AT THE EDGE PODCAST

SEASON 2, EPISODE 1
SHWETA BANDI – How Employee Experience is Like Ice Cream
Interviewed by Michael Lee

Shweta Bandi is the Director of HR Technology and Employee Experience at Adobe. Previous to this she worked as the Director of People Technology and Systems and in other positions at Clorox for more than a decade. An innovative strategist and thought leader in Employee Experience and HR Technology, she has been an instigator in bringing the workplace and workforce technology together to deploy a digital mindset and drive a unified experience with employee at the core. Shweta is responsible for defining and executing the Employee Experience Technology strategy and the short- and long-term HR tech roadmap to attract, hire, develop, and grow diverse and inclusive talent at Adobe. Shweta leads a team of Senior managers, tech partners, business analysts and solution architects to design and build solutions and platforms to deliver on business capabilities and trusted, valuable analytics and metrics to drive data driven decision making for Adobe.

In this episode, Shweta talks about the new definition of employee experience, and what it's composed of, tips and tricks to maximize employee experience both with and without technology, how the hybrid experience is different than the traditional one, and most importantly of all, why employee experience is like ice cream.

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Michael Lee

Welcome to At the Edge. It is an absolute delight to have you here with us.

Shweta Bandi

Thank you. And thank you for having me. Absolutely delighted to be here myself. Looking forward to the conversation.

Michael Lee

Share with our audience a bit about your history and how you came to be where you are.

Shweta Bandi

I've been in the consulting and HR technology space from the very beginning of my career. I started as an analyst, and then grew up the chain and took on a few things before I realized I really have a passion for HR tech and employee experience, making lives easier for our workforce so that they can do their job and we can get out of the way and have them do what they really love to do.

Realize that with HR technology and employee experience technology, you can actually make a difference in the company's bottom line, engage with the right employees, get the right talent, and keep the right talent. And so that's where my passion is. In recent years, I feel like it's not just even HR-focused technology. It's overall employee experience.

It's not just about getting your paycheck or signing up for your benefits. It's about the workplace experience that you get. It's about the digital workplace experience that you get. The last twenty months has really hit home on why it is important to think about an overall employee experience, be it related to HR or to workplace. And now that your workplace is, in a lot of cases, your home - what is that digital impact that you want to drive? What does that hybrid experience look like? So that's my current focus at Adobe.

Michael Lee

HR is spreading out. The definition was more restrictive. It's becoming everything in a way.

Shweta Bandi

I would totally agree with that. In fact, at Adobe, the HR function is called an "Employee Experience Function." So we were a little ahead of the curve to start with. It's been quite a few years since we've called ourselves Employee Experience. And Employee Experience, as I said, is about giving the right experience to the employee in the moments that matter to them in the workflow that they are in. That could be an HR-driven workflow. That could be an IT-driven workflow. That could very much be a workplace-driven experience.

I am at the office, it's lunchtime. What's available for me at the cafeteria? Can I get that information on an app? Can I order it on the app, so I can quickly get in and get out? Or if I want a team meeting, and I want to book the office cafeteria to get that team meeting happening - can I do that? And in a digital way? And especially now that we've moved out of the office, and I go into the office very infrequently - can I know where the parking is available, so I do not spend any time finding parking?

So these are examples of experiences that impact the employee in a different place of where they are in their workflow and in their journey. And that's all coming together, in hybrid and digital employee experience.

Michael Lee
Do you think in a way that the term Human Resources, which looks at people as a resource rather than as people - do you think that term will change?

Shweta Bandi
Definitely. And that's why there's a human aspect to it. There is a resource aspect to HR. But there's a human aspect of it as well. I think that's the fine balance that we need, is that as we think about technology, and as we think about the digital world, we don't miss the human aspect of it.

