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Interview starts

Paul Cabrera speaking

How do we leave the legacy? How do we create that experience where no matter how long or short someone's tenure is, they look back on it fondly of, wow, that was an incredible job. I felt amazing working there. I learned so much working there. I think trying to define that in this new way of working is going to be really interesting and super challenging.

Megan Wright speaking

If there's one thing Paul Cabrera knows, it's what makes a great experience. As Global Onboarding and Employee Experience Programs Manager at WhatsApp, he specializes in growing teams and engaging people through unique work experiences.

I'm Megan Wright and in this interview Paul joins me to discuss how the employee experience is changing as the lines between the professional and personal are increasingly blurred.

We'll also discuss the role and responsibility employers have to keep their people engaged and learning in a post-covid world.

Paul says, it's culture that lies at the heart of the matter as leaders start to think about what employees are craving most from their worklife experiences...

Paul Cabrera speaking

A lot of leaders such as myself, we've never really written down what is the microculture of the team that's directly impacted by my leadership style or directly impacted by the type of work? I give candidates and new hires the analogy of Facebook and WhatsApp and teams in general it's a large model that's a Russian Matryoshka doll of culture, right? Where it's a microculture within a slightly larger culture within a slightly larger one. And all these things are usually wrapped around a mission statement or a vision that's pretty bold in every team because of the work.

Feels a little bit different, but we're seeing that need and that want to feel more seen and have a higher degree of identification with the direct team rather than this broad stroke, large enterprise type of thing. And that's really hard to do. It's a really big challenge.

Megan Wright speaking

Yeah, absolutely. I note that recent Microsoft research showed that 41% of the global workforce is likely to consider leaving their current employer within the next year, which is astounding. So, what are some of the challenges, with that in mind, that you think organizations will really start to face when it comes to catering to these new employee experience needs?

Paul Cabrera speaking

I think it's really a massive exercise in how you program for inclusivity. And that means not only being inclusive of the different dimensions of diversity, equity and inclusion that have become such important topics in the past two years. But also, where those intersect with the workforce that you are hiring remotely. And are they going to be permanently remote? Are they going to be a hybrid employee where they're maybe in the office 30 to 50% of the week or a month? And how do you drive programming or social activities or panels of even just having a Q&A with senior leadership? How do you make that equally as accessible and impactful for someone that's in the office, as well as someone who's going to be watching it after the fact because they're streaming it or watching it live but are not able to feel the palpable tension or inspiration that comes with being in a room?

We need more direct line thought leadership around how do we grow employees while they're in your company or while they're at a longer tenure? We always focus a lot on the new hire experience which is usually the first six months. But afterwards how do you continually grow and develop your people? Which means that they are growing as a professional, which means you retain them? No one really wants to stay in a role where they've plateaued and they're not necessarily being challenged. And if so, there may be other factors, it's ease, they're growing a family, they have ulterior motives and weighty distractions from going out and finding a new role. So how do you convince them to stay? Provide them educational opportunities, certifications, stretch projects and growth. And that's really hard to do depending on the industry you're in, if your company is in a stage of hyper growth or maybe it's plateaued for the time being. I don't think there's any one particular way to continue to drive one area. I think it's a multifaceted problem. It's going to be really dependent on the stage of maturation the company's in. And it's a multi-faceted problem.

Megan Wright speaking

The Society for Human Resource Management did a survey recently which showed that two in three employers say that maintaining employee morale is such a challenge at the moment. We know that there have been higher instances in employee requests for mental health support. We know that wellbeing and burnout are high on the agenda and certainly a big challenge for a lot of these companies.

What are some of the things that employees are really starting to look at, when it comes to really their expectations, and the responsibility that they think their employer should be taking in this context?

Paul Cabrera speaking

I hear this work-life balance, and a few colleagues use work-life integration. People are not necessarily living to work, but working to live. And I think that's really important as we think about this trend of the great resignation, quote unquote, as we've all been forced to be at home, and forced to have internal monologues, and rectify where we are in our careers. And do we identify with where... Are we feeling compelled, or am I inspired to continue moving on? I look at the things and opportunities that are provided by my company, and where do those intersect? Are the motivations the same? All rhetorical questions I think we should all be answering ourselves. I think it would be foolish to look at this massive signal from the universe, and not inwardly reflect on, "Okay, where am I going after this?" Rather than just think that business is going to continue as usual.

Megan Wright speaking

Reflecting then on how the worklife experience has changed, what do you think has changed for the better? Where do the benefits lie for companies that get it right?

Paul Cabrera speaking

I think some of the benefits have been an opportunity to really think about the explicit cause and reason to ask someone to spend an hour or two in a video conference, in a VC. Whether that's a learning program, or an onboarding program, or an employee experience program.

