Inside Out The Experience eZine

FROM THE CREATORS OF THE GET SMART PLATFORM AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2025

Workplace Culture

The hidden engine of customer experience

What your team

REALLY WANTS

...and it's not just more money

Frontline Flex

Practical steps to support flexibility on the ground

From ice to insights at Fox Glacier Guiding

Inside Out

The Experience eZine

Contents

- Workplace culture: The hidden engine room of Customer Experience
- **07** From the ice to insights, how Fox Glacier Guiding charts the course with team input
- 10 Frontline Flex—practical steps to support flexibility on the ground
- 14 What your team really wants, and it's not just more money
- Big lessons, small teams. People strategy advice by Tahlia Mahan of NZ Rugby
- 20 Moments that matter and how to nail them



From the Editor's desk

Here we are! The second edition of **Inside Out.** In this issue we're digging into what it really means to create a great experience for the people who power your business (and your customer experience!), your team.

From life on the ice with Fox Glacier Guides to behind the scenes at NZ Rugby, we share real stories and practical ideas about culture, flexibility, and what really matters at work.

Let me know what you think. Enjoy the read!

Samantha Howarth

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Workplace culture: the hidden engine room of Customer Experience

When we talk about delivering a great customer experience, most of us think of the obvious things first: speedy service, friendly staff, a clean space, a smooth process. But what often gets missed is what's powering all of that behind the scenes: **your workplace culture.**

Picture this. You're on a long road trip. You pull into two different service stations two hours apart.

At the first, the attendant barely glances up, mumbling through your transaction. The coffee is lukewarm, the restroom door doesn't lock, and there's a low hum of tension in the air, as if everyone is waiting for a shift to end that hasn't really begun. You leave annoyed, wondering why you even bothered stopping.

At the second stop, you're greeted with a genuine smile. The barista makes small talk while preparing your order. The music is upbeat, the floor is clean, and even the other customers seem lighter somehow. You drive off feeling better than when you arrived.

Same job. Same type of service. Vastly different experiences.

What's the difference? More often than not, it's what's happening behind the scenes, in the culture of the workplace.

The Customer Experience is the tip of the iceberg

Customer experience (CX) is often thought of as the frontline, the smiles, the service, the ease of a transaction. But in reality, what customers experience is only the visible tip of a much larger iceberg. Beneath the surface lies employee experience (EX) the attitudes, values, support systems, and workplace culture that shape how employees show up every day.

In other words, CX is the output. EX is the engine.
And like any engine, if you neglect it, things start to break down.

The invisible thread between employees and customers

Let's go back to our two service station scenarios.

The first attendant, disengaged and distant, may be working under a manager who doesn't listen. Perhaps the team is understaffed, underappreciated, and operating in a culture of blame. They might have had three complaints before you walked in and no one to help them handle it. In that context, your request is not a welcome challenge, it's just one more thing.

Contrast that with the second location, where staff are smiling not because they're told to, but because they want to. Perhaps there's a culture of collaboration and shared success. Maybe the manager checks in often, not just about tasks, but about how people are doing. Staff feel safe to speak up, supported in their roles, and celebrated for small wins. In this setting, your presence as a customer is a welcome opportunity, not a burden.

This is the invisible thread: how employees feel shapes how they make customers feel.

Culture isn't ping pong tables and pizza Fridays

Too often, workplace culture is mistaken for perks, free snacks, branded water bottles, or casual Fridays. But culture is much deeper than that. It's the unspoken "how we do things around here." It shows up in how feedback is given, how mistakes are handled, who gets recognised, and whether people feel psychologically safe.

In high-performance cultures, employees are clear on their purpose, aligned to shared values, and empowered to make decisions. There's trust, accountability, and often a touch of fun.

In toxic or misaligned cultures, fear and micromanagement take over. People play it safe. Communication becomes transactional. Morale slowly drains and so does the energy customers feel when interacting with the brand.

The ripple effect is real.

Culture drives consistency

One of the most overlooked roles of workplace culture is how it supports consistency. Customers don't just want great service once, they want it every time. That means every employee needs to deliver a baseline of care, attention, and accountability. That level of consistency doesn't happen by chance. It's baked into the systems, values, and behaviors of a strong culture.

In other words, great culture doesn't just produce isolated moments of magic, it creates a reliable rhythm of excellence.

Employee Experience is a Customer Strategy

If there's one idea leaders need to embrace, it's this: you can't build a great customer experience on the backs of a poor employee experience.

Want more loyalty from your customers? Start with your team.

Want higher NPS scores? Invest in your team's wellbeing. Want brand advocates in the marketplace? Create advocates inside your walls.

