

Ogilvy

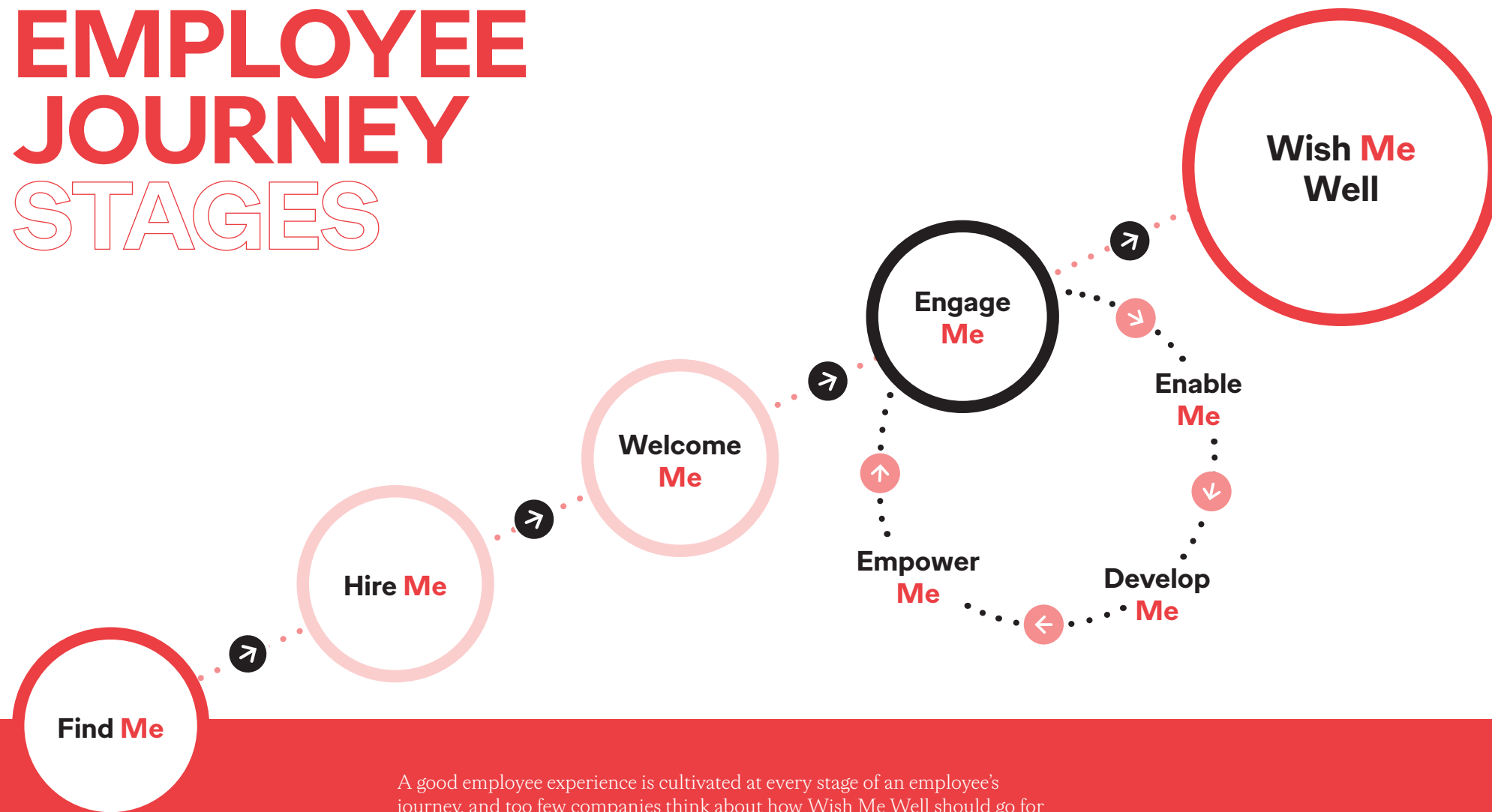
IMPROVING  
THE **EX** IN  
“**EXIT**”

# INTRODUCTION

As our persistently unconventional economy shifts with every fluctuation in interest rates, the news and the market, we keep seeing deep reductions in the workforce, particularly in tech. In 2023, more than 191,000 workers at U.S.-based tech companies were laid off,<sup>1</sup> spanning massive organizations such as Google and Microsoft all the way down to smaller startups. Add in the potential for disruption from new technologies such as generative artificial intelligence (AI) and shifting political headwinds, and the trauma of a mass exodus on both those leaving and those who stay is tough to ignore.

Although the majority of exits are not layoffs—66 percent of exits in November 2023 were voluntary separations<sup>2</sup>—these very public reductions in workforce highlight a key moment in the employee experience (EX) that often gets ignored: the way to handle things when employees leave. We call that key stage of the employee journey *Wish Me Well*, which, for most employee departures, happens one voluntary quit at a time. And too often, companies aren't prepared to make the most of this moment. Worse, they handle it in ways that damage the experience for more than those leaving.

