

The Dialog Box

EPAM CONTINUUM

A CONVERSATION WITH

Megan Burns

Toby Bottorf

Few people get customer experience the way Megan Burns does. For years, she was a leading CX analyst at Forrester Research, producing many of the firm's most thoughtful reports. Today, she helms her own company, *Experience Enterprises*. If you seek to understand the vital importance of CX to contemporary business (and it's extremely important), as well as its relationship to employee experience (and it's absolutely relevant), you'll want to read the great back-and-forth between Burns and our Toby Bottorf, Senior Director and Head of Client Engagement at EPAM Continuum. Burns understands that respect for humanity must be knit into the experience, if companies are designing for growth. It's a necessary response to the increasing digitization of our lives. "The experiences that companies are going to have to facilitate will be increasingly human experiences, because we have all of this digital technology and people are more connected and yet feel more alone than they ever have." The opportunity, for companies, resides in a human-centered approach: "I think that humanity piece is going to become a bigger piece of the emotion that people are looking for from an experience."

“Human Beings Are Notorious for Wanting Multiple Conflicting Things”

—Megan Burns

Mentioned in this Conversation

Better CX Is Like Eating Healthy and Exercising. It's Not Enough to Want It. Part of the challenge in delivering on expectations is that people are creatures of habit who often want multiple, conflicting things. In this blog post, Megan Burns shares how to achieve balance and incite change by making people aware of their own actions.

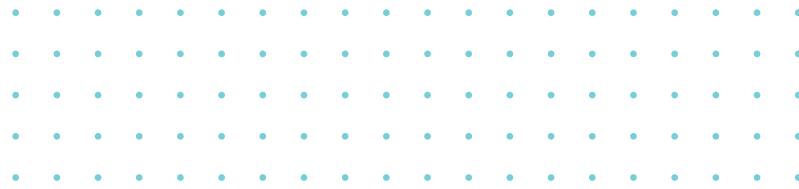
Is the World Getting Better or Worse? A Look at the Numbers "There's no limit to the betterments we can attain if we continue to apply knowledge to enhance human flourishing," says Steven Pinker, Harvard professor and author, as he uses data to explain why the world is getting better in his 2018 TED Talk.

The Sleep Revolution Sleep: We all need it to survive and thrive, but what happens when this basic human need is culturally dismissed and viewed as time wasted? Co-founder and Editor-in-Chief of *The Huffington Post* Arianna Huffington explores how lack of sleep compromises pretty much every facet of our lives.

Deep Work As the world becomes more connected and, therefore, more permeated by distractions, people must figure out how to do more, better, with less time. In *Deep Work*, author and professor Cal Newport presents a training regimen to focus, without distraction, on cognitively demanding tasks.

2019 Edelman Trust Barometer Each year, Edelman releases its *Trust Barometer* to outline trends in consumer behavior. The 2019 report titled "In Brands We Trust?" details how, now more than ever, consumers have more reasons to question how much they trust a brand.

Megan Burns



TOBY BOTTORF: Every time we talk, I feel like I learn something more about the space we're in: CX, customer experience, service design. Our perspective here at EPAM Continuum is often kind of a deep dive into narrow, very specific projects. And when we've talked in the past, I've always benefited from your broader perspective. You get to see a lot more cases and different kinds of pattern recognition at play. I'm curious if we could just jump into what we're talking about when we talk about good customer experience. You've written about effectiveness, ease, and—my favorite, we're going to talk about our feelings—emotion. Let's start with effectiveness. What's going on there?

MEGAN BURNS: Effectiveness is basically the idea that, [in] most business interactions, there's some customer trying to accomplish some goal. It might be looking up information. It might be entertaining themselves, if they're listening to music on Spotify—

TOBY BOTTORF: —or really good podcasts.

MEGAN BURNS: Or really good podcasts, true. But whatever need you [have, the question is]: "Did you get that need met?" So very functionally, if you were trying to buy something, [effectiveness is about asking]: "Did you buy something?" going on through, "If you had an information need or to resolve an issue, was the issue resolved?"

TOBY BOTTORF: So is [effectiveness] closer to "basic quality" or even "product quality"?

MEGAN BURNS: The word "quality" has so many dimensions. I think [the right word] really is "effectiveness" because experiences are inherently subjective. And so, quality to me is actually more around the emotional piece. "Was it a good experience?" This really has to do with the very task-oriented, functionally-oriented dimension of quality.

