

The Rise of the Employee Experience Platform Essential to Business Success



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As businesses deal with constant economic, industrial, and technological change, employee experience has become a CEO-level issue. Today, more than 81% of employees feel burned out¹ and despite an economic slowdown, almost a third of workers will change jobs this year. Employee experience (EX), the focus on making work easier and more productive for people, is now central to business growth and success.

The EX topic, which started as a way to rethink employee engagement, has exploded in complexity and growth. Today this domain includes all aspects of an employee's career, and companies have large cross-functional teams focused on it. The technologies for employees have also exploded—billions of dollars are now spent on employee portals, apps, collaboration tools, and much more. Technology is critical in supporting the right culture, trust, and inclusive environment, which underpin a superior employee experience.²

At first glance, the EX problem feels very complex. In a large manufacturing company like Medtronic, employees have a very different set of issues from employees in sales, marketing, or finance. A global distribution company like C.H. Robinson has employees in many countries, each dealing with different legal regulations, business issues, and social norms. Other

industries like healthcare have to support nurses, drivers, and administrators. How can a company build an EX strategy that scales, given these many dimensions of complexity?

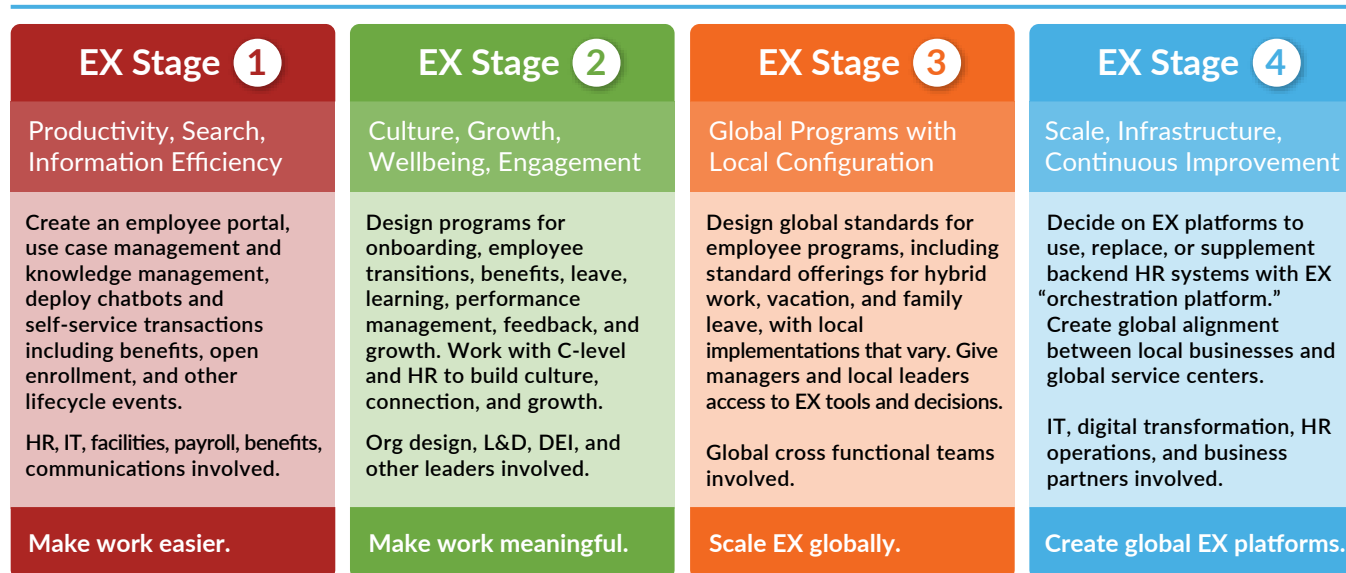
As our Employee Experience Maturity Model³ shows, the problem starts with a focus on transactional efficiency and service delivery and then grows to cover culture, global needs, and eventually enterprise-wide growth. At each stage, new technologies are needed, new problems arise, and deeper integration must be addressed across HR, IT, facilities, legal, and finance.

