People are the biggest disruptors

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INTRO

The customer service industry is like a space shuttle navigating its way through the unknown; set on a trajectory for a new digital world, vastly different from traditional business as we know it.

With developments in automation and AI happening at lightspeed, to transform and maintain a competitive edge, we need to adapt quickly. The secret to success? Ensuring people are your number one focus – putting them above everything.

Julie McIntosh, Chief Culture Officer at Kura, explores how people will make the biggest impact in the customer journey.

01 THE HUMAN POWER OF EMPATHY

Ernest Hemingway once counselled that it is important to "listen completely" when people talk. Strange though it may seem to take advice from a novelist in the context of the customer journey, as we move to an increasingly digital world, the human capacity to listen and empathise has never been so important.

Empathy is not a soft skill. It has hard-nosed business benefits.

The global analytics business, Nielsen, tracks tens of thousands of product launches every year to identify the most innovative ones. Its 2019 results identified empathy as the single most important rule for "new product innovation success." Understanding customers, it seems, still underpins good business.

In a marketplace filled with technological solutions, it will be people who make the difference in the next phase of modern customer service.

Research into the causes and origins of empathy has shown that we are hard-wired to perceive the emotions of others and to resonate with them emotionally. As such, it is in fact something that can be taught, not an immutable trait only the lucky are blessed with. In medicine, empathetic care has been linked to better patient experiences, adherence to treatment recommendations and better clinical outcomes.

In a variety of commercial settings, empathetic customer service means better customer experience and improved loyalty. It also means fewer mistakes where conflict can lead to lost custom. Many now agree empathy is not a soft subject in customer experience design, but a genuine component part that should be nurtured deliberately. For example, empathy is one of KPMG's six pillars of experience excellence.

To customers themselves, it may feel counter-intuitive to hear that companies that aim to improve customer service are investing not only in technology, but also in human skills. But technology is only one part of the equation. There's a blend, a balancing act. Whilst technology is changing the way we live our lives, we all still want someone to talk to when we have a real problem that needs solving – there's still value in human interaction, there's still power in empathy.

If empathy is so powerful and has real tangible business benefits, how do we set our people up for success? How do we get them to care? To answer this, let's look at Google. A fair few would label Google a tech disruptor but if we really hone in on what makes them great, it's their people; it's their culture.

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'By rewarding, recognising and developing their staff, Google has created an environment where people care. Their by-product of caring? Increased creativity, innovation and empathy. Culture is also the reason why Google consistently ranks in the top 100 places to work. So, if we understand that empathy is what we are striving for and recognise that culture can act as a catalyst for creating this empathy, surely our focus as leaders, should always be on culture, and creating an environment where our people shine.

02 HOW TO GET THE BEST FROM AN EMPATHETIC WORKFORCE

I) Give your people a 'why'

People are more likely to care more about a business if they feel like they are part of something bigger, believing not just in the day job but also the company's values, vision and goals.

McKinsey and Co have even suggested that businesses that currently focus on purpose, inclusivity and wellbeing will be better equipped to cope in a post-Covid world because a sense of purpose helps people to deal with high levels of uncertainty and change. Further, people 'living their purpose' at work are more likely to sustain or improve their levels of work effectiveness, are four times more engaged and have five times better wellbeing overall. Interestingly, only a third of people believe their organisation strongly connects actions to culture and purpose – it's clear there is much work to be done. Those businesses already connecting their people to a greater purpose currently have the competitive advantage in the months and years ahead.

II) Give your people the freedom to amaze you

From remote working and hotdesking policies to professional development programmes, there's a lot to be said for empowering a workforce and giving them the freedom to shine.

Lazlo Bock, CEO and Co-Founder of Humu and former Head of People Operations at Google sums it up perfectly: "If you give people freedom, they will amaze you."

In the Harvard Business Review, Nathaniel Koloc, co-founder and CEO of ReWork, details the advantages of giving staff greater freedom. According to Koloc, companies that allow employees to work remotely at least three times per month are more likely to report revenue growth.