TOBY BOTTORF: Sometimes we get the problem of low engagement, and [clients] think that may be a problem of the customer experience. And often, we diagnose that it's really a problem of effectiveness or, really, usefulness or relevance. Does that resonate?

MEGAN BURNS: It does. And it's interesting because the effectiveness, ease, and emotion framework actually came from a usability framework many, many years ago before I even started working with it. "Desirability and usefulness," that was actually what that dimension was called. So there's absolutely a piece of that.

TOBY BOTTORF: The next one is ease, which may be the same thing as convenience. Check me if I'm wrong on that.

MEGAN BURNS: The word nerd in me could probably spend a couple minutes talking about the difference between ease and convenience. Convenience, to me, is ease of access. There are other forms of ease, but I think of it as: "How much unnecessary effort do I have to put in?" There's inherently some amount of work involved in every task. And when I think of things being not easy, it implies that there is some level of effort that I have to put in beyond what I "should have to put in."

TOBY BOTTORF: In work that we've seen, especially around employee experience more than customer experience, sometimes work is really crucial to leave in. People take pride in certain aspects of their work, and the things that you want to get rid of are menial, busywork. People have their craft that they want to be good at.

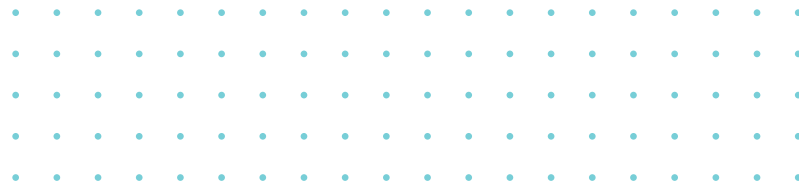
MEGAN BURNS: Interestingly, I heard, I believe it was the CEO of Betterment, talk at a conference not long ago, and he was saying that if [employees] don't show their work in the math, the customers aren't as trusting of the numbers. So they actually expose some of the work instead of simplifying, which is counterintuitive, but it speaks to that emotional dimension of experience. And also, sometimes slowing down and going through the steps [is necessary]. We were just talking about writing earlier, and writing is not easy. There is no shortcut to writing, and sometimes the work of doing that is difficult but necessary.

TOBY BOTTORF: That Betterment example sounds a bit like they've put some friction in it, which is great because we keep on hearing—I think too much—about "removing friction" and "frictionless" and "more convenience." Sometimes things are better if you have to slow down. If you notice more, you get more out of it.

MEGAN BURNS: I wrote a blog post, probably about a year and a half ago now, on what is really the definition of meeting customers' needs, because human beings are notorious for wanting multiple conflicting things, right? So is making it easy for someone who's trying to curb their spending habits to buy \$400 worth of shoes at three o'clock in the morning from their bed, from their phone... Is that really meeting the customers' "needs"? Probably not. And so, in customer experience, I think we need to start factoring that into: "Where do we put some friction in place to help customers save themselves from some natural human tendencies that we [all] have?"

TOBY BOTTORF: Now, let's get to emotion. You've said that's the one that drives loyalty the most. Loyalty. Something I'm a little bit

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obsessed [with] on our projects, because the experiences are so ephemeral. What makes them stick? My hunch is that has a lot to do with memory, and emotion and memory are super connected.

MEGAN BURNS: They are, and if you look at the research, emotion plays a role in three different places in the experience. It determines what we even notice, right? Our conscious brains only notice about 40 pieces of the 11 million pieces of information we take in at any moment. What we even notice depends on how our brain unconsciously processes it. Then how we attach meaning to it is also shaped by emotion. It's pretty well-proven that if you're in a bad mood, you're going to interpret things as more negative than you would [otherwise]. Some days, your friends and family are just more annoying than they normally are because you're in a bad mood. And then [there's] the emotional intensity of that experience, which is based on that sort of level set that you come in with. The more emotionally strong an experience is, [the more] our brains are programmed to keep [it] first in the queue. Memories are kind of like a hierarchy, and the ones that are really emotionally intense—which tend to be negative—those are the ones that we can very often recall fastest.

TOBY BOTTORF: So are we hardwired to remember negative things more easily than positive things?

MEGAN BURNS: Yes. For a couple of reasons.

TOBY BOTTORF: That sounds like a glitch.

MEGAN BURNS: Well, no, it's not a glitch. It's a survival mechanism.