This doesn't mean putting employees above customers, but recognising that putting employees first often leads to better outcomes for customers.

The brands we admire most have long known this. They obsess over culture not because it's trendy, but because it's strategic.

Practical ways to strengthen the engine room

So how can you fuel a workplace culture that drives exceptional customer experience? A few powerful levers:

Purpose alignment Help employees connect their daily tasks to a bigger mission.

Psychological safety Create environments where people can speak up, share ideas, and admit mistakes without fear.

Recognition and feedback

Make appreciation part of the daily conversation, not just the annual review.

Empowerment Give people the tools and trust to solve problems creatively.

Leadership modeling Culture flows from the top. Leaders must embody the behaviours they want to see.

Fix the engine, not just the dashboard

If your customer experience is sputtering, don't just retrain your frontline. Pop the hood. Look at what's driving employee engagement, how teams communicate, and what people say when leaders leave the room. Because ultimately, your customer experience will never rise above the culture your employees are living in. The engine room matters. Keep it humming, and your customers will feel it.



When people love where they work, everyone notices

Get Smart's Survey Science design for Employee Experience delivers key employee insights from an independent, research-backed, survey design.

- Expert-designed survey not DIY
- Independently administered for honest insights
- Reliable results for confident decision making



Find out how Get Smart might work for you







From the ice to insights at Fox Glacier Guiding

How Fox Glacier Guiding charts the course with valuable input from their team

Rebuilding connection after disruption

For over 50 years, Fox Glacier Guiding has delivered unforgettable glacier experiences, supported by a tight-knit, family-oriented team. But after COVID-19 reduced their workforce from 66 to just six, as they rebuilt they needed a new way to reconnect with staff and understand their changing needs. Their long-standing DIY paper-based surveys were no longer efficient.

Embracing a fresh approach to employee feedback

In 2024, CEO Rob Jewell ran a comprehensive employee experience survey using a tailored version of Get Smart's Employee Experience Insights product. With independent oversight and access to benchmarking through the wider EX network, they gained a clear, objective view of staff sentiment. Repeating the survey in 2025 allowed them to track their progress over time and compare against peer organisations.



"By investing in our people by working with Get Smart, we found clarity, connection, and strength that gave us the roadmap to address important challenges and grow even stronger."

ROB JEWELL

CEO, Fox Glacier Guiding

Turning data Into direction

The findings were eye-opening. They not only validated their strengths as an employer but also revealed unrealised challenges. The team began shaping new policies informed directly by staff feedback. Rob also looked outward, identifying solutions from other organisations that could be adapted to their unique setting. For a company built on navigating shifting terrain, employee voices now help chart the course.



Frontline flex—practical steps to support flexibility on the ground



by **Gillian Brookes**, Director and Author of Flexperts: Getting the best from flex in a world that's ever changing

In retail, hospitality, and tourism in New Zealand, our businesses are typically small (yet mighty) tight-knit teams where every staff member counts.

The idea of frontline flexibility can sound daunting for a small business when there is always so much to do! But the core lessons from frontline flexibility pilots (such as Timewise's Flexibility for All) show that even the smallest businesses can benefit from practical, people-focused flexibility.

Why flexibility matters for small teams

Frontline workers (those who serve customers face-to-face or keep operations running on-site) often have the least flexibility, even though life's demands don't pause for work.

A lack of flexibility can lead to higher turnover, absenteeism, and difficulty attracting reliable staff. Yet, flexibility is valued by workers, often more than a pay rise, and can be the deciding factor in whether someone stays in a role or leaves for another opportunity.

Small steps, big impact

You don't need a big budget or a complex HR department to make a difference. Here are three practical lessons that any small business can apply:

1. Start conversations about flexibility

Ask your team what would help them balance work and life. This could be as simple as a conversation or quick survey. Even small adjustments, such as allowing people to swap shifts to attend a family event, add significant value that money can't buy.

2. Give input and choice over shifts

Allow staff to express preferences for certain days or times, or to swap shifts with each other. This doesn't mean every request can be met, but it creates goodwill and often leads to better coverage overall.

3. Test and learn: don't wait for perfection

Pilot a small change, get feedback, and adjust. For example, try compressed hours or a "shift swap" board. Learn more about the impact of a pilot by tracking simple outcomes: Are staff happier? Fewer sick days? Better customer feedback? From your pilot, keep what has worked and drop what didn't.

Flexibility isn't just for big companies

The benefits of frontline flex, such as lower levels of sickness absence, staff retention and increased productivity, are possible for small businesses as well as large ones. The key is to involve staff in finding solutions that work for your unique context, rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all policy.

