

WHITEPAPER

# LIGHTING THE FIRE WITHIN



PART THREE

CREATING A PERSONALIZED EMPLOYMENT  
EXPERIENCE FOR THE WIN



Actalent

One of the earliest inventions was mastery over fire. It changed the course of human evolution and interaction.

## INTRODUCTION

# This is a true story.

In spring of 2021, while millions of Americans were running toward increased flexibility, better pay, even trying their hand at the gig economy, I was running from it. Or so I thought...

For the past fifteen years, I'd worked as my own boss — freelancing on writing assignments and creative marketing campaigns, consulting on strategic planning projects, and turning organizations into cross-functional, streamlined machines.

I was also raising four children and a dog. "Doing it all," as they say. Which is ironic, because most days it felt like I was "doing none of it" particularly well. When you're your own boss, there aren't regularly scheduled "check-ins" to discuss what's working, where you feel overwhelmed, what you need help with. At least for me, there was only the constant drum beat of this voice, my voice: *Do more and do it better. All of it.*

Looking back, it doesn't sound very flexible.

I was tired of the hustle, the endless hours, the work that never turned off. "I'll probably lose all my flexibility though," I cried to my husband. "I won't have as much time with the kids. Watch their games, get them off the bus. I'll probably make less money." After all, that was my experience before I struck out on my own — rigid hours, proof of worth, first to arrive, last to leave.

My husband put his arm around me, "Maybe not, though." I appreciated his encouragement, even if I didn't believe it.

That same night, I updated my resume and did a quick search on Indeed. But it was a long overdue visit with a friend that opened the door for me at my current job at Actalent. I told her I was looking; she made a connection with a colleague.

Fast forward through the very speedy recruiting and interview process: I got the job and the entire experience was very personal. In fact, the director of marketing and I recognized each other by our dogs at the interview. (Lesson: Be nice to people in your neighborhood, they might be on the other end of an interview. Actually, be nice to people everywhere.)

My experience at Actalent hasn't stopped being personal. I was wrong and my husband was 100 percent right — my worry about losing flexibility, workload overwhelm, lack of feedback has evaporated. In fact, it's the complete opposite.

Here's why: Actalent doesn't just apply the practices of engagement for their employees, they prioritize them. They believe an investment in the well-being of their people is an investment in the success of their clients. It's not a departure from the adage 'the client is always right,' it's proof that you don't have to have losers to create winners. Everyone can win.

When I started, my manager asked what was important to me: flexibility, freedom, making meaningful contributions, expressing ideas in creative ways, collaborating on important work. Check, check, check. I thought I was running from all the things I hoped for in an employment experience. Turns out, I was running directly toward them.

But that's just me. How fires get lit will look different for everyone. **Companies that are curious and care about what's important to each employee — and make it a priority to provide it — won't just succeed, they'll pioneer a new course of employment.**

**They'll prove everyone really can win.**



## Every Employer Must Operate Like a Seismologist

### It's the strangest labor market in modern history.

The demand for employees has never been greater, nor has the scarcity of them. The rapid acceleration of digital transformation during the pandemic revolutionized how — and where — work gets done in nearly every industry. As a result, the competitive field for talent has flattened. Forget county lines; today, employers are competing across state, even country lines.

- [Recent Gallup data](#) shows that, two years into the pandemic, **60% of "remote capable" employees (workers who can do their job off-site at least part of the time) prefer a hybrid work structure**, almost double the 32% who would prefer to work remotely full-time.
- The latest [WFH Research Update](#) reported that **54% of unemployed respondents are exclusively considering or prefer jobs allowing them to work from home.**
- Additionally, **51% of sampled persons who are not working and not looking for work would seek work if they were guaranteed to find a job allowing them to work from home.**
- Even more, **55% of sampled women who are not working nor looking for work "would seek work if they were guaranteed to find a job allowing them to work from home.**

Many employers are offering higher pay to lure both existing and missing workers back to the workforce, particularly as inflation continues to break records.

Even if increased pay does help, the gap between available jobs and available workers will only widen as the workforce ages and the birthrate declines.

Besides, employees have made it clear — particularly in the engineering and sciences industries: Competitive pay is a conversation starter in this market. It might get them through the door, but alone, it's nowhere near enough to keep them there.

And given the record number of job quits in over the past year, it seems workers are exercising their options. If they don't find what they're looking for on the first try, they'll try again. And again. Probably even again.

### Job quits remain high.

On average, more than 4 million workers quit their job every month between June 2021 and June 2022.

