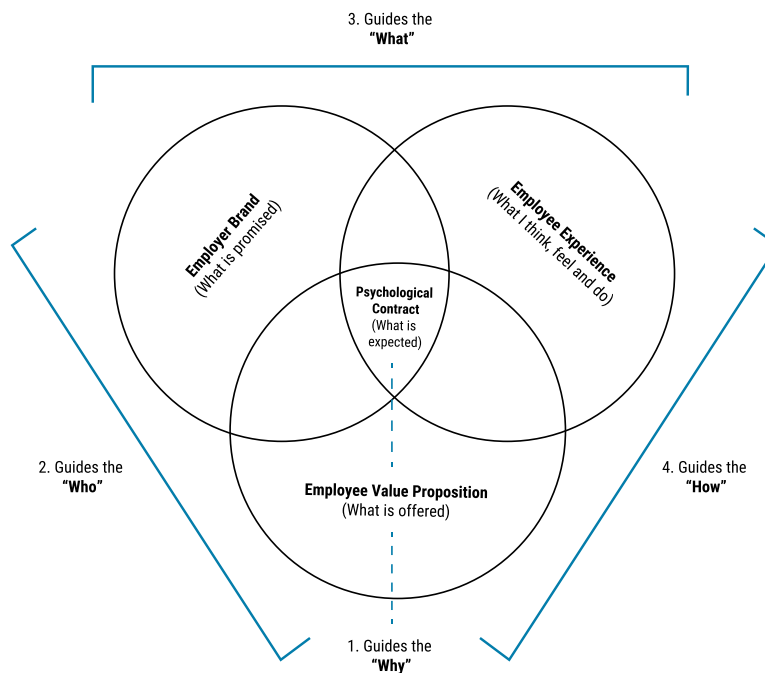
Based upon this theoretical background, the authors propose an integrated model that demonstrates the need to balance the employer brand (what is promised), the employee value proposition (what is offered), the employee experience (what I think, feel and do) and the psychological contract (what is expected) by applying a human-centred perspective. The balance of these different but related concepts is the key criterion for authentic employee experiences. A golden thread or coherent storyline that flows from one to the other will be crucial to ensure an authentic and optimal employee experience. Misalignment could have significant consequences on employee/employer trust, engagement, and talent attraction or retention (Swanepoel & Saurombe, 2022). Figure 1 below provides an overview of how the alignment of these concepts needs to be balanced.

Figure 1
The E-cubed model (Authors' own work)



Practically, the intersections between the employer brand, employee experience and employee value proposition can be used to guide human-centred practice design, as a mechanism for delivering coherent and authentic experiences in line with employee expectations. Figure 2 below, illustrates the intersections and how they can be used to create a golden thread in practice design.

Figure 2
The E-cubed model and practice design implications (Authors' own work)



The intersections illustrated in Figure 2 provide important underpinnings of the human-centred design methodology and we will elaborate on each by using practical examples:

- 1** The psychological contract guides and aligns the “*why*” of people management practice design. It articulates why it is important from both the perspective of the employee and the organization (mutual expectations) and provides clarity on how these expectations are managed as a result of the existing or resultant type of psychological contract. This could relate to an employee expecting an organization to care and provide them with family benefits, while the organization expects employee loyalty and productivity in return (where a balanced psychological contract exists).
- 2** The intersection between the employer brand (EB) and employee value proposition (EVP) guides “*who*” people practices are designed for. It articulates who the end user or consumer is at the receiving end of the process or interaction and what they want from the organization, based on what is promised and offered both externally and internally and the associated needs that should be met. This could relate to employee personas that are based on the unique needs of groups of employees and the alignment of the EVP to these needs. For example, where the “young family” persona joins the organization based on its family-orientated employer brand, the EVP delivers on these needs and expectations by providing broad “family benefits”.
- 3** The intersection between the employer brand (EB) and employee experience (EX) guides “*what*” we should focus on when designing people practices. It aligns what we advertise, promise and sell with what we need to subsequently deliver, which will have the biggest impact on the end user. This alignment should highlight the moments that matter that have the biggest potential to impact the lived experience of the articulated promise. For example, this could refer to the experience related to maternity and paternity leave, as a significant life event for the employee which is based on the organization’s reputation of “care”.
- 4** The intersection between the employee experience (EX) and the employee value proposition (EVP) guides “*how*” experiences are authentically delivered through either physical or digital touchpoints. It aligns what is offered through the EVP, to the mechanisms through which this is delivered within the organization through intentionally crafted experiences. This could include the tangible leave application processes, availability of benefit information or

engagements with the benefits provider offered by the organization, during these interactions.