In 2021 and 2022, we studied this topic in detail, and after interviewing hundreds of companies we discovered four stages of employee experience platforms (see Figure 1).

The History of the EX Marketplace

In the mid-2010s, as the job market became competitive, companies poured money into employee engagement tools. They launched surveys, employee listening tools, pulse survey tools, and held more and more town halls to understand how to make employees' lives better.

Figure 1: Evolution of Employee Experience Platforms



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

1 [Global Talent Trends, 2022 Study: Rise of the reliable organization](#), Mercer, 2022.
2 "The Important Role of Technology," *The Definitive Guide: Employee Experience*, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2021.

3 *The Definitive Guide: Employee Experience*, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2022.

What did they learn? They found out that every employee is different, and each employee job role has a wide dimension of issues. Employees face issues in onboarding and training; in administrative needs like vacation, leave, and pay; and in many areas of benefits administration, healthcare support, and IT and legal compliance.

Many of these services were available in the core HR platform or the employee portal, but as companies competed more aggressively for talent, HR organizations wanted to do more. A forward-thinking HR manager applied the idea of “design thinking,” and she started to realize that “maybe we should design great experiences for employees, just like we do for customers.”

Design Thinking and the Employee Experience

The idea of design thinking took off quickly. Companies were embracing design thinking in their products and services, so HR and IT teams immediately started to build journey maps, employee personas, and all sorts of designed “experiences” for employees (see Figure 2).

In the early days, this was a “design project” and was often led by a cross-functional team dedicated to solving a particular problem. (Global onboarding and employee job transition is a common EX design project, for example.) What they found is that the problem is very complex. Not only does every

employee need cross boundaries between HR, IT, legal, finance, operations, and real estate, but employee needs also often involve transactional systems that have been in the company for years. So you can’t just design an employee experience from scratch. You have to integrate and accommodate existing systems and then build a workflow and user experience on top.

During these early years, most companies bought tools to help with this survey problem. Vendors sold case management tools, portals, chatbots, and many varieties of learning, collaboration, benefits portals, and wellbeing apps. Companies gobbled them up, essentially creating a new “stack” of software sitting on top of the core human capital management (HCM) applications.

This has led to where we are today. The EX market is no longer only one of design; it is now a market that must accommodate design, delivery, and scale. Therefore, these tools and apps, which are each valuable and interesting in their own way, must be integrated and orchestrated into a seamless tapestry.

We now also know, for example, that the users of EX tools are not just employees. HR, IT, and legal service delivery teams and call centers must use these systems, as must HR and IT designers and line managers, legal, and facilities people. And in each country, geography, or business unit, there are very likely some variations.

Figure 2: Making Employee Experience Simple for Employees



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

Today, most big companies have an EX team or owner, and this person is both a designer and service delivery leader. They no longer want to buy dozens of tools and apps; they want a “system” to work with, a real platform that brings all these solutions together. As with every other market in HR, this market has shifted from that of “tools” to that of “platforms,” and that’s why big vendors like ServiceNow, Microsoft, and others have entered the market.

What Domains Should EX Cover?

We recently completed a major study of employee experience around the world⁴ and uncovered that companies take this on in stages (see Figure 3). Organizations start with basic transaction and productivity issues, and then grow to EX solutions in career management, wellbeing, and local and global team management.

