A New Model for Employee Experience:
Continuous Response

Shortening the Distance from Signal to Action

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Over the last two decades, companies spent billions of dollars each year surveying their employees to track employee engagement. Certainly monitoring engagement metrics is important. But in a continually changing and highly uncertain business climate, the ability to quickly respond to employee feedback—often the best source of real-time information—is paramount. Our recent research on pandemic-related responses found that only 42% of employers can quickly take action based on employee feedback; the numbers are even lower in hospitality (21%), manufacturing (29%), and healthcare (35%).

This need for rapid response requires a new approach to collecting and analyzing feedback and encompasses all aspects of an employee's work life—one that goes beyond static pulses, takes into account a variety of direct and indirect data, and most importantly, is designed for action. We call this a continuous response strategy.

Rather than creating surveys to measure engagement at moments in time, we create an "action platform" that can provide the type of information to answer employee questions quickly, help managers identify and address issues before they become big problems, and give leaders the insights that can help the company stay its course.

A continuous response strategy requires experience management technology that can deliver the basics such as pulse surveys and case management. But it must also embed modern listening tools such as text analysis, video, and always-on surveys across the employee journey. These capture in-the-moment, organic employee feedback. AI and text analytics uncover trends and emerging issues, trigger suggested actions, and automate workflows—making sure feedback is routed to the person on the team best equipped to take fast and effective action. When companies continuously engage and respond to employees, they create an empowered workforce. Employees know their voices are being heard, their opinions count, and that they are an instrumental part of the business.

In many ways, this is a natural extension of employee engagement. Today employees are constantly dealing with new policies, projects, and often ongoing organizational change. We want an approach that picks up as many employee signals as possible and then helps us shorten the time between those signals and appropriate actions.

We know continuous response works because companies are already using it with customers. An airline now can tell how easily you found the right flight on its website, how well your check-in experience went, and how you evaluate your overall experience. Hotels now track all aspects of guest experiences. By applying these practices internally, we can quickly create a more integrated and productive experience for all our employees.

Three Steps to an Effective Continuous Response Strategy

First, we need to decide which signals to collect. Medallia, an experience management software company, defines signals as coming from direct and indirect experience data points. Every company has a myriad of experiences that impact an employee's productivity, engagement, and performance. We need to comb through our workplace and talent practices and decide what journeys, transitions, and issues we want to measure. And this means collecting data through surveys, transactions, chats, voice calls, website visits, and more.

Direct signals come from solicited feedback via annual and pulse surveys, idea factories, social media conversations, and crowdsourcing. Indirect signals can be collected from behavior analysis of social channels, videos, and speech or operational data generated by systems of record (such as HR, case and knowledge management, and applicant tracking systems or other point solutions). Observed behaviors, such as consistently late meeting attendance or unusual PTO requests, can also be incorporated into a continuous response strategy. (See Figure 1.)

The next step is to determine what to target. As much as we'd like to assess all aspects of employee engagement, doing so is virtually impossible. Leaders need to determine which areas are most important. For example, employee safety and productivity are top priorities for most companies right now. So you might decide to focus on key aspects of remote work and day-to-day workplace support. Or, perhaps because of critical hiring needs, onboarding might be an urgent employee transition to zero in on.

Direct Signals	Indirect Signals	Observed Behaviors
Annual and pulse surveys, polls, idea factories, online conversations, priority cases, crowd-sourced feedback	Performance reviews, number of helpdesk tickets, meeting records, 360 feedback, turnover rate, call, chat, and chatbot transcripts	Meeting attendance, badge tracking, PTO patterns, benefit opt-ins, volunteer activities, recognition awards, employee relations issues

Figure 1: Types of Signals Used for Continuous Response

The final step is to create various response teams throughout the organization. It will be the responsibility of these teams to determine how to act on the information gathered. For instance, some issues should be routed to IT, while others might be best handled by finance or HR. Certain issues should be surfaced to managers, and some must immediately go to legal, safety, or compliance. It's important to determine in advance who handles the various issues surfaced.

