

AT THE EDGE PODCAST



SEASON 2, EPISODE 7

BRIDGETT HART – Ibexology and Employee Experience

Interviewed by Michael Lee

Bridgett Hart is Senior Director of Communications & Change Management at IBEX. Previous to this, she was the US Director of Training, and before that spent more than twenty years in a variety of positions in the telecommunications industry including at Sykes, Travelocity, AT&T, and Frontier Communications. She holds a bachelor's degree in Communications from the University of Virginia's College at Wise and completed her advanced studies in teaching/education at Western Carolina University. Bridgett has a teaching endorsement in both Virginia and North Carolina and recently received certification in Change Management. Bridgett is a HUGE supporter of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, where her son was treated and cured of leukemia at an early age.

In this episode, Bridgett shares about the multiplicity of ways that hybrid work has changed the corporate culture, and how her own company has responded to it to transform and improve employee experience, in so many ways that she has given her company's approach its own name: Ibexology.

Michael Lee

So Bridgett, thank you for being with us. And welcome to At the Edge.

Bridgett Hart

Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Michael Lee

How has hybrid work changed the nature of things for Ibx?

Bridgett Hart

Well, to be honest with you, it's changed everything. At the beginning of the pandemic, we had no home workers. All of our work was done in the site location. All of our engagement, all of the ways that we communicate and coach, everything that we did was in person, face-to-face. The pandemic caused us to adjust to that kind of work entirely. Gladly, we were able to do so quickly. We went from zero employees to having eighty percent of our employees working from home during the course of the last two years.

Michael Lee

What impact has that had on the company?

Bridgett Hart

We've had to get really creative and go back to the drawing board when considering how to connect with people. So we've built tools, and use tools that we've never used before. We had to rethink how we coach and how we engage. And that includes everything from social media to messaging tools to group chats to different things just completely out of the norm that have been pretty effective. And we're pretty glad to say that we feel like we've adjusted well.

Michael Lee

Please share some of your secrets.

Bridgett Hart

From an engagement perspective, it's different when you're used to partying in person and giving away things and getting that face time. But we found avenues to accomplish that same thing through social media, through Zoom parties. We have closed groups on Facebook, Instagram. We launched a TikTok account. We're intentional about it. We regularly plan activities and incentives to get them on there. And then when they're on the social media platforms and they start to see other people engaging, they naturally join into that. So we've

grown that whole facet of the business completely. Tons of contests. We have to rethink everything we've had done before. So when we have a contest, we have to make sure it has a way to get to complete that task on site, and also a way to replicate that same experience for somebody who's sitting at home at their desk.

Michael Lee

And that really is the challenge that we've heard from a lot of people is, how do you account for both sides of hybrid? You have some people in a central location, some people everywhere.

Bridgett Hart

I would say the most successful part has been these closed Facebook groups. We know that the majority of our people are on social media, and then we make sure that the content we have there is exciting, that it's something that resonates with the group. We have fundraisers. We do philanthropy. We have Women of Ibex initiatives. We have games. We play games. We do contests. We have Simon Says where everybody just drops things. We ask trivia questions and the first answers win prizes. Mostly through social media, but we've also used Zoom parties, which has been really exciting. During the times we would normally celebrate together in person, we do the same thing online. We just have everybody log on to Zoom, and we talk and we celebrate and we ask questions and we play games together. It's just through the computer instead of face-to-face.

We started by developing a model for engagement that lays out what we expect and the way we want to engage with our employees. It looks a lot like Maslow's hierarchy of needs. And it starts with, first you have to meet the basic functions. You have to train them. You have to welcome people to the company. And you have to get them comfortable with their job. And then as we go up the pyramid, you want to make sure you interact with them and ask for their opinions. You want to recognize good performance. You want to mentor and coach. You want to promote internally. And you want to have celebrations and big ticket events where you recognize all of that hard work.