Figure 3: Four Stages in the Employee Experience Evolution

EX Stage	Focus Area and Organizational Strategy
Stage 1: Focus on employee productivity, search, information, and efficiency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create an improved employee portal. • Implement case management and knowledge management. • Deploy chatbots and self-service, including benefits, open enrollment, and other lifecycle events. • HR, IT, payroll, and benefits are involved. <p>Challenge: making an employee interface easy.</p>
Stage 2: Focus on culture, growth, wellbeing, and engagement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design programs for onboarding, employee transitions, benefits, leave, learning, performance management, feedback, and growth. • Organization design, L&D, DEI, and other leaders are now involved. <p>Challenge: building culture, connection, and growth.</p>
Stage 3: Focus on global integration while also meeting local needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design journeys and global standards for complex employee programs. • Implement standardized offerings for hybrid work, vacation, family leave, and many local implementations that vary by country or team. • Global cross-functional teams are involved and own processes. <p>Challenge: giving managers and local leaders access to EX tools and decisions.</p>
Stage 4: Focus on infrastructure, scale, and continuous improvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make strategic decisions about what EX platforms to use. • Possibly replace or supplement many of the backend HR systems with an EX frontend “orchestration platform.” • IT, digital transformation teams, HR operations, and HR business partners are involved. <p>Challenge: creating global alignment between local businesses and global service centers.</p>

Source: *The Josh Bersin Company, 2022*

⁴ *The Definitive Guide: Employee Experience*, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2022.

The more experience a company has the faster they move to Stage 4. A global company like Medtronic, for example, may design an onboarding program for new manufacturing engineers but must quickly understand its global implications and the adjacent roles that also need this program. Every program that Medtronic now designs has a global team and a service delivery element built in.

Rapid Maturity of Employee Experience Technology

As we wrote about several years ago,⁵ these technology complexities demand an integrated platform, and the sooner companies think about this the better.

At the beginning of the EX journey, most companies want a simple employee portal, a case management system, and a place to look up policies, procedures, and checklists. Quickly, as the program matures, companies realize the EX platform (EXP) has to do more. Now the system must deeply integrate with many legacy applications, enable development of custom journeys, and provide AI-enabled chatbots, intelligent routing, and user interfaces for different employee roles.

Despite the wide variety of EX tools, companies need all these systems to work together. Every new employee need has the potential to touch many backend systems, so the EXP becomes an “orchestration system” to bring these pieces together.

Consider, for example, the simple need for employees to take family leave. They have to register for leave and get approval from their manager, then schedule their leave time, set up payroll adjustments based on their role, turn in or turn off their devices and security, and then set up remote access security for their time off. Just this simple set of transactions may access three to five backend systems, each of which is complex and “legacy” in its own design.

Expansion of EX Use Cases

The number of use cases keeps growing. Current research on EX finds there are more than 80 employee “journeys” to consider, and dozens of technologies involved. Each can be important and critical at some moment in time, and when they matter, they can often make or break an employee’s job satisfaction and productivity (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: EX Use Cases and Issues

EX Use Case	Issues
Employee portal or app	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where will an employee go to locate or source information and tools? • What will the mobile, remote, or disconnected environment look like?
Onboarding and transitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will an employee transition into a job or across roles? • What is the process for leave, promotion, retirement, or transitioning to a new role or country?
Knowledge management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where are the policies, rules, forms, and standards employees need to find and use? • How does an employee change a password, find payroll information, submit a grievance, and rectify hundreds of other questions?
Case management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will an employee ask for help or open a case? • Where will the question be serviced, and how does an employee reach the appropriate service center or business partner?

⁵ *The Employee Experience Platform Market Has Arrived: Employee Service Delivery as a Foundation for Great Experiences*, Josh Bersin/The Josh Bersin Company, 2019.