With traditional employee experience solutions, companies collect data through surveys and then create reports and action plans for managers, HR, or senior leaders. While this is useful and informative, the process doesn't move fast enough and doesn't necessarily send signals to those who need to take action.

In a continuous response approach, we design for action not just data. We look at all sources of information, clearly assign ownership for different issues, then segment the workforce by personas, groups, or journeys.

Solutions should have the ability to do sophisticated groupings. For instance, young employees working from home with families could be a cohort—even if those employees have different job roles or live in different areas. Employees expecting their first child or moving to a new city could be another cohort.

How do you identify such groups? A large bank in the Netherlands actually looked at all the demographics they had in the organization and then used statistics to find clusters of employees who shared commonalities. They discovered almost ten surprising cohorts—for example, employees under the age of 45 who live in big cities and have families with young children.

Another company found that its sales employees have a unique set of issues (travel, time spent in the car, limited time for exercise, lack of office facilities) and therefore require specially designed and supported experiences. On the other hand, manufacturing employees, who spend much of the day standing or walking around, needed different experiences.

While employee surveys are still important and remain critical, we need instrumentation, action tools, and information routing systems to make sure insights get to the right place at the right time. And on top of all this, we need the systems to be simple. We don't want employees to have to spend time learning how to provide feedback.

Employee Engagement Evolves into Employee Experience

As companies are demanding more real-time data and requiring much quicker decisions and actions, the market is shifting from employee engagement measures to those which track and analyze comprehensive employee experiences.

This section discusses the evolution taking place.

1.0: Annual Surveys

In its earliest form, the measurement of employee engagement was the domain for industrial psychologists, who looked at specific work-related issues and how they impacted productivity. They did this through annual engagement surveys or other similar projects.

The famous Hawthorne studies, conducted in the 1920s, were designed to determine if workers were more responsive and worked more efficiently under certain environmental conditions, such as improved lighting. The results were surprising. The researchers found that workers were more responsive to social factors—such as the people they worked with on a team and the amount of interest their manager had in their work—than the factors (lighting, etc.).

Fredrick Taylor, Carl Jung, and many others have since studied the connections between employee productivity and other work-related factors, ranging from the amount of weight an

1.0	2.0	3.0	4.0
Annual engagement survey	Pulse surveys with mobile access	Intelligent dashboards and action plans	Continuous response action platforms
Once per year. Focus on management. Benchmarked annually. Rigid questions asked year after year. **Focus on benchmarking.**	Agile surveys as needed. Pulse on regular basis. Feedback on mobile or apps. AI-based action plans. Immediate feedback. **Focus on feedback.**	Many sources of data. Dashboards recommend action, deliver nudges, suggestions, and learning or action plans for individuals. Now called employee experience. **Focus on behavior change.**	Tied into internal systems with alerts, feedback, cases and integration with CX systems. **Focus on action.**
Survey technology	*Mobile, easy to use*	*Useful data and learning*	*Instrumented actions and alerts*

Figure 2: Employee Engagement Evolves into Employee Experience

employee had to carry in a factory to the amount of freedom and empowerment in a job.

While these studies and traditional annual surveys are useful, they are far from actionable.

2.0: Pulse Surveys

In the mid 2000s as mobile phones became pervasive, we moved to pulse surveys. Some companies pulse employees every quarter, month, or even week. Others, such as Amazon, pulse people every day.

Pulse survey mechanisms increase the volume and timeliness of data and uncover issues that need immediate attention. For instance, a pulse survey can show an immediate change in a key metric, such as a dramatic change in team performance, a spike in accidents, or an abnormal spike in PTO requests.

Pulse surveys now can include survey questions, open-ended text responses, and many forms of red/yellow/green or upvote responses which are easy and instantly measurable. For example, some restrooms now give patrons green or red buttons to indicate cleanliness, helping facilities staff instantly see if a particular location is dirty or needs new supplies.