All those quits cause fractures throughout the companies they leave — workloads get transferred, morale tanks, [managers melt down](#). **In the geological world, there's a phenomenon called dynamic triggering. It occurs when the energy from an earthquake is so impactful, it causes new earthquakes along fractures elsewhere.**



Source: [BLS](#)

The past couple of years have been hard. They've also been revealing. The world tilted and humans took a good, hard look at what really matters in life and what doesn't. Many who were able to make changes, did. Maybe they're not done. Others are just getting started. Kathryn Edwards from The Wall Street Journal put it best, "The labor market in 2022 will reflect what workers learned from their experience, but also how employers and policy makers choose to respond."

Just as seismologists study the internal structure of the earth to identify factors that contribute to or predict earthquakes, employers must understand the internal, or personal, needs of employees that contribute to their engagement. Then, employers must decide how they'll respond to what they learn.

Ignoring what they learn, giving it lip service, perpetuates a cycle of scarcity — triggering more and deeper fractures. But acting on what is learned, digging in and understanding what employees need and finding creative ways to provide it — consistently and persistently — helps perpetuate cycles of engagement.

Scarcity cannot exist with engagement. And engagement results in more than just employees who stay. Engaged employees who feel personally cared for also:

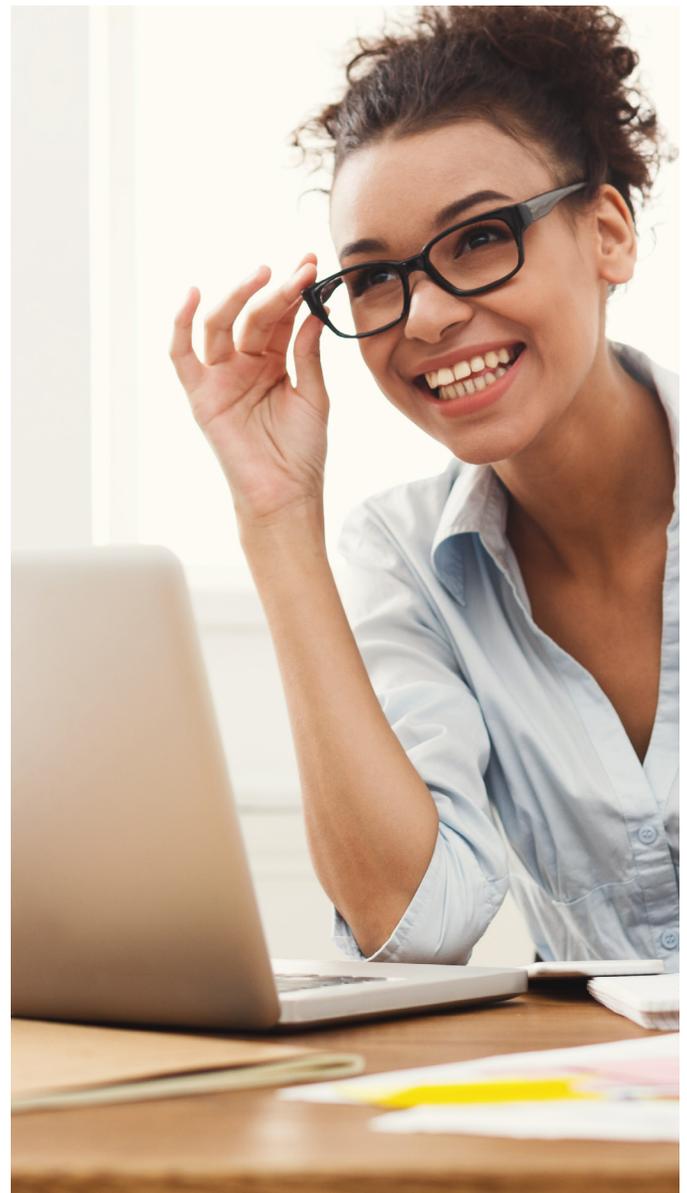
- *Solve problems before problems arise*
- *Look for opportunities and seize them*
- *Identify needs and address them*
- *Care for and give credit to colleagues*
- *Make an impact — on the work, and on one another*
- *Enjoy what they do and who they do it with*
- *Recruit great people to work with them*
- *Make things happen*

If companies want to compete in this talent market — the likes of which we haven't seen since TVs came without remotes — the prioritization and personalization of employee engagement is no longer a nice to have. It's a must have.

If companies want to grow and prosper, they must make sure their people do, too.