Figure 4: EX Use Cases and Issues (continued)

Chatbot or call center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can an employee ask for help or get answers to a question without necessarily finding an HR business partner? • How should this interaction fit into Microsoft Teams, Slack, or other messaging systems?
Pay and benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where do employees go to look at vacation balances, hours worked, 401(k) options, and the myriad benefits and wellbeing programs? • What is the process for resolving a pay issue, question, or change?
Growth and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does an employee find new learning and growth? • What career options are available? • Where is the employee's performance plan, goals, or financial budgets to manage?
Employee directory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does an employee find peers, experts, or others? • How can an employee share their interests and skills? • How can employees share personal aspects of their lives with their coworkers?
Belonging and special interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can an employee experience social "belonging" while at work? • How can an employee find and join interest groups and share family photos or other personal information? • How can an employee join an employee resource group? • Where is DEI education and support?
Wellbeing and flexible work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are flexible work and wellbeing managed? • Is there a process or set of systems for scheduling, determining location, desk reservations, gym membership, and hundreds of other "nonwork" related issues?
Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can an employee give suggestions or feedback to the company, HR, or IT? • Where are the employee opinion surveys, group chats, crowdsourcing, or suggestion tools?
Legal or compliance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can an employee make sure they are up to date on compliance training? • What if they need to open a legal case involving some kind of escalation?
Communications and news	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where does the company communicate messages from the CEO and leadership, new policies, new announcements, or news? • Where does an employee go to find out what's local and relevant to their location or department?
Local policies and procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can an employee stay current on local information about their team, facility, department, or function?
Manager hub	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can a manager easily view, manage, support, or communicate with their local or geographic team?

Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

As you can see, there are myriad employee experience issues to consider, each of which comes from different systems, data sources, or applications. While many who utilize HCM systems believe they can do this alone, no single application is designed for this breadth. Therefore, we need the EXP to become a “global orchestration system,” designed for configuration, scale, and ease of use.

The New Employee Experience Platform

In the early stages of the EX market, vendors provided standalone tools such as case management systems, survey tools, communications platforms, and portals. Now, as the market has grown and expanded, the EXP itself has become an enterprise system.

Consider layered architecture (see Figure 5). While it may be possible for IT to integrate dozens of employee-facing applications, there is no easy way for these to work together. Companies need a new platform, one that might be called a “design and orchestration system,” to create workflows,

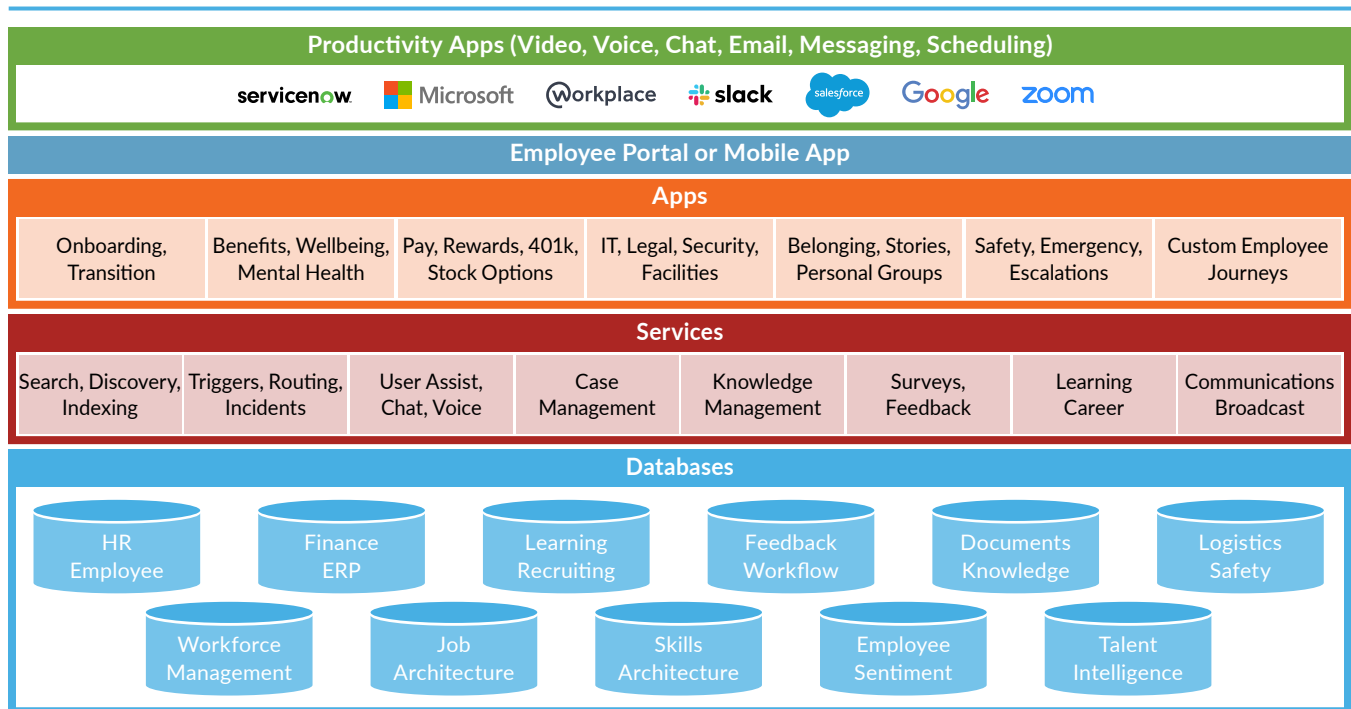
manage backend interfaces, and give HR managers and leaders a set of design tools to build what individual work groups need.