We call that Ibexology. Once we've determined the framework and identified how we want to approach employee engagement and employee experience, we build programs that intentionally include that and build that into our culture.

So we identified our framework, and we identified how we want that to look each year. And then we took a look at our core values, and determined what's important to us as a company. We also know that it's important to support diversity and inclusion. So we built in a week where we focus on how our cultures and our differences make us unique and make us stronger, as opposed to pulling us apart. We take part in the Rainbow Project in the Philippines in support of the LGBTQ community, and making sure that people who work for Ibex have a place and have a platform that they can relate to and engage with. And it just brings out a lot of fun, the spirit of fun. And that celebratory culture that we want to have in our company.

Michael Lee

You mentioned values. One of the things that seems to come up a lot is, how do you make sure that the employees actually, number one, know the values of the company, and number two, align with the values of the company?

Bridgett Hart

Well, we start that from the very first day. One of the very first things that our employees do is they learn our values, which happen to be respect, integrity, transparency, and excellence. So we made a fun little way to remember that we call it Rightway. When they come into the company, they're handed that with their new employee orientation paperwork. And every single year, we host a series of training events for all of our employees called Rightway training. And it's focused on practical lessons that relate to each one of these categories. So for example, in the new year, the first quarter, we will be focused on respect. All of our employees will complete a training, but we'll also have the ability for them to attend seminars, complete some additional training, workshops, videos, and engage around all of our activities for that month around the core value. So as you work here, it rolls, if you come in during integrity, the second quarter, you're going to be exposed to that. And by the time the year ends, you're going to get an in-depth knowledge and alignment to those core values.

Michael Lee

I'm gonna ask you the same question about culture.

Bridgett Hart

Culture is the general feeling that employees get when they think of a company. So if you're trying to build a culture of recognition, then that's something that you have to live every day. It's not something you can do once a year and say it's part of your culture. It's something that you're intentional about, including throughout the year, year after year, month after month, so that people recognize that as a normal part of the way that you do things.

Our culture wants to foster engagement, celebration, recognition, caring, diversity, respect, all of those things. So at the beginning of every year, we sit down with a cross-functional global team. And we choose events and activities every single month that we're going to do to align to those goals.

Another important part of culture is not assuming that you know what the culture is or what the feeling of the agents or the employees are. What we have to do is, we have to ask them, we have to seek feedback regularly. Make sure that we're developing events that build the culture we want. Are those events working? Is that resonating with the group? What did they like? What did they not like? What did they want more of? What was particularly impactful? What was a waste of time? So that we get that feedback, and we consider it in real time as we're developing the action plans to move forward.

So if we do an event that's intended to recognize people, and people don't feel recognized, then we need to seek that feedback, take it and make adjustments. It's a total, ongoing process. It's collaborative. It's two-way communication. And it's making sure that you put the focus on the things that are important to the company and to the direction of the company.

Michael Lee

What other ways do you see using technology to be a benefit to employee experience, whether it's hybrid or not?

Bridgett Hart

Well, technology is key to everything that we do. And especially in global markets and global companies with so many employees like we have, without the technology to connect us we would not be able to achieve the things that we are able to achieve.

One of the most important tools that come out of this hybrid site, work-at-home situation is the use of our company Intranet, and making sure that the one tool that everybody can consistently access is fun. It has the news and the information that they're looking for. People can go there to look at photo galleries, to celebrate together, to see who's being recognized, to understand who's being promoted, who's being added to the company, to see how the company is performing in the market. And just to get the same message out to everybody that works for the company. That's very important.

We've also used a variety of tools like, we built an Xbox messenger tool, which kind of functions like Skype or Slack, where our employees can communicate with each other, regardless of where they are. They can ask questions. They can get answers. They can talk and share and collaborate. Because that's one thing that we have to keep consistent. In order for a team to feel like a team, they have to be able to connect together.

