



THE NEW EMPLOYEE LISTENING PLAYBOOK

Using AI to transform people analytics and employee experience to drive business performance

CONTENTS

	INTRO	4
1	THE HIDDEN DRIVERS OF EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE	5
2	FROM HYPE TO VALUE: OPERATIONALIZING AGENTIC AI	8
3	TURNING DATA INTO DECISIONS	11

ABOUT



A world leading provider of market intelligence on the Future of Work and HR Technology. **UNLEASH** is a customer-first, global digital media and events business, delivering the latest news, analysis and market trends for HR, technology, learning and recruitment leaders.

UNLEASH has championed HR excellence and disruption since 2011, serving as the strategic transformation engine for Human Resources. We are built to inspire, connect, and empower HR leaders worldwide to navigate the fast-changing world of work.

Our community is a diverse group of leaders, including HR Buyers from over 120 countries, who reimagine work and help optimize, enable and unleash new ideas and thinking that improve the lives of millions of people each year.

unleash.ai



Welliba—winner of the 2024 HR Unleash Global Startup Award—is redefining people, culture, and organizational insights. Their EXcelerate solution uses the latest AI technologies combined with behavioral science to instantly analyze all available public data and deliver deep insights into people and organizations—without the need for surveys.

EXcelerate converts raw data into strategic recommendations and benchmarks, enabling organizations to make informed decisions that enhance employer branding, boost engagement, address retention challenges, and foster employee development.

Discover how you can elevate your talent strategy, transform your workforce, and stay ahead of your competitors. Learn more at www.welliba.ai

INTRO

People analytics is at a tipping point – and the next wave of transformation is set to redefine the rules as we know them.



New technologies, smart data capabilities and AI tools are already converging to change the way business and HR leaders gather workforce insights and shape their culture. It marks a clear departure from reactive guesswork to proactive, data-driven decisions around talent.

The shift is long overdue. Traditional surveys are no longer enough to uncover the roots of engagement or capture the full spectrum of employee experience (EX). Between low participation, survey fatigue, integrity of feedback and fear to give honest opinions, the barriers preventing employers from sourcing genuine perspectives from their staff are plenty.

For HR, there are further challenges in the form of data overload, poor quality insights and difficulty linking employee listening initiatives back to core business objectives. All of this comes at a time of great challenge for employers looking to maximize engagement and high performance across their workforce. The global percentage of engaged employees fell from 23% to 21% last year according to Gallup's long-running annual study¹ – only the second time this figure has fallen in the past 12 years.

If businesses are to buck the trend and remain competitive in the battle to attract and retain top talent, they must rethink how they listen to employees. The future lies in leveraging external data to uncover real-time sentiment, ensure greater accuracy of feedback and predict turnover risks ahead of time.

So, where exactly should your business begin? This guide serves as your strategic playbook, equipping you to deliver the next generation of people analytics and elevate employee experience at scale – if that's your goal, this is an ideal starting point.

– **Abigail de Vries-Weller, Head of UNLEASH Labs**

¹ Source: [Global Workplace Report 2025](#), Gallup

Chapter 1

THE HIDDEN DRIVERS OF EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

Employee experience (EX) is a multifaceted concept, and one that's often misunderstood or approached at surface level only.

While company-wide surveys and eNPS scores can provide useful quantitative insights, they can fall short in capturing the depth and nuance of key EX drivers from the full workforce across the entire employee lifecycle. These legacy approaches are also comparatively slow, expensive and often too shallow to form a basis for real change – yet they remain the most common methods of gathering employee feedback across the business landscape.

This spells opportunity for HR leaders willing to capitalize on new digital capabilities and behavioral science trends. By rethinking how EX is measured and how people data is collected, businesses can uncover richer insights and act faster on key decisions.

The first step is to establish a holistic model for EX that captures the result of the interaction between people's characteristics and their work environment, which is broader than their experience with services delivered by HR teams or technology or the result of moments that matter. Without this, data insights are left unstructured and chaotic, and there's no stable foundation on which businesses can make sense of vast datasets, let alone extract value from them.



Findings from the S&P 500

The top 100 firms with the highest EX scores outperform the rest of the market – and this gap is doubled during periods of growth.²

² Source: EXcelerate Validation Study, Welliba

Traditional Listening

- ☐ How engaged do you feel?
- ☐ Would you recommend your employer?

Outside-In Listening

The culture here changed after the reorg

I'm overwhelmed

I feel invisible at work

The future of listening isn't what you ask - but what you dare to hear.