The new enterprise EXP should allow for several layers of functionality and provide:

- A “productized portal” that makes it easy for HR and IT managers to add new applications to the user experience.
- A personalized and configurable platform, so all employees see and experience their own journeys. It must tightly integrate with backend systems (HCM, learning, benefits, time tracking, financial apps, security, badge readers, etc.).
- A “designer” toolset to ensure nontechnical managers can build journeys, design and build workflows, and distribute administration to local groups.

Under the covers, the EXP must make it easy for service centers, business partners, and managers to communicate with and respond to employee needs. As one major HR leader put it, “EX is all about service delivery.” In other words, everything that isn’t self-service needs a service delivery person behind it.

Figure 5: HR Technology Architecture



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

Where Should Information and Business Rules Reside?

According to the latest OKTA study of internal applications⁶, the average large company has more than 80 different “employee applications.” (This number grew by 40% over the last three years.) These range from things like payroll and benefits to time-tracking, career management, goal-setting, directory, and fundamental things like badge readers, email logins and passwords, and various forms of compliance, security, and monitoring. While companies try to standardize these applications on an HCM or ERP (enterprise resource planning) platform, no vendor does everything; companies are stuck in a very heterogeneous world.

And the issue of who “owns” the EX can never fully be solved. In some cases (e.g., legal compliance) the “owner” is the corporation, so everyone must comply with the rules regardless of where they work. In many other cases the EX rules are written by a facilities leader, a senior executive, a functional leader, or a team supervisor or manager. Policies and procedures for hours worked, how we want people to interact, and various ways we work together can only be done at a local level—with “global oversight” and “global standards” to help.

What our research finds is companies need a “core and spoke” model to scale. The corporate employee experience team should focus on the platforms, global programs, standards, and tools. The local business and HR leaders should use these standard tools to build personalized and localized programs, create locally relevant communications, and relay feedback to the corporate team.

Personalization and Skills-Based Solutions

As companies roll out more personalized and local employee solutions, a big question remains—how can the EXP best deliver a highly personalized, relevant set of experiences for each employee? Does all the data that resides in the core HCM system need to be used in order to make this work?

⁶ “Businesses at Work,” OKTA.com, 2022.

The market is evolving quickly. While the HCM system has valuable information about an employee’s location, job title, pay grade, and benefits, it may be missing many valuable insights about an employee’s open cases, prior interaction history, or even aspirational learning needs. The new generation of EXPs are smart data systems in themselves, creating their own employee profiles, integrated with the HCM.