The intersections described above provide practical guidance on how people management practice design should be intentionally designed to place the human being, and, in turn, their set of expectations, at the heart of people practices.

Implications of this model for people management practice design

Traditional human resource (HR) practices are primarily based on process-oriented design methodologies (Shafagatova & Van Looy, 2021) aimed at answering the questions around the what, where and how. These practices often view the employee lifecycle as a siloed process, based on the boundaries of functional HR activities that the employee engages in as part of their employment relationship within the organization that leads to increased efficiency, cost-effectiveness and scalability (Carlson & Kavanagh, 2011).

Veldsman and Van der Merwe (2022) argue that while these questions and outcomes are still crucial for HR, adopting a truly experience-based design methodology allows organizations to deliver on the expectations of the psychological contract, by placing the employee expectations at the core of the design process and intentionally aligning what is promised and offered, to the experiences of employees. An experience-based design methodology seeks to answer the following questions (Veldsman & Van der Merwe, 2022):

- Why is this experience significant?
- Who is the consumer of this experience?
- What do they want to achieve from this experience?
- How do we deliver this experience?
- What should we improve based on their feedback?

Including these questions in the design process creates a deeper understanding of the employee's needs, wants and desires as a consumer. It implies an outside-in approach, focused on continuous listening and feedback from the employee as end-user. Consistency of the process becomes less important unless it creates the experiences that are important for the employee. Techniques originating in the domains of design-thinking and consumer psychology become important perspectives in applying this type of approach, as the focus is no longer only on the process and the "what" but also on the "why" and the "who" (Buchanan, 2004; Pande & Bharathi, 2020). While this approach focuses on

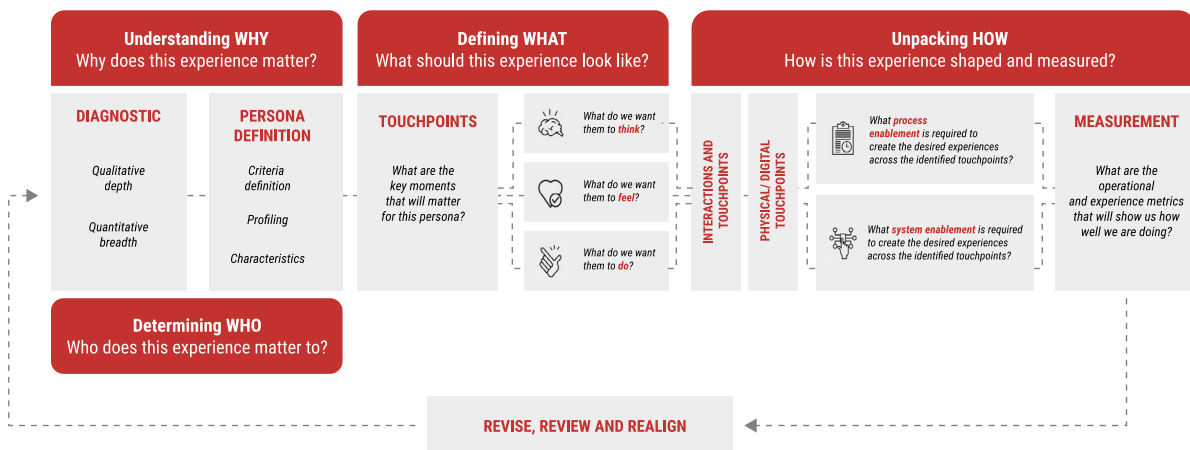
the employee, it effectively delivers the organizational outcomes associated with positive employee experiences by deliberately crafting authentic experiences aligned to employee expectations. This becomes the golden thread or coherent storyline from the employee’s perspective, which directs authentic lived experiences in line with expectations.

