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*Every company needs a “signature experience” that sets it apart. By explicitly communicating what makes your firm unique, you can dramatically improve employee engagement and performance.*

## What It Means to Work Here

by Tamara J. Erickson and Lynda Gratton

Included with this full-text *Harvard Business Review* article:

- 1 [Article Summary](#)  
The Idea in Brief—*the core idea*  
The Idea in Practice—*putting the idea to work*
- 2 [What It Means to Work Here](#)
- 10 [Further Reading](#)  
A list of related materials, with annotations to guide further exploration of the article’s ideas and applications

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# What It Means to Work Here

## The Idea in Brief

What separates great companies from merely good ones? Exceptional firms attract and retain the right people—employees who are excited by the company's culture and values and who reward the organization with loyalty and stellar performance.

How to get the right people on board? Don't try to be all things to all employees, Erickson and Gratton advise. Instead, communicate your company's **signature experience**—the distinctive practice that best conveys what it's *really* like to work at your company and what makes your firm unique.

Consider Whole Foods Market's signature experience: team-based hiring. Employees in each department in every store vote on whether a new hire stays or goes after a four-week trial period. This experience sends a strong message about the company's core values of collaboration and decentralization. It weeds out lone wolves—and attracts only people who share those values. Whole Foods' reward? Highly engaged and productive workers in *every* team.

## The Idea in Practice

To establish and leverage *your* company's signature experience, Erickson and Gratton offer these guidelines:

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### DEFINE YOUR TARGET EMPLOYEES

Identify your target potential employees as methodically as you do customers.

- ▶ Example: Unable to pay reservation agents standard industry salaries, JetBlue targeted people who prize flexible schedules. It created a signature experience reservation system: Agents work out of their homes and trade shifts using an online community board. Their job satisfaction has engendered a 30% boost in agent productivity and 38% jump in customer-service levels compared to industry averages.

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### ADDRESS BUSINESS NEEDS

Craft a signature experience that meets a specific business challenge.

- ▶ Example: To help integrate five recently acquired oil companies, BP developed a signature experience called "peer assist": unit heads assigned to peer groups exchange ideas about what is and isn't working in their businesses. The experience has enabled BP to meet financial and safety targets while weeding out managers who can't buy into its signature experience.

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### SHARE YOUR STORIES

Encourage employees to relate legendary, signature experiences to potential hires.

- ▶ Example: One legend any MBA student worldwide is likely to hear is that of Goldman Sachs's signature recruitment experience. Successive cohorts of B-school students pass along the tale of the MBA student who went through 60 interviews before being hired. Job candidates who enjoy meeting partners in the

myriad interview sessions are exactly those who will be capable of building the networks and collaborative relationships upon which the firm's success depends.

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### STRIVE FOR CONSISTENCY

Buttress your signature experience with processes that send consistent messages to employees.

- ▶ Example: Whole Foods backs up its team-based induction process with compensation practices, employee rewards and recognition, and promotion criteria that are also strongly team based. Bonus pay, for instance, is explicitly linked to group, not individual, performance. Result? Team members choose their trainees carefully: They want hard workers, not buddies.

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### HAVE THE COURAGE OF YOUR CONVICTIONS

Accept that you don't need to be—nor should you try to be—all things to all people. No matter the content of your signature experience, you can use it to attract people who are suited to *your* organization's culture—and who want to further its goals.

*Every company needs a “signature experience” that sets it apart. By explicitly communicating what makes your firm unique, you can dramatically improve employee engagement and performance.*

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# What It Means to Work Here

by Tamara J. Erickson and Lynda Gratton

It's the HR equivalent of keeping up with the Joneses: In their quest to find and retain top talent, businesses often try to match competitors' offers, ensuring that their compensation schemes, health care benefits, training programs, and other talent-management practices are in line with the rest of the industry's. While this strategy may be useful for bringing job candidates to the door, it's not necessarily the most effective way to usher the right people across the threshold—great employees who will be enthusiastic about their work and fiercely loyal to the organization and its mission.