The Market Has Flipped: Employees First, Backend Systems Second

The employee experience platform has become essential. In the early days of the EX crusade, companies used the existing employee portals to add features and new programs, often spending many millions of dollars on custom systems. These systems were expensive to build and maintain and could rarely keep up with the never-ending employee needs over time.

Bank of America, for example, found out that the biggest EX issue in their 60,000+ consumer bank was the ongoing development and transition support as people move from new hire to seasoned banker to leader to retiree. In their analysis of turnover and financial performance, it found that employees who “didn’t adjust well” to one of these transitions would leave, resulting in a local branch that underperforms. So they built an entire EX strategy focused on the lifecycle of a retail bank employee, setting up formal programs, call center support, and analytics to support these “lifecycle events.”

Medtronic is in the middle of doing this around the world. The company has embarked on a global project to build a new framework for onboarding and job transition management, with a standard set of tools and programs to help people transition to new roles. The corporate team is leading the effort, working with local teams to define what is standard and what should be localized.

A third global company, C.H. Robinson (one of the largest global logistics companies in the world) is doing the same for employee leave. It is looking at the many types of leave policies around the world and coming up with global and local versions to standardize.

In every one of these projects the issue of a platform looms large. Where do companies put these “journeys” and “programs” and workflow business rules so that the corporate HR and IT team can deploy them while others tweak them locally? How do we connect them to the ERP system for security and identity management? How do we leverage data about the employee in the human resources management system (HRMS)? And where does the data about the process go? (Employee experience applications generate large amounts of data that does not necessarily fit into the traditional HRMS.) There are a couple of options that organizations can consider:

Option 1: Use the ERP (Workday, SuccessFactors, Oracle, ADP, Ceridian, UKG, or others). The first option, which most companies quickly outgrow, is the attempt to put these services into the off-the-shelf tools from the core HCM provider. Each of the vendors mentioned have employee portal tools, customizable (to some degree) journeys, and mini-applications that help employees access some of the EX applications. And it makes sense to use these, when possible, since they are tightly linked to other internal systems, security, and data.

The problem most companies run into is that these applications are incomplete. ERP vendors spend most of their R&D on core payroll and technology infrastructure; they are rarely experts on leave management, onboarding, or even corporate training. And when a company wants a highly open system (enabling lots of third-party vendors to plug in) the IT department is dependent on the ERP vendor to do the work.

We do want many business rules institutionalized in the ERP, however. Things like pay, benefits, vacation, time-tracking, and other financially relevant EX applications must integrate tightly with financial systems. But many ERP EX applications are new and less flexible, so companies pick only the ones that work best. Vendors like Workday and Oracle have opened their platforms for development, but this means hiring an IT contractor to customize the ERP and then living with the custom development for years.

Option 2: Use a scalable EXP. The second option, which is now becoming mainstream, is to invest in a platform like ServiceNow (or Microsoft Viva, Applaud, Salesforce Portal, and others) to manage and integrate these solutions. ServiceNow,

which comes from a background in global service delivery, has built a wide range of EX applications and services to make this easy—more and more companies are going this way.

Microsoft is moving in this direction with the Viva family of products. Viva, unlike ServiceNow, is not yet a workflow management system, but eventually it will likely compete with ServiceNow in its open architecture and ease of application development.

In addition to giving the EX team a robust platform to build upon, platforms like ServiceNow are designed for “citizen developers.” In other words, if Medtronic or C.H. Robinson wants to build a series of journeys and let local managers personalize them, ServiceNow has a design tool for nontechnical users to accomplish this. Oracle is moving in this direction with its Oracle Journeys product, but it is still behind ServiceNow in its maturity.

Where Do the Business Rules Go?

The employee experience platform, in addition to being a place to “plug in” and design EX applications, is also a business rules engine. When a new employee needs a badge, laptop, or leave adjustment, who should approve this? What is the process for auditing this process and where should the budget reside? These and hundreds of other business rules need to be coded somewhere, but where?