Even at Clorox, it wasn't a human resource function, it was a people function. And it is important to acknowledge and understand that we're talking about living beings here who have emotions, we're here to do a job for sure. But a lot of time that they spend nine, ten, eleven hours at work. They're spending a significant amount of time, energy and passion doing what they do. It's important to look at them not just as a resource, but also look at them as a full human being. It's not just about thinking of them as a check-in, check-out time clock, but more around - what are their true needs? How can we make them more productive, more engaged, really help them get to where they want to get to?

Michael Lee
Adobe consistently gets very high ratings for from employees.

Shweta Bandi
Particularly for Adobe, because we are in the experience-selling business. Delighting our customers is our number-one priority. Our logo says Creativity for All. We do understand and acknowledge that providing top-notch experience is important. And so obviously it is very important for us to do that internally facing as well, for our employees and for our workforce.

Michael Lee
What would you say, as an expert in this, are the important elements of employee experience?

Shweta Bandi
Employee experience, that definition is evolving every single day. Every single day, we're hearing and understanding what and how we can continue to engage our employees and give them the best experience that they are looking for. And in some respects, it's very much around what I expect.

As with the Amazons of the world, the Doordashes of the world, simple, clean, minimum clicks to get to what I need to get to. If I were to frame this in the digital world, that's the experience that an employee is looking for.

HR, or finance, or some of the other functions that are enabling functions need to get out of the way so that a software engineer who's being asked to develop these awesome products like Acrobat can do their job.

I often describe experiences as ice cream flavors. You could be asking for half a scoop, a full scoop, in a cup, in a cone. You might feel like vanilla one day, and you might feel like strawberry the other day. And it's not about serving every single ice cream flavor to your employees. But it is about serving a personalized experience to the employee in the moment that they are looking for it, to be presenting them data with action items, with a workflow. In the US, there's no reason for somebody sitting in India or Africa to get that experience, because that's got nothing to do with them. I go back to, How can we personalize what an employer is looking for in the moment that they're looking for it?

Michael Lee
To extend the metaphor, you're saying the more flavors of ice cream you have on offer, the better.

Shweta Bandi
I think it's a balance. Which is why I said I don't think it is about serving every single ice cream flavor. It is about the right balance of serving the right flavor at the right time and personalizing it. It's about serving the content that an employer is looking for. You can't scale if you were to serve every single ice cream flavor. You have to balance it, which is where the technology component is so crucial in serving up the right employee experience.

How do you then make sure that it's secure, scalable, providing the value that it really needs to? And it's not just specific to Adobe. A lot of companies are struggling with the amount of benefit offerings that they have: Buy a meditation app, bring your pets to work, dry cleaning laundry, you name it. Which one is the most valuable to the employee as an exercise on its own? It doesn't

mean the more ice cream flavors that a company is serving truly translates into the best employee experience. I don't think that's true. I think it is the right balance of what you're serving up to your employees and what they're looking for.

And each company can be on a different journey as well. I'll give you an example. At startup, onboarding might be so crucial because they are looking for getting that computer into the hands of that employee on day one. So that person can be productive day one, for a maybe mid-sized growing company, getting experience to the culture of the company is more important than getting that person to be productive day one. So it also depends on where you are as a company in the journey, in the lifecycle of existence of the company, and where the employee is, and why.

I talk a lot about the work around personas and journeys, it's really important to understand what's an onboarding experience for a new hire versus an onboarding experience for an internal mobility candidate. They're both onboarding experiences, but they might look very different.

Michael Lee
Ben and Jerry's has a different offering than Baskin Robbins has a different offering than Edy's. So there's a balance between the offering a company has based on its own values and mission and purpose, and then also being diverse enough to have that offering be appealing to all of the employees.

Shweta Bandi
Yeah. Which is why I think sometimes we try and talk more about personalization than, say, customization. So you're absolutely right, I think what you're suggesting is, each employee might want something different depending on where they are, and how we can cater and personalize that to the location that they are in? If you're a new parent, and you're looking for content around being a new parent, if you're going on leave, and you're looking around content on leave, how do we make sure that we're serving up that to you? But that might not mean we're customizing every single application or technology. It just means understanding your end user, understanding your consumer, which is employees, and contingent worker and visitors in a lot of cases, and then making their experiences top-notch.

