

Connecting People + Purpose

Steelcase's Applied Research + Consulting division is helping companies leverage their spaces, processes and technology to bring purpose into the daily work experience.

Imagine you've just been assigned to work on a high-profile team. Your job is to lead culture change at your company to help build transparency, trust and collaboration. It's a CEO directive based on his future vision as well as some expensive research from a well-respected consultant. But one of the first things you're required to do is sign an internal non-disclosure agreement, ensuring you won't share what your team is doing with the rest of the organization.

Or you walk into the corporate headquarters of a large manufacturer that's seeking to revitalize its iconic brand with new products. Its leaders are trying to bring more style and cachet to the company's image with a new design-focused advertising campaign, challenging employees to think innovatively to bring new energy to the culture. Yet, this company's workspace dates back to the 1920s, punctuated by rows of highly traditional, dated private offices converted from manufacturing space.

Stories like these—where employee realities contradict the organization's purpose—are all too commonplace. "We see this all the time," says Jennifer Jenkins, leader of practice of the Steelcase Applied Research + Consulting team (ARC). "Purpose, or meaning, is one of the key components of employee engagement."

With the new economic realities of intense global competition, employee engagement is a must-have for today's organizations.

"We see purpose as living at the intersection of strategy, brand and culture," she explains. "When those three converge, engagement thrives and ultimately so does the organization. We identify strategies to improve the everyday work experience and help organizations express their purpose so they can truly thrive."

Jennifer Jenkins
Leader of Practice, Applied
Research + Consulting (ARC), Steelcase

Jennifer brings a deep skill set to ARC's clients including qualitative and quantitative research, leading internal change initiatives and applying design thinking skills to enhance user experiences in the workplace. "I love to tell stories based on research and insights we uncover while engaging with clients. Finding those patterns and dynamics that have the potential to improve the way people engage with space, process and technology is the heart of our practice."

THE PURPOSE EQUATION

Surprisingly, according to Gallup, only three in ten employees worldwide are actively engaged with their jobs, a ratio that's barely budged in a decade. Only one in ten are considered good managers, and the cost impact to business is pegged in the hundreds of billions.

But when employee engagement is healthy, Gallup says, stock performance surges with nearly 150 percent higher earnings per share. Employees generate significantly higher productivity, profitability and customer satisfaction, and fewer safety incidents.

So what's the calculus for organizations to arrive at purpose? There's no single answer, no silver bullet to instantly transform an organization. But there is a potent mix of strategies proven to improve workplace experience and bring daily realities more in line with organizational goals. And it often starts with purpose or meaning, Jenkins says.

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JENNIFER JENKINS | Leader, Applied Research and Consulting

Today's conversations around meaning are vibrant and fluid, touching aspects of wellbeing, economics and psychology. They're happening everywhere, from the most recent World Economic Forum in Davos to the boardrooms of some of the world's most progressive companies that seek to integrate purpose into all facets of work. Whole Foods co-founder John Mackey stated in a recent interview, "People want more than to just earn a living. They want meaning, they want purpose, they want to feel like their work is making a difference in the world."

Another prominent voice in the dialogue is Aaron Hurst, author of "The Purpose Economy." "People gain purpose when they grow personally, when they establish meaningful relationships and when they are in service to something greater than themselves," he writes. "People pursue personal, social and societal purpose."

This quest for meaning isn't new, according to Hurst; it dates back to ancient Greek philosophers. What's different about it today is that it's driving an entire movement, or as Hurst argues, an entire emerging economy. The Purpose Economy is propelled by the failures of the old one, where cash was king and meaning a distant consideration. The global recession fundamentally shifted values and priorities, magnifying peoples' need for stability and purpose. People today are looking for work that does more than simply pay their bills; it must contribute to something better—better selves, better relationships, better communities. We're all looking to climb the pyramid of human needs to the top, to self-actualization.

Tim Quinn
Vice President, Applied Research + Consulting (ARC), Steelcase

As a leader in ARC, Tim works with clients to interpret organizational culture and provide recommendations to help create better workplace experiences. “When the workplace offers a better experience for employees, the organization can achieve its business objectives. We help them do that in a meaningful way.” Tim enjoys creating and leading high-performance teams to tackle complex challenges. A voracious reader, he helps clients make meaningful connections to reach their goals.

Steelcase researcher Nicolas de Benoist has studied worker wellbeing and engagement for several years. “When people are engaged in something greater than themselves, than the project they’re working on, they have more resilience to face the stresses of everyday life,” he says. “Without purpose, you get stuck in the small details of everyday life and forget the larger goals.”

But meaning shouldn’t be confused with supporting a cause. It’s more about finding work that aligns with your personal beliefs and strengths and understanding how your work contributes in the larger scheme of things. All too often, employees are directed to improve their weak areas instead of building on their strengths. But research shows that when employees are encouraged to use their best skills, the chance for disengagement practically disappears.