Final thoughts for frontline managers

Frontline flexibility is about better business and a willingness to try new things. Even in a small business, giving staff more input into their working patterns can pay off in loyalty and reliability. Holding back flexibility is like trying to hold back a rising tide, it is coming and eventually it will lift us all.

Start small, listen to your people, and remember that in the world of frontline work, a little flexibility goes a long way.



GILLIAN BROOKES

Flexperts
Kickstarter
Pack

I've worked successfully with over 50 organisations so they can get the best from flex.

I blend the best of my economics and HR expertise so that I can show you how to make a measurable difference to your strategy, your business and your people.

"The course has excellent information, detailing flex options, opportunities and potential pitfalls in an easy-to-access format with great supporting tools." - Penny, Regional Manager

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This pack contains everything you need for success!

- Access to the Flexperts online course
- · a copy of the Flexperts book,
- and a notebook (to keep track of your flex insights and ideas)



What your team really wants, and it's not just more money

When it comes to retaining and motivating staff, it's easy to assume that money is the top priority. But when times are tight, salary increases aren't always possible. Fortunately, our Employee Experience (EX) research reveals a surprising truth: for most people, financial compensation isn't their primary motivator. So, what is?

While every workplace is different, clear trends are emerging from our growing EX database. Across industries, one theme consistently tops the list: flexibility. Flexibility signals trust and fosters a sense of agency, factors our data shows are strongly linked to job satisfaction.

Here are some cost-effective options that can significantly improve employees' quality of life:

- Extra leave or birthdays off
- Reduced hours with the same pay
- 4-day work weeks are a popular request in openended responses

- Adjustable start times, giving your team more control over their daily routines
- Going beyond remote work to include a home office enablement fund (e.g. for desks, chairs, or monitors)

Professional Development

Professional Development is an area often rated as more important than pay rises. This offers clear mutual benefits: employees grow their skills and career prospects, while employers gain a more capable, motivated team. Development doesn't need to mean expensive external

courses. Mentorship programs, job shadowing, and cross-training can foster learning and broaden networks within your team. Investing in development sends a strong signal that you value your staff and want them to grow with you.

Company Culture

Company culture is another powerful, free retention tool. In our surveys, a strong workplace culture is frequently cited as the main reason employees choose to stay or leave a role. Employees who "know how their role contributes to the company" are significantly more likely to report that they "do their best work every day". Creating a culture of unity, recognition, and shared purpose helps make work intrinsically rewarding, even in the absence of a pay rise.

The case for investment

Of course, many of these options still require some investment through time,

planning, or budget, but turnover is far more costly due to constant recruiting, retraining, and rebuilding lost institutional knowledge. A stable, satisfied team not only performs better but becomes a valuable source of advocacy, helping grow your reputation through positive word-ofmouth

Tailoring your approach

The key is to tailor your approach. Employees at different life stages have different needs: some value sociability, others flexibility, stability, or opportunities for advancement. Avoid defaulting to one-size-fits-all solutions or current trends. Instead, invest in understanding what truly matters to your people.

We've shared some broad themes from across our client base, but every organisation is unique. So, what does your team need to thrive? If you don't know, the best way to find out is to ask.



Big lessons, small teams: People strategy advice from NZ Rugby's Tahlia Mahan

From spotting early signs of disengagement to creating simple rituals that work, **NZ Rugby**'s People & Capability Advisor **Tahlia Mahan** shares practical insights any business, no matter the size, can use.



You've seen culture at scale at NZ Rugby and Contact Energy what's one simple but impactful ritual or habit you've seen work that even a 10-20 person team could adopt?

A simple but powerful habit is a Monday morning check in. This involves connecting as a team at the start of the week and allowing people to share where they are currently at. The benefit of this is you can quickly gauge how people are feeling, celebrate wins and discuss any roadblocks they may be facing.

Allowing people to share as much or as little as they like can create an open and honest culture where challenges are shared as a team and positives are celebrated together.

What's one principle behind your best people policies that would still hold up in a smaller team?

People over processes. Yes, there is absolutely a place for strong processes but they should support (not replace) relationships, conversations, empathy and common sense.

Focusing on the people impact helps to build trust and connection, which ultimately drives performance and engagement.

This can work easier in smaller teams as lengthy processes can sometimes slow things down and the trust and personal connection becomes even more visible.

"The best people strategies are shared and owned as a group, so everyone is aligned on where they are going and they can clearly see how their role and their work contributes to it"

TAHLIA MAHAN

People & Capability Advisor, NZ Rugby

What are the earliest signs of disengagement that leaders often miss and how might business owners catch and address them quickly?