The employee experience-based practice design methodology

Based on these findings, Veldsman and Van der Merwe (2022) designed a methodology to intentionally design experience-based practices. The methodology is presented below in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Employee-experience methodology (adapted from Veldsman & Van der Merwe, 2022)



The methodology consists of four questions that have to be explored as part of practice design, based on the theoretical understanding of the EB, EVP, EX intersects and the resultant psychological contract (PC) expectations.

Step 1: Defining the “why”

The first phase of the approach focuses on defining the “why” for both the organization and the individual. Articulating why the specific experience is important is a critical first step during this phase. This means creating an understanding of the experience and its impact on the individual level and organizational level. During this phase, insight is gathered into the psychological contract (which may be implicit or explicit), the

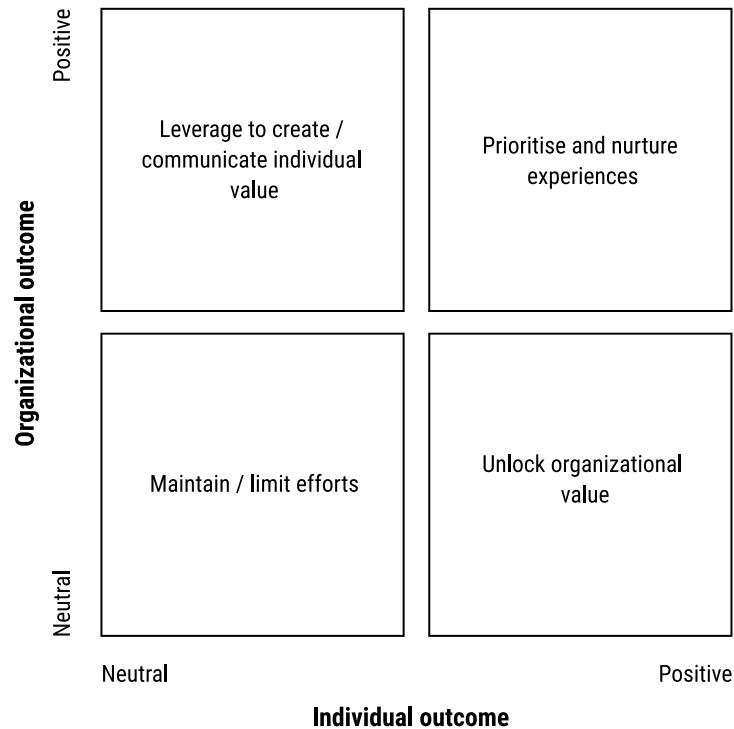
mutual expectations that may exist between the organization and the employee and the interactions that shape the reciprocity of the experience. During this phase, data-driven insights need to be gathered to dispel any assumptions regarding the importance and value of the experience to be designed. Importantly, this has to be approached from two perspectives:

- **Organization:** Does optimising this experience deliver any value for the organization? For example, optimising a workplace experience might be positive for the employee but not lead towards any additional benefit to the organization in terms of employee engagement or productivity. Or alternatively, an optimised experience might lead to benefits for the organization, but not any direct benefit for the employee. An example of such an experience may be the interaction that an employee has with their benefits (e.g., capturing a leave transaction).
- **Individual:** Does optimising this experience deliver value for the individual and in what manner? For example, an experience which leads to positive individual outcomes may not always lead to organizational value, and may therefore not require a differentiated focus. However, it may be leveraged to gain organizational value which leads to mutually beneficial outcomes. An example of such an experience may be the exit process of an employee, which does not hold particular value for the organization but can be leveraged to create organizational value indirectly, through the individual experience.

The above understanding of organizational versus individual outcomes is important to guide the prioritisation of the people management practices, which may have the biggest experience outcomes for both individuals and organizations, whilst delivering on psychological contract expectations. The prioritisation matrix below (Figure 4) is a useful tool to distinguish where value is unlocked for the organization and the individual:

Figure 4

Organizational versus individual experience outcomes and aligned focus of people management practice design (Authors' own work)