TOBY BOTTORF: "That pan is still hot that you just pulled out of the stove." I can never remember that. Yeah, I know how to stay away from a lion, I guess.

MEGAN BURNS: "Oh, hey: Last time I saw that I was in a world of hurt—perhaps I should steer away from that!" versus, you know, forgetting. So, it is absolutely a survival mechanism, but it does have implications now, where we can hear about and have an emotional response to far more stories and experiences than we ever used to. So it biases us towards a more negative view of everything. In 2018, Steven Pinker gave a TED Talk that I absolutely loved about why the world is actually better than it's ever been—counter to the feeling a lot of people express having that, you know, we're about to fall off a cliff. That's that negative bias in action.

TOBY BOTTORF: The world is so complex right now. We're going to hell in a hand basket and things have never been better. Things that are contradictory can both be true at the same time, I think.

MEGAN BURNS: Yes. And I actually use that phrase "hell in a hand basket." I just wasn't sure if anyone else still did. So, thank you.

TOBY BOTTORF: That connects to the second point that you mentioned, which is: We go through the day, especially in unfamiliar situations, making meaning. A line is made up of just two points, and you can extrapolate from that, and then all new evidence gets mapped to this template. You've built a provisional version of, "Oh, I see how this is going to go."

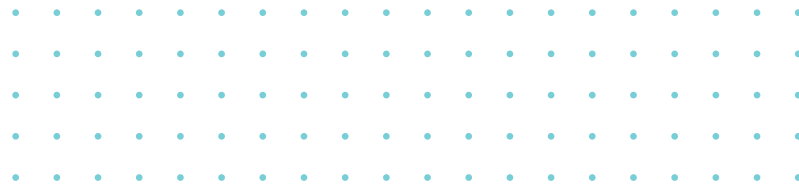
“Our conscious brains only notice about 40 pieces of the 11 million pieces of information we take in at any moment. What we even notice depends on how our brain unconsciously processes it.”

MEGAN BURNS: Yeah.

TOBY BOTTORF: And it cues you to expect good things or more trouble ahead. I'm starting to feel a little overwhelmed. What's an experience designer to do? Do we even have the tools to set people up to be more optimistic, to have positive expectations and intent?

MEGAN BURNS: We do. And I think it's really easy to get this sky-is-falling perspective. I did an analysis very similar to what Steven Pinker did, but with customer experience data instead of with life-and-happiness data, and the vast majority of customer experiences are not only okay, they're positive. More than 75%. And if you think about your life, you don't go through life having massive crises every day. But we take for granted that so much works. So just building in moments where we can pause and recognize that, especially as experience designers, recognize all the things that we get right before we worry about how to improve the things that we get wrong. Because we get a lot of it right, and we don't give ourselves credit for that.

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TOBY BOTTORF: There's been a first wave of customer experience improvement that's been about fixing the most broken things—[making] sure people don't have something terrible to remember—and now we're moving into a new wave. We're thinking more about, "Where are the heightened emotional moments and what can we do there?" So we're not trying to just bombard people with delight every step of the way, which sounds a bit wearisome to me.

MEGAN BURNS: It is. When people say, "Surprise and delight customers," what they're really getting at is the fact that humans are wired for novelty. One of the things that makes something get our attention is that it's new. And so, surprise is usually new or unexpected. And [achieving] that does become harder because people acclimate to things very quickly. When I think about the fact that there was no iPhone when I started in customer experience in 2006, and I think about what we defined as "easy" or "effective" back then relative to now... [it's] only been 13 years. So, what counts as "new" or "standing out"? Things just blend into people's expectations so much more quickly now. I think the challenge is really: "How do we do something new, even if it's not necessarily delightful for any reason other than that it's new?"

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TOBY BOTTORF: One of the things that's tricky about novelty is it doesn't work repeatedly. So, one of the things that I think we've seen in our work is [that employers need] to try to give [employees] flexibility. Something that is scripted is inherently not novel, but [when] you give frontline employees the leeway to respond to people's needs—do the right thing in context—that fits better. It's

more memorable. It's more in line maybe with effectiveness, and it's got a nice emotional component to it as well.