Nor does marching in lockstep with industry standards prompt companies to consider what's unique about their histories and values or potential employees' attitudes about work. Certainly, reasonable pay and a breadth of health care options matter to prospective hires, as do the tasks they'll have to perform. But people also choose jobs—and, more important, become engaged with their work—on the basis of how well their preferences and aspira-

tions mesh with those of the organization.

Imagine yours is one of three job offers a talented candidate is mulling over. She hears a little about the orientation program at each firm. At your company, the first three months are probationary: As a new hire, the candidate would work closely with an assigned team, and when 90 days are up, the team members would vote on whether she stays or goes. Management won't have the final say. At the second company, the candidate would work on a series of fast-paced, creative projects during her first three months, under the close scrutiny of senior management. At the end of that period, she'd be expected to find a project that matched her skills. In the third company, the new hire would undergo intensive training during the first three months, learning the organization's well-defined ways of doing business; after that, she would apprentice for an extended period with one of the firm's strongest performers.

None of these orientation experiences is inherently better than the others; the prospect

will pick the company whose entry program most closely reflects her own values and preferences. If she loves risk and can put up with ambiguity, she might relish the challenges and the pace of the second company but would probably be miserable with the constraints of the third. If she enjoys collaborative work, she might gravitate toward your company.

These examples underscore the importance of employee preferences in the war for talent. Unfortunately, they are often overlooked. What truly makes good companies great is their ability to attract and retain the right people—employees who are excited by what they're doing and the environment they're operating in. Such people are more likely to be deeply engaged in their work and less likely to chase after slightly better salaries or benefits. They will find ways to satisfy their own preferences and aspirations while meeting the organization's need to come up with creative and productive solutions to business problems. Their commitment becomes contagious, infecting customers and prospective employees. Indeed, engaged employees are the antithesis of hired guns rotating in and out of critical roles—they're productive for the long term.

You won't find and keep such individuals simply by aping other companies' best practices or talent-management moves, however. You need to be able to tell new and prospective hires what it's like to work at your company, to articulate the values and attributes that make working at your firm unique. You need to provide a "signature experience" that tells the right story about your company. In the process, you'll empower the people who share your values and enthusiasm for work to self-select into your firm, thereby creating the foundation for highly productive employee-employer relationships.

### Bringing Distinctiveness to Life

A signature experience is a visible, distinctive element of an organization's overall employee experience. In and of itself, it creates value for the firm, but it also serves as a powerful and constant symbol of the organization's culture and values. The experience is created by a bundle of everyday routines, or signature processes, which are tricky for competitors to imitate precisely because they have evolved in-house and reflect the company's heritage and the leadership team's ethos.

The concept of signature experiences grew out of organizational research we've conducted during the past five years. Initially, we looked closely at companies with highly engaged employees (as measured by workplace surveys and other tools) and set out to compile a checklist of the common practices these businesses used to foster enthusiastic, committed, mission-aware employees at all levels. Surprisingly, their approaches to talent management varied greatly. For instance, some firms paid well above the mean while others paid below it. Some boasted highly flexible, self-scheduling work groups; others featured more structured, "all hands on deck" environments. The companies' underlying philosophies about the employer-employee relationship also varied, from paternalistic to hands-off.

The more we looked, the more we realized that the variation in practices was not just noise in the system; it was, in fact, a critical element of the companies' ability to achieve high levels of employee engagement. These organizations excel at expressing what makes them unique. They know what they are, and it's not all things to all people. They understand their current and future employees as clearly as most companies understand their current and future customers. They recognize that individuals work for different reasons and accomplish tasks in different ways. And they demonstrate what they are vividly, with stories of actual practices and events, not through slogans on the wall or laminated values cards on every desk. As a consequence, these companies hire people who easily and enthusiastically fit in, and thereby cultivate a more committed workforce. To understand how these companies attract, engage, and retain the right kind of talent, let's take a closer look at the three signature orientation experiences we described earlier.