Practices and processes which have positive organizational and individual outcomes should be prioritised and nurtured, to ensure that experiences are intentionally designed to deliver on expectations. These are experiences which create mutual benefit, for example, the recruitment or onboarding process. Where the experience of a particular practice or process predominantly has a positive outcome for the organization, there is an opportunity to leverage this to either create or communicate the potential individual value that can be derived from it. An example of this can be the individual's interaction with their benefits and the broader EVP, which holds clear organizational value that can be unlocked at the individual level. Where a practice or a process predominantly leads to positive individual outcomes only, this presents an opportunity to unlock potential organizational value. This could include experiences with HR systems and processes which, if streamlined, provide a positive user experience but might also be leveraged in a variety of ways to guide other interactions. Where a practice or process is neutral in the organizational or individual outcomes that it leads to, it might only need to be maintained in the longer term, or monitored to ensure that it does not deteriorate into negative outcomes over time. An example of this may be "hygiene" factors such as contractual arrangements.

Step 2: Understanding the “who”

Once clarity exists around why the particular experience is important, the next phase focuses on understanding the consumer or “end-user” of the experience. This is a data-driven and insights-informed step in the sense-making process. It relies on qualitative and quantitative data to define user personas that shape the experience requirements. User persona design is a method that has been applied extensively within the domains of marketing, product design and user experience design. The approach can be linked back to the early 1980s when software designer Alan Cooper developed user stories to empathise with the technology users (Duda, 2018). A persona describes the mentality, behaviour and mindset of a particular clustering of consumers that helps the designer of products and solutions target a specific need for the consumer (Guo et al., 2011). These initial approaches towards personas have later developed into more sophisticated methods, described as design thinking. Design thinking is an iterative and explorative process to empathise with the end consumer of products and solutions in an attempt to experiment, iterate and evolve consumer experience (Razzouk & Shute, 2012). Traditionally used in product and service-design, this same type of thinking is required to develop consumer-based employee experiences. Over time, the use of various research methodologies, such as ethnographic research, demographic analysis, interviews, focus groups and other data collection techniques have made the persona approach more robust and scientific (Salminen et al., 2020). Importantly, however, personas do not describe an individual but rather a grouping of consumers that share similar needs. Personas should be created for a specific purpose and, within the context of employee experience design, be used within the intended purpose (Salminen et al., 2020). Therefore, rather than simply describing the general workforce, personas will differ based on the relevant people management practice, the associated experiences and expectations that exist as a result of the psychological contract. As an example, personas used within the benefit design process might be focused on broader needs related to biographical differentiators (e.g., age, gender, race, etc.), whereas personas used to define the end user of a recruitment process might use particular career needs as differentiators in the process.

Step 3: Articulating the “what”

Once the “end-user” or consumer has been defined, the next phase has to consider what the experience entails. This phase focuses on defining the touchpoints that shape the experience and the desired experiences of each interaction. This phase typically entails the creation of employee experience maps that articulate what the ideal experience of the

end user should be at each interaction touchpoint, by considering cognitive, emotive and behavioural reactions:

- **Think (Cognitive):** What do we want the consumer to think during this interaction?
- **Feel (Emotive):** What do we want them to feel?
- **Do (Behaviour):** How does this translate into a desired action or behaviour?

Employee experience maps help understand these touchpoints in relation to the desired experience and the resulting action that needs to be created. Practically, the experience maps use the desired reaction (think, feel and do) as the foundation for describing the desired experiences for a particular persona, across a particular process, product or practice. They detail the touchpoints that the end user will go through and can be broken down into specifically described phases. Desired experiences can contain many cognitive, emotive and behavioural reactions and could describe the desired experience either in terms of an “at its best” scenario or an “at its worst” scenario.

This also provides the blueprint for testing whether lived experiences are aligned to desired experiences. Measuring the lived experiences of employees across the various touchpoints provides valuable input into how successful the design of a particular process, product or practice has been in driving the desired experiences. Measurement data provides iterative input into the design process and highlights where adjustments need to be made in order to lead to the desired experiences.

Step 4: Determining the “how”

The desired experiences are brought to life through defined interactions, either digital (technology-based interaction) or physical (human interaction) or a combination of both. By clearly outlining these interactions, decisions around the required processes and system capabilities are directly aligned to the touchpoints and the articulated desired experiences. This phase entails the storyboarding or mapping of the actual experience to understand where and when these interactions occur and how the interaction is best facilitated. Using the touchpoints as a basis, the interactions are specified in more detail, often considering process steps, interaction outlines or step-by-step walk-throughs. Regardless of how the interactions are detailed, they should provide an overview of the parts that make up the whole from an experience perspective. Highlighting which interactions are digital or physical also provides data to support decisions around the technology, process or human enablement that is required and should be invested in, to bring the experience to life.

