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Special Issue of California Management Review

Competing on Employee Centricity
How Organizations Achieve Competitive Advantage by Focusing on Employees

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THE FOCUS OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Over the past few decades, leading companies have transitioned from a product-centric to a customer-centric orientation (Fader, 2020). This shift was driven by heightened competition in many markets and by the availability of rich data that enabled companies to refine their value proposition and segment customers in nuanced ways (Shah et al., 2006). We now have an extensive scholarly and managerial literature that documents how managers collect customer insights, ideate based on their findings, and translate improved customer experiences into business performance (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Payne, Frow, & Eggert, 2017; Oberholzer-Gee, 2021).

Today, a similar transformation is underway inside organizations. Companies are beginning to apply the principles of customer-centricity to attract, engage and retain employees (Anicich and Lindsley, 2024). Analogous to customers, employees are increasingly seen as stakeholders whose diverse needs and personal circumstances offer ample opportunity for value creation. In a world where many individuals seek work experiences that align with their motivations and values (Cassar & Meier, 2018; Qualtrics, 2022), companies can gain a competitive advantage in competition for talent by developing attractive employee value propositions (Bernstein, Horn and Moesta, 2024; Minchington, 2010). Ideally, these propositions reflect what employees value in their work (Buckingham, 2022; Maestas et al., 2023; Burbano, Padilla, & Meier, 2024) and their willingness to trade off better work environments and compensation (Sockin, 2022).

There is considerable evidence that employee-centric companies outperform their peers (Pfeffer, 1994; Becker & Huselid, 1998; Jiang et al., 2012; Meier, 2024). For example, finely tailored employment practices (Lepak & Snell, 1999; Ton, 2014), high-involvement work

systems (Ichniowski et al., 1996), as well as human-centered tech integrations (Cimini et al., 2022; Schoenherr, Speier-Pero & Niu, 2022) all raise employee productivity and corporate financial performance. Importantly, these gains do not come from universal best practices, but from fit—the alignment of human resource strategy and firm context—as well as complementarities across HR practices (Wright & McMahan, 1992; Delery & Doty, 1996; Boxall & Purcell, 2003). Employee value propositions that facilitate the sorting of talent across companies appear particularly effective (Huselid, 1995). Zappos' incentive for new hires to leave after training (Frei et al., 2019), culture match tools (Cai, 2023), and purpose-based matching (Ashraf et al., 2025) all demonstrate the power of employee segmentation.

Macro trends accelerate the shift towards employee centricity. The relevant trends include talent shortages in specific sectors, declining fertility rates that result in shrinking workforces, a prolonged expansionary period with low unemployment in the United States, and the upheavals due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which revealed both the fragility of employee engagement and the importance of work-life integration (Kniffin et al., 2021).

Despite all of this, the promise of employee centricity, the idea that employees can choose from clearly differentiated value propositions put forward by companies that leverage their position in the market for talent to increase business performance, remains largely unfulfilled. While a small number of pioneering firms have reimaged the employee experience, most companies have made minimal progress (Fuller and Raman, 2023; Ton 2023). The consequences are stark. As of 2024, less than a quarter of employees worldwide are engaged at work. The Great Resignation in particular revealed deep structural issues in how workers relate to their jobs (Gallup, 2023 & 2025; Fuller & Kerr, 2022).

Perhaps most notably, there is still little differentiation in companies' value proposition for their employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Mortensen and Edmondson, 2023.) “Employer value propositions have gone from ‘a new way of thinking about how we attract and hire talent’ to ‘the generic platitudes we send to make us look good,’” laments HR consultant James Ellis (2024). This is all the more surprising because, in the context of customers, both academic research and company experience show that it is differentiation that allows companies to capture a fraction of the value they create for their stakeholders (Brandenberger & Stuart, 1996.) But in the employee domain, true differentiation remains rare (Bhatia & Meier, 2025). In fact, in most companies, HR practices reflect the fashions of the day and best-practice thinking, which yield limited competitive distinction. Why has it been so challenging to formulate differentiated HR strategies?