***If we assess pay in terms of value, it becomes an investment rather than an expense. Our people ARE our value. But we can't only look at pay. We must also understand what matters to them — at work, in life and find ways to help them succeed at both. A personalized employment experience is a win for everyone — employees feel cared for, and they make things happen. Every company can create a win-win situation. It requires a shift in thinking and intentional action.*** - BRYAN TOFFEY,  
Actalent Vice President of Talent Experience





## Six Rules to Help Ensure the Personalization of Engagement

### Humans love categories.

Grouping information into categories helps us simplify our complex world and process new information quickly. Referred to as associative thinking, categorization is automatic and essential: If our brains weren't wired for grouping and pattern finding, we'd have a really hard time learning anything. Actually, we'd have a really hard time surviving.

But because associative thinking prioritizes speed over accuracy, it makes mistakes. It overlooks nuance — the details that make people or things different. And people are different. If we're going to help employees succeed and stay, we must get to know them. We must make an intentional effort to learn about them, and what they need whether they're in-office all the time, part of the time, or not at all.

In Part B of this paper, we'll review several practices that contribute to employee engagement. These practices operate like categories, orienting us toward the big picture experience employees want. But in order to provide a personalized experience and uncover the nuance, we've identified six "Rules of Engagement" that will help.

By getting to know employees and learning what matters most to them, and building relationships that value autonomy (I can be me, you can be you), safety (I can count on you, you can count on me), and respect (I care about you, your feelings, your time, and you care about mine) employers will both mend existing fractures and prevent new ones from occurring.

### RULE ONE

**Personalization requires employers and managers to be curious, to take a genuine interest in their people.**

There's a lot happening at every layer of existence right now and one of the greatest gifts we can offer someone is our genuine interest in their life and success, and concern for their well-being.

For all the advancements technology affords, for all the worlds and possibilities it joins and opens, it cannot replace the relationship between an employee and manager. Employees feel cared for when their abilities, interests, and aspirations are reflected in the projects they work on, the professional learning opportunities they're provided, the responsiveness and encouragement they receive from their manager.

Nothing keeps people more productive and engaged than **connection** — to people and a purpose, **belonging** — to a team, a company, a mission, and **success** — personal, professional, and relational.

### RULE TWO

**Personalization requires employers and managers to be consistent and persistent with their curiosity and interest.**

Here's an example of why nuance is so important: Just because you ask someone how they're doing, or what they need, or how they work best, doesn't mean they'll want, or know how to respond.

There could be any number of reasons for that — maybe they're private or believe having needs would be perceived by others as a weakness. Maybe no one has ever asked what they need before — maybe they have no idea what they need. At least not yet. Or maybe they're skeptical (still mending those cracks). We've all got a story about a time we were led to believe one thing but experienced something else.

**One of the biggest mistakes an employer can make in this situation is to give up or take it personal.**

Keep showing up, keep asking, keep being interested. That is how trusting relationships are built.

Through your consistent actions, they'll begin to know that your care in their well-being and your investment in their success is sincere. Sometimes asking questions differently encourages a more descriptive response.

For example, consider your own answers to these two questions:

OPTION ONE: *What is your ideal employment experience? What makes you feel engaged at work?*

OPTION TWO: *What would cause you to jump out of bed, excited to start your day? Describe how you're spending your time, where you're spending it, the kinds of interactions you're having, and who you're having them with.*

Notice a difference between these two questions? With the first approach, people might have a hard time knowing where to start, or what part of the employment experience to begin with. The second question provides context, elicits emotions, allows the person to put themselves in the situation and almost SEE what matters to them and what would cause them to feel happy, productive, and engaged at work.

#### A STATEMENT FROM

## Jeremiah Holland

ACTALENT CONSULTANT/SENIOR SUPERINTENDENT

*"Jake has done so much for me. He's been there for me through the entire recruiting, onboarding, and everyday experience. Every step. And he's made it feel really personal between us. There hasn't been one time he hasn't answered a question or helped me through a situation. Longest wait was just under a day and that's because he was on vacation. Still took the time to answer and help through a situation. I can't say enough how much he's done for me. I talk about him so much my wife knows all about him. It's nice to know you have someone in your corner. It's not just professional. Jake makes it feel personal. He's been so loyal to me and at the end of the day, when you have someone in your corner, who fights for you? Well, I'm not comfortable leaving that. He cares about me, and that's what makes a difference."*



**Every person I've ever worked with has unique interests, needs, aspirations, skills.**

*The best way to honor that nuance is to listen closely, ask questions — and not always about work. Another way is to follow through on our word. If we say we will do something, we must do it."* - ERICA MCCOMAS,  
Actalent Consultant Engagement Manager

#### RULE THREE

**Being persistent and curious about what your employees need is not the same as micromanaging.**

*In fact, it's completely the opposite.*

Being persistent and curious about what your employee needs to succeed is very different than telling them what they need (or how they must work) to succeed.