When this happens, employees are their most authentic selves. “It’s hard to talk about meaning without authenticity,” de Benoist says. “It’s about sharing our gifts and talents with others with a sense of shared purpose.”

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TIM QUINN | Vice President, ARC

That sense of working toward a common goal drives fulfillment when even the smallest tasks can be connected back to a larger purpose. Too often, especially in large organizations, individual work can feel disconnected, irrelevant or underappreciated. “Without purpose, people can feel frustrated and even a sense of shame,” de Benoist explains. “When companies can express their values in a pure, explicit way, it helps employees feel there’s a connection to their work.”

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

Cultivating purpose in organizations requires a multi-pronged approach, according to Tim Quinn, ARC vice president. “We’re looking at how space, process and technology can influence or support behavior and open up new conversations with our clients about how to create great work experiences,” he says.

Quinn references Google and Apple as examples of companies whose new headquarters are intended to reinforce their strategy, brand and culture. Google's purpose is discovery, and its culture is one of transparency, so their new campus design prominently features translucent canopy roofs that cover green spaces, retail spaces and workplaces that easily shift to accommodate emerging needs. Apple, on the other hand, is famous for taking a protective approach while they incubate ideas, and its new headquarters design reflects this.

"Space is only one of the tools we leverage," Jenkins adds. "We're helping clients take a three-dimensional look at how they encourage purposeful behaviors both individually and organizationally. That means our work can impact not only space, but other influencers such as HR and IT processes to infuse purpose in every work experience."

Take the manufacturer mentioned earlier. The original request was to help them transition from their outdated space to a more inspiring, flexible environment in a new building. "We talked with the CEO and explained why he really needed to be focused on the behaviors and culture he wanted to build, not just the physical space," Quinn says. The result was a holistic assessment revealing the company had cultural gaps in trust, transparency, risk-taking and empowerment.

"These are very common problems we see in our work with clients pursuing purpose," Quinn says. "Employees are asked to be more collaborative, but measured or rewarded for individual achievements. Employees are asked to be more innovative, but aren't encouraged to take risks. Employees are asked to be strategic, yet they're confused about the overall direction of the company."

In this case, the company designed its new space to foster behaviors and experiences that build trust, transparency, risk-taking and empowerment. In the new space, leaders are more mobile and visible, information is shared on digital displays throughout the space, and cross-team relationship-building is encouraged with the addition of a WorkCafé, where employees are free to work, socialize, meet or just get away. With these changes, employees are better able to connect with the company and contribute to fulfilling its purpose.

Or consider a company that developed an idea for a new product that changed the industry years before the competition, but it never came to market. The competitor got there first, rewrote the rules and reaped all the rewards. Why do the best ideas lose traction here?, asked the CEO. ARC's assessment found disconnects between the behaviors and outcomes that leadership was asking for and results that employees were being reviewed against. New product developers were encouraged to generate ideas, but the culture and performance assessments didn't reward or support fast failure. As a result, no one wanted to share poor results during development and the best ideas never made it to the shelf. One solution, Quinn says, is to carefully examine where expectations and success measurements intersect, and ensure the organization is encouraging and rewarding purposeful behaviors.

A CALL TO PURPOSE

As momentum for the emerging purpose economy continues to mount, organizations will be challenged to re-examine practices, beliefs and values. They'll be challenged to overcome behavior versus expectation gaps, to create new policies and rethink their spaces to reinforce a purpose-driven culture. As the drive for meaning permeates culture, it will redefine how we work, the organizations we prefer to work with and how we make choices. In response, vanguard companies are rediscovering their purpose, learning to articulate it clearly, and putting tools in place to ensure employees are connecting with it every day. In this new era of meaning, purpose is the new job description.

WHAT'S YOUR PURPOSE?

When working with clients to help express and strengthen a sense of purpose, ARC asks them to consider their current state. Often these conversations reveal gaps between the reality and an ideal state, leading down a strategic path to infuse purpose into everyday workplace experiences.

If your organization seeks to guide culture and behaviors toward a greater sense of purpose, here are some questions to ponder.

By addressing these questions at all levels, organizations can begin to infuse purpose into their everyday workplace experiences.

QUESTIONS FOR THE ORGANIZATION

1. Is the purpose clear? Do people at all levels understand it?
2. Does achieving the purpose seem both aspirational and feasible?
3. Does it motivate action?

QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

1. Is our work experience designed to link our skills/capabilities to accomplish something for the organization?
2. Does the purpose build community? Do people believe that we are better together?
3. Is it safe to challenge the status quo?

QUESTIONS FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

1. Do I understand our purpose?
 2. Is there a clear line of sight? Can I see my contributions impacting our purpose?
 3. Do I find the work personally compelling and meaningful?
 4. Do I believe in the work that I do?
 5. Do I have an opportunity to learn and grow?
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