A subtle but important sign is when an employee stops seeking growth or 'stretch' opportunities. Not everyone has to have ambitious career motivations, but if someone appears to withdraw from career conversations this can be a sign that they are becoming disengaged.

You can address this by reframing the development conversations with them to be more self-led, asking them what they would like to improve in, what they genuinely want to get better at not just what they think the next step is.

Setting short term growth goals that are tied to their interests can reignite connection and engagement for them.

You've supported leadership development at scale, if you were coaching a first-time manager, where would you start?

One of the biggest things I see from new leaders is the difficulty shifting from a 'doer' to an 'enabler' and I absolutely understand why this is a challenge. It's tough, especially when your past value was measured by what you delivered yourself and now, it's about enabling others to succeed.

It's useful to consider what to delegate and what to keep, remembering to not just give team members the simple tasks but also using this as development for them, allowing them to stretch and grow in their roles. Shifting your mindset from viewing your success as individual but rather viewing it as team

success can help too, creating shared goals and celebrating group wins together.

With all you've learned about employee experience, what one piece of advice would you have for business leaders with regards to their people strategy?

Co-create your people strategy with your team. Strategic direction is important, but the way it is created matters just as much. My advice is to make it as collaborative as possible - share drafts with the team, create the space for open and honest feedback and be adaptable based on what you hear from them.

The best people strategies are shared and owned as a group, so everyone is aligned on where they are going and they can clearly see how their role and work contributes to it.



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Turning great advice into action starts here

Tahlia Mahan of **NZ Rugby** said it best: "Co-create your people strategy with your team." It's the right approach but leading that process while also trying to be part of it can be a tough balance.

That's where independent facilitation matters.

Next Labs by Angus & Associates helps you step into the room not as the leader

driving the conversation, but as a contributor to it. Our expert-led workshops create space for open, honest input so your team can co-create solutions together, with direction and clarity.

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EX moments that matter and how to nail them

Between managing customers, balancing rosters, and making sure the lights stay on, it's easy to put employee experience on the back burner. It can feel like something reserved for bigger businesses with HR teams and bigger budgets. It doesn't have to be.

Great employee experience doesn't come from expensive perks or complex systems. It's built in the small, everyday moments, especially the ones that matter most.

There are four moments in the employee journey that have outsized impact: the first day, the first win, the tough conversation, and the career chat. Nail these, and you create a culture people want to be part of.

The first day

The first day sets the tone. It's more than just paperwork and a uniform, it's about how someone feels when they walk through the door. Do they feel like they belong? Like the team knew they were coming?

A simple welcome, an introduction to the crew, and a bit of time to talk about what the business stands for can go a long way. One small café owner leaves a hand-written card and shouts the new hire a coffee before the shift begins. That small gesture creates a big sense of care.

The first win

Then there's the first win—the moment a new team member nails a tricky order, handles a customer on their own, or survives a chaotic shift with a smile. These are moments to celebrate, even quietly. A quick "Nice work today" or a high-five in the back room can give someone the boost they need to keep going. It

reinforces that they're doing well and that their effort is being noticed.

The speed bump

Eventually, every team hits a speed bump, and that's where the hard conversation comes in. Maybe someone is underperforming, or something's gone sideways. These chats are never easy, but they're essential. When handled with respect and clarity, they show that standards matter and that you care enough to help someone lift their game. Ignoring the issue, on the other hand, only erodes trust and morale.

The career chat

Finally, the career chat. This one often gets skipped in small businesses, but it's more important than you might think. People want to grow. That doesn't always mean promotions, it could mean learning new skills, trying different tasks, or taking on more responsibility. A quick check-in to ask what someone's interested in or what they'd like to learn next can make them feel valued and invested in.

These four moments, starting strong, recognising progress, handling challenges and supporting growth, are the foundation of a great employee experience. They don't require a big budget or a formal policy, just attention, empathy, and a bit of time.

When you show up for your team, they'll show up for you and your customers.

Why settle for good when unforgettable is in reach?







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NEW ZEALAND TOURISM 2030: BEING DYNAMIC IN A GLOBAL MARKETPLACE

Attendees will explore the bold strategies, innovations and partnerships that are shaping the future of the tourism industry in Aotearoa New Zealand. With a forwardlooking focus on 2030, we'll dive into what it means to be agile, sustainable, and competitive in an ever-evolving global marketplace. The Summit will be followed by the prestigious New Zealand Tourism Awards Dinner in the evening.

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- Forward-thinking sessions designed to prepare you and your business for what's next
- Interactive focus sessions
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- · Valuable networking opportunities during the Pre-Summit function and throughout the day
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