People and organization

EX measurement should provide details around how employees internalize and interpret day-to-day interactions at work. These interactions can be split into two main categories: People and Organizational Factors.

- **People Factors** – These are the key internal drivers that determine how employees perceive themselves and their personal experience at work. Do staff feel they are achieving their potential? Do they have the personal capabilities, soft skills and confidence to succeed in their role? Focus on developing these internal factors is vital to sustain positive feelings as employees carry out work. It also feeds directly into their sense of purpose, ability to handle pressure and ambition for personal growth over the long term.
- **Organizational Factors** – These are the external drivers and stressors that impact employee experience: workplace conditions, company culture, the nature of corporate communications, leadership & feedback approaches and rewards provided to employees, to name just a few. It's also important to account for differences in how external factors affect individual experience. Introducing changes or new initiatives can be a positive experience for some and a negative for others, which is why continual measurement is important to stay on the pulse of employee sentiment.

Both people factors and organizational factors have a significant impact on an individual's experience at work – and the dynamic interplay between them essentially determines whether an individual's experience is positive or negative. While employees cannot always control their context, they can learn to influence the way they interact with it, especially when they have a route to open dialogue with direct managers and business leaders.

Any of these factors can manifest as a blocker or a booster of EX, which is why gaining the widest possible view of them is crucial to understand specific pain points and get real value from employee listening data.



How exactly does agentic AI help?

Agentic AI is transforming the way HR teams decipher the complexities of employee experience and workplace sentiment, making it much easier to analyze huge datasets, source truthful opinions and categorize results into a defined framework. All of this can be done much faster, and to the same or higher standard than a human.

Automatic text summarization tools and large language models (LLMs) can now process entire streams of public data in just a few clicks. This unlocks on-demand visibility of employee sentiment at speed, while offering a new window of insight through external footprints like industry reports, employee review platforms and social media commentary.

That information feeds straight into an automated pipeline for AI summarization, without imposing extra workload or lengthy questionnaires on employees. And while human-to-human communication and review will always form a core aspect of capturing employee feedback, research shows that AI technology can match (or even exceed) human summarization and perception of a written concern.³

3. Source: [Seeing Without Asking: A Multi-Method Construct Validation](#), Berger & Justenhoven

The end result goes far beyond surface-level metrics. It highlights actionable areas for HR across both personal and organizational factors, with minimal human input required. The pace and non-invasive nature of the technology also enables HR managers to get ahead of the game and deliver impact quickly, rather than the ‘ask and fail’ approach which typically prevents people analytics projects from getting off the ground.

Paired with industry context, this enhances decision-making with instant, cost-effective insights and affords business leaders a more holistic understanding of what makes their people tick. What’s more, you no longer have to rely on aggregated industry benchmarks to understand how you are performing in key areas as this approach allows you to compare yourself directly to specific named companies. This creates new opportunities to understand why your talent may be attracted to other specific employers, both inside and outside of your industry, and also learn what you can offer to attract talent from another organization to join yours.



