

A Culture of Contribution-The Hiring, Training, and Retaining of Passionate Employees:

A Disney Perspective

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**Abstract**

The company culture of Walt Disney World is renowned and worthy of emulation. The underlying culture incorporates servant leadership attributes and encourages the employees to demonstrate these attributes through a commitment to excellence and a desire to serve. It is through hiring, training, and retention techniques that a competitive advantage is garnered, and those in who work for Disney serve as a role model for other companies to follow. Training the Disney way is unique. It is considered a true culture of contribution. By using Disney's training techniques and commitment to excellence, other companies can see a drastic improvement in their customer service. In order for companies to model the Disney customer service experience, they must place a higher emphasis on hiring, training, and retaining employees.

## **A Culture of Contribution-The Hiring, Training, and Retaining of Passionate Employees: A Disney Perspective**

The Walt Disney World Resort is a world-renown organization, and its Cast Members are a large reason for this contribution. The Walt Disney Company selects and trains its employees to seek excellence and exceed guest expectations. Disney understands that engaged employees deliver better service, which increases customer satisfaction (Johnson, 2016). The Walt Disney Company goes to great lengths to ensure each Guest has a happy and memorable experience anywhere on Disney property. This is accomplished through the stellar service of the employees. By placing an emphasis on hiring, training and retaining their employees, Disney develops a culture that is renowned and worthy of imitation (Schueler, 2000).

### **Hiring the Disney Way**

Disney aims to put its employees first so that employees will take pride and strive to put the customer first (Wilkie, 2019). Disney fosters this sense of pride and community through respect, equality, and appreciation. Even the name *Cast Member* conveys the sense of a team rather than a job. Several factors make Disney employees extraordinary, and there are a few techniques that other organizations could utilize to evoke those same characteristics in their employees. The training and development style as well as operational values are several factors that make Disney so successful as a brand (Lipp, 2013). Disney values the happiness of their customers and hires employees who seek to create that happiness. Other companies can emulate Disney in this same way by recruiting and hiring employees who specifically match their mission and vision and have a strong dedication to the brand. Disney employees are personable, engaged, and willing to serve, and they are recruited and trained in skills that fulfill the company mission statement of creating happiness. By using Disney's hiring techniques, such as a

recruiting website, a multiple-step interview process, and their commitment to excellence, other companies can see a drastic improvement in their customer service.

### **Company Culture**

Every company has a core mission, purpose, and values that guide how it interacts internally with employees and externally with customers. These shared values create a distinct culture within an organization, a culture that can create community among employees and bind them together for the cause of the company's mission. Walt Disney World is known for their outstanding company culture. This company culture results in their Cast Members dedicating their time and effort to seek excellence and exceed expectations for customers. To foster the company culture, Disney seeks to find employees on their exclusive recruiting website who share the unique values of the organization. This is discovered through specific questions about past connections and potential dedication to the Disney brand. Rather than hiring employees, Disney recruits Cast Members for specific roles. In this way, Disney is fostering common characteristics among new employees that the company esteems and seeks to maintain (Ingelsson et al., 2012).

Looking further into building a company culture, an organizational culture is crucial for creating a positive environment where employees not only accomplish their work but also have a sense of pride and belonging when they share the company's values. Culture is the common values, ideas, and practices shared by a group of people, and company culture can be inferred as the values and beliefs shared by company employees (Traphagan, 2015). While not all employees will feel a connection to a company's mission or values, a company has the power to create an environment that connects employees and inspires them in their work. In recent years, company culture has grown in importance among company leaders, for it can be inferred that a strong company culture can result in other desired company traits, such as stellar customer

service, passionate customers, and dedicated employees (Warrick, 2017). According to Peter Drucker (2016), a business management expert, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast” (p. 1). In other words, company culture at the core will result in characteristics on which company success can be built and company strategies can be successfully implemented.

Four characteristics that make up a company culture include shared, pervasive, enduring, and implicit (Groysberg et al., 2018). A culture cannot exist solely within the top executives of company. Therefore, a culture must be shared by most of an organization. Culture relies on community beliefs and actions, so it must also be pervasive. A permeating culture demonstrates that the community of a company are all aware of cultural standards. In addition, a pervasive culture affects every single employee in a company. This can range from employees who are on the executive team, handling financial information, working face-to-face with customers, or cleaning up offices behind the scenes. Each employee would need to be aware of the mission, vision, and values of an organization and as they inherently link the behavior with the strategy of the organization, they will then successfully create cultural awareness.