**Whole Foods Market.** The first signature experience—team-based hiring—is similar to the orientation experience at Austin, Texas-based Whole Foods Market. Potential hires are informed that each department in each store (meat, vegetables, bakery, and so on) comprises a small, decentralized entrepreneurial team whose members have complete control over who joins the group. After a four-week trial period, team members vote on whether a new hire stays or goes; the trainee needs two-thirds of the team's support in

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order to join the staff permanently. This signature experience is in line with Whole Foods' profit-sharing program. Thirteen times a year, the company calculates the performance of each team. Members of the teams that do well receive up to \$2 per hour extra in their paychecks. That bonus pay is explicitly linked to group rather than individual performance, so team members choose their trainees carefully—they want workers, not buddies. This entry into the company undoubtedly weeds out lone wolves and conveys a strong message about the firm's core values of collaboration and decentralization. This signature experience seems to be working: Whole Foods has appeared on *Fortune's* list of the 100 Best Companies to Work For nine years in a row.

**Trilogy Software.** The second orientation experience described earlier—trial under fire—is patterned after the signature experience at Trilogy Software, a rapidly growing software and services provider also based in Austin, Texas. New employees go through an exhausting three-month immersion process, a sort of organizational boot camp, in which top management, including the CEO, oversees their every step. In the first month, new recruits participate in fast-paced creative projects, in teams of about 20, under the mentorship of more-experienced colleagues called section leaders. In the second month, the project teams are shuffled and split into smaller "breakthrough teams" charged with inventing product or service ideas, creating business models, building prototypes, and developing marketing plans—all in hyperaccelerated fashion. In the third month, the recruits have to demonstrate their capacity for personal initiative. Some continue working on their breakthrough teams; others find sponsors elsewhere in the company and work on their projects. Upon completion of the program, candidates undergo rigorous evaluation and receive detailed feedback on their performance from colleagues, section leaders, and senior management. The new hires are sent to different parts of the organization, but the bonds they develop during this extreme orientation period remain strong throughout their careers.

Trilogy's signature orientation experience serves as the company's primary R&D engine: Recruits' projects have produced more than \$25 million direct revenues and have formed

the basis for more than \$100 million in new business. The experience also serves as a proving ground for Trilogy's next generation of leaders: the mentors and coaches who guide the members of the breakthrough teams as well as the new hires themselves. Most important, Trilogy's orientation experience provides a compelling illustration of life in the firm. A candidate who prefers a clear-cut, well-defined work environment will almost certainly decline after hearing the details of the immersion process. But a candidate who likes intense challenges and can tolerate some ambiguity early on will probably jump right in.

**The Container Store.** The third orientation experience—extensive training and indoctrination in a proven approach—is from the Container Store, a Dallas-based retailer of storage solutions ranging from the basic (Tupperware) to the sophisticated (customized shelving systems). Some of its products are quite expensive—a single custom-designed closet system, for instance, may cost several thousand dollars—so the floor staff's ability to meet customers' expectations can have huge financial implications. Because the company depends on employees to be capable of suggesting storage options that will match a customer's requirements, its induction process consists of immediate and intense training. All new hires in the stores, distribution centers, and headquarters (full-time and seasonal employees) go through Foundation Week—five days dedicated to absorbing information about the Container Store's products, processes, and values, plus extracurricular HR paperwork and reading. New employees assume regular work schedules only after having completed the five full days of training—and even then they usually apprentice for a while with some of the company's star performers. The employee education doesn't stop there: In their first year at the Container Store, all staffers receive at least 235 hours of formal training, compared with an average of about seven hours in the retail industry overall. Employees spend time in different functions and units to gain a broader perspective and to learn about the company's strategic challenges.

The Container Store's signature experience sends the right messages about employee fit and long-term opportunities: More than 40% of new employees are recommended by friends who work for the company. Employee

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surveys reveal that, on average, 97% of them agree with the statement, “People care about each other here.” And employee turnover is less than 30%, significantly lower than the industry average. Obviously, some job applicants will be impressed with the clarity and rigor of the Container Store’s commitment to training; others won’t. But a hiring manager’s description of this intense orientation experience certainly sends a clear signal to a potential employee about what it takes to succeed at the company.

By defining and communicating their core values and distinctive attributes in unique and memorable ways, Whole Foods Market, Trilogy Software, and the Container Store empower potential hires to make well-informed employment choices. These companies likewise are increasing the probability that they’re bringing aboard highly engaged and highly motivated workers.