As a last step, designated feedback mechanisms are identified and put in place to continuously improve, adapt and change the experiences based upon collected data. The modes and mechanisms for gathering feedback should be aligned to the experience touchpoints and should provide real-time feedback from the interaction in a continuous and interactive manner.

Applying this methodology to people management practices: Creating a positive offboarding experience for departing talent

The practical human-centred experience design methodology is applicable to any people management practice, where a particular experience is shaped through interactions and touchpoints. The method has successfully been applied to the talent attraction experience (Veldsman & Van der Merwe, 2022) and to a lesser extent to the design of employee-centric well-being practices (Veldsman & Van Aarde, 2021). Although in practice the methodology is not always applied as a linear and step-wise process, it does prompt and facilitate consideration of the consumer or “end user” in a structured manner, based on psychological contract expectations.

For the purpose of this article, the offboarding experience within a global insurance organization ($N = 16,432$) operating across 3 continents will be utilized to demonstrate how the methodology can be applied in practice. Within this organization, the offboarding process was identified as a particularly negative experience for departing employees, to the extent that they indicated (through post-exit surveys) that they would not recommend the organization, would not consider returning to the organization and would not want to keep in contact post-exit. This posed challenges in retaining a positive employer brand as well as access to potential clients and alumni talent as a viable talent pool.

The human-centred design methodology was applied, to ensure that the needs of the departing employee are clearly understood (what interactions have the biggest impact on the experience) and to balance what is important for the employee with what is required by the organization.

Table 2 below summarizes the application of the different steps to the offboarding experience which will be discussed below.

Table 2

Applying the human-centred design methodology to the offboarding experience (Authors' own work)

Steps	Application in the offboarding practice design process
1. Defining the "why"	Departing employees remain potential clients, a viable future talent pool, as well as brand ambassadors for the business. It is therefore critical to ensure that the exit process creates a positive lasting experience, that keeps departing employees connected to the brand and provides access to alumni talent as a talent pool. The current exit process was not conducive to these outcomes, based on exit interview and exit survey data.
2. Understanding the "who"	Three personas were identified based on their shared needs and characteristics
3. Articulating the "what"	Three broad touchpoints were identified as moments that matter during the exit process (pre-exit, day of departure, post-exit)
4. Determining the "how"	The end-to-end exit experience was mapped based on the three identified touchpoints. Based on these touchpoints, detailed process enablement was developed across all role players who play a part in the process and system enablement to manage workflows and communication.

The step-by-step application of the experience design methodology to the offboarding practice is detailed below, to showcase considerations as well as example outputs from the process.

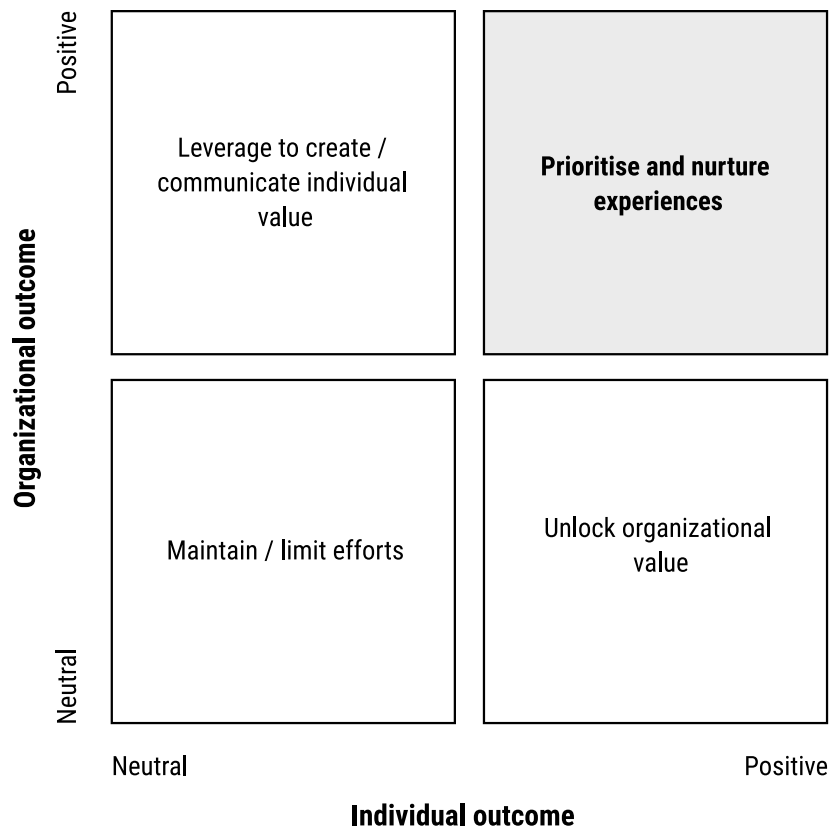
Step 1: Defining the "why"