The third characteristic of a company culture is that it endures throughout the company lifespan. While culture is continuously evolving and changing as the world changes, the core of corporate culture should be enduring from the inception of a company to present times. Part of an enduring culture is the ability to self-reinforce social patterns so that a culture is less likely to be affected by the changing culture of the world (Groysberg et al., 2018). This resilience allows for the culture to maintain its original values and beliefs separate from outside influences. The final characteristic of company culture is that it is implicit. Employees need to know what a company stands for and it should be inferred in every interaction between an employee and their employer. The company culture should be present in onboarding, training, new initiatives, and

projects, so that employees would be able to recognize it and respond to it (Groysberg et al., 2018).

### ***Walt Disney World and Company Culture***

One great example of thriving company culture can be seen in the Walt Disney Company. Since it opened on October 1, 1971, the Walt Disney World Resort has been creating magical and memorable experiences for their guests, taking great lengths to ensure they have a solid company culture that builds community among employees and works to serve their guests well. Rick Johnson (1991), a manager at Walt Disney World, believes that a company strategy is crucial to the overall impact of an organization in relation to its customers. He defined Disney's strategy in several values: having strong corporate culture, knowing your audience, empowering employees, and delivering quality service. This company culture is a result of intentional hiring and training, because Disney finds employees who match this desired culture and trains them in a way where the employees are engaged and they reflect the Disney culture.

When hiring, the Walt Disney company seeks to find employees who are motivated intrinsically as well as extrinsically. Organizations should ensure that participants understand the value of training and are motivated to study for their own self-improvement, since employees gain more desirable training outcomes in that condition (Charoensap-Kelly et al., 2016). Disney does this by hiring employees who care about the Disney brand and their mission: creating happiness for guests. This company seeks to create happiness in every guest interaction, whether that is entering the park, dining at a restaurant, riding an attraction, staying at a resort on property, or any touchpoint in between. This happiness is achieved by the stellar service and a common attitude of their employees. Disney fosters similar characteristics that they esteem and seek to maintain among employees that are recruited and hired (Ingelsson et al., 2012).

Another cultural characteristic at Walt Disney World Resort is the concept of making magic for guests. Making magic, from an employee perspective, involves doing everything possible to make a guest experience magical and memorable. In other words, Disney desires to make dreams come true. This can be accomplished by replacing a lost stuffed animal, aiding in a wedding proposal, giving a crying child an ice-cream bar, having a personal meeting with a princess, or any other action that goes above and beyond guest expectations. By creating happiness and making magic, Disney Cast Members embody the mission and values of their company and, as a result, find strong community within their company.

One aspect of Disney's company culture is the "Five Keys" to success (Daley, 2018, p. 20). These Five Keys describe the known and active priorities of the Disney Company and the expectations that every employee is always expected to uphold. These keys are the foundation on which the Disney company culture is built. The first key is *Safety*. As the first key, it is the first priority. Every Cast Member understands that safety begins with each individual, in their decisions and in their actions (Daley, 2018).

The second key is *Courtesy*. This is one of the features for which Disney employees are most known. Because employees are the core of in-person interactions, showing kindness, enthusiasm, and helpfulness in every situation is crucial for Disney Cast Members. The employees understand that presentation and tone matter, and every guest is unique and deserves proper courtesy (Daley, 2018).

The third key is *Inclusion*. This key was added in April of 2021, because Disney wanted to emphasize a culture of belonging throughout their business model. As the third key, Disney wants inclusion to remain at the heart of every guest interaction. To continue a rich legacy of exceptional customer service, it is crucial to understand the diversity of their employees and their



customers. By promoting inclusion among their Cast Members, Disney is setting an example of caring for employees as human beings as well as members of a team (D'Amaro, 2021).

The fourth key is *Show*. This element of Show impacts every Disney employee. Whenever an employee comes to work, they are on-stage and a part of the show that is the Disney Parks. The reason Disney employees are called Cast Members is because every employee is a member of the show and experience of the Walt Disney World Resort. Cast Members are story tellers, leaning into the magic of Disney and making dreams come true, for both young and old. Every employee contributes to the show, no matter where they are working (Daley, 2018).

The final key is *Efficiency*. This element emphasizes the importance of a guest's time in addition to the employee's time through quick yet effective interactions that meet the needs of guests. Understanding the importance of timing and completing tasks endorses a diligent work ethic in Disney employees and reminds them of the value placed on their time in addition to guest time. The Five Keys of Safety, Courtesy, Show, and Efficiency form the foundation of Disney company culture past, present, and future (Daley, 2018).

### **Soft Skills**

Within the modern workplace, certain traits are found to be desirable in employees. These skills are not only seen in the hard application of jobs completed but also in the way employees conduct themselves in interactions within the company and in their customer service. Both measurable application of skills and less-measurable character traits have their value, but more often in the modern workplace, leaders are finding higher worth in soft skills found in employees. Both domestically and globally, soft skills are appreciated, and especially within the Walt Disney Company.