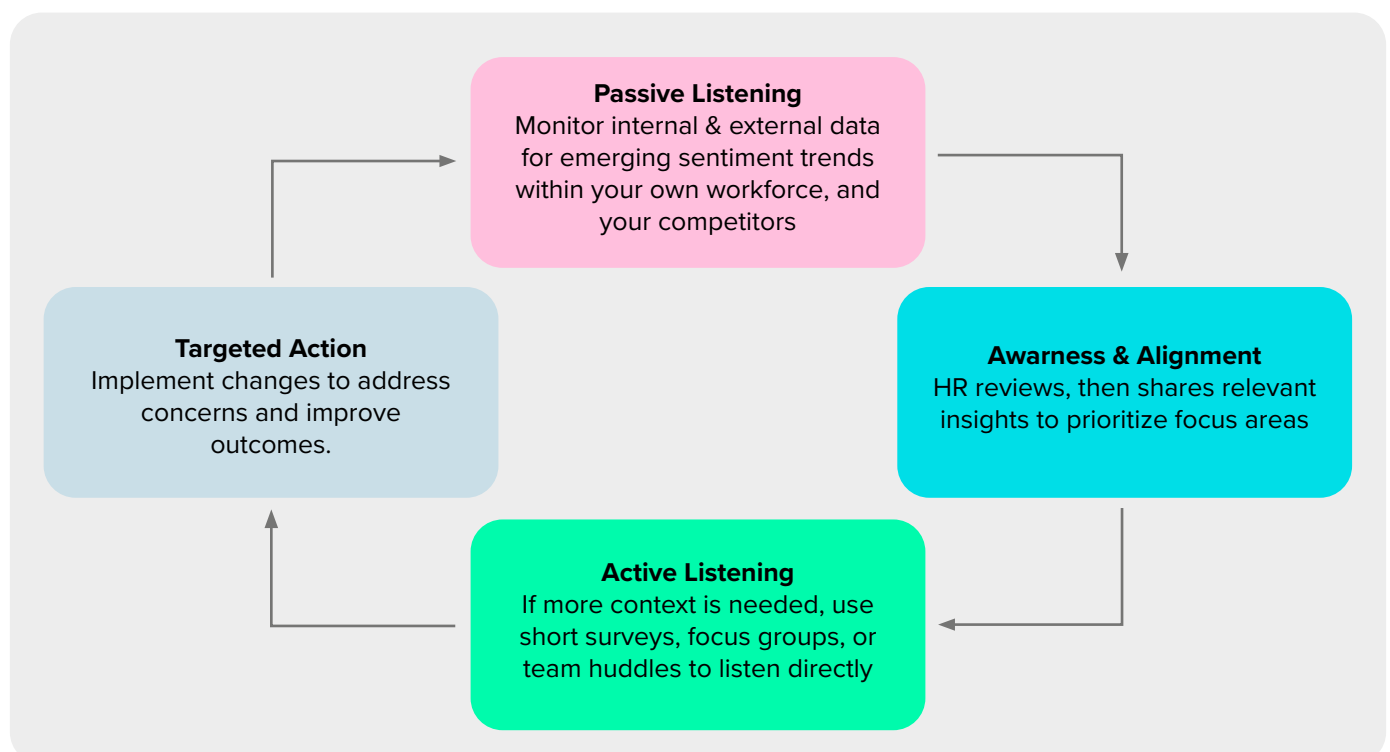
FROM HYPE TO VALUE: OPERATIONALIZING AGENTIC AI

Expanding the scope of employee listening through agentic AI might sound like a challenge. In reality, it's simpler than most businesses imagine.

The first thing to understand is where your current approach is lacking. Traditional questionnaires are useful but they are strictly limited to the questions you ask your own staff – which means they don't give you a comprehensive view of what past and future employees want from their employer.

Staff often feel under or over-questioned and tend to give answers they think are desirable, rather than sharing honest sentiment or constructive criticism. It can also take weeks, even months, to send out surveys to all staff, and even more time to turn the raw data into real insight.

Agentic AI avoids these pitfalls by collecting and analyzing huge amounts of public data in a matter of minutes, before converting that data into targeted actions. The graphic below provides a closer look at the practical steps needed to seamlessly integrate AI tools alongside your existing employee listening workflows.



1: Use a robust EX model

Start by mapping out a psychometric model of employee experience that covers the dynamic interaction between an employee's personal traits and their work environment. That's easier said than done for most businesses, especially if they don't have behavioral science experts on their team to guide the process.

Rather than basing your entire strategy on shallow metrics, it's worth partnering with a provider that has a robust, validated model for EX that covers all bases. Not only will this give you a ready-to-go framework on which to deploy AI and categorize data insights at pace, it will also enable you to start predicting key outcomes that directly impact organizational performance.

2: Understand how data relates to business impact

Establishing a robust EX model is only the first step. Real value emerges for businesses that can connect categorized data streams to tangible business and people outcomes, such as flight risk, eNPS, growth, careers, trust, absenteeism and psychological safety.

Let's take the airline industry as an example. Welliba researched the top 100 airlines rated by Skytrax and looked at which EX drivers link to top airline performance using a validated model. The study revealed that airlines with an EX score greater than 80 are **6x more likely** to be in the Skytrax Top 20 – the industry's leading benchmark for quality and achievement. The metrics behind this model highlight that **feedback loops, communication approaches and overall business strategy** are key contributors to the diverging performance of the industry's best airlines.⁴

This shifts the conversation from surface-level talk about 'happy, engaged employees' to a data-driven business case for specific actions, securing executive buy-in along the way and ensuring your EX initiatives are focused on what matters most to the organization.