MEGAN BURNS: Part of what we need, the needs that we need met in an experience, is to be seen and recognized as ... human being[s]. And people actually dislike, at least in the research I've read, humans who are acting like robots more than they dislike actual robots because there's something just inherently worse about that. Every experience you have is novel. Even if you and I sat down later this afternoon and did this again, it wouldn't be quite the same. So part of what we have to do is just... recognize human interactions to be the sort of ad hoc things that they are. And that's where a lot of that employee empowerment and just conversational-ism, I think, is going in customer experience. We also have a pendulum effect. I was thinking about this the other day. It used to be that you would go to your mailbox, your snail-mailbox, and pull out a giant stack of direct-mail postcards. Now I get maybe three or four a week. So, if someone sends me a letter, not a postcard but an actual handwritten letter, that stands out tremendously. Whereas 20, 30 years ago, that was not that unusual of a thing to do. [It] used to be that people were like: "Oh, I got an email! Ooh, I got an email!" Now we get thousands of emails. So, we sometimes have this pendulum of behavior that says what wasn't new or different a while ago, after some time becomes new and different again.

TOBY BOTTORF: Some things come back. Old things come back in new ways. We're having an event here, just an internal beer and jam session—with typewriters.

MEGAN BURNS: Oh, I love it.

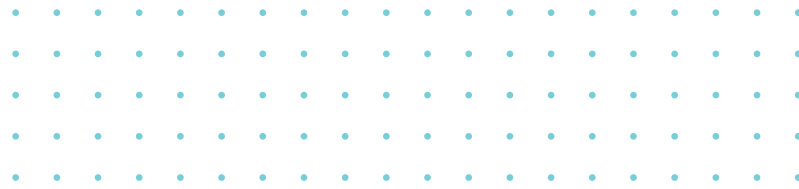
TOBY BOTTORF: [The event was thrown by] some of our younger designers... I remember typewriters as being tiring for your hands. But they're now a different kind of thing. They're fun. They're special. They're analog.

MEGAN BURNS: I probably have an old record player somewhere in my basement that I could lend to some of them. Yes. They're becoming very cool again.

TOBY BOTTORF: The relationship between customer experience and employee experience. We find repeatedly that, when you start out trying to develop a better customer experience, you're inevitably gonna have to start working on a better employee experience. Is that true to your experience, too?

MEGAN BURNS: Absolutely. And I think it's most acute for the employees who interact directly with customers. Because that's the same experience. You can't redesign one half without

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redesigning the other half. But I think that's also true further down in the organization because everything is so interconnected. Even if people hadn't slept well or they're stressed out—they don't make as good decisions [as they otherwise would]. There's a great quote from Arianna Huffington in her book on sleep that said a board that gives kudos to a CEO who says they only sleep four hours a night is basically saying: "Okay, good, we're happy that you're running this company drunk, because the cognitive impairment of living on four hours of sleep at night is the same thing." Our empathy goes down when we're frustrated and we don't have the right tools and we have barriers. So, all of these things that we're asking people to do—and put themselves in customer's shoes—if we don't make sure that they're having an experience that makes them feel like they're achieving something in making a difference—in doing work with purpose—they are physically, physiologically less able to do the things that we're asking them to do.

TOBY BOTTORF: That comment you made a minute ago about customers wanting to be recognized as people, as individuals—the same thing is true of employees. And, the employee [who's] being forced to behave like a robot, they're not having a good time, either.

MEGAN BURNS: No, it's funny that, totally separately, [in] the research that I did and then [in] some research I've seen from the HR space, the number-one thing that drives loyalty for customers and employees is feeling valued.

TOBY BOTTORF: So have you seen examples of where you might not perceive there to be a lot of value creation in the process, but actually there's room for things to be pretty special? I think one of the things to look for in good customer experience, good employee experience, is that you're not just transferring value in one direction or the other, but you're actually creating it through that interaction.

MEGAN BURNS: There's a lot of talk about empowerment and the need to include empowerment in employee experience. But what a lot of people don't realize is that the act of being given the option to fail or to make a bad decision and develop your judgment over time—that's an incredibly valuable skill. [For example,] if you think about an entry-level employee: No, maybe they can't make as good judgment calls as their manager right now, but how will they ever

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be able to until—and unless—they've been given the opportunity to hone that judgment? Learning how to read people, learning how to think on your feet, all of the things that we have to do to manage the uncertainty of customer interactions, those are incredibly valuable skills for employees in the coming decades that we're helping them build.

TOBY BOTTORF: Everybody who works at [a] corporate job that used to wait tables retained some lessons from their time waiting tables.

MEGAN BURNS: Yes.

TOBY BOTTORF: I can speak for myself having been fired from waiting tables. I learned some hard lessons.