Pulse surveys can also help managers spot trends quickly, such as when a project is falling behind schedule.

Case Study: Walmart's Employee Feedback Program Becomes More Agile at Scale to Support Employee Excellence

Walmart has a long-standing tradition of listening to associates (employees), gathering feedback, and actively analyzing employee surveys each year. For years Walmart launched a global employee survey twice per year, stretching out the process from country to country. This process on the Medallia platform reaches 1.2 million US associates and around 1 million non-US associates across 13 different markets.

Recently, Walmart decided to speed up the process using Medallia so the company could deploy a worldwide survey in a shorter period of time. This lets local country managers and team leaders make decisions more quickly, and ultimately lets Walmart create a more "real-time" feedback process. The prior process took months to roll out, so as world events changed, the data became less relevant. This new process is designed to let Walmart survey, analyze, and act on data more quickly.

To make the process more agile, the team has standardized the questions and dashboards across both home office and the field. There are also local weekly pulse surveys being deployed at a local level. After the two-week survey period closes, Walmart's system immediately emails results to managers with five or more responses and managers are expected to review results and discuss with teams.

3.0: Action Plans

As more and more companies implemented pulse and other survey tools, the need for advanced analytics became urgent. If we pulse people monthly or more frequently, where does all this data go? And what can we do with all this information?

This need led to the introduction of intelligent dashboards which show real-time results and recommended action plans for managers. At this point, the market shifted significantly. Vendor investment moved from developing better and better survey tools to real-time analytics platforms with easy-to-configure dashboards, lots of intelligent alerts and reports, and personalized action plans for managers and executives.

Imagine a scenario in which a large group of employees takes a monthly or weekly survey and suddenly one manager sees an enormous spike in stress or harassment concerns. This manager should be alerted with a report, they should see their data compared to their peers, and they should receive some educational information to help them solve the problem.

This is where the market is today. Employee experience platforms are turning into advanced analytics systems which recommend, suggest, or even nudge managers (and HR teams) to make behavioral changes. Almost all the vendors are moving in this direction and functionalities vary depending on the vendor's focus:

- Some vendors focus on large global enterprise clients, so their analytics, reporting, and analysis are highly configurable and designed to scale.
- Others focus on small or mid-market clients, so their analytics and reporting are simple and easy to use.
- Still other solutions are primarily based on feedback from performance management and other processes, so their analytics correlate to goals, development plans, and other leadership strategies.