3: Create a vendor checklist

It pays to do your research when looking for expert third-party support to enhance your employee feedback and listening strategies. Make sure to ask the following questions when comparing your options:

- **Does the provider match AI capability with a robust psychometric model?**
- **Is their approach backed by behavioral science research and valid accreditations?**
- **Can they show a clear link to meaningful business outcomes based on their model?**
- **Can they prove a clear ROI for AI tools in terms of completing tasks faster than a data expert or team of analysts?**
- **Do they offer quick, easy integration into your existing tech stack, free from any data privacy issues by excluding any personally identifiable information?**
- **Can they help secure buy-in from both senior leadership, employees and internal 'champions' at all organizational levels?**



4. Source: EXcelerate Validation Study, Welliba

4: Pilot the new system

Even if agentic AI has the potential to completely overhaul people analytics across your business, it's usually a good idea to road-test it in a priority area before pushing a full launch. Choose a use case, business area, or business challenge where you want to make an immediate impact and use this as a sandbox to build a business case.

For example, you might run a pilot within your talent acquisition department, using AI to analyze job board reviews, LinkedIn posts and other social media mentions to help identify the EVP of your organization. This information can then be cross-analyzed with your existing content on career portals or candidate messaging to highlight any gaps or discrepancies.

Focusing on a relevant topic or team will help determine what success looks like and who is responsible for managing each stage of the process. Feedback from relevant stakeholders and business leaders not only enables you to refine your approach before scaling, it also creates a group of early adopters who can champion wider buy-in across the organization.

5: Launch and optimize

With the groundwork in place, you're ready to deploy passive listening across your employee listening strategy. But remember that a successful launch isn't an endpoint; it's the start of an iterative journey to refine processes and drive tangible people and business improvements wherever possible.

Make sure to take time to understand the insights when you get them, and to ask the right questions to generate even more insights into specific job groupings, locations, experience levels, or comparison organizations. Top HR leaders also make a point of sharing exactly how feedback is being used in practice. For example, if the passive listening approach flags the risk of employee stress or burnout in a certain area, that's a perfect opportunity to review the drivers of the issues, assess relevant actions, and communicate a message to employees about what's being done to tackle the issue.

This level of transparency helps to turn your employee listening approach from a 'black box' into a visible driver of change, developing greater trust in the technology as time goes on.



TURNING DATA INTO DECISIONS

Expanding your employee listening strategy with public data is just the beginning. The real challenge is turning those raw insights into decisions that drive impact.

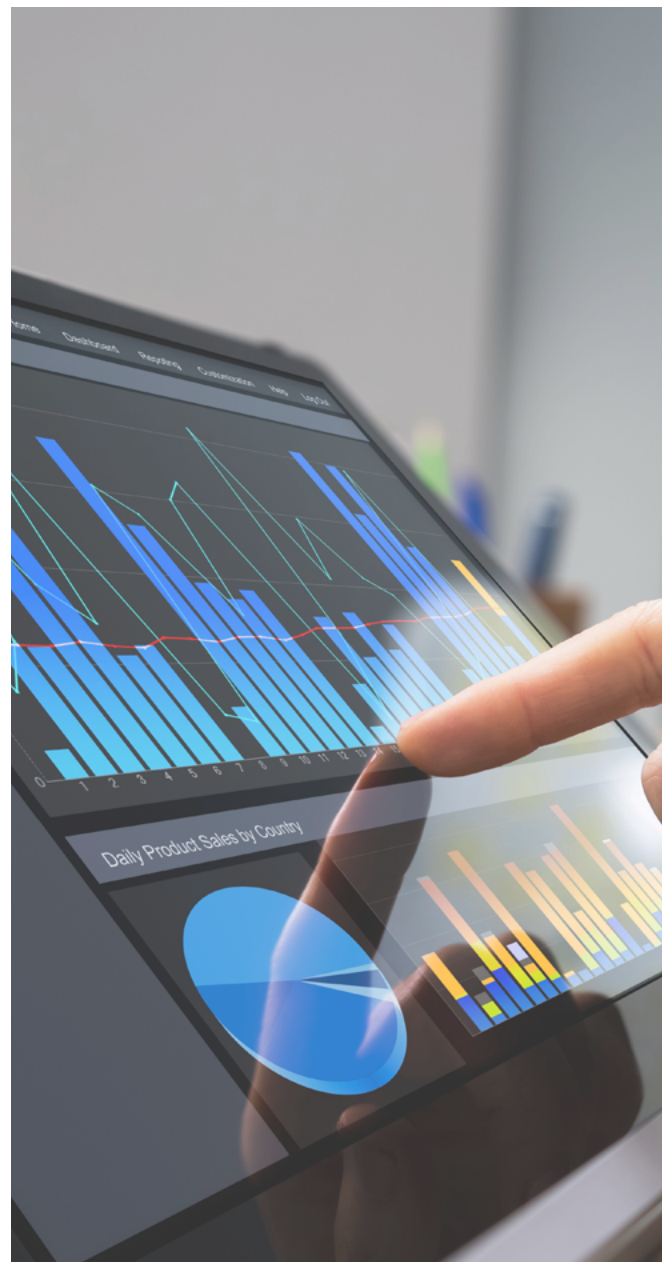
When properly collected and analyzed, employee data tells stories that anecdotal feedback alone cannot. True value emerges when EX drivers link back to what the C-suite cares about most: staff retention, engagement that correlates with customer satisfaction and gains in performance and efficiency that ultimately boost the company's bottom line and how this compares or differs to other organizations in your business landscape.