We observe a number of obstacles. A first is that many companies know little about the preferences of their workforce. Almost a third collect no information other than basic demographics. Only 50% measure job satisfaction, a quarter know levels of stress (De Neve and Ward, 2025). And what little companies do know is not often translated into changes in actual work practices (Burris et al. 2024; Pralong, 2025). Second, companies struggle to control the experience that employees have at work (Lazear, Shaw & Stanton, 2015; Gibbons & Henderson, 2012). Instead, it is individual executives and direct supervisors who largely determine the work experience of their teams. Looking at the variation in engagement scores

across business units, Gallup finds that 70% of that variation is due to individual managers (2015). Not surprisingly, then, a majority of workers who leave their jobs report quitting because of their manager (Gallup, 2015; Development Dimensions International, 2019). Third, even if companies offered predictable employee value propositions, making these promises credible to prospective employees is difficult because jobs are experience goods. Their value becomes clear only after consumption. While job review sites provide additional information, posts at sites like Glassdoor and Indeed likely suffer from bias and limited credibility, one reason why job reviews have a more limited impact on job seekers compared to the influence of product reviews on consumers (Sockin & Sojourner, 2023; Ward, 2020; Donati, 2022).

In the absence of differentiated employee value propositions, job seekers first and foremost look to compensation when they judge the attractiveness of a particular job opening (De Neve and Ward, 2025). This is problematic for employees and companies. Workers turn out to be wrong—compensation is not the main determinant of their job satisfaction (De Neve and Ward, 2025)—and companies, forced to compete on compensation, suffer poorer financial performance. If managers are limited in their ability to predict the quality of the match between applicants and open positions, competing on compensation also diminishes valuable selection effects. Why? Because everyone likes money, making compensation a particularly dull instrument in the selection of talent. As a focus on compensation increases the heterogeneity of workforces, developing a sharper employee value proposition becomes even more challenging because there will always be some groups that reject the implied trade-offs. The current debates of hybrid work policies illustrate this dynamic. In a heterogeneous workforce, there is no policy that is welcomed by everyone (Yeke & Özveren, 2024). Forgoing selection effects at the point of talent entry has grave consequences for the prospects of formulating a sharply differentiated human resource strategy.

Taking a page out of the customer centricity book, personalization appears a natural response to diverse workforces that resist uniform policies. As companies collect more employee data and develop better algorithms to manage their workforces, many aspects of work can be personalized (Ganatra & Pandya, 2023; Lovich et al., 2024; Lovich et al., 2025)). At this point, we know very little about the consequences of such personalization for employee productivity and overall business performance. One concern is that tailoring work experiences to individual preferences might trigger fairness concerns, especially if highly visible elements such as flexibility or career growth opportunities are customized (Lambert et al., 2023). A second concern is the tension between personalization and differentiation. If an employee's work experience becomes perfectly personalized, companies will look undifferentiated, heightening the role of compensation in the competition for talent.

With this special issue of the California Management Review, we hope to

- **showcase programs and initiatives at the cutting edge of employee-centric human resource management**, including specific examples from leading firms that illustrate the performance consequences of employee centricity;

- advance the HR conversation from one that is focused on best practices to a discussion of **how companies can achieve sustainable differentiation in their employee value propositions**, encouraging more deliberate strategic thinking;
- **provide intellectual support and encouragement to executives and HR leaders** who are exploring the possibility of developing distinctive, employee-centric strategies.

TOPICS OF INTEREST

The topics below are intended to highlight key domains in which employee-centric strategies can shape organizational performance, managerial decision-making, and employee outcomes. Across these areas, we are especially interested in research that examines how organizations move from generic “best practices” toward differentiated approaches, and how leaders navigate the associated strategic, ethical, and operational trade-offs.

