

Beyond the Network: Transforming the Employee Experience

How do you define the value of an experience? That might sound like a philosophical question but it's one more and more businesses are asking – on behalf of their customers, and their employees. And they're doing it for very practical reasons. A good or bad customer experience influences whether a customer comes back. A good or bad employee experience... what difference does that make? How is it measured, let alone improved? What's the key to ensuring great employee experiences, especially for companies with people in vastly different job roles and work environments?

Beyond the Network's Arthur Woo spoke recently with Cisco's Janet Ramey, senior vice president of Employee Services, and Mike Mitchell, senior director for Employee Digital Services. They talked about what the company is doing to reshape everyday experiences of its global workforce, why it's so important, and what have been their challenges – and secrets to success. Cisco has more than 70,000 employees in 94 countries and was just named the #1 World's Best Workplace by the Great Place to Work Institute. Listen in as they go Beyond the Network.

ARTHUR WOO: “What does it mean in terms of what's Cisco doing for employee experience? And how did you kind of come about thinking that this is something we need to focus on and how do you approach it? How do you get your, how do you wrap your hands around it?”

JANET RAMEY: “I came into the business a few years ago, into operations from the customer-facing side from working in Technical Services. And so it was very natural for me to think about what our customer needs, the experience that our customer's having, and what we do to continually enhance that experience and reduce their effort. That came very naturally. When I turn my attention to working on the services that serve all of our employees and our contingent workers I found that we really didn't have that same focus. We didn't think about our employees as though they were customers – not initially – and we were more focused on the process and our work to make the process work than we were about the impact on the employee and there were good reasons for that at the time but what inspired me and what Mike came into the team to work on was really how do we shift that focus and put the employee in the middle and we think about how we drive engagement and productivity by focusing on the day-to-day experiences that employees have at the company”.

MIKE MITCHELL: “Yeah, one of our colleagues – a peer of mine that works for Janet – she says something that really I thought was great, which is that we're trying to be not the back office, but the office that has your back. And that's really what attracted me to work in the space is that you know after being at Cisco for a long time, you're invested in it emotionally and you want to create an environment that your fellow employees you have been working with so long really enjoy and they want to show up every day and give their best every day to Cisco. So, you know, it's a great space to work in because our customers we run into the hall every day, right? People say, 'oh you're not external facing' but the truth is is that our customers are right next to us every day. And for me personally, that's really invigorating when I come into the office.”

ARTHUR: “With that said, you know Cisco was a huge company. We've got around what 70,000, 75,000 give-or-take, people. We're spread out with so many different countries, different locations. We're in big offices and small offices and we full-time telecommute and then some people don't even have offices, they're traveling in between. How do you think about the experience when you have such a distributed workforce, such a diverse workforce and obviously a one size cannot fit all but how do you go and tackle that how do you get your arms around something that is seems so monumental or big?”

JANET: “Well. Here's the first thing, which is you mentioned our full-time employees, but we consider our population that we serve to also include our contingent employees. So we're looking at more like 120,000, 150,000 people when we think about our employee services and when we think about our people services, we're also thinking about candidates who we want to attract to Cisco. We're thinking about the families of employees at Cisco because we provide benefits to the families as well. And we're thinking about retirees after they've left Cisco. So if you broaden the spectrum that makes our audience very wide indeed. So that's one way we think about it. But your question was so how do we get our arms around the fact that one size doesn't fit all. I would say it has a lot to do with personas and understanding the different needs of people. Trying to personalize to the greatest extent possible but offering choice as a primary design principle.”

MIKE: “Yeah. You know Cisco just as a company really embraces diversity and we're really proud about that. We've been recognized in the industry for that. But that carries to how we look internally and not just with diversity of a person but diversity in a work style as well. Everything that we set up tries to accommodate for that. It starts with the manager and the manager being able to set the right environment for an employee to be successful, balancing what the company needs with what the individual needs, but it also gets down to the services that we provide. Providing choice in those services and then allowing those services to be consumed at the way that a user might want to consume it. Whether that's a physical space like flexible work spaces that the team is designed or digital spaces with making sure that those services can be abstracted when possible and inserted directly into your work stream so you don't have to jump around to try to figure out where to find the information that you need.”

ARTHUR: “If you had to focus or how do you focus on certain elements that would impact an employee specifically? Your experience might be different from mine or what I think is important. Are there certain aspects you target? Are there perhaps specific or unique buckets so to speak, that you can identify like well, ok, we can't do it all but maybe let's do these three?”

JANET: “We have done that, and –”

ARTHUR: “Oh cool!”