### Finding Your Signature

Companies that successfully create and communicate signature experiences understand that different types of people will excel at different companies, and that not all workers want the same things. In a series of studies conducted jointly with researchers Ken Dychtwald and Bob Morison, Tamara Erickson cate-

gorized workers into six segments on the basis of why and how they like to work. Some care deeply about the social connections and friendships formed in the workplace, for instance. Others just want to make as much money with as much flexibility and as little commitment as possible. Some have an appetite for risk. Others crave the steadiness of a well-structured, long-term climb up the career ladder. (See the exhibit, “A Job by Any Other Name.”)

The firms we’ve studied that have engendered highly productive, highly engaged workforces acknowledge and address these differences more effectively than their competitors. Specifically, they follow some general principles for creating, supporting, and preserving their unique employee experiences:

**Target a segment of potential employees.**

Most executives can tell you which consumers will buy their products or services. Few have the same insight into which job candidates will buy into the organization’s culture and adapt to its workflow. Companies that target potential employees as methodically as they do potential customers can gain a sustainable market advantage. That’s been the case at Jet-Blue. Since its launch in 1999, the airline has defied many common industry practices, including the traditional approach to flight res-

## A Job by Any Other Name

As many societies become increasingly affluent, more and more people have the luxury of allowing work to fill a variety of roles in their lives. Studies conducted by Tamara Erickson and researchers Ken Dychtwald and Bob Morison suggest that work plays six general roles, which correspond to six types of employees, based on psychodemographic characteristics. Each worker segment cares deeply about several aspects of the employee-employer relationship and little about the others.

Employee Type	Expressive Legacy	Secure Progress
The Role of Work	<i>Work is about creating something with lasting value.</i>	<i>Work is about improving one’s lot in life and finding a predictable path.</i>
What Appeals and Engages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Autonomy</li> <li>Entrepreneurial opportunities</li> <li>Creative opportunities</li> <li>Stimulating tasks that enable continual learning and growth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fair, predictable rewards</li> <li>Concrete compensation, solid benefits and retirement package</li> <li>Stability</li> <li>Structure and routine</li> <li>Career training</li> </ul>

ervations. When most airlines were using standard call centers, JetBlue devised a system based entirely out of employees' homes. This has become one of the airline's signature experiences and part of its organizational lore, attracting a strong and productive base of employees who find flexible schedules more valuable than above-average compensation.

According to founder and CEO David Neeleman, it was more than cost savings that prompted the company to create this signature experience. Like the flight crew, the reservations agents are the face of JetBlue, responsible for ensuring high levels of customer satisfaction that will translate into increased revenues. The company couldn't afford to pay the agents huge salaries, however, so senior management decided to appeal to them in a different way—by letting them work from their homes. "We train them, send them home, and they are happy," Neeleman says.

JetBlue tries to accommodate call center agents' varied scheduling requirements—some may work only 20 hours a week, for instance, or may need to swap shifts at the last minute—but the airline balances those preferences against its business objectives. Employees have unlimited shift-trading privileges, which they can negotiate using an online community board. This self-scheduling process keeps em-

ployees motivated and satisfied, which means they're more likely to provide better customer care. For its part, JetBlue has enjoyed a 30% boost in agent productivity, a 38% increase in customer-service levels, and a 50% decrease in management workload per agent, compared with industry norms.

Bright Horizons, a leading provider of employer-sponsored child care, has crafted a signature experience that also begins with the reconceptualization of a critical organizational role—that of the classroom teachers in its centers. These individuals are never referred to by common terms such as "child care worker" or "babysitter." Instead, Bright Horizons hires "early childhood educators" for its classrooms, thereby attracting people who see themselves as long-term professionals in a field full of temp workers. This important shift sets the stage for an employee experience in line with the firm's mission statement, which, among other things, pledges to "nurture each child's unique qualities and potential" and to "create a work environment that encourages professionalism." Reinforcing this signature experience are the company's team-based approach to hiring; a welcome program that makes it clear to new hires (and their families) that they have joined an organization that is serious about excellence and professionalism;

