

Elevating the Employee Experience

BY BEVERLY CROWELL

Employee engagement. What is it? Where do you start? And how do you go from a place where you are managing attrition to attrition managing you?

EY, a global professional services organization of member firms with more than 200,000 employees and operating in more than 150 countries, faced a problem common in the professional services industry: attrition. In past years, attrition of personnel from the assurance practice of the U.S. firm's central region started to trend upward. Today, the U.S. firm is seeing a decrease overall and, at some levels, more than a 10 percent decrease. What happened? Did people just stop leaving?



podcast

Attrition challenges led EY to re-evaluate its employee engagement and career-planning strategies.

No, but EY realized success when it began to understand what was behind the attrition in the first place.

Connecting the dots: Exit data and onboarding

“We started centralizing our exit data and connecting it to our onboarding process,” says Diana Kutz, a talent leader at EY. “By connecting these dots, we got ahead of risk. We also started conducting focus groups with our professionals on why they stay. Why people leave and why they stay is not always the same, so understanding both is equally important.”

Some of the data captured include whether professionals feel they are using their skills and if they are experiencing and doing the things EY described during the interview process. Personnel also were asked if they understand EY’s vision, how they fit into the vision, if they would recommend EY as a future employer to others, if they are satisfied with their decision to join EY—and would they make the same decision again, knowing what they know now.

Exit surveys also are telling. The information learned from these conversations fed into the company’s onboarding process, so EY can see at an individual level how one acclimates over a period of time. “It’s all about putting leading and lagging indicators together,” Kutz says.

The firm also started to track if an individual’s departure was a push or a pull. A push means EY had complete control over the turnover, and a pull means it did not.

A typical push could be the lack of honest feedback and passing the responsibility to someone else to deliver the performance feedback. A pull could be a situation where a professional leaves the firm to care for a sick relative or because of a spouse’s employment relocation to a region where EY does not have an office.

“We directionally look for our push to come down, which indicates our culture is moving in the right direction,” Kutz explains. “Since our journey began, we’ve seen our push come down over 15 percent and it directionally continues to come down over time,

which tells me we are moving our culture in the right direction.”

Next, EY introduced an engagement team survey called “Rate My Engagement,” which enables team members to share their experience at the engagement team level in four key areas: team culture, flexibility, client environment/engagement, and communications.

“Collecting these insights enabled us to understand trends at the engagement team level, where our professionals spend over 80 percent of their time in an average week,” Kutz notes. “Rate My Engagement also enabled our teams to focus on their unique needs as a collective team, providing greater ownership into the team’s experience.”

She adds: “Teams are recognizing engagement team efficiencies and, ultimately, achieving better business results, such as higher levels of retention that increases team continuity and other sustainable results.”

Looking back, the best part about Rate My Engagement is how the firm has been able to replicate it. What started as an idea from junior staff, adopted by regional leadership, has been rolled out rapidly across the firm and is expanding globally.

“Connecting the engagement team experience to our exit and onboarding data has given us a deeper appreciation for what impacts the experience for our people, while seeing a direct correlation to a team’s business results. It’s been incredibly powerful,” Kutz says.

JournEY Day

Collecting the data from all three sources also helped to inspire members of EY’s workforce who wanted to be a part of the solution. Their inspiration? JournEY Day.

JournEY Day is an annual event dedicated to focusing on key business drivers, learning, and critical issues facing the assurance practice of the U.S. firm’s central region. The theme for JournEY Day shifts each year and often is based on the pulse of the organization and what’s top of mind with EY professionals.

To take the pulse, EY pushes out regular surveys to professionals of its assurance practice, but not just any survey. It’s a gamified “morale



**EY'S CENTRAL
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thermometer” designed to help the organization understand how employees are feeling on a five-point scale. “The thermometer is pushed out to employees during busy season, arguably the most stressful time each year, so we can really gauge people’s sentiments,” Kutz explains.