Michael Lee
One of the things you mentioned a bit earlier is the close alliance at Adobe between customer experience and employee experience. Tell us more about that, and why and how that works.

Shweta Bandi
I think personally, it should absolutely be that way. There's no reason for us to think of experiences differently for our customers and for our employees. Because talent is a premium, it's as much of a premium as a customer. If you don't have a top-notch product to offer your

customer, your consumer is going to move to another product. Similarly, if you don't have the right experiences to offer your talent, and in some cases, talent is even more premium than the product you're selling, because only then can you sell the product that you're selling or building. Is that a priority for every single company? Perhaps not. I've been around the block enough to know that HR or employee experience wouldn't get as much of a priority in some cases as sales or marketing or even finance.

I think CEOs are coming around. There is a change at the top leadership level. To understand the criticality of keeping talent, it's expensive to lose talent, and then to find new talent. To answer your question, I feel like it's critical to treat your talent as much as if not more, from an experience perspective.

Michael Lee
What is the impact of good employee experience on good customer experience?

Shweta Bandi
What we've definitely understood, and this comes up very loud and clear in eight years in our Adobe engagement survey and some of the other poll surveys that we do, but I think in general - engagement drives productivity. So the more engaged your talent is, the more productive they are. So that would lead to better customer enablement, because you have talent that is being as productive as they can be. From a retention and numbers perspective or internal mobility perspective, we've consistently seen that an engaged audience is more engaged to do their job, is more strategically aligned with the goals of the company. That easily translates into better service and better products.

Michael Lee
You've pointed out that more engaged employees are more productive. They're also more innovative.

Shweta Bandi
We are huge on creating new and innovative products. Creativity is just bubbling up in our offices and our campuses. And when I say offices and campuses, our online offices and our online campuses as well. I mean, I'll speak for my own team. A more engaged employee experience and technology teams means better innovation, creativity, drive, and employee experience technology for our employees.

Michael Lee
What about what engagement creates? What are some of the factors that create engagement?

Shweta Bandi

Definitely leadership and strategic alignment drive engagement. Those are some of the things that a lot of companies lay a lot of emphasis on. Clear and articulated communication around goals and objectives is really important to drive engagement. The right culture that speaks to the employee is very important in driving engagement, in that culture could be the culture of innovation, culture could be the culture of being genuine, culture could be the culture of being together. One team one goal. It could depend on the company and type of culture that they want to drive. But alignment to that culture drives engagement.

I think it's an overall package. This is where the experiences come in. It's important from a strategic alignment perspective. Where is the company? Do you believe in the vision, the mission and the goals, but at the same time, are you able to drive the impact that you need to drive as an employee? And that would mean different things to different people, depending on where they are.

Michael Lee

In your experience, what have been the techniques or tricks that you've found most effective?

Shweta Bandi

As a valued employee and driving that culture, where can I make a difference? Where can I drive the impact that I need to drive as an employee? If you can build that culture, everything else is going to follow, in my opinion. If I feel valued as an employee, if I know I can make a difference in my field, then a lot of those things come back after the fact. If I don't feel empowered to make decisions, if I don't feel aligned to the strategic goals of the company, then I don't feel like I'm adding value. And then, even if you were paying me more, even if you were giving me all the benefits that we just talked about - pet friendly culture, doing my laundry - I almost feel like those are cherries. If you don't have the right cake or ice cream, then I don't think you're going to be able to drive engagement that you need to drive.

Michael Lee

For you as an HR leader, how do you achieve those two goals?

Shweta Bandi

It's not a goal that you check off and say you achieve tonight. In this case, the goalpost keeps moving. What you have to define for your organization is, What are some of the keys? How can you take action on strategic objectives that are going to help you to continue to move the needle in those directions? So as an HR or as an employee experience function, I have to say, we have to set the goals for what employee experience stands for. Attract, acquire, and retain the best talent. Create a culture of innovation, inclusion, diversity. If those are your objectives that you

set up for the true north for the employee experience function, then how do you rally everybody behind it to make a difference to these goals and objectives?