Individual Expertise and Team Success	Risk and Reward	Flexible Support	Low Obligation and Easy Income
<i>Work is about being a valuable part of a winning team.</i>	<i>Work is one of multiple opportunities to live a life filled with change and excitement.</i>	<i>Work is a source of livelihood but not yet (or not currently) a priority.</i>	<i>Work is a source of immediate economic gain.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaboration</li> <li>Fun</li> <li>Stability and structure</li> <li>Opportunity to gain competence</li> <li>Opportunity to leverage personal strengths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opportunity to improve personal finances</li> <li>Flexibility</li> <li>Opportunity to choose tasks and positions from a long menu of options</li> <li>Open-ended tasks and approaches to getting work done</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Flexibility</li> <li>Well-defined vacation and family benefits</li> <li>Well-defined work routines—the ability to plug in and out of tasks and assignments with ease</li> <li>Virtual, asynchronous tasks and assignments</li> <li>Fun</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jobs that are relatively easy to come by</li> <li>Well-defined work routines</li> <li>Lucrative compensation and benefits packages</li> <li>Stability and security</li> <li>Recognition</li> </ul>

Source: A statistical survey of the U.S. workforce conducted jointly by the Concourses Institute and Age Wave, a research and communications company, and funded by 24 major corporations.

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and strong skills-based training and promotion opportunities. In an industry known for high turnover—the average is about 50%—Bright Horizon's turnover runs from 20% to 22%.

**Address specific business needs.** Some companies' signature experiences stem from critical business needs. For instance, several years ago Lord John Browne, the CEO of BP, was faced with the daunting task of bringing together five oil companies BP had recently acquired. The challenge was to create a culture of learning across the company's 120 business units; without such integration, none of the anticipated cost-benefit synergies would materialize. At the time, many of the business unit heads were adept at competing, but few were adept at collaborating. To address this gap, Browne and his colleagues developed a signature experience called "peer assist." The business unit heads are assigned to peer groups representing as many as 13 units, and the members are required to exchange ideas and information about what is and is not working in their businesses. (To encourage knowledge sharing, much of each business unit leader's bonus pay depends on the performance of the whole peer group.) Employees are learning from one another. Thanks in part to these cross-platform groups, BP has met its financial targets and talent-management criteria. The beauty of this signature experience is that it clearly demonstrates Browne's basic operational philosophy: Peers working together will be the foundation of BP's success. Managers who can't buy into the signature experience won't waste their time or the organization's.

**Identify and preserve your history.** The seed of a signature experience already exists in many companies. Their challenge is to find it, extend or shape it to the needs of today's business, and protect it. Consider Royal Bank of Scotland, which can credit its rise from a small national bank to one of the largest financial institutions in the world to a work environment that values action and speed. Those who do best in the bank deliver high-quality results quickly and under intense pressure—which is why prospects need to hear about RBS's historic signature experience.

In the eighteenth century, when the financial institution was founded, banking was a gentleman's pursuit. The day's business was usually completed by lunchtime so that businessmen could get on to more important mat-

ters in the afternoon—fishing, hunting, and the like. That schedule was made possible by the morning meeting. Now, of course, banking is a 24-hour business, and there's much less time for afternoon jaunts through the Scottish hills. But the morning meeting lives on. Successive RBS CEOs have adopted this practice and made it their own. The current executive team meets with the chief executive, Sir Fred Goodwin, every morning between 8 and 9 to talk about the previous day's events, go over that day's agenda, and plan for the future. The sessions force employees to think about speed to market; RBS talks about completing projects within 30, 60, or 90 days—there is no mention of weeks or months. The morning meetings reinforce the collective accountability of the senior team.

RBS knows that early morning meetings and short-term, fast-paced projects won't appeal to everyone. So its signature experience sends an explicit message to potential hires: There are plenty of jobs out there for those who need a caffeine jolt and a few minutes with the *Times* before making a decision—just not at RBS.