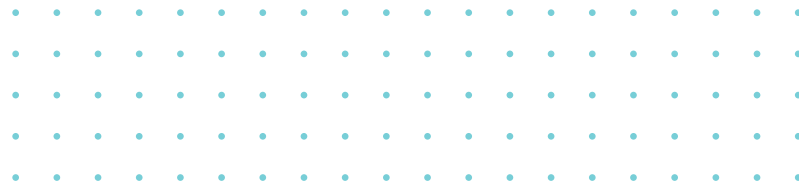
MEGAN BURNS: And there [are] some companies [in which] I believe this is still the case. [At] Enterprise Rent-A-Car, you cannot be promoted into management unless you have come up from the ranks of working in one of their rental facilities, because they don't want anyone who doesn't have that visceral experience of staring at a customer who is upset because their car's not ready. They are just very ... "strict" isn't the right word, but they are very consistent about that.

TOBY BOTTORF: The gap between frontline interactions, between customers and employees and the C-suite, can be so high. It's a reason why I love *Undercover Boss*. Because it's such a shock oftentimes for executives to know what their employees are going through on a daily basis.

MEGAN BURNS: And I'm sure you see this in research. I've seen it. I do an executive journey mapping workshop where it's not [the point] to come up with a full journey map, but it's to expose executives to the process. And, more than a few times, I've had a head of a call center who has never actually called into his or her call center that they run. And they do this as part of the workshop. And [I've seen] the change in their facial expressions from sort of frustration to horror to being ready to throw the phone at the wall—a feeling we all know quite well, but they never realized just how bad it was.

TOBY BOTTORF: We've worked with some clients where the CEO spends time every month answering the phone and we know that's a sign of a good company. Absolutely. I try to oftentimes tell clients there's only two rules of customer experience. One is: "You can't make me," and two is: "I'm not doing it wrong."

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MEGAN BURNS: I've heard you say that before and I think you're absolutely spot on. So I do a lot of working with companies [that] are interested in customer experience, [and that are] not quite sure what that means, not quite sure what a transformation involves. And empathy in particular is a tough concept to introduce because you're sort of backhandedly saying that these people are not already empathetic. So, one of the things I remind people, and a lot of them don't even know this, is that it is difficult for human beings to put ourselves in the shoes of another person. That task of perspective taking, some of us are better at it than others, but it takes practice. And so, the idea that you need to do customer visits and spend time on the phones and spend time with people is not a sign of your competence as an executive. It's a sign of the fact that you are a human being who is different from the people you are trying to serve. And taking that stigma away from it helps some people feel more comfortable about doing this, without seeming like they're admitting what they didn't know.

TOBY BOTTORF: To that point about empathy: It's extremely hard to persuade somebody, rationally, about the value of it. When they get it, they get it in a visceral way. It's kind of like a closed loop. We try super hard to get executives [to join us] when we're doing customer interviews, going out to meet customers in their homes or shopping with them or whatever the right domain is. Because there's just no substitute for that firsthand experience, for the overburdened messiness of somebody's life. And that you're trying to earn permission to have a place of prominence in their life and be a choice for them? It's harder than you think.

MEGAN BURNS: And I heard a great example of this. So we were talking about employee and customer experience coming together. I was at a conference, and I heard the chief diversity and inclusion officer of a tech company talking about her work. And one of her big challenges was getting people to think of D&I as more than just representation, right? [More than:] "Do we have the right number of people?" And she said what she does when she works with a new executive is, she says: "Can you tell me about a time when you felt left out of something?" And it doesn't matter how much of the mainstream majority class you are in; we have all felt left out of something at some point. And she uses that as a foray into, "Diversity and inclusion programs are about minimizing the times when employees feel left out or excluded or not part of

“Empathy in particular is a tough concept to introduce because you’re sort of backhandedly saying that these people are not already empathetic.”

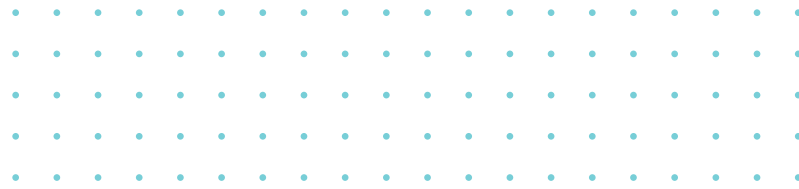
something.” And she connects it to an emotional experience that everyone has had to get them to think differently.