I think you have to be really explicit around making it compelling for people. Being really obvious and here's what we're going to be doing. Here's where we could use your input rather than just thinking that the title of the meeting or the title of the session will drive someone to show up when, especially now, as we all continue to work from home, there are so many other competing factors. VC fatigue is very much so a thing.

And I think it's causing myself and my team to be really pragmatic about, is this something that we need them to do live? Is this something where they could be doing it asynchronously? Is this something that needs to be hosted? And then as we take on remote work, moving into 2022 and beyond, how do we continue to build for those different audience types?

We're thinking of remote employees as an additional site. How do we think about making sure that this is impactful for them and providing them the same material, the same opportunity to engage, the same context, which can be really hard as we're used to leaving a conference room and having that chitter chatter as you leave the room or in a hallway, or even just like swiping your badge to get into your building in the morning.

Megan Wright speaking

I know a lot of the focus has shifted to this remote working world and to what it will look like when a flexible or a hybrid model becomes the norm. To what extent has that also been forcing you though, to perhaps rethink the physical workspace? Are there different things that you're thinking about there that you will need to be able to cater for in a world where perhaps the majority or some of your workforce remains remote, but others will need to come into the office or to the workspace? And I guess to that point as well, how do you, in your role, ensure that the employee experience is consistent for those that are physically showing up still?

Paul Cabrera speaking

It's a great question and one that honestly keeps me up at night, especially the latter half of that. Where, how do we make sure that it's consistent? The physical space is something that I've seen some companies do really, really well. And I feel like they will adapt well to this. I think of Airbnb and if you've ever had the chance to go to their offices, it's a completely open working space. There are team areas, but you don't have an assigned desk. It's the antithesis of everyone having their own office or their own cubicle. And so I think as you have employees who may be in and out of the office sporadically over the course of a month, or over the course of a year, you're able to have that elastic model where say my entire team is here for two weeks.

Excellent, we have a space. And then they leave. And there's only a couple of us that are left we still have that same space. But how do you continue to take that to the next step where it's consistent? Similarly, something that we've been exploring, especially on my team, and the overall Facebook enterprise, is around where teamwork intersects with virtual reality.

It could be interesting to think about having team meetings in a virtual engagement space. And does that actually feel like you are tied to your team?

What do we think about this to remain consistent for those employees that are going to be remote or hybrid or full-time in-office, without it being extremely resource heavy? At this point, I feel like I could have an entire copy paste version of my team where one part of the team works on in-person. And the other part of the team works on virtual remote, and it's the same subject, but you need to

kind of have a dual modality and a dual development cycle for these types of things, just to ensure that it's consistent and it's being applied across the board and all employee types are being thought of equally. It's going to be really interesting.

Megan Wright speaking

And finally, Paul, just to draw together a lot of what we've been talking about, but also reflecting on your own background and experience and all of the trends you've seen in this space. What are you most excited for in the coming 12 to 18 months? What are some of the things that you're perhaps seeing come to the fore now, in terms of employee experience, that really get you excited for what's to come?

Paul Cabrera speaking

I'm most excited by the challenge, and the opportunity to experiment. Looking at my history, I was at Virgin America, a small domestic US airline, for a good seven years of my career. The Virgin brand and the culture is pervasive, and it really gets under your skin. And that still resonates with me to this day, having been gone from that organization for a number of years.

But I think the challenge of that and trying to redefine that employee experience so that culture is still pervasive, how do we leave the legacy? How do we create that experience where no matter how long or short someone's tenure is, with WhatsApp or Facebook or any other organization, they look back on it fondly of, wow, that was an incredible job. I felt amazing working there. I learned so much working there. And so I think trying to define that in this new way of working is going to be really interesting and super challenging.

Again, because we don't know what we don't know, the technology is not necessarily there, and so what are the creative ways that we can try and elicit that response and elicit that feeling, is really interesting to me. And then measure it. How long does someone stay after they go back to the office and this is normalized at this point, over the next 24, 36 months? And getting to define that experience for them, where they look back on their time with my organization and say, "Wow. That was amazing. That was a place that I would love to work again." Or ask someone like, "Hey, you should work there. That was a really cool experience." Same thing from my experience at Virgin, that's exactly how I felt. And I look back on it fondly, the same thing. I want someone to look back on their time at WhatsApp fondly, the same way that I do.

Megan Wright speaking

I think that's a really good point and definitely a wonderful note to end on. So, Paul, thank you very much for your time today.

Paul Cabrera speaking

My pleasure. This was awesome.

Megan Wright speaking

This interview is part of Sodexo's Experience Next campaign. It is produced by Longitude, a Financial Times company, in partnership with Sodexo.

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