# EMPLOYEE JOURNEY STAGES



## Learning from letting go

“The Great Resignation” fears of 2021 and 2022 didn’t come to pass. However, millions of workers quit their jobs last year, representing a major opportunity to capture key performance data.

Through November 2023,

**41.4**  
**million**  
workers quit their jobs.<sup>3</sup>

A good employee experience is cultivated at every stage of an employee’s journey, and too few companies think about how Wish Me Well should go for employees leaving the organization. Handling exits shouldn’t just be a job for HR—it’s a key component of your employment strategy as well as your brand. This paper explores the ways in which businesses benefit from leaning in and learning from employee departures, which they should take as seriously as bringing them on board. Treating this stage of the employee experience with creativity and, most important, humanity delivers brand insights and operational benefits that could otherwise be lost.

# THE VALUE OF EXIT DATA

## GETTING YOUR STRATEGY RIGHT LEADS TO GREAT DATA ABOUT HOW YOUR BUSINESS OPERATES

Turnover isn't ideal, but it is constant and a point in every employee's experience with your company. The goal is to mitigate the downside. Ask probing questions to uncover insights on diverse topics such as operations, culture, ambitions and workflow. In fact, you may even get some competitive intelligence that you wouldn't otherwise have been able to get and therefore refine your retention strategy. "Rather than dismissing employee feedback or viewing exit interviews as a rote but required process," says performance management software company Lattice, "HR teams have the chance to look for trends and develop employee engagement strategies."<sup>4</sup>

However, just gathering the data isn't enough—taking action is key. One employee quitting doesn't necessarily indicate a problem, but you may find patterns in the data that expose real issues for future retention. There are great opportunities to gather data with empathy and an eye toward understanding the bigger story through data.

- *Create a multimodal data ecosystem:* Use surveys, gather qualitative findings and engage the departing employee's manager to get a better understanding of the day-to-day EX.
- *Validate outliers with team members:* Collect top-line insights from exit data to determine whether other team members are dealing with the same issues.
- *Collaborate with HR teams and leadership:* Create a culture of sharing, and build toward a transparent, proactive change team.

You may find incremental improvements to make to nearly every aspect of the employee experience, demonstrating your commitment to growth and improvement, a key determinant in the power of your employer brand.

## JUST-IN-TIME INSIGHT INTO YOUR OPERATIONS

In addition to highlighting potential managerial issues, an effective exit interview allows employees to discuss organizational and workflow challenges they may not have been comfortable addressing previously. Performing an analysis of the reason for departure also gives you an opportunity to rethink processes and to consider implications for the role entirely: Does this role truly drive the value that was expected? Could some of the workload be absorbed by other employees without disruption or even to improve the overall experience of getting the job done? Even better, could you use this as an opportunity to help star performers transition to more prominent positions to demonstrate their value and help progress their career trajectory?

Every exit doesn't necessitate a crisis and immediate need for a backfill. Carefully examining the reasons for an employee leaving is an opportunity to evaluate ways to improve the remaining team, processes and business needs. And using a period of disruption to improve the EX for your other team members builds employee and brand loyalty.

# WHY SAYING GOODBYE THE RIGHT WAY MATTERS

Employees who have a positive exit experience are

**2.9**  
times more  
likely

to recommend their organization to others than are those who have neutral or negative experiences.<sup>5</sup>

## TURN FORMER EMPLOYEES INTO INFORMAL RECRUITERS

Being courteous, gracious and thoughtful when your employees leave isn't just the right thing to do—it's also good business. Former employees can become many things: new customers, business partners or resources. They can also become brand ambassadors who help you fill your talent needs.

Your people are one of your greatest business assets, and they can be one of your greatest brand assets, too. Although a great exit interview can't overcome every deficit, it can help star performers direct prospects to your company, which can be a great benefit to you: Aptitude Research found that referrals have a 2X improvement in first-year retention and a 24 percent improvement in candidate experience.<sup>6</sup>

Improving the experience and demonstrating respect for your exiting employees could be an open door to new sources of talent.

## YOU'RE STILL BUILDING YOUR EMPLOYER BRAND AT "GOODBYE"

Paying attention to the exit experience reinforces what your brand stands for, even for people on the way out. It's a last opportunity to live the company's purpose, show how the employee contributed to it and explain how his or her feedback will help the organization continue to refine and fulfill its purpose. Because prospective employees read reviews to look for companies that align with their personal values, the voice of previous employees on sites such as Glassdoor and Indeed can play a significant role in how prospects view your company. And voices writing from a positive last experience with your brand can make a difference to your talent market.

## FOCUS GROUP OF ONE

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Many Gen Zers and millennials make career decisions based on their values and want to be empowered to drive change within their organizations.<sup>7</sup> With every exit, employer brands have a focus group of one on which to build deeper understanding of these employee expectations. Employees who leave because they feel misaligned with how your company operates are a precious source of knowledge because one thing is almost certain: There are current employees who feel the same misalignment.

It's true that employees could simply have grown apart from the company's purpose, or, as noted previously, their misalignment could be a red flag of addressable systemic issues. But the misalignment could also be a simple indicator that better vision-setting and storytelling might be in order. Companies that take the opportunity to probe the concerns of an exiting employee may find that they can identify and often address employer brand issues with refreshed, more active communication.