In a highly scalable EX team, these decisions must be made strategically. If the company has ServiceNow, they are likely to use it as the “EX business rules platform” and interchange these rules with the ERP. But these are decisions that should be made deliberately, because if a process step must scale it may interact with HRMS business rules, business rules in the corporate learning management system, or even financial rules located elsewhere.

Over time, as new platforms like ServiceNow, Viva, Workday, Oracle, and SAP continue to evolve, it will become obvious to customers which process goes where. In the last year, ServiceNow introduced a variety of new functions: listening posts (scalable surveys and feedback), learning posts (learning programs and learning pathways), employee journey management (journeys and workflows designed for employee transitions), manager hubs (a place for managers to view and support employee journeys), and employee center (a single unified productized portal and mobile app).

Delivering at Scale

In our many conversations with companies we realized that the EXP market had clearly arrived. Almost every large company now has a team looking at various EX projects, and they each bring together stakeholder teams from various constituencies.

In every case they start with the “most urgent” problems, then after building experience as a team, develop workflows that can scale. The platform, which used to be a heterogeneous set of applications, is now becoming the core.

Think, for example, about a new compliance application, onboarding program, or management transition program. Before the world of EX platforms, these programs might be built in a compliance system, a learning management system, or a coaching tool. Today, with an EXP like ServiceNow, many of these programs can be built within. This means that employees can find them, enroll and consume them, and track their completion in one easy-to-find place. Whenever there are questions, the EXP has a chatbot, knowledge database, and case management system for solutions.

For the service delivery team, the EXP can now be the workflow engine that not only manages employee journeys

but also lets the service team delegate responsibilities to experts. One part of the workflow may be supported by an HR business partner, another by a call center specialist, and a third by a legal expert.

Platforms like ServiceNow make this all possible, while most ERP-designed programs do not. This in-depth comprehensive architecture, which includes design, deployment, personalization, and support, is a whole new type of platform, one that the EXP alone can deliver (see Figure 6).

The Employee Experience Platform Market Has Arrived

Just as cloud architectures replaced in-house enterprise software, so employee-centric workflows are now replacing and sitting on top of traditional ERP systems. EXP systems with a wide range of capabilities, like ServiceNow, do this well.

What is apparent from this research is that the EXP market has arrived. CEOs, CHROs, and CIOs want a platform that makes all new employee programs world-class, delivering global support at scale.

Figure 6: The Stages and Value of an Employee Experience Platform

EX Stage	How the EXP Adds Value
Designing a journey or EX application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy to build • Configurable by user demographics • Editable at a local level • Does not require IT programming skills • Able to interface with different content and external applications
Managing the deployment of an EX application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring the progress of employees through the journeys • Providing chatbot, case management, help, and other support • Providing analytics on search traffic and progress or places the journey is stuck
Customization of the EX application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Configuring the journey so it is localized by language, location, and other factors • Giving local partners the ability to configure the journey
Service delivery of the EX application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case management • Assigning ownership to different experts • Tracking resolution • Identifying time and speed to resolution • Surveying users for feedback or satisfaction

Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

About the Author



Josh Bersin

Josh founded Bersin & Associates in 2001 to provide research and advisory services focused on corporate learning. He expanded the company's coverage to encompass HR, talent management, talent acquisition, and leadership and became a recognized expert in the talent market. Josh sold the company to Deloitte in 2012 and was a partner in Bersin by Deloitte up until 2018.

In 2019, Josh founded the Josh Bersin Academy, a professional development academy that has become the "home for HR." In 2020, he put together a team of analysts and advisors who are now working with him to support and guide HR organizations from around the world under the umbrella of The Josh Bersin Company. He is frequently featured in publications such as *Forbes*, *Harvard Business Review*, *HR Executive*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *CLO Magazine*. He is a popular blogger and has more than 800,000 followers on LinkedIn.

The Josh Bersin Company Membership

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