Michael Lee

Where do you see things going in terms of the hybrid workplace using technology to overcome those resistances? But also maybe other some ways in which this is actually a benefit we didn't see coming?

Bridgett Hart

It is! In fact, I'm pretty sure we will never go back to one hundred percent on-site work, the way things were before this. We've found that embracing the at-home platform is really a wonderful thing for a lot of people. So as we continue to accept that change and embrace it and even grow it, it's going to be equally important that we maintain these communication channels. We have to get people on social media. We have to connect. We have to play games. We have to deliver consistent messages. We can't go days and weeks without talking to these

people, because we're not passing them in the break room to say hello. We have to be intentional about our time with those employees who are not physically at a site.

Michael Lee

Do you see a big change coming for companies?

Bridgett Hart

I think the big change has already happened. The big shift was hard and fast. In 2020, we had to rethink very quickly how to stabilize a workforce that wasn't in the traditional setting. Right now we send mail-in prizes and things to their homes, just to make sure that we are having those consistent touch points with our employees, that they feel like they're part of something,

Michael Lee

if we could create a hybrid work office virtually, which was like going into an office, except it's virtual, what would it look like?

Bridgett Hart

You would want to see a place where video is available sometimes, so that you get to see people and get to know them in their own environment. It would be very collaborative. That's one part we have to be. We have to focus to make sure that we don't lose collaboration. When people sit in a home office by themselves, it's easy to turn it off and walk away without having those ideas, share sessions, brainstorming sessions with other people. So collaboration is key.

Any kind of breakout rooms where you encourage groups of people to get together and collectively determine the course of action or the business plan or the event, whatever it might be. So that these decisions are not being made in silos.

I'm used to living in this virtual world. And it was a matter of bringing everybody else here with us. And making sure that the things that are important, which are connecting, collaborating, working together, having your questions answered, being coached, building a way to get face time even if you can't be together - all of those things are critical to maintaining success. Teams have to celebrate together. They have to team-build together. In order to do that you have to set aside time when your entire team is in this room or this space, or whatever it may be, together. So that we can learn from one another.

Michael Lee

It's a different kind of hybrid, right? You've got one-half that is working in a certain way with the call center people. And you've got another part of the company that's working in a different way. How do you get those to interact and feel like they're the one unit and collaborative?

Bridgett Hart

One way that we do that is through Town Halls, though they're virtual now instead of in person. We still go through all of the bells and whistles. We give away prizes. We have themes. Our executive leadership team comes together to deliver the same message to people all over the globe. We launch our annual survey and pulse surveys to get feedback from the group. We still try to host these big ticket events, so that we do have an opportunity to bring our people together to collaborate and communicate. And we have a huge focus on the tools that we use. So video conferencing and chat - that's all internal and built internally to ensure security. Those have become like a crutch for us.

You have to make sure that you're setting up your workspace in a way that opinions are welcome, that our leaders intentionally seek out the opinions of other people. You make team meetings and focus groups a priority in the way that you set up the work for communication. You have to start it. You have to live it. If you want them to communicate with you, you have to give them avenues to communicate with you. To communicate with the business. Using the Intranet, sharing the news, sending emails, text messages, making sure that you open external platforms that don't have to be quite as rigid, like social media channels to give people the opportunity to come together, to get to know one another, to share ideas, and to feel safe when they do that. That's part of the culture that you have to build.

If you want a culture of communication and collaboration, you have to focus on that. And you have to build it on purpose into everything that you do.

Michael Lee

How do you make people feel safe?

Bridgett Hart

One of the ways that you make people feel safe is that you embrace who they are. So again, you find ways to connect with them. We do it through these regular coaching sessions. It shouldn't just be giving them performance information, right? It's an exchange, it's going, "Well, what could go better? What do you like? What don't you like?" And taking that information to build a relationship.

In order for people to feel comfortable and not feel scared, there has to be relationships that are built between members of a team. And also between the leadership and the employee. So setting that up is key.