Another firm with a signature experience rooted in its history is W.L. Gore & Associates, a private firm headquartered in Delaware. The company's best-known product, Gore-Tex, is used in clothing worn by adventurers the world over. W.L. Gore attributes its steady growth to an employee experience built around the so-called "lattice" system of management—no hierarchies, no predetermined channels of communication, and no defined jobs locking associates (they're never called employees) into particular tasks. This approach, which founder Bill Gore introduced more than 40 years ago, has been protected and reinforced ever since. Associates have sponsors, not bosses. They don't have jobs; they make voluntary promises to meet general expectations within functional areas—running a particular machine, for instance, or crunching numbers. For their part, sponsors commit to helping new associates find "quick wins"—projects that put the recruits on a fast track for success while acclimatizing them to the organization.

W.L. Gore's general processes uphold this signature experience. For instance, associates are compensated on the basis of the quantity, quality, and financial outcomes of their work. Performance is reviewed twice each year, and



peers and sponsors get to weigh in on their colleagues' work. They share their feedback with a compensation committee—there are about 15 such committees within the company, one for each functional area of the business—that then ranks people who handle a particular function from the highest contributor to the lowest. (The associate's rank is determined by contributions to the success of the business, not just personal achievements.) Using guidelines based on external salary data, the company pays the associates at the top of the list more than those at the bottom. The objective is to be internally fair and externally competitive.

Employees who want clear definition in their work would probably hate W.L. Gore's emphasis on personal ownership and commitment; those who are comfortable in a high-reward but somewhat uncertain environment would be likely to thrive.

**Share your stories.** One of the legends any MBA student is likely to hear is that of Goldman Sachs's signature recruitment experience. Successive cohorts of B-school students worldwide pass along the tale of the MBA student who went through 60 interviews before being hired. That story isn't an urban myth. The selection process is truly an endurance test, requiring enormous resources. In a given year, about 5,000 applicants speak to ten members of the firm, and the top 2,500 speak to more than 30. Each year, Goldman Sachs invests more than 100,000 man-hours in conversations with prospective employees.

The seemingly endless interviews are not designed to ferret out candidates' intellectual prowess or previous work experiences—that's what the GMAT scores and application forms are for. The process is a reflection of the company's deep commitment to internal collaboration and networking and serves as a preview of life in the firm. At Goldman Sachs, there is no room for individual stars. Prospective candidates who hear the stories and enjoy meeting partners in the myriad interview sessions are exactly those, the firm believes, who will be capable of building networks and strong collaborative relationships.

Employees at Starbucks have their own tales to pass on. When recruiting baristas, the company looks for people with outgoing personalities and strong social skills. To convey these attributes and prompt customer-savvy

individuals to self-select into the firm, Starbucks tells all prospective hires about its mandatory in-store immersion process. Every new Starbucks employee—even at the corporate level—goes through a 24-hour paid training module called First Impressions. The standardized curriculum focuses on learning about coffee and creating a positive customer experience. This is followed by in-store training—employees spend time making beverages, talking to customers, and learning the business on the floor. Employees at all levels say this hands-on experience is essential preparation for any role within the company. And they swap stories about candidates who ditched the process early on, just because they didn't want to spend weeks working in the stores. Indeed, the satisfied lot who stuck with it and poured lattes for a while tell these tales with great pride.

**Strive for consistency.** A signature experience must be buttressed by processes that send consistent messages to employees. Our research shows that one of the most common causes of low engagement in organizations is employees' perception that some elements of the work experience aren't exactly as they were advertised. How many times have we all heard people, six months into a job, say, "It's just not what I expected or wanted."

Several years ago, a large industrial company asked us to help redesign its orientation process, which executives at the firm felt was turning people off and driving them away. When we took a close look, we concluded that the orientation process wasn't the problem; it accurately reflected the highly structured, tightly managed nature of the organization. The problem was occurring much earlier, during recruitment, when the company promised prospective employees a flexible work environment full of excitement and innovation. This company was not a bad place to work, but it was doing a poor job of targeting and attracting people who would thrive there. It needed to change either the pitch it used with job candidates or the experience of working at the firm.