TOBY BOTTORF: So, I have some questions about where you think things may be headed. We talked earlier about a good first wave of fixing things that are the most broken and now getting to a more targeted understanding of where to prioritize—maybe that's in line with brand—and maybe it's in service of a better, bigger-picture vision. I think a lot of customer experience work has been incremental in nature, focused on measuring and fixing and measuring and fixing. What do you see about the prospects for a kind of a bigger-picture perspective taking form? Because I think the reputation of customer experience is increasing in the C-suite.

MEGAN BURNS: It is, and I think there are two paths that are going to happen in parallel. One is, the general population is getting to a point where they're saying: "Just because I can doesn't mean I need to or want to." I read *Deep Work* by Cal Newport, and one of the things he talks about is that our strategy for social media has been an "any benefit" strategy. "If there's any benefit to using a social media platform, let's just add it on," as opposed to saying, "No, you know, this had some benefit, but it doesn't add as [many] benefit as others, so I'm going to pick one or two." So, I think there's going to be a thinning out and a calling out of things that [will encourage people to say:] "Just because it's a cool experience doesn't necessarily mean that it earns a place in my life." And then, in parallel with that for companies, I think the experiences that companies are going to have to facilitate will be increasingly human experiences because we have all of this digital technology and people are more connected, and yet feel more alone than they ever have. And there [are] a lot of sociologists looking at that. So, we're seeing more live events. We're seeing more people coming together in very human ways. I think that humanity piece is going to become a bigger piece of the emotion that people are looking for from an experience.

TOBY BOTTORF: It's that pendulum swinging back again. I've noticed that so many [companies that] started out as purely digital direct-to-consumer businesses, [ones] that sell mattresses or shoes or makeup and skin-care stuff, they're all opening shops. It may not be the place where they're going to make a lot of money, but a place that somebody can visit once makes all of the other, more ephemeral touch points a little bit more human, a little bit more concrete in their lives.

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MEGAN BURNS: Yeah. Humans are physical beings.

TOBY BOTTORF: I feel like this conversation has kind of moved from the customer to the employee experience. Let's take one more step backward and move behind what, in the trade, we call the line of

“The truth is that scale creates some problems that empathy will just never be able to solve.”

visibility. What about things, systems, or ways of working that can be set up—invisible to customers—that you may have seen this as helpful to a great customer experience?

MEGAN BURNS: I think one of the most useful things, one of the most useful systems, is having a way to show people where they fit in the bigger picture. The truth is that scale creates some problems that empathy will just never be able to solve. More empathy is not the answer. And so, the question becomes: “How do we deal with those problems?” And [part of this is] understanding where [employees] fit in a larger process. [An employee might say:] “Maybe I can’t understand all the details, but it gives me a connection, it gives me some context for making decisions, that makes me better at my job—in addition to making me feel like I’m part of something and understand how my work impacts people.” There was a company that found that when they had good collaboration, it was because there was someone on the project who had been there 25 years or more. And they said, “What is it about that person?” And they said, “That person knows people everywhere in the company.” They said, “How can we build that for new employees?” So, the first three months of an employee’s tenure was about building relationships with people in other parts of the company. Because, even if you’re not the person to solve the problem, [you might say:] “I feel much more comfortable picking up the phone and calling and saying, ‘I know this is somewhere in your division. Will you help me solve this problem [and/or] find the person to solve this problem?’” And so, that social connectedness inside the company has a very functional usefulness, in addition to making people feel like they’re part of a team.

TOBY BOTTORF: And that keeps people from having to solve the same problem again and again. If somebody solved it already, we have already discovered fire—don’t go do it again. One of the things that gets me excited about the pendulum swinging back to more humanity is what it asks of brands. Customers more and more want to understand what a company stands for, as a place to shop, and employees want the same thing from a place to work. That’s where I see things headed. That’s where I hope customer experience is taking us.

MEGAN BURNS: How a company treats its employees is increasingly important to customers. And I was flabbergasted when I saw this year’s Edelman Trust Barometer data that said that the most trusting relationship people have is with their employer. So, people don’t trust companies, but they trust the company they work for to do the right thing. And so, it’s increasingly important for people to believe that the company they work for is gonna take a stand on bigger social issues as well.

TOBY BOTTORF: You heard it here first, guys—get after it.

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The Dialog Box: A Resonance Test Magazine

is a project of EPAM Continuum. EPAM Continuum integrates business, experience, and technology consulting focused on accelerating breakthrough ideas into meaningful impact.

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