Another way that you make people safe is that you promote a culture where you want people to give their opinion. One way we do that is through these surveys. We're constantly surveying our people. We're putting out surveys on events. We're putting out surveys on experience. We're putting out surveys on pay. We're putting out surveys on their work, the nature of their work. We're making sure that we stay connected to what they want.

Michael Lee

And how do you make sure the employees know that all these surveys are actually causing results that they can see?

Bridgett Hart

You have to tell them. So that goes back to communication. When you receive feedback in the surveys, you have to make adjustments accordingly.

So if for example, we get feedback that an event we did didn't really resonate, then we say to them in email, in text or on the Intranet or in-person through our virtual meetings or situations, "Hey, we heard you! And this new thing is happening instead. Hey, you told us this. So as a result, we're happy to introduce the answer, the solution you asked for."

You have to tell them. You have to connect the actions that you're taking to the feedback that you received, and make sure that connection is obvious, so that they know you hear what they're saying. And that is important. That matters. It drives the way that we work.

Michael Lee

How would you recommend that everyone in the world could adopt Ibexology to make a better workplace?

Bridgett Hart

Well, you have to think about it as something that you build on experience. A culture is something that is built over time. You can't start giving everything on the first day. They're not ready for everything on the first day. You have to think about building a firm foundation. What is the foundation of your business? What are the most important things to an employee?

Most people come in and they want to do a good job. What are those key critical components that are going to enable them to do that? Once they've got their firm footing, and they're ready to go, then they need to be recognized, then they need to be mentored, then they need to be collaborating and sharing their ideas, moving up to a different level of employment.

Someone with a little bit of tenure, someone with an understanding of the business, then you move on up again. So they've been mentored. They've shared their knowledge. What now will put them in a position where they can share knowledge to other people? Where they can feel appreciated and developed so that they know there's an internal career path? So that they stay with the company? So that they're engaged with the company?

Then you move up and you promote these people internally. And you give them new responsibilities and you find new ways to connect them, with their business, through engagement, through additional responsibility, through accountability.

And you celebrate all the way through. You celebrate and welcome. You celebrate when they are being mentored. You celebrate when they become a mentor. You celebrate when they're ready for a promotion or the next step. And you continue to build on that.

And then you put incentives throughout. And you make sure the whole time that you're hearing their voices, so we're not just assuming what they want. We're asking what they want and how they feel. And we're building plans that align to that.

Michael Lee

Let me ask you about rewards. There's a lot of scepticism that rewards make a difference. Do you find that rewards make a difference? Or is recognition more important?

Bridgett Hart

I think rewards and recognition go hand-in-hand. If I'm rewarding you but not recognizing you, that's going to hit one type of person and not the other. It's about relationships and understanding what people need. Some people do need to be recognized more than others. But I think that consistently building rewards and recognition into what you do provides a place where employees feel accomplished, supported, seen. And that's important to every generation, to every person.

So whether you're being recognized for tenure, that's important. Or for performance. Or for fun. All of those things have a place within the business. And it's an important way to connect people to the business.

When we talk about rewards, it doesn't always have to be money. Sometimes it's an Ibex t-shirt that you can wear in town and feel proud to be part of something else. It can be a trip. It can be money. It can be time off the phone to work on a bigger project that you're interested in.

So rewards can take a lot of shapes. Recognition is calling attention to the good work somebody is doing. And making sure that they're seen and that they feel accomplished and appreciated. Because again, those are universal things that go a long way with every person.

Michael Lee

And what would you say are the best kind of rewards?

Bridgett Hart

It's dependent on the people. The greatest reward for me personally is time off, because I value time away with my family and work-life balance. But the relationship that I have with my boss, he knows that.

So it's getting to know your people and offering them rewards that are important to them. If you're the kind of person who's in a difficult financial situation, then we wouldn't want to give you a t-shirt! We would want to reward you monetarily.