Feedback from departing employees during exit surveys consistently indicated that their exit process did not live up to expectations. Employees indicated that the offboarding process negatively impacted their perception of the organization and the extent of care shown. This was also driven by the complexity and uncertainty related to benefit withdrawals and logistical arrangements, which was further emphasised during the pandemic.

This was highlighted as an experience which, if managed well, could result in significant positive outcomes for the organization to build brand ambassadorship and an alumni talent and referral pool, whilst creating positive lasting experiences for departing employees. Using various available data sources such as exit surveys, anecdotal employee feedback and exit interview data, the human resources team determined that the current off-boarding experience for individuals was complicated and frustrating which resulted in a negative lasting perception of the organization as an employer. Based on the prioritisation matrix drawn up (see Figure 5), it became clear that the offboarding process could have both positive organizational and individual outcomes. From an organizational perspective, it was deemed to be an important experience based on the importance of

building alumni talent pools and brand ambassadorship, which were both strategic people priorities for the business. For the individual, the experience could be optimized to create value within the experience itself and further support the employee during a period of transition and change. Based on these inputs and the understanding of why the experience is important, the necessary process was deemed to fall in the top right-hand quadrant of the prioritization matrix, which focuses on prioritising and nurturing experiences aimed to maximize both individual and organizational outcomes (see Figure 5).

Figure 5
Positioning the offboarding experience to guide the “why” (Authors’ own work)



Step 2: Understanding the “who”

A workgroup of HR practitioners was established, to participate in the practice design process and represent different perspectives from different business areas and employee types. Other data sources were also utilized, where available, to gather input with regards to current employee departures, reasons and numbers through the use of employee headcount and trend data.

The first task in the design process was to establish who the team should be designing the practice for, or who the end-user or consumer is. To define personas that are representative of the end user, the different types of exits from the organization guided the various needs that departing employees might have, and how these may be different. Based on a grouping of needs (fairness in the process, benefit withdrawal support or career transition support), three personas were identified and broadly described (see Table 3).

Table 3
Identification of the personas related to the offboarding experience (Authors' own work)

Persona	Example	Individual needs and outcomes	Organizational needs and outcomes
The employee that is asked to leave	Dismissals Terminations	Exiting the employee in a fair and respectful manner regardless of circumstances	Fairness, transparency and consistency of process aligned to organizational values
The employee who leaves due to unforeseen circumstances	Disability Death	Transitioning into a new phase requiring support (disability) or focus on loved ones left behind (death)	Managing the untimely exit process which extends to the beneficiaries and family's needs
The employee that decides to leave	Resignations		Creating a positive offboarding experience to maintain the relationship and ensure longer term contact

Considering the exit data that was gathered as part of the sense-making process, the majority of exits were “career departures” or “resignations” and this was therefore the persona that guided the first phase of the practice design. The output from this design process acted as a blueprint for the other personas. This acts as a minimum viable experience that can then be further expanded based on the specific needs and nuances of the other personas (e.g., further interactions associated with disciplinary processes or – in the case of a permanent disability departure – would not be reflected in a resignation process).

