

# The Intangible Things Employees Want from Employers

— Anne Bahr Thompson

Managing employee-employer relationship is quite a challenge in these times. Employees expressing opinion about their employer on social media has an instant effect on the firm's reputation. Several generations of workers are employed simultaneously, with each having different expectations from their employees. Thus, the larger question that emerges is what kind of relationships should businesses foster with their employees? This research based on quantitative and qualitative studies of several employee cohorts in the USA, suggests that cultivating truthful employee relationships is similar to cultivating loyal customers. This summary presents the key observations made in the article.

## “Me” to “We” Continuum

Just like customers who first have "me-first" orientation, i.e. "satisfy my wants and needs first" and then culminate into a "we" orientation, i.e. "address issues critical to my community and larger world" (like sustainability), employees also look for a broader meaning of their relationships with their employers. Employers are not just "companies" but are characterized as "friends, family (or even enemies)" whom employees want to focus on things that they care for. The author suggests that a satisfying employee-employer relationship straddles the entire "me to we" continuum. Therefore, the preferred employer is the one that helps the employee achieve his/ her "me" (personal) goal while simultaneously

working together to resolve generalized "we" issues as well. Between the two extremes, employers can enrich the lives of employees and larger communities in a number of ways (see Figure 1).

1 ←	2	3	4	5 →
Me	Mine	Ours	Us	We
<i>Trust</i>	<i>Enrich -ment</i>	<i>Respon -sibility</i>	<i>Commu -nity</i>	<i>Contrib -ution</i>
Don't Let Me Down	Enhance Daily Life	Behave Fairly	Connect Me	Make me bigger than I am

**Figure 1. The “Me” to “We” Continuum:** Five ways firms can foster better relationships with employees.

Best employers move along the entire spectrum focused on not only employees' individual needs but also offering solutions to the larger problems that employees care for.

The intangibles that employees look for are the following:

**1. Trust—Don't let me down:** Employees want to work for employers they can trust. This is a firm that lives up to its promise and delivers value for "me" like, fair pay, acknowledgement of job executed well and policies contributing to healthy, positive and less-stressed work environment.

## **2. Enrichment—Enhance daily life:**

Work-life balance was rated high across all groups of employees but different cohorts wanted different things from their employers. For instance, the senior most employees looked for recognition of individual strengths, middle-aged cohort wanted routine tasks to be made easier to accomplish while the younger most cohort wanted organizational support for personal development and well-being.

**3. Responsibility—Behave fairly:** Across all categories, employees expected their employers to treat others fairly and be ethical and proactive in business dealings with employees, suppliers, business partners and other stakeholders. If the business has shortcomings on these fronts, employees want their employers to accept the same and make sincere efforts to improve rather than being duplicitous or in denial.

**4. Community—Connect me:** Employees look for a sense of 'belonging' and a work culture that reflects their values. In that sense, the firm they work for is a 'badge of honour' that communicates who and what they are to the people they meet (family, friends and others). While seniors seek to work with teammates, middle-aged look to form friendships with co-workers and youngsters aim to spend time in a cohesive and supportive environment that enriches them. They look to connect with friends who share their values and interests not just job functions or departments.

**5. Contribution—Make me bigger than I am:** Employees want to work for firms that

care for the larger causes and contribute to communities for whom they are concerned. However, they do not want their employers to be doing so with overt political intentions. They look at their employers to address and find solutions to society's challenges, in much the same way as they look to the brands they buy.

Through these intangibles, employees seek from their employers a much larger meaning for their jobs. Hence, ranging from immediate individual benefits to larger societal benefits, there are multiple intangibles that employers can offer to attract talented individuals.

## **Practical Implications**

The key practical implication of the study for family firms is that it pays to develop holistic relationships with employees, giving due weightage to the intangibles that employees look for, in their employer. Family firms would do well if they provide opportunities to employees to develop and grow themselves to their full potential. Instead of undertaking one-off initiatives for employees, it is better to create a sense of shared responsibility across the business, which would provide a richer meaning to the employees. Another implication is that family firms must focus on building mutual understanding and respect between its employees and the business. This will cultivate loyalty in the workforce.

Adopting the suggested measures will ensure that the employees and the firm mutually benefit from the relationship.

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(<https://hbr.org/2015/12/the-intangible-things-employees-want-from-employers>)