And that doesn't mean employees don't want guidance — they do, and that's a manager's job. In fact, providing clear expectations for performance was identified by employees as contributing to job SATISFACTION.

Employees want to know what is expected of them, and they want support in removing obstacles to success. But when managers scrutinize, direct, and provide feedback on every detail of a project, it says to the employee, "I don't trust you to do the job you've been hired to do."

Building strong relationships that involve autonomy, trust, and respect eliminates the need for micromanagement. Employees who feel safe asking for help when they're struggling (and know their manager will offer it without judgment) are more likely to grow, take risks, and turn into highflyers than those who feel constantly scrutinized and over-managed.

**Asking, "what can I offer, or help with, to make you feel more comfortable or successful?" is very different than saying, "Today, I expect you to call Jess, calculate these figures just like this, tackle the project in this order, and report back on how far you get by the end of the day."**

## 4 RULE FOUR

### Don't avoid the hard conversations.

Not all questions will be exciting and thrilling and focused on possibilities. Some will be uncomfortable — to ask and to answer. While it's human nature to want to avoid uncomfortable conversations, doing so leaves room for resentment and misunderstanding to build (also known as fractures, to resurrect our earlier metaphor).

More often, having the hard conversations brings clarity to problems, allowing us to address them more accurately.

#### An Example:

An employee asked his manager for a pay raise.

Even though he was a great employee and deserved it, his manager knew it probably wouldn't happen. The company just gave end-of-year increases and was preparing for a few difficult months ahead. Still, she pursued his request, which was denied for the reasons she suspected.

Despite feeling concerned the employee would be unhappy and look for another job, the manager explained the decision and the reasons for it. She also told him how much she valued him and hoped he wouldn't consider the decision a reflection on the job he was doing. She told him she would pursue a raise for him as soon as the timing improved and wondered if there was anything else she could help with to accommodate his needs until then. Finally, she said, "Tell me what you're thinking. What's your heart saying, what's your head saying?"

Does this decision make you want to look for another job?" She braced for the worst.

"I like my job," the employee said. "I'm really happy here. I like who I work with and what I do. I hoped for a different answer, but I understand why the decision was made and I appreciate you looking into it for me."

Trust is built in the small moments, in the split-second decisions to engage and connect with someone. Whenever we have an opportunity to connect, especially when it's inconvenient or hard, we make a choice to build trust. When we ignore it, or look away, we make a choice to betray that trust.

**When an employee shares what's important to them, they are demonstrating trust. Managers return that trust with positive action, even when the desired result isn't achieved.**

## 5 RULE FIVE

### Check on your easy employees.

When there are intense challenges — at work, in the world, with employees — it's easy to overlook the ones who seem to have it all together, who don't need much attention.

This is your quick reminder to check on them.

Just because they're quiet doesn't mean everything is okay, or they don't need support. Check in with every employee as frequently as possible, and certainly more often than required for performance reviews. Use these opportunities to make sure you're not missing something or putting unknown pressure on them to not express their needs.

**The fastest path toward disengagement is feeling forgotten.**

“ ——— ”

*Trust is choosing to make something important to you vulnerable to the actions of someone else.* - CHARLES FELTMAN



## RULE SIX

### Expect needs to change and be gracious about it.

Applying the rules of engagement to learn about and support the interests, needs, and aspirations of employees is not just a once-in-a-while occurrence. It's a constant one. As employees grow and change, it's expected their needs will too.

It might even mean employees seek — and take — opportunities outside of your company. In fact, it's expected they will. It's rare you'll find an employee who stays at one company for the life of their career. Today, the average person will have 12 jobs throughout their employment experience. The question managers and companies must ask is: What's more important to us, making sure the employee knows how offended we are they're leaving, or making sure they know the door is open for them when they're ready to return?

Taking the long view of employment, retention, and re-attraction builds a win-win mentality, even when we get disappointed. Again, it proves we don't have to have losers to create winners.