This is a stage where many heritage vendors have fallen behind. Suppliers who built great benchmarks and survey tools were focused on question design, data correlation, and benchmarks. With the market shift, issues such as scalability, ease of use, AI-driven recommendations, security and domain management, and easy-to-use reporting are now in demand.
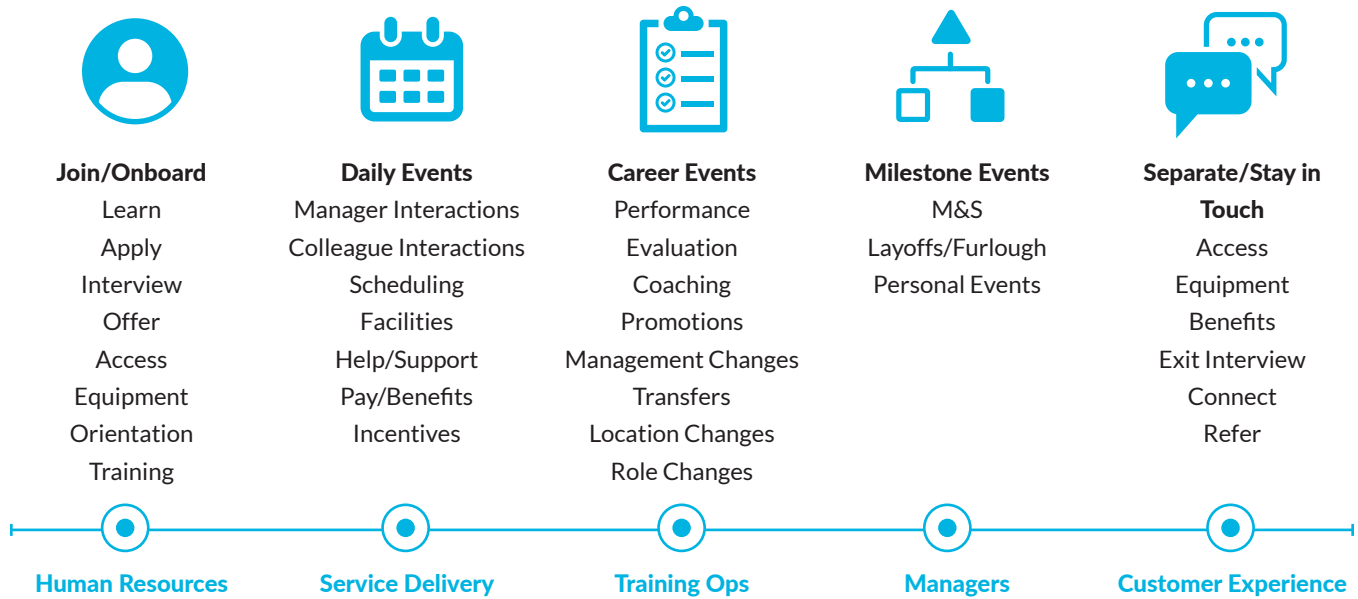
Case Study: *Bank of America Uses Continuous Response Strategy to Build Best-in-Class Training Program*

Bank of America has an entire program, called The Academy, focused on all aspects of onboarding-related training for branch and client-facing employees across the organization. The Academy's team is responsible for the entire new hire experience for job roles ranging from small business banker to call center agent. Depending on the role, onboarding experiences range from six to fifteen weeks or even longer.

Given the complexity of these experiences, Bank of America leverages Medallia as its end-to-end listening platform to survey, monitor, and collect employee feedback throughout the entire onboarding process: at mid-point, at the end, and 60 days after completion of the program.

In addition to measuring satisfaction, this end-to-end platform is designed to give the team tactical, in-the-moment feedback on the entire learning experience so the team can make iterative changes to the program. Bank of America gets thousands of recommendations from these new employees which helps to continuously improve the program.

The training team has built very specific triggers into its surveys. If a score is low or alert words are found, the manager is automatically informed and they reach out to get more information. Every month, the role managers look at all the feedback for each role group and determine the various areas in need of improvement. The triggers are very powerful. They can identify phrases such as "poor experience" or "I'm upset" or "it didn't work" so that managers can immediately spot problems. Even phrases such as "the sound won't work on my Chromebook" can trigger different workflows to help employees get issues resolved by the right person.

Join/Onboard	Daily Events	Career Events	Milestone Events	Separate/Stay in Touch
Learn	Manager Interactions	Performance	M&S	Access
Apply	Colleague Interactions	Evaluation	Layoffs/Furlough	Equipment
Interview	Scheduling	Coaching	Personal Events	Benefits
Offer	Facilities	Promotions		Exit Interview
Access	Help/Support	Management Changes		Connect
Equipment	Pay/Benefits	Transfers		Refer
Orientation	Incentives	Location Changes		
Training		Role Changes		

| Human Resources | Service Delivery | Training Ops | Managers | Customer Experience |

Figure 3: Experience Examples and Functional Responsibilities

4.0: Continuous Response

Today, the most advanced state of employee experience incorporates all the good work from the three prior stages and moves to a model of action, which we call continuous response.