I would say that might look a bit different depending on the function. But if the corporate goal is Creativity for All, building a culture where every single employee, every single person on the planet, feels like they can contribute towards creativity, if that's your true north? I think it's a fantastic vision to get behind. It starts from there. And then it translates into, "What are the functions goals? What are the goals for your leadership team? How does that translate into your own goals?"

Michael Lee
I'm gonna push this metaphor one last time, because I love it so much. You've already said it's not so much the number of flavors of ice cream. So what is it? Is it the ability to access the ice cream? Is it the cost being cheap for the ice cream? Isn't that you can have ice cream at your desk? What if you had to pull that metaphor to say what is the key there around that ice cream?

Shweta Bandi
It is about the flavor of ice cream that an employee is going to value in in the moment. There is no silver bullet. There's no one thing that you could say, if I serve chocolate over a scone, in the middle of the day when it's hot, that's going to check it off. I don't think it's going to work.

Michael Lee
You have a particular passion for technology, HR technology. Tell us why.

Shweta Bandi
As I say HR technology and as I go back to employee experience, a lot of companies out there say people are the number one strategy. "What's your number one strategy?" People.

I want to get my people rallied behind a cause. And how do you do that? Technology is an enabler. It allows you to push the envelope for whatever goals and objectives you have set for yourself. So I go back to people as your number one strategy and you say, I'm going to hire the best talent to build the best product. If that's your goal as a company, to enable that hiring of the best talent, to enable keeping of the best talent, in order to do that in a most efficient, scalable, secure way, you need technology. In today's day and age, going back to our ice cream analogy, there's so much available. It's not about using every single thing. It's about stitching it together to drive a strategy.

Where I feel we really make a difference is not just by offering solutions that are reactive. Okay, so you need a learning technology. There are thirty-five different learning technology tools available. I'm going to help you pick one. That's one way of looking at it. Where I feel like my

expertise is, and I kind of bring it together, is looking at the full landscape, considering the architecture framework that you have, the integration framework that you have today, you also have to empathize and understand what your business is looking for.

Your talent partners ask, why do they need to move out of workday recruiting to get the best talent, as an example? Why do they need to hire another platform to do candidate relationship management? Why do they need in the moment learning or micro-learning tools or capabilities? I can help stitch it together to understand the business needs, empathize with what they're looking for to drive their own objectives and goals. I can help stitch it all together to provide what the business is looking for.

I always give the analogy of customers and consumers, a talent team, a talent partner, or a learning and development team. An ERC team is a customer of a lot of the technology that I have either built or bought or put together. The consumer is a candidate, a new manager is a new employee is the VP or is the CEO. And I want to make sure that I'm serving up to the customers as well as to the consumers of those technologies.

Michael Lee
What are the biggest challenges facing you right now as an HR leader, and how can technology help you with those?

Shweta Bandi
From a technology perspective, the biggest challenge, especially in the employee experience world that we're facing today, is that a lot of the best of the breed's SAS cloud platforms are striving to be in the employee experience layer. And it is not easy for a product to be a best SCM tool, plus a best talent acquisition tool, plus the best learning tool.

And there are pros and cons of going by best of breed. You can build a full portfolio of these technologies. And then also think about employee experience. The biggest now are ServiceNow, Glynde, Workday, Microsoft Viva, Oracle, Facebook. You name it. A lot of these companies are coming up with an experience layer. And I would say the biggest challenge would be to integrate these experience layers with the base human capital management system or the transactional systems. I almost think of it as a transaction layer, or an analytics and insights layer, because a lot of your transaction tools do not allow you to do analytics and insights. And then think of it as an engagement or an experience layer. And then how do you put all of these layers together to give a seamless experience to your employees? Because they don't care whether they have to change their address and workday, or do method planning and workday, but create a case in ServiceNow or an event report from Glynde, they don't really care. That I would say would be the number one challenge, which is an exciting, challenging problem to solve.