JANET: “The way we think about it initially – because we know that there are a lot of experiences in a lot of personas we need to address over time, but initially – we wanted to look at experiences that impact the largest number of people in the most foundational ways. And so one that we've chosen is our new employee onboarding and that's not just external hires. That's also interns. It includes our newly acquired employees and it includes our conversions. A lot of people impacted, at a very important time which may be your first impression to the company, setting the foundation for success. The other two experiences we're looking at are our meeting and collaboration experience because we know every day this impacts every employee and how they can work together either in a physical space or a virtual space and then the last one is all of our support experiences.”

MIKE: In each one of these spaces one key thing I want to point out is it's not just one group. It's not like Janet's organization that needs to go and and solve for this. All these areas require cross-functional execution to be successful. So each one of these areas, there's multiple different services that comprise of an overall journey like onboarding. You've got everything from getting your laptop to your offer letter to meeting your manager on the first day and we can't solve all that ourselves. So one thing I'd leave listeners with is if you're going to go after any of these high return spaces don't do it alone. You're going to have to grasp your overall organization. If you're in HR reach out to IT. If you're in IT reach out to HR. If you're in Operations reach out to both because you're going to need all the support you can get.”

ARTHUR: “So when you talk about onboarding could you provide some perhaps examples?”

MIKE: “Yeah, I can point to one. So an example that I think went really well and India is that one point we we're hiring people in willy-nilly and their start date was at any time. We actually had to make the onboarding experience

better by actually putting more governance into place. And governance is a dirty word, you know, and everybody wants, you know, the freedom to do whatever we they want but that first day for an employee is so important. What we had to do is actually limit it to two times a month that we could bring in employees because we wanted to put – I'll use a cliché – all the wood behind the arrow just on those two days to make them fantastic for that set of employees coming in. So, you know a big lesson learned there is sometimes governance is what leads to a better experience and you see that in the consumer space as well. You know, if everybody was just completely doing their own thing and something like an Amazon experience or an Apple experience then that experience would become fractured and less meaningful. It's the same thing in these key journeys that we're looking at: onboarding, support and meetings. There's got to be some level of consistency, some level of governance in order to remove the friction and to make a meaningful experience for employees.”

ARTHUR: “So it sounds like it's a combination of the facilities, like the technology you mentioned before but also the process –“

MIKE: “Yes.”

ARTHUR: “– and the people, which is also dependent upon perhaps the location because there's maybe different rules or different things going on that, again, not a one-size-fits-all. You have to be like, okay, what works in India like you mentioned may not be appropriate for another part of the world. So you have to adjust accordingly is what I'm hearing.”

MIKE: “Yeah, that's absolutely right. “You know, a small office with 10 people in a smaller Cisco location they can probably have that for that one extra person start any time that they want, you know, but in high-volume locations main offices, sometimes some governance is needed to improve the process. All that said what we're doing is constantly listening to the management base in order to get feedback on how to improve the process for their areas because to your point it could be different for each area. So it's not governance just for governance sake its governance with a mind towards an improved employee experience.”

ARTHUR: And could you talk about looking at the collaboration space because, you know, everybody works differently. Some people are just fine working in an open group or an open style others would prefer to be like, okay just leave me alone and turn off the lights. I'd rather just ,you know, work in a cave, right? And then there's a lot of us are probably somewhere in between depending what we do. Like, how do you approach something like that in terms of the the services that we offer, in terms of the facilities, the technologies, or even like If I need help?”

MIKE: “Well it gets back to what Janet just said is that we focus on personas and so for each persona we'll list out the needs and wants of a particular persona. You have that stay-at-home engineer introvert who is very different than maybe a leader working in a large location, or a salesperson or et cetera. So we capture these introverts. We capture these introverts. We capture these – Yeah, we capture these introverts. We put them in a box and then we –”

ARTHUR: “They would be happy with it, though, actually. Probably.”

MIKE: “Yeah. Yeah, actually.”

ARTHUR: “They would they would actually enjoy that probably.”

MIKE: “No. So we focus on these personas and then we capture the pain points for each of these personas. And then we look at the effort required to eliminate those pain points and we try to eliminate them. Now, sometimes we make a determination that frankly the effort involved compared to the relief given isn't a good investment of our time. But most of the time we can do something to at least improve the experience for particular persona.”