This is where robust analytics and industry benchmarking become a strategic asset. When provided with a comprehensive view of EX drivers, HR leaders and CHROs can identify pain points before they escalate, spot emerging engagement drivers in real-time and allocate resources to where they'll have the greatest impact. Crucially, it also gives them more credibility to influence board-level discussions and advocate for positive change.

This shift from hindsight to foresight doesn't just drive productivity; it creates a culture where every decision is rooted in evidence – and every employee feels heard.



Businesses using data analytics and AI to inform strategic decisions outperform their peers by **29%** in employee satisfaction and **23%** in operational efficiency.⁵



5. Source: [Transforming Data into Business Value through Analytics and AI](#), Harvard Business Review

How do you stack up against the competition?

If your business is serious about building and maintaining its position as a leader, you'll need to understand what competitors are doing, how you compare and what you can do to stay ahead of them.

This has typically been a blind spot for traditional surveys. No amount of internal data will enable you to compare your workplace culture or Employee Value Proposition with the competition. Even when industry benchmarking is offered by third-party providers, it tends to focus solely on an aggregate of their clients that have also completed the same survey, rather than providing a full industry view, or insights on any of the specific companies within the industry.

Public data analysis is reshaping the way that company's approach and act on competitor intelligence. By harnessing unfiltered insights from thousands of public sources such as employee reviews, recruitment sites and employee discussions on social media and forums, organizations can pinpoint what matters most to specific workforce or talent segments within a target competitor or industry.

This allows organizations in highly specialized industries, such as airports or central banks, to get a detailed comparison of approaches and performance levels of other businesses in the same sector. They can also see where rivals excel, where their strategies falter, and what is driving retention and turnover.

10,000s of sources analyzed in moments



Armed with this knowledge, business leaders find themselves in a much stronger position to address attrition risks before they escalate and refine their Employee Value Proposition to exploit any gaps in their competitors' offering.

Competitor benchmarking to improve talent attraction and drive EX success.

Learn how [IDEMIA Secure Transactions \(IST\)](#) used Welliba EXcelerate to ensure their EVP communications and content strategy remained well above industry averages.

[**Read the full case study**](#)

Unlock quick wins and gain a competitive advantage

Time is often the biggest barrier between insight and action. The effort required to clean, connect and mine internal datasets means valuable opportunities can slip away. By layering external sentiment and benchmarking over existing knowledge, organizations can surface decision-ready insights in hours — not days, or weeks.

Without the need for complex integrations or additional data gathering, HR, IT and analytics teams can focus on interpreting key findings and guiding strategic decisions. This rapid access to context and comparison empowers businesses to seize quick wins, close retention gaps and respond to market shifts while they still have the advantage.

The most powerful decisions are often those made before a challenge becomes visible. By linking sentiment trends to business-critical metrics and other internal data streams, you can identify attrition risks months before they appear in exit interviews, or spot the exact leadership behaviors that consistently drive high-performing teams.



“We’ve reached a turning point in terms of how we listen and understand people at work, and how businesses connect that information with real business outcomes. AI now provides an alternative that’s quicker, cheaper, more agile and better able to combine vast datasets on your own organization as well as those of relevant players in your market. Without the full context of what’s happening across your industry, you are left to make investment decisions based on shallow survey results and guesswork. External data is the natural foundation for the next generation of people analytics. The only question left: is your business ready to deliver it?”



Katarina Coppé

Chief Commercial Officer

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