Step 3: Articulating the “what”

Based on the “career departures” persona, the next step was to identify the typical touchpoints that would be part of this consumer’s offboarding experience. The touchpoints were identified that demarcate the moments that matter during the exit process. To identify the touchpoints, the team considered existing offboarding processes, input from human resources, compliance representatives and payroll and benefits employees. At a high-level, three major touchpoints were identified (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Touchpoints and “moments that matter” during the offboarding process (Authors’ own work)



Throughout the design sessions it became clear that the employment type (e.g., permanent vs. temporary) and contractual agreements might impact the notice period and time span of the touchpoints. Despite varying timelines, the touchpoints remain relevant for employees regardless of their employment types and these nuances were catered for in the interactions that shape the experience (step 4).

For each of these touchpoints, the desired experiences were mapped out. For the purpose of this design process, the focus was on describing the desired experience that the organization was trying to create, as opposed to looking at isolated incidents or worst case scenarios. When facilitating the design session, this approach was much more conducive to coming up with solutions, than following a detailed and critical evaluative approach. This led to describing the experience at its best, without focusing the design process only on what is not working or the most salient pain points. This also led to robust discussions around what is most important for the relevant persona, having participants represent this employee type and articulating their needs.

For each of the touchpoints, the cognitive (think), emotive (feel) and action (do) responses were debated and unpacked by the human resources task team, which represented most of the business areas. An overview of the desired experience statements are included in Table 4 below.

Table 4
Articulating the desired experiences at each touchpoint of the offboarding experience (Authors' own work)

Desired Experience	Before Exit	Point of Departure	After Exit
Think	This is an organization that cares for their employees, future, past and present	I believe my experience at the organization has been a positive career experience	I think that the organization is a place I will return to in the future or recommend to friends and family
Feel	I feel cared for, equipped and supported through this transition	I feel valued, recognised and am attached to the brand, although I am departing	I feel a sense of pride when thinking about my organizational experience
Do	I am clear on what is required of me through the exit process, knowing that the organization is there to support me	I retain my organizational pride, relationships with colleagues and engage with the brand outside of my role as an employee	I refer others to the organization for career opportunities or as clients

Writing the desired experiences in the first person or using “I” statements, resulted in a relatable experience for the human resources task team participants, shifting the design process from highly aspirational “want to” statements to specific statements that can be translated into interactions. These statements were later used as the basis for the employee experience feedback at the different touchpoints to determine whether the experience lived up to the desired experience design.

Step 4: Determining the “how”

After the desired experiences were mapped out, the next step was to determine how these experiences across the various touchpoints are executed. With a highly administrative practice, such as offboarding, this step can easily turn into a process mapping exercise that simply documents the as-is. To avoid this pitfall, as a first step, the interactions were documented through a storytelling approach, where participants of the human resources task team would walk through the phases of the experience (based on their insights of working with the practice) and document their interactions. This formed the basis of interactions, which were then further detailed and enhanced through the process. Table 5 below shows an output from this step in the process, which was then used as a basis for further detailing the interactions.

Table 5

Interactions that shape the desired employee experience during the offboarding process (Authors' own work)

Touchpoints	Before Exit	Point of Departure	After Exit
Description	Starts from notice of exit, through applicable notice period, until the last day	Point of departure (actual last day)	Starts after last day into the future, 60 days + longer term "maintenance"
Desired Employee Experience (EX) <i>(Think, Feel, Do)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This is an organization that cares for their employees, future, past and present I feel cared for, equipped and supported through this transition I do what is required of me through the exit process, knowing that the organization is there to support me 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I believe my organizational experience has been a positive career experience I feel valued, recognised and am attached to the brand, although I am departing I retain my organizational pride, relationships with colleagues and engage with the brand outside of my role as an employee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I think that this organization is a place I will return to in the future or recommend to friends and family I feel a sense of pride when thinking about my organizational experience I refer others to the organization for career opportunities or as clients
Interactions <i>(How do we create the EX)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding of exit process even before I resign Line manager reaction / conversation at notice of resignation My understanding of what will happen next My understanding of my benefits and what will happen once I leave How my exit interview is conducted - acting with care and type of information asked How my exit is communicated to broader teams & stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowing that my legacy will live on and the knowledge that I have is transferred The actual goodbye, feeling appreciated and acknowledged for my contribution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How smooth the actual transition is to wrap up my benefits Post-exit communication to check how I am doing Providing input, knowing it is valuable in making things better How I am treated when I engage with the organization in the future (do they recognise that I am an ex-employee?)