To meet these objectives, we hope to draw on the work of a broad, interdisciplinary set of scholars and practitioners, including those who do not traditionally focus on human resource management but can contribute relevant ideas from adjacent domains such as marketing, behavioral economics, organizational design, technology, and strategy. Relevant themes include but are not limited to the following:

1. Creating Employee Value Propositions

- What are examples of companies that have chosen a clearly differentiated employee value proposition that sets them apart from the competition? What theories and frameworks explain how companies choose these points of differentiation?
- In competition for customers, many companies differentiate along dimensions that are appealing to some but not to all customers. By contrast, in competition for employees, most companies choose value propositions that are universally appealing (for example, “We do ‘respect’ better than anyone else.”). What explains this difference?
- What are the consequences of making compensation the focal point of an employee value proposition? Do companies that emphasize generous pay and benefits attract specific groups of employees? What opportunities and challenges present themselves in organizations with compensation-focused workforces?

2. Applying Marketing Techniques to HR

- How do companies use marketing tools to enhance the employee experience? Which experiential marketing techniques are most effective in the work context?
- What are the different ways companies capture employee insights? How do they act on them and what is the impact on engagement and performance?

- What is the effect of increased transparency around workplace conditions on potential employees' decision-making? What types of information do job candidates consider, and how does this influence their behavior?

3. Variation in Engagement Across Teams

- What factors drive the often-substantial variation in employee engagement and job satisfaction across teams in the same company?
- Is the variation in engagement and job satisfaction linked to overall productivity and company financial success?
- Do executives and HR teams seek to limit the variation in engagement and satisfaction? What are their motivations to do so? What interventions show promise?

4. Ethical and Fairness Considerations in Varied Work Environments

- How do employees perceive and evaluate inequalities in non-monetary job attributes, such as flexibility or career development paths?
- Do employees perceive inequality in non-monetary attributes differently from wage inequality?
- What are the ethics and fairness considerations in moving away from a one-size-fits-all work environment to a personalized one?

5. The Future of Personalized Work Experience in the Face of New Technologies

- How can employee-centric design drive successful human-machine collaboration in the workplace?
- How can technology be used to improve the employee experience?
- How does the role of HR and people leaders change in the age of AI?

Managerial Implications

We especially welcome submissions that translate research on employee centricity into clear guidance for leaders and HR practitioners. Strong papers should highlight how their insights help organizations design, implement, and sustain differentiated employee value propositions. Relevant questions include but are not limited to:

- What frameworks or tools can managers use to translate employee insights into distinctive and credible value propositions?
- How can leaders navigate trade-offs—such as personalization vs. fairness or flexibility vs. coordination—when designing employee-centric practices?
- What organizational structures, metrics, or processes help companies move from generic “best practices” to differentiated people strategies that support business performance?
- Do the skills of executives have to change to lead employee-centric organizations?

SUBMISSION PROCESS AND TIMELINE:

Please review this section carefully. We welcome submissions from any disciplinary or methodological background. California Management Review publishes evidence-based articles that offer actionable insights for practicing managers while advancing theory. Successful manuscripts will

- employ rigorous qualitative or quantitative methods;
- identify the purpose and motivation of the study;
- state the particular management or leadership issues addressed;
- clearly express the contexts in which phenomena are examined;
- integrate cross-disciplinary perspectives;
- show the relevance of the study for practitioners by providing clear, prescriptive advice for executives, boards, policymakers, or other stakeholders;
- communicate in an engaging, accessible style consistent with CMR standards (read submission guidelines at <https://cmr.berkeley.edu/resources/submit/> and find sample CMR articles at <https://cmr.berkeley.edu/resources/sample-articles/>).

Initial submission: Submit your manuscript no later than June 1, 2026 to [CMR's Online Submission Portal: https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/uc-cmr](#)

Submissions should be 5,000–8,000 words (excluding charts, tables, figures, and end notes), double-spaced, 12-point font. and include a one-page cover letter that summarizes

- Author information
- Purpose and research question
- Alignment with the special-issue theme
- Managerial and scholarly relevance
- Intended contribution and impact

Editorial screening: The guest editors will review all submissions to select approximately twelve papers with the greatest potential for resulting in high impact, published articles. Authors of papers not selected will receive a formal decision letter no later than June 20, 2026.

Peer review: Selected papers will undergo CMR's formal, double-blind review process. Please note that while Guest Editors make publication recommendations, all final decisions rest with the CMR Editorial Team.

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