JANET: “I think the bottom line is choice because as you mentioned people have different work styles. They have different needs to have different levels of technical ability. So offering choices as a design principle is a really key foundation. So if you want to deal with somebody in person and you're at our larger sites, we have support centers where you can take your laptop get some assistance. If you don't, if you feel quite confident troubleshooting your own machine, we have a lot of self-help, or you can talk to somebody click-to-chat. So we've got a range of options in the support arena, as an example. Everything from self-help to automations to click-to-chat to live agent assistance that helps you get your job done and it's up to you to decide which one do I feel most confident in and which one can I get my answer fastest so I can get back to work?”

ARTHUR: “Yeah, I think choice is really important and me personally. I'm someone who likes to fuss around and try to figure out myself if I have to search externally, Google it and figure it out or watch a YouTube video. If I have to finally pick up a phone and call somebody. Okay, I will do that. But that's me.”

JANET: “You're not alone.”

ARTHUR: “Oh, ok.”

JANET: “There's many, many people – especially engineers – who have that persona.”

ARTHUR: “Oh, interesting. I think, I remember way back in the days that everybody had to call a support line. So you're sort of funneled into this one model, but nowadays we have so many different ways of technology just changes things up. Could you talk about, when you talk about experience, you know, we talked about facilities and services and tools there's got to be a people aspect of this experience. Are there anything from a people or a process or a cultural perspective that you guys focus on?”

JANET: “We've absolutely found it to be the case that the human interactions are perhaps the most important element of building strong engagement in the culture at Cisco and that's why you'll have seen the intense focus on changing the way we think about those interactions so that team leaders or managers have the tools to spend more time and pay more attention to their teams to understand their needs, to talk about their development, and to make that a priority for setting the foundation for how we can do work better together and how we can bring teams together dynamically. So there's been a lot of work done in that area as a collaboration between HR and IT and Employee Services to make that happen but a specific example would be something we found during the onboarding journey. So we look from the time that the offer letter is issued to about 30 days after the employees joined the company and what we found was that there were several pain points having to enter information multiple times at different points of the process. That was a pain point, there were others, but one that we found was really meaningful is did my manager reach out to me between the time the offer letter went out and my first day of work?”

ARTHUR: “Oh.”

JANET: “Did he or she reach out and say ‘I'm really excited you're going to be joining the team. I can't wait to get to know you.’ That made an impact. The second one we found is. Is did my manager greet me if they were physically in the same location or me reach out to me if they were not within the first day or two that I joined the company? Again, it sends a big signal about ‘Hey, you're part of a team. We care about you. We want to know you better.’ In the cases where that didn't happen there's a lot of disappointment on the behalf of our very excited new employees when joining the company. So that's a good example where we've given now feedback to reinforce to hiring managers the importance of that simple act in reaching out via email or preferably in person or on the phone.”

ARTHUR: “It's funny. It sounds sort of obvious, but it's something that I think people forget sometimes. It's these small things that make a big difference and make a big impact and I can imagine that it also contributes to the things that we have to measure like, it sounds like oh, how can you measure me saying hi to you and stuff like that,

but you can actually measure satisfaction, productivity by these kinds of things, on something that looks like it's Intangible.”

MIKE: “Yeah.”

ARTHUR: “But it's actually, there's some hard metrics that you can attribute to that.”

MIKE: “Yeah, absolutely. So if we back up a little bit and we look at the cultural aspects you're talking about and then we look at physical and digital aspects of the overall experience. So you have cultural, physical and digital. It's not just us saying it but you'll find in the industry that people feel that the cultural side is the most important. That's really, you know, how you're treated the norms within the company work at – that's really the single largest lever. Okay. Now if you look at the cultural side, you can measure the impact of the culture through employee engagement. And in fact, we're doing that. The HR team especially is leading the way and looking at measuring employee engagement. So if I really like you and I'm working in an environment that doesn't have the best facilities – it doesn't have the best tools but I really like you – I'm probably going to work really hard still and I'll try to get through all that other stuff and we can put a dollar figure on that engagement, on that level of engagement, that incremental effort that you're willing to give to get through stuff.

Now, the important thing and where we show respect for our fellow employees, is that we also look at the other side of it, which is productivity. You have engagement, that's cultural. Productivity you can tie directly to the physical and the digital space. Okay. And so what we're doing now is that we're capturing the effort and the satisfaction with the particular journey that looks at the cultural, physical and digital aspects of that particular journey and then measuring either the engagement or the productivity associated with that particular journey. So again on the productivity side, we can take the physical and the digital side and we can improve that to increase your productivity so that even though I really like you I don't have to jump through all the different hoops in order to get something done. Instead it's easy and straightforward for me to get my job done and I can contribute at the end of the day more to the company.”