More than  
**66%**

of Gen Zers say it's important for companies to value their opinions.<sup>8</sup>

## ENERGETIC EXITS ARE THE BEST ANTIDOTE TO DREAD

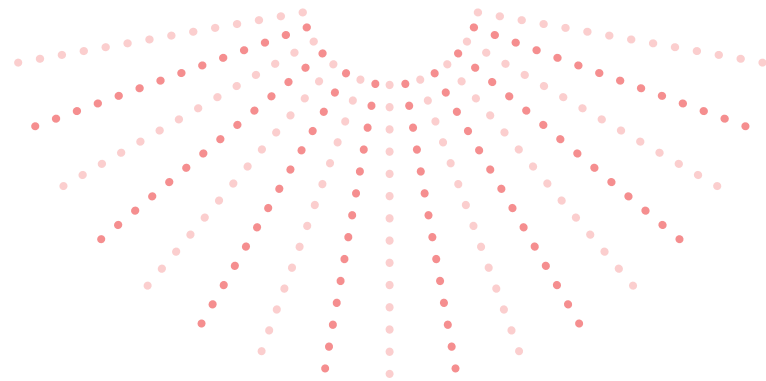
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Someone's exit can be sad news for at least a few, if not a great many. Treating your departing employees with grace, respect and, when possible, even celebration can have positive downstream effects on the rest of your team who will still be logging in the next day. Demonstrating a true understanding of a former team member's value helps alleviate concerns for those who remain.

Honor the past impact, and talk about the loss as well as the future that can be built on the foundation of that person's contributions. You'll be able to reduce the likelihood of additional downstream issues such as loss of productivity, depleted morale or, even worse, more turnover by reassuring your remaining employees that issues created or uncovered by the exit have been acknowledged. Every exit is an opportunity to build psychologically safe teams that communicate more freely, perform better and feel comfortable taking the risks necessary to stay innovative.

**“A team member's departure can be a significant blow to employee morale, as losing a friend and colleague leaves a hole in the team dynamic. On top of that, employees may begin to look for problems; if someone they trust and respect decided to leave, should they consider it, too?”<sup>9</sup>**

# CULTIVATE CONTINUING CONNECTION



## CLOSE THE CHAPTER, BUT NOT THE DOOR

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Although some leaders and managers may struggle with the idea of bringing back employees who take their skills elsewhere, the advantages to rehiring former employees are clear—and the trend is increasing: According to LinkedIn data, boomerang employees accounted for 4.5 percent of all new hires among companies on LinkedIn in 2021, up from 3.9 percent in 2019.<sup>10</sup>

Acting impulsively, effectively kicking employees out when they submit a resignation, should not be part of your typical exit strategy. In a tight talent marketplace, it's important to think long term. Leaving space for a possible return is always a good idea, and it starts by asking the right questions at the exit. Take the opportunity to inform retention strategies by asking employees under what circumstances they would consider returning.

The right questions can lead to a wealth of free EX intelligence. And if a boomerang does return, you may find added benefits to your team. Their new skills or processes can improve productivity, and having an existing grasp of your culture and structure directly lowers the cost and time associated with onboarding.

“It’s good to know what factors would lure a highly skilled professional back into the fold. ... Dig deeper with follow-up hypothetical scenarios regarding pay, perks, flexible scheduling and greater responsibilities.”<sup>11</sup>

## CREATE AN ALUMNI NETWORK

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Forward-thinking institutions create and maintain opportunities to stay connected with former employees through a range of activities. And why not? The odds are very good that your former employees still have friends at your company. Formalizing an alumni strategy is a prime opportunity for engaging your previous talent pool.


Consider how you can leverage existing activities, webinars or events to bring former employees into the mix and maximize your return on investment as well as engender positive feelings about your organization.

Robust alumni programming for former employees “provides opportunities for meaningful, ongoing engagement with both the organization and fellow alumni, thereby strengthening their connection to the company and maintaining an ongoing relationship.”<sup>12</sup>

Layoffs and voluntary resignations are part of doing business at every organization. Although this stage of the employee experience isn't as direct or measurable in its impact to operations in the ways infrastructure or professional development may be, turnover costs are extensive, in both bottom-line impact and psychological effects on the team. It benefits your organization to consider how it makes the best of every exit.

## How Ogilvy can help

Ogilvy's Employee Experience practice can help your organization make Wish Me Well a critical and positive component of your employee experience strategy.



**Stephen Partridge** is a Marketing Strategy Director for Ogilvy's Employee Experience practice based in Denver, Colorado. As an "Ogilvy boomerang" himself, he focuses on aligning his clients' business goals with the needs of their employees: marketing, sales, customer service, and even ensuring that internal teams share and live their company's vision and values. As a certified change management practitioner and self-admitted lover of deep technology, Stephen seeks to empower businesses and their employees with the processes and tools that enable and elevate the employee experience and, ultimately, the brand. In his free time, Stephen looks for new sauce recipes, reads too much news and not enough new books, and is slowly accruing fly fishing gear to take advantage of the beautiful Colorado landscape.

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