

Becoming a Talent Magnet by Making Work Enjoyable

With Debbie Lovich

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August 21, 2025



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The phrase “war for talent” sets the wrong dynamic between employers and employees. Strategy and finance follow linear models; people do not. What motivates one person may discourage another.

Over the past two decades, the fastest-growing companies were those that treated customers as central to their strategy. Yet employees are still treated as costs. The next wave of highly successful companies will be those that give employees the same importance as customers and shareholders.

How do you create energy in the right direction across thousands of individuals, each with their own rhythms and needs, while working with leaders focused on efficiency?

01 RADICAL EMPLOYEE CENTRICITY

Build a partnership

Reframe the war mindset. War creates a transactional, us-versus-them relationship that erodes trust and drains energy. For example, in transactional environments, transformations are experienced by employees as a threat: learn something new or lose your job.

Consider the employee relationship as a partnership to create conditions where everyone pulls in the same direction. The organization invests in making employees happier, more capable, and more energized. Employees in return give their best to make the organization better and more successful.

CASE STUDY

Design employee tools by segment

While rolling out generative AI tools for administrative staff, BCG identified three broad segments of employees. A large group sought to learn and advance quickly, drawn to new tools. Another group took pride in the craft of administration and valued the human contact, which made them wary of automation. A small group was disengaged, mainly there for the pay.

Adoption required different approaches. For scheduling, the team redesigned the tool to automate availability checks while leaving the art of “landing the meeting” to the human. The change respected what each segment valued, increased adoption, and delivered real productivity benefits without eroding pride in the work.

Like customers choose where to spend, employees choose every day how much energy to bring. Treating employees as customers opens space for solving recruitment and retention challenges with creativity rather than cost.

02 EMPLOYEES AS CUSTOMERS

Measure the employee experience

It can be uncomfortable to challenge assumptions or opinions. You already track efficiency and productivity for shareholders. You likely have teams working on personalization, innovation, segmentation, journeys, and analytics to strengthen customer insight. Turn that same capability toward your workforce. Track enjoyment and turnover with the same discipline you bring to customer metrics.

Segment your workforce

Segment employees as you do customers. Meet each segment with the right message and support.

For example, when you study employee profiles, you will find groups that value learning and growth and are eager to try new ways of working. Others prefer to wait until the kinks are worked out. Identify the pioneers and bring them into new initiatives early.

FURTHER READING

[Enjoying Work Matters](#)

[Does Your Hybrid
Strategy Need to
Change?](#)

Design for workplace fit

You do not build a product and assume customers will come. You think first about the customer and design around the product market fit. Apply the same logic to employees by designing for workplace fit.

A competitive salary matters, but it is not enough to attract and keep the best. Design the workplace and the work based on who you want to thrive there.

03 RETENTION AND PERFORMANCE

Prioritize enjoyment over engagement

Engagement is abstract. Enjoyment is intuitive and personal. Ask whether people enjoy their work and why. What creates enjoyment varies by person and by life stage.

Research shows that employees who enjoy their work are less than half as likely to quit or be looking for a new job, and two to four times as likely to feel motivated to give their best effort. Enjoyment unlocks tangible value. For example, in retail, where turnover can reach 100 percent, Costco's employee turnover is about 7 percent.

Measure emotional drivers

If you ask people what they want, they often answer with pay, which makes motivating the workforce unprofitable if interpreted too literally. Pay matters, especially at the point of attraction. But deeper analysis shows that retention is driven by emotional benefits such as being treated fairly, enjoying the work, and feeling supported.

Measure the wants and needs of your employees through more sophisticated analysis. You will find many non-financial levers to strengthen your relationship with employees.

Recognize and coach

Recognize good work publicly. Coach privately and promptly when work misses the mark. Treat each person as you would a client. People choose every day how much energy to bring. Positive reinforcement builds momentum and raises the standard for the whole team.

Let managers design hybrid

Only 20 percent of jobs globally are hybrid-capable, though the share is higher in service economies. For office work, hybrid is the right answer when done well, but you must avoid a uniform policy from the top. Set clear guardrails, then let team leaders design the pattern of work for their teams based on the task, team makeup, and individual context. Equip managers to motivate, coach, and develop hybrid teams. Hold them accountable for impact and results rather than inputs or volume.

04 AGENCY

Move ownership from HR to managers

Emotional benefits are delivered in day-to-day work, not through HR programs. HR plays an important role, but its influence on motivation is limited by its periodic contact points such as onboarding and performance reviews.

Make managers responsible for the employee experience and equip them to deliver it.

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