At this stage we not only expand the type and nature of feedback we collect, but we also decide who needs to act dependent upon employee signals received. While annual and pulse surveys tended to be company-wide, at stage 4 we want individual employee concerns to go to the manager, call center, or HR person who can make a difference. This means the analytics platforms must be intelligent enough to determine who should receive information in order to address the issue at hand.

Consider an employee who loses her laptop. He simply wants to fill out the right form to obtain a replacement. If a laptop is broken and requires immediate fixing or replacement, the employee may want to escalate the case, perhaps informing the appropriate manager of the problem but also tracking the case, response, and resolution.

Another employee may face a harassment or diversity issue at work and may want to either escalate a case or mention the problem to someone. In a survey, the employee may highlight an issue that reflects on a manager or team. But, if the problem isn't resolved, the employee may want to open a harassment case which should then be routed to a specific compliance team and may not go to the manager at all.

A third employee may simply be unhappy with the company's benefits or leave policy and would like to recommend the expansion of some specific benefits. They may want to send some descriptive information to the company and also may want to crowdsource this suggestion to see if others agree. Such actions could be used to cover topics like the performance process, how pay and bonuses are awarded, how careers are managed, and other more strategic issues. While some employees will simply mention this to managers, company leaders will want to take broader views and may seek additional input for decisions.

Finally, a fourth employee may have a personal issue (perhaps an illness or problem at home) and simply wants to let people know but doesn't want to open a case or may feel uncomfortable mentioning this to their manager. Issues around wellbeing or psychological safety are important to understand, but we may need more subtle or even anonymous tools in order to gain meaningful signals.

The above examples cover a range of issues—from basic safety and health to culture, belonging, pay, and career. They touch on topics that matter to IT, facilities, HR, and business leaders. Some are urgent, and others not so much; some require immediate action while others are for future consideration.

The new breed of employee experience tools can handle all of these variations. They provide a wide range of listening tools, enable triggered alerts to send information to different sources based on the type of feedback they receive, and incorporate analytics to measure feedback by employee group, demographic, topic, or other dimensions.

Case Study: Johnson & Johnson Leverages Helpdesk Signals to Continuously Improve the Employee Experience

Johnson & Johnson's (J&J) Technology Support and Services team comprises over 1,000 agents that assist their employees across 81 countries. The team manages close to 100,000 incidents per month and generates approximately 1.3 million interactions over the phone, chat and within its portal. To manage a signals-rich and action-oriented program across so many channels (surveys, call transcripts, live chats and chatbots), J&J turned to Medallia for "an all-in-one service recovery platform."

The company is now able to reduce errors and dissatisfaction while holding technology owners accountable. When cases and incidents are closed in ServiceNow's IT Service Management system, a survey is automatically sent out and experience resolution data is available in Medallia, keeping users of both systems on the same page. The feedback J&J receives is then used to coach service agents on how to provide a better service delivery experience in the future, while ensuring every action has been taken to swiftly resolve the issue.

By engaging in continuous dialogue with its business partners, the team is using data to anticipate and respond to employee needs proactively. Data has helped identify and resolve friction in the employee journey by providing coaching suggestions for better engagement, addressing gaps in knowledge articles, and improving content in areas that

previously led to higher employee dissatisfaction (such as the password reset process and remote VPN connection).

As a result of the integrated solution, J&J closes 87.2% of alerts within 72 hours, has reduced incident volume by 10%, and has seen an 18% increase in employee response rates.

Bottom Line: Shorten the Distance from Signal to Action

The bottom line is simple: We need to collect employee signals in many ways, and we have to quickly funnel these signals to people who can interpret the data appropriately and then take action on the issues identified.

Of course, we'd all love to have an employee portal or knowledge management system that could do all this work automatically—and that's a direction one part of the market is heading. But in todays' world where every employee is seeking better productivity, wellbeing, and support, we need to invest in solutions that can provide a system of response. Remember, employee voice is often the most important signal we have to make our company better. The faster we listen and respond, the better our organization can be.

About Josh Bersin

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

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

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

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

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