During this phase, it became clear that a number of steps or processes have to be included, to ensure either legislative compliance (e.g., specific tax forms) or to mitigate risks (e.g., revoking system and building access). To ensure that these interactions (which do not necessarily form part of the desired experience, but are important to the organization) were considered and incorporated, subject matter experts in information technology, forensics, payroll and benefits were consulted, to ensure that these elements were sufficiently documented in the interactions. After the interactions were documented, these were then further defined as either digital (technology-based interaction) or physical (human interaction) touchpoints or a combination of both. During this step, the administrative components of the exit experience were highlighted as significant potential stumbling blocks or hindrances in creating the desired experiences. This meant that process and system enablement would be critical to ensure that the interactions that are dependent on human interactions are meaningful and standardised, whilst

technology is utilised to enable efficiency and also relieve some of the burden from the departing employee (i.e., relieve some of the frustration in the process). This led to the documentation and mapping of an end-to-end exit process which would form the basis of the human interactions required. The system enablement requirements were detailed through a functional specification. This included enhancements of the current system (automation of certain interactions) and the build of a simplified user interface to initiate and drive the exit process from an employee perspective, focusing on transparency and visibility of the process and progress.

The existing employee experience surveys were also adjusted to the newly defined touchpoints and interactions, specifically to ensure that the right feedback is sought at the right touchpoints, and to ensure the timing aligns and allows for swift action where required. This formed part of a broader design of continuous feedback of employee experiences. This input would then be used to refine, optimize and review experiences in line with the desired think, do and feel experiences defined at each touchpoint.

Final reflections and conclusions

In the reality of the current talent market, distributed workforces and non-traditional employment relationships, the importance of the human experience of work (regardless of where, when and how it is performed) cannot be underestimated. This experience, which aims to ultimately deliver on the expectations of employees from the organization, is the culmination of tangible and intangible interactions, through digital and physical channels. Therefore, an intentional human-centric approach to designing people practices is critical in shaping employee experiences. This requires a shift in how people management practices and policies are designed, specifically, a shift from a primarily organizational needs and risk perspective to a perspective that focuses on the needs and expectations of the human being as the “end consumer”.

For the organization included in this case study, ensuring brand ambassadorship post-departure and having access to a viable alumni talent pool, were critical strategic people objectives. To address this need, the E-cubed model was used to guide the development of a human-centred design methodology, to design a sustainable offboarding practice that places the human being at the heart of a traditionally predominantly transactional practice.

This article adds a unique perspective to the existing body of literature on human-centric organizational practices, with a specific focus on employee experience, employee value proposition and employer brand through the exploration of the psychological contract as a conduit to shaping authentic lived experiences. By building on the theoretical foundation of the psychological contract, the experience methodology is anchored in research and provides an organizational psychology lens to what has predominantly been a client experience and product design approach to understanding experiences. The employee experience includes cognitive and emotive interactions through impactful “moments that matter”, which shape the experience regardless of the engagement channel or people practice that it forms part of. These moments occur within the balance of “moments of value” for the organization which is identified for mutual benefit. Instead of a mechanistic and one-dimensional concept, the employee experience is more than the sum of its parts. It is dynamic and shaped through interactions across the employee lifecycle while balancing the expectations of the individual and the organization.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes the following:

- It proposes that a focus on the psychological contract and clarity around expectations are critical when it comes to the employer brand, employer value proposition and employee experience
- It puts forward the E-cubed model as a framework for experience-based design
- It positions human-centric design as a valuable approach to iteratively redesign people practices, whilst also actively considering the end-user
- It describes the benefits of using a defined methodology which adds robustness and structure to the design process, by systematically answering the questions of “why?”, “who?”, “what?” and “how?”

Practically, the study provides a human-centric design methodology that can be applied to various organizational contexts and HR systems to design HR practices that are more relevant and aligned with the new psychological contract. It should also help organizations set themselves apart in a highly competitive talent market by increasing their ability to deliver authentic lived experiences that are in line with (prospective) employee expectations. For HR practitioners, the application of the methodology has the potential to usher in a new era with regards to designing consumer-driven HR practices that bring employee memorable moments and organizational moments of value to life.

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