“Our theme for 2015 focused on cars, so we featured a morale speedometer with the scale ranging from ‘My tank is empty’ to ‘Topped off and ready for the long haul.’” It turned out that the tank was empty for quite a few EY employees on the topic of planning and managing one’s career at EY, so career planning became the focus of JournEY Day in 2015. Leveraging the thermometer, EY follows up with team discussions on what the firm can stop, start, or continue doing. Those thoughts are centralized at the region level so top themes can be addressed. These meetings also allow for innovative ideas to be shared and, more importantly, implemented.

This year, leveraging the car theme, event organizers created and deployed a personal application for employees called “Me, MY experiences” in time for JournEY Day. The tool showcased the many experiences available to assurance professionals at EY and provided employees with a way to sort potential career and personal experiences in the

short-, medium-, and long-term categories.

At the same time—and because EY wants its professionals to envision their career journey—employees could rank how they were feeling along the way with road signs such as “Baby on Board,” “Dead End,” or “Green Light—Full Speed Ahead!” The tool enables consistent conversations between managers and their employees and a way to drive dialogue around many important topics.

The personal application was only the beginning. On JournEY Day, leaders and managers gathered face-to-face to focus on career planning and value. Some of the events of the day included:

- A team building activity that highlighted how a career in audit might look like. They developed a game that challenged employees along their career route, and participants could collect envelopes with tips, similar to tips one might gather from a mentor, to help them successfully navigate their journey.
- A panel discussion with boomerang employees (those who left the firm and returned), experienced hires, alumni, headhunters, and global exchange employees to allow for varying views in careers. “No two careers are alike, even

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if the same in title, so it's important to share stories of varied experiences as likely many of our professionals have similar questions or thoughts. Our message is 'Don't go it alone—have conversations, be curious,'" Kutz explains.

- Breakout sessions, by level, so that employees in each rank could see the next steps and get curious about the possibilities of their future with the firm.

Who am I and what are my options?

To further demonstrate the value of an EY career, the regional assurance group recently added a framework it has coined "Upnext," produced and developed by the group's professionals, that enables them to see the peripheral and upward view of the opportunities both inside and outside the firm, including the value of their experiences over time.

Accompanying the framework were monthly calls with rotating topics on the various options available at various points in an employee's career both inside and outside the firm to further develop and expand one's experiences over time. The topics range from internal service line opportunities, to other service line opportunities, to external opportunities such as joining a board.

Anyone interested can dial in and ask questions or just listen. This framework also helps assurance professionals update their "Me" diary and leads career conversations to better questions about what comes next.

"We are in the business of developing careers," Kutz says. "Building tomorrow's leaders today starts with transparency, which builds trust. We can either be a part of their thought process or not, and I'd prefer the former. My hope is that each professional can learn more about who they are and what their options are."

The winning formula

EY's quest to reduce attrition is working.

During the past few years, the firm's annual Global People Survey results show that EY's central region assurance group realized a 12-point increase in its employee engagement index with steady climbing results year over year. And this was achieved during a busy time of year in a highly regulated environment. In addition, the central region assurance group has realized a higher concentration, compared with history, of boomerangs returning to the firm.

So, what's at the core of EY's winning formula for increasing engagement and reducing attrition? The people.

"Our people have the answers," Kutz notes. "You just have to capitalize on the opportunity to get them involved." Leaders must set the tone and be catalysts for change, but their engagement needs to be fun, not forced. It's not always about what you do, but more about how you do it. And, when it comes to measuring success, look to build it into existing processes.

"You'll never be surprised once your analytics are built into the way you operate and offer accountability," says Kutz.

Finally, success at EY hinges on being consistent for the long haul.

"I am not claiming victory yet. We continue to learn by diving deeper into our success indicators through predictive analytics and other qualitative measures," explains Kutz. "More importantly, I believe in the power of our people having a voice in the business. Doing so creates an innovative culture that is fun and agile—it's our culture, it's our exceptional EY experience."

■ **Beverly Crowell** is executive vice president of Career Systems International and a contributing author to *The Talent Management Handbook* and *Coaching for Leadership: Writings on Leadership from the World's Greatest Coaches*; beverly.crowell@careersystemsintl.com.



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