ARTHUR: “The stuff that we're doing from an employee experience. How does that align to Cisco's overall goals?”

JANET: I think it's really important to think about as a tech company, our most important asset is our people. And it's the innovation that the talent we can attract can generate for the market and for our customers and our partners. So the people really are Cisco's most valuable asset. That makes it really important to attract, retain and nurture the very best talent that we can and so – so important that it's one of the key pillars of our COO Irving Tan's charter for the company. So that's our alignment right to the top. The talent makes the difference because that's where innovation happens for the company and our role is then to attract, retain and nurture it. To remove the friction and to enable the best experience so that Cisco can not only win in the market, but can be a great place for people to work.”

MIKE: “Yeah. At almost any company Cisco's size your biggest line item is going to be your people cost and so to not invest in that to try to maximize the return off of for what Cisco a multi-billion dollar investment is just silly and negligent. So for any, you know, large company focused on focusing on the employee experience is incumbent on you as an officer that company.”

ARTHUR: “So what's the hardest thing to get this right?”

JANET: “The hardest thing is to make it scale. Not to do it once but to do it sustainably and for the diversity of our population. Getting that right from the get-go really enables you to move faster.”

MIKE: “Yeah, to me the hardest thing is cross-functional execution, really being able to come together with all the different competing agendas. And I don't mean that in a negative way, just different functions have different

priorities. We have all the different competing agendas and having to sometimes set those to the side in order to put a united face on what's best for the end user, what's best for the employee.”

ARTHUR: “What advice would you offer to companies whether they're big or small of how to approach experience?”

MIKE: “Nobody knows what the future holds but there's some trends that are going on that are pretty clear in the industry for the next 5 to 10 years and let's go through them, through this filter that we've been talking about about the cultural physical and digital. So on the cultural side, what we know is that the gig economy is driving forward. There's more people want more flexibility in the way they work, where they work and companies want to be able to pull talent for multiple different pools from around the world. So this will be a cultural impact where we need to be able to accommodate that while still have accountability for major projects. There's one thing when your journey is literally getting into an Uber and the journey starts and the journey ends when you get dropped off. It's quite a different thing when you're working in a large enterprise and the journey is a multi-year journey. So we have to set up our cultural norms for where the lines are starting to blur where we're truly getting to this space of a borderless talent pool. People talk about the borderless network, well the talent pool is becoming more and more borderless as well. So we have to be able to accommodate that from a cultural point of view.

The physical side, we see a similar dynamic happening where physically people want more flexibility to be able to work wherever they want. And it's really interesting for me. When I started at Cisco, you know, a couple decades ago or whatever, I almost bought land in Oklahoma because I figured when people were working remotely and everybody, you know, would move from the large population centers and distribute and just work from wherever. Totally the opposite has happened, right, where everybody wants to work in city centers. They want to work in dynamic environments and frankly they want to work next to people that aren't necessarily in the same company they are even. So in the physical spaces we're having to be able to again knock down those borders as well.

And then in the digital spaces this concept of their being monolithic portals or monolithic end-to-end services is rapidly dissipating, where instead what we're seeing is platforms offering services out via APIs to be consumed however the end user wants to consume it. So you get much more flexibility and you see that in Cisco's products as well. Cisco's Webex line, for example, they have a tagline that I love which is “building bridges not islands. So in each of these spaces where you have the people on the cultural side, you have these physical connections and then you have these digital services that are being developed. We have to provide the framework for those bridges and not just create a series of islands if we want to get to the future.”

ARTHUR: “So any closing thoughts Janet and Mike, if you had one thing that you wanted to really have a listener take away from this discussion and this chat, what would it be?”

JANET: “If I were to take away one thing that I've learned it's that the opportunity is great, but the hill is steep. Meaning while you start small to take opportunities you've got to have a broad vision in mind. What you create today has to scale. And so you always have to be thinking about not only how will I solve this problem today but how will I simplify such that I can solve this and other problems more quickly, more effectively and more sustainably in the future.”

MIKE: “I would say that for the last many decades in the corporate world we've gotten really good at functional execution. And that's the past now. What you really have to focus on is cross-functional execution in order to be able to address the employee experience but frankly also the customer experience. We're seeing this both internally and externally so it's not just about executing really well in a silo anymore. It's about working to your left and to your right to create an overall experience for either your end customer or your employee. And again, it's about building bridges and not islands.”

You've gone Beyond the Network. This episode was produced by Douglas Alger. Follow and like our podcast on SoundCloud or iTunes. Visit cisco.com/go/ciscoit for episode transcripts and related content.

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