Michael Lee
So there's a lot of tool fatigue.

Shweta Bandi
There's absolutely a lot of tool fatigue. And then there's sometimes not enough. That's where I would say the expertise comes in. It's not about buying the best of the breed tool and implementing it. That's a challenging one in some cases. But it's not about that. It's about integrating it with the existing set to provide the experience that your employer is looking for. That's the challenge.

Michael Lee
What are your thoughts on hybrid work? How technology is supporting that. Where is it going?, How is the space changing?

Shweta Bandi
At Adobe, we believe the future of work is flexible. Both virtual and hybrid – there's no question in our mind that hybrid work represents the biggest shift to how we will work in our generation and in the next generation. As people leaders, we need to be the role model for that digital-first mindset.

It is important to have the right leaders role model that behavior, to enable hybrid teams to be successful. So I think it's really critical that that human side comes into play as we think about hybrid. And, an exciting anecdote I'll tell you, when all of us were working from home this past eighteen months, it wasn't hybrid, everyone was on video calls. The numbers we have, the numbers that we've had in the last year and a half, phenomenal work has happened. And I don't think it's just true for Adobe. It was pretty much across the landscape, especially in the tech world.

But now that we will have hybrid culture, I think that's where it's important for leaders to be able to relate to folks. Going back to your question on how to make it work, I almost feel like it's a digital-first mindset shift. It is not just about the collaboration and the productivity tools. They're very important. And we've moved from a Miro board to do whiteboarding to having Teams, celebratory sessions, all kinds of things from a digital force perspective. But it is definitely a mindset shift to do more, to do a hybrid model where you have to recognize that somebody is going to be in the office and somebody is going to be on the video, and then how do you work together? It has to start from the top.

Michael Lee
How does hybrid technology different from that of remote technology?

Shweta Bandi

A lot of innovation is already happening in that world. If you were to think of a complete remote workplace, which is where we were in the last eighteen months or so, it was very much the Zoom and Teams world. Now that we are trying to do more, how do you integrate that with the physical space?

One of the things that we've done is actually have a digital app, where if you're only coming into the office once a month, you don't want to spend twenty minutes just finding the conference room that you need to be in, because you've not been coming into the office every day. How can we help navigate the physical landscape? How can we help navigate you getting to the cafe and ordering the food that you want to order so that it doesn't become an exercise in itself? How can we redesign our conference rooms to enable a more hybrid meeting environment? How can we make sure that the person sitting in Seattle is as much field-engaged, involved?

Going back to our conversation around engagement and being able to drive change and drive an impact, I would definitely talk about, as we think about employee engagement in the hybrid world, How do you enable a culture of more digital feedback? How do you enable a culture of more goal setting and visibility into where you're going from a career perspective? How do you enable more internal movement and mobility, knowing that you have forty-five different locations and offices? Perhaps even more.

Michael Lee

Well, I wish we could go on a lot longer because you've got so much great to say. But before we go, I'm gonna ask you the most important question of this session. Shweta: How many scoops? What flavors? Cup or cone? What is your order?

Shweta Bandi

What's my order? I have to be very honest with you. My husband and my both my girls are big ice cream fans. I'm not much of an ice cream person, but I'd be happy with - maybe mint chocolate in a waffle cone. A single scoop would make me happy.

Michael Lee

No toppings, no whipped cream, nothing like that.

Shweta Bandi

Keep it simple. That's the other thing about employee experience. The bells and whistles are great, but make sure you can keep it simple so that it's digestible and personalized.

Michael Lee

It's interesting as we wrap up that you use the ice cream metaphor, but you're not an ice cream person. It's an interesting metaphor itself for being an HR expert who's helping lots of other people. I'm going to leave that thought with our listeners and see what they come up with. But thank you so much. It's really been great. Thank you.

Shweta Bandi

Yeah, absolutely. And thank you for having me. I really enjoyed our conversation.