While many businesses are likely to be relying on remote working, for now, this point is worth remembering when planning for a return to "normalcy". And beyond the 'great remote working debate', there are other ways to increase freedom. For example, the Gerson Lehrman Group's, New York headquarters, doesn't have set work areas. Instead, employees can move around and work out of different "neighbourhoods" within their office environment.

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But freedom isn't just limited to where you work. Providing people with the ability to choose their own learning path is another way you can give freedom. Within most businesses, the workforce is made up of people from a variety of backgrounds all at different stages in their career journeys.

A fair few people are happy in their assigned roles, but in many cases, they would welcome the opportunity to retrain, redevelop or progress. Cultures that give freedom to explore development opportunities are likely to see improved employee satisfaction scores and increased loyalty.

III) Don't just talk 2g

No, we aren't talking mobile phones here! In this context, we are looking at generations. Over the last decade, we've focused a lot on two specific generations: Generation Z and Millennials (2g) and it's clear to see why; they have revolutionised the modern workplace.

Being more focused on topics such as mental health and inclusivity has enabled these generations to identify outdated employment practices. To date, these 2g's have been the largest driving force behind organisational culture change; businesses have had to adapt to better support their new beliefs, values and career prospects.

Yes, our strategies have put 2g at the fore but is it now time for a new way of thinking? Do we need to take a multigenerational approach?

With people living and working longer, we are entering unchartered territory – soon it will be commonplace to see five generations working within a business and we need a step-change to ensure we are set for the future.

If we want to create an empathetic workforce, ready for what lies ahead, we need to be mindful of all generations within an organisation. By continuing to focus on 2g instead of 5g, we may create disharmony within our teams and find ourselves falling behind our competitors (think Nokia & Motorola's failings.)

Scott Gohan, CEO at McGohan Brabender goes even further to suggest:
"Stop trying to figure out generations; if you just care about people, you'll be fine!"

So, we've talked about creating an empathetic team and taking a multigenerational approach, but arguably, none of that really matters without feedback. Without striving for continuous improvement, we can't survive in this digital world. If we don't understand where we're going wrong, we run the risk of irrelevance and stagnation. But, before we even ask for feedback, we need to look at whether we've put the right mechanisms in place.

Will our employees provide genuine feedback if they don't feel empowered? Will they tell us what isn't working, if they have no trust in our product or service? We need to ask what we can do within the organisation to help our people understand the value of the business's offer. We also need to listen.

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IV) Create a culture that promotes continuous feedback

People-focused disruptors like Eric Yuan, CEO of Zoom, believes that employee adoption of a product or service is a key component in gathering useful feedback. It helps employees and senior teams have empathy for customer frustrations and highlights where improvements can be made.

Yuan's own product adoption can be evidenced by the decision to run his entire Initial Public Offering Roadshow from an office using the Zoom platform. This progressive approach is now engrained in Zoom culture. He and his workforce continue to be amongst some of the platform's heaviest users and his people are regularly encouraged to feedback issues and recommendations directly to their development team, thus creating a hotbed for product development.

03 WHAT SUCCESSES CAN BE SEEN FROM A PEOPLE-FIRST CULTURE

It's a no brainer. Companies with a people-first culture are, simply, better places to work. A recent survey even went so far as to suggest that a lot of us would rather put up with lower pay (65%) or forego a fancy title (26%) than deal with a bad workplace environment.

If you concentrate on your people and create a culture that breeds empathy and happiness, then success will be seen in the following ways:

Improved customer experience & ROI

If you believe in the ethos that 'people are your number one customer,' then you'll not be surprised that by keeping your employee's happy leads to happier customers. Hilton makes a great example of how a good culture can affect revenue. The hotel group was ranked no1 on Fortune's Top 100 Places to Work 2020.