**I had a coach tell me once, "I don't ever want to be the reason a kid doesn't want to play anymore." If we apply that to work, it sounds like: Let's not be the reason an employee wouldn't want to come back one day.**

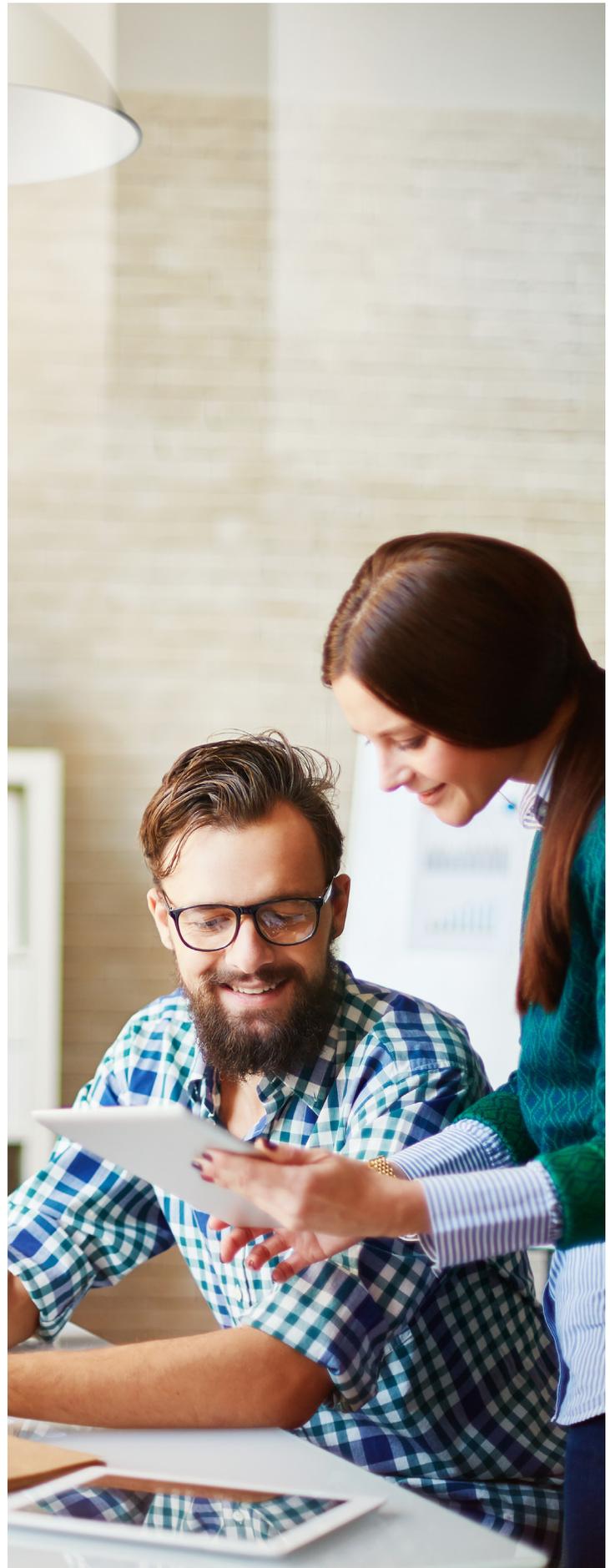
And for those employees who don't leave — life will still change for them, too. Their perspectives and priorities will adjust and re-rank. In this way, Rule Six reminds us to keep returning to Rule One: Be curious and take a genuine interest in your people and their needs. Expect them to change, and find ways to accommodate them when they do.

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### Before the Great Reshuffle,

the average person changed jobs 12 times in their lifetime, according to the latest available public survey data (2019). The average employee stays with their employer for 4.1 years as of January 2020. However, this number varies slightly between women (3.9 years) and men (4.3 years). Men hold 12.5 jobs in their lifetime, on average, while women have 12.1 jobs.

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## The Greatest Gift You Can Give Your Employees

In this competitive talent market, a lot of companies are defining and improving their Employee Value Proposition (EVP), which answers the question: Why should someone work for us, what does our business offer our employees, what are we trying to build that someone would love to be part of?

And those are all important questions to ask and answer. But companies that are interested and committed to the Personalization of Engagement need to add this question to their EVP discussions: **What does our organization hope to build WITHIN our employees? What do we hope for them?**

Years ago, a mentor of mine was diagnosed with cancer. It was scary, unexpected, and uncertain. I called him even though I had no idea what to say. But Sam would. He always knew what to say. After a few *I'm sorry this is happenings*, I asked him: "What would feel like a miracle right now?" For once, Sam was silent. He didn't know what to say. I thought I'd blown it, gone and asked the wrong thing.

Turns out, I hadn't blown it at all. He said I'd given him a gift. Permission to dream. By asking a simple question, I helped him see his life beyond the cancer diagnosis, something he hadn't been able to do since he'd received it.

What I learned was this: Obviously I couldn't perform a miracle. But by asking, I gave him permission to talk about what he needed, what he wanted, what he hoped, what he dreamed. **The magic wasn't the granting. The magic was the asking.**

So, ask. At the very least, you'll reverse — even end — the fractures that spread and deepen. At the very best, you'll find yourself in the middle of a miracle. 🔥



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