Whole Foods backs up its team-based induction process with compensation practices, employee rewards and recognition, and promotion criteria that are also strongly team based. All elements of the overall employee experience are aligned. Likewise, Goldman Sachs's

## Elements of Engagement

To foster deeply committed employees, you need the following:

- A comprehensive understanding of the types of people who will be productive in your organization over the long term. What kinds of skills should they have? What should be their attitudes toward work?
- A well-defined, well-communicated signature experience that conveys for potential hires and reinforces for employees the attributes and values of the organization.
- A coherent employee experience—none of your company's environmental elements misrepresents what it's really like to work there.

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commitment to cooperative networks and its “one firm” mentality are reinforced in multiple ways, including through its promotion practices. Attention is given not only to an individual's commercial acumen but also to the extent to which he or she is a culture carrier for the company. Representatives across the company, not just within specific divisions or product lines, participate in the evaluation and selection of partners.

**Have the courage of your convictions.** Companies—even very large ones—don't need to be all things to all people. In fact, they shouldn't try to be. No matter the content of your signature experience, you can attract people who are suited to your organization's culture and interested in furthering its goals. Conversely, you must be willing to accept that your employment proposition won't appeal to everyone. Exxon Mobil, for instance, readily acknowledges that its highly structured environment isn't for everyone, and a number of employees choose to leave early in their tenures. The company's demands are exacting; employees are expected to follow clear communication protocols and strict security regulations—as you might expect in an industry in which safety is a high priority. Interestingly, however, attrition among employees who make it past the five-year mark is almost nil, and the level of engagement among them is very high. Perhaps there's a more effective way for the company to communicate the structured nature of its work experience to prospective hires, but Exxon Mobil's signature experience is strong enough and cohesive enough to retain those who are likely to be engaged and productive in the firm for the long term.

The company's executives calmly recognize their plight. “The suit was too tight,” they

say, as they describe those who departed early on. That statement serves as a polite but powerful reminder that Exxon Mobil's employee experience is unlikely to flex on the basis of one individual's preferences and that opting out is an acceptable path. Management understands that the company's signature experience won't necessarily map to every stage of the employee life cycle. And management carefully and sensitively protects the processes that contribute to this secure, structured experience. For example, the company recently considered switching from a defined benefits plan to a defined contribution plan, which the majority of companies today favor for their employees. In the end, it concluded that the security the defined benefits plan provides is more in sync with the values of the employees the company hopes to retain.

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People will become long-term, deeply engaged employees of your company if their work experience is what they expect it to be and if your firm's values and attributes match theirs. You do a disservice to your organization—and to prospective employees—if you try to be all things to all people. The best strategy for coming out ahead in the war for talent isn't to scoop up everyone in sight, unless you want to deal with the fallout: high turnover, high recruitment and training costs, and disengaged, unproductive employees. Instead, you need to convince the right people—those who are intrigued and excited by the work environment you can realistically offer and who will reward you with their loyalty—to choose you.

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# What It Means to Work Here

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### ARTICLE

#### [Are Leaders Portable?](#)

by Boris Groysberg, Andrew N. McLean,  
and Nitin Nohria

*Harvard Business Review*

May 2006

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What defines the “ideal” employee varies from company to company, depending on each firm’s circumstances. This article focuses on how to ensure a good fit between a leadership candidate and your firm’s particular needs. For example, hiring an expert cost cutter when your company must drive top-line growth could set him or her up for failure—though that same executive would likely excel if your strategy hinged on cost management.

How to determine whether a newly hired leader’s abilities will pay dividends at *your* company? Consider four types of leadership skills: 1) **Strategic**: expertise in cost cutting, growth, or cyclical markets. These skills are right for your firm if they match your company’s strategic needs. 2) **Industry**: technical and regulatory knowledge unique to an industry. Seek these skills if your company needs strategic relationships with other industry players or familiarity with industry customers. 3) **Relationship**: productivity deriving from participation in teams. These skills may benefit your firm if you can bring one or more of the new executive’s former teammates on board as well. 4) **Company-specific**: knowledge of idiosyncratic processes and management systems. These skills are valuable if a great degree of similarity exists between the systems and culture of the new hire’s former setting and those of your company.

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