When Chris Nassetta, CEO of Hilton, was interviewed about being top of the list, he put people and development first: 'it helps to have 430,000 employees worldwide pushing the company forward...We're not, we are constantly finding ways to learn.' Nassetta is focused on talent development and staff incentives. "We try to care for our people in the right way, so they care for our customers...and as a result of doing good things for our people, we are doing very well". The company saw total revenues up from $6.6billion in 2018 to $7 billion for the same period in 2019. "There is nothing I am more proud of than what we've done with the culture."

A more developed workforce

Spending time and energy on your people pays dividends. Consider Hubspot -, they show how developing the workforce leads to better engagement. Hubspot is Ranked no 30 on Fortune's 100 best places to work and was voted the no1 place to work in 2020 on Glassdoor. The company focuses on staff development programmes. They offer a 4 -day mini MBA course to promote critical-thinking skills, personal development, and the ability to deliver cross-functionally. One employee said, "We are a young, nimble company that's ready to make changes, whenever it's needed."

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Improved employee satisfaction and wellbeing

Engaged and inspired employees are more than twice as likely to recommend their workplace to friends, and the people they recommend are nearly 3x as likely to be hired and stay, according to Harvard Business Review. So, engagement and inspiration play vitally important roles in attracting and retaining great talent.

Salesforce is Ranked 6th on Fortunes top 100 Best Places to work 2020.

Salesforce invests in candidate attraction and believes that people are the real drivers in their business. Here's a snapshot of their successes:

- **95% of employees think it's a great place to work**
- **97% of employees said they were proud to tell others that they worked for salesforce**
- **52% of new hires come from referrals by current employees**

See what employees say about what makes Salesforce a great workplace. These words are drawn from employee comments on the Trust Index™ survey, and they clearly show people, culture, values and community comprise their key priorities.

04 KEY TAKEAWAYS

We've discussed empathy and culture throughout this whitepaper. In my roles as Chief Culture Officer, my main takeaway is that positive disruption will always be the by-product of good people. Google knows this, Forbes' Top 100 know this and we at Kura know this. To build a culture that drives success, we must see our people as individuals. In doing this, we'll build a culture that: appeals to all generations, fosters empathy, is more skilled, and is more laser-focused on improving the business. What's more, you'll create an innovative and engaging place to be. Great business results on a relatable and human level. Empower your people, give them a sense of purpose and develop them as individuals. Understand what makes them tick and always recognise that everyone is different.

Here is Kura's 5 tips for success:

I. **Remember people are your number one customer**

II. **Culture is the key to great performance**

III. **Empathy is power**

IV. **Empowerment is the route to innovation**

V. **Life is short – find your purpose, enjoy the challenge and have fun**

KURA

About Kura

Kura is the largest independent outsourcer in the UK, specialising in providing tailored customer support solutions to businesses across a range of sectors including insurance, finance, telecoms, retail, charity, utilities and the public sector. Kura is unapologetic in the unrivalled investment it makes into its people, it is what sets Kura's offer apart. Kura also recognises and has embraced the role of tech in delivering its first-class customer service.

Inisoft is Kura's state of the art, inhouse software, which has been developed in partnership with Kura employees. Its omnichannel management system makes it easy for customer support teams to use, allowing them to focus solely on the customer they are engaging with, whether over the phone, via email, text or even video call. Kura has offices in Glasgow, Liverpool, Sunderland, Forres and Durban in South Africa, employs over 2,500 people and has a multitude of clients across 16 countries, including Canada, the UK, mainland Europe and the United States of America.

At Kura, we've been purpose-driven from the beginning. We talk a lot about helping our people cross the bridge - to stop our people from focusing on the 'how' and instead of the 'why'. Being purpose-driven and super clear on our why, helps us to learn, innovate and grow. There's nothing in our values that will prevent us from being able to disrupt ourselves and the customer service sector as we navigate the changing customer service landscape in the years ahead.

To find out more about Kura as an outsourcer:
please visit www.wearekura.com or email marketing@wearekura.com for more information.