So again, that goes back to these personal relationships, just like everything in business. We have thirty thousand employees. But there have to be personal relationships.

I personally know the executive leaders of this company. And that's something that I've never experienced before. At any given time, the CEO might reach out to me and say, "Hey, good job," or, "Hey, I need your help with this." And that kind of focus on building personal relationships with people really goes a long way.

You can't expect that this CEO has a relationship with thirty thousand people, but he tries. That's why we have the Town Halls. That's why there are personal messages from him to different groups. That's why you have to know your direct manager. And you have to know the people that report to you, because this personalization can't get lost just because we're not sitting in the same room.

Michael Lee

How do you maintain that personalization in a hybrid setup?

Bridgett Hart

You have to call them. You have to set up a thirty-minute session where you talk, and where you ask questions and get answers. Where you give them a platform to say, "Hey, I'm struggling with this", "Hey, I need help with this, I like this. I don't like this."

You have to force those communications, those phone calls, those messages, whether it's vox messages or text messages, whether you send them a photo or an SMS, it's something to connect every day with those employees. You can't just allow the employee to sit at home by themselves and not hear from you. You should call. You should check in. You should schedule a video meeting. You should schedule focus groups. You should schedule team time. That time together is expected. It's part of what you do every single day.

We were doing all of these things before, but we were doing them differently. Now we have become very heavily reliant on technology to allow us to still interact with people, whether they're in Honduras or Pakistan, That connection is still important. And it's not going to happen in person right now. So Zoom and text messaging and email and all of those sites become a thousand times more important. You can't stick a poster or a flyer on a table and expect that people are going to know anymore. You have to be much more intentional.

I've found that you have to attack it in a variety of ways. Some of the employees are going to look at the Intranet and some aren't. Some are going to read email and some aren't. Some are going to get a text message, and some are going to opt out of that. Some people are going to be on social media and some people aren't.

So instead of just coming at it through one channel, we've really had to expand the approach to multi-channels to gather as many people as we can.

I've said a lot of times, if you throw out one hook, you catch one fish. If you throw out a bunch of hooks, you might not catch a bunch of fish, but there's definitely a possibility that you're going to catch more fish. So that's the way we're looking at it. We're not throwing out one hook, we're throwing out as many hooks as we can get our hands on, so that we can pull in as many people as we can.

Michael Lee

It sounds like the story of hybrid work is really personalized attention to each and every employee as a human being.

Bridgett Hart

People like to be known. People like to be appreciated. People like to be acknowledged. And you have to be intentional about giving the business that human feel, even through technology. We want to talk to people. We want to seek their opinions. We want to know how they feel. We want to celebrate together all of those things. So it's important that we do exactly that, humanize it and be intentional about building relationships with one another.

Michael Lee

If you wanted people to remember just one thing about listening to you today, go away and say this is what Bridgett said - how would you summarize your message for the world?

Bridgett Hart

My big message is to be intentional about the way you engage with your people. Don't assume that just because you sent one email that people know and will participate. Remember that when you're building events, when you're building activities, think about how you're going to engage both a person sitting in a desk or in a meeting or in person. And the way that you're going to engage that same message with a person who's at home with a person who's not attached to other people, that sit there all by themselves.

You have to be intentional about making sure that what you're doing now resonates on both sides of the coin. It has to work both ways. You can't just do one thing anymore. You have to think it through from beginning to end. And make sure that whether the person is at home in

Pakistan or on site in Texas that what you're doing works. And that they both have the opportunity to participate in whatever it is that you're doing.

So the message, the important takeaway for me is, "Be intentional with your planning" And make sure that you're covering an at-home audience and an on-site audience with everything that you do.

Michael Lee

Thank you, Bridgett. It's been really nice to chat to you and get a perspective from the heartland of Virginia and in a big company running all over the world that you're working with from there. So thank you for taking the time and being with us on At the Edge.

Bridgett Hart

Thank you for having me.