Skills within a workplace can be separated into “hard skills” and “soft skills.” Hard skills are technical skills and knowledge that has been acquired and that can be easily quantified. This can be the use of computer programming, writing, or math; all skills that can be called upon and quickly demonstrated. These skills have value because they allow an employee to successfully complete assignments given to them within their own skills and knowledge (Henville, 2012).

Soft skills are harder to quantify but no less important in the workplace. Soft skills are desirable qualities for certain forms of employment that do not depend on acquired knowledge (Robles, 2012). They can include traits like common sense, flexibility, and positive work ethic. Rather than technical skills that are easily tested or demonstrated, soft skills are character traits, attitudes, and behaviors that enhance a person’s interactions, job performance, and career prospects and can determine one’s strengths as a “leader, facilitator, mediator, and negotiator” (Robles, 2012, p. 457). In contrast to hard skills, which can often only apply to a certain type of task or activity, soft skills are interpersonal and broadly applicable.

Soft skills are critical in today’s workplace and should be viewed as an investment. According to Kathryn Robles, success is based not only on what you know but also on how you can communicate it (2012). Rather than hiring an employee who can simply complete the job, companies are looking for employees with the abilities of good communication, active listening, and emotional intelligence. Even though interpersonal skills are critical for employers, many job applicants and current employees in business do not have adequate interpersonal skills.

Walt Disney World focuses intently on their employees, and this attention allows employees to focus on their customers. This focus is derived from an attention to detail in hiring, continuous training, and employee engagement on an emotional level (Freeman, 2014). In the hiring process, Disney quizzes applicants on their work style, their punctuality, their experience,

and their willingness to work at the level Disney requires. In this way, Disney values soft skills: those attributes that allow an employee to interact well within an environment. These skills are not necessarily taught by a company, so recruiting employees that seek to do well in their environment and adapt as difficulties arise is crucial.

Many skills are valued in the category of soft skills, from flexibility to a positive attitude to work ethic to professionalism. However, several soft skills stand out in their importance to the workplace, both domestically and globally, especially within the Walt Disney Company. Having communication skills, the ability to actively listen, emotional intelligence, and adapting these skills globally will set an employee apart and allow them to excel in the business world. These skills grant a person the ability to clearly express themselves, understand others, and create strong relationships with colleagues and customers.

### ***Communication***

Communication is an essential skill that allows people to express themselves in a personal and professional settings. It can be defined as the act of imparting information, and in the business world, this skill is crucial for accomplishing tasks and building relationships. There are several types of communication used within the workplace: verbal, nonverbal, written, and business. Communication is vital for success in the global business environment and effective communication permeates every aspect of life (Mitchell et al., 2010). Especially in the twenty-first century business world, communication, whether in a face-to-face setting, a virtual setting, to an individual, or to a group, is one of the most used skills and most important to develop. Some examples of communication in business include oral presentations, team projects, written reports, and e-mails. Workers need effective communication to resolve issues with other team members. (Adhvaryu et al., 2018).

Verbal communication is the act of communicating through sounds and words. In order for an employee to succeed in their workplace, they must be able to clearly and effectively express their thoughts through speech. This skill is used every day, whether in simple conversations or in presentations. A notable skill in the eyes of a company is when an employee can respond adequately to questions and concerns under pressure (Mitchell et al., 2010). Another communication skill involves expressing oneself through nonverbal cues, such as gestures or mannerisms. It is communication without the use of language, and they are often culturally bound (Hill & Hult, 2020). Understanding silent communication and body language allows for an employee to read a situation and adapt accordingly, such as when the receiver of communication is confused or upset.

While both verbal and nonverbal skills are crucial in the workplace, written communication is important and can be clearly observed in the form of writing. Written communication is the ability to write clearly and to critique, evaluate, and synthesize information (Mitchell et al., 2010). Paying attention to content, style, structure, and design of written communication are tactics that put the reader first and help ensure understanding of the material. The goal of written communication is to clearly and concisely write a message that can be properly understood by the receiver.

Finally, the last form of communication in the business world is business communication. This form consists of proficiency in communication relating to technology: e-mails, text messages, online memos, and the use of the Internet. The twenty-first century workforce uses all of these tools proficiently in order to compete in this new, global, fast-paced environment. The advent of the Internet has placed enormous emphasis on e-mail and websites to be used as communication tools. These four methods of communication allow employees to clearly express

their thoughts and ideas in a manner that is professional, a soft skill is that necessary in the business world (Mitchell et al., 2010).

As Walt Disney World Cast Members, these employees are expected to communicate well on every platform. Especially in frontline positions, Cast Members are trained in proper communication, both verbal and nonverbal, so that every customer is understood and assisted properly. For example, if a customer is distressed, a Cast Member would be able to pick up on those nonverbal cues and answer any questions they may have, while keeping a calm and friendly attitude. Because communication skills are essential in any workplace, this soft skill is highly desirable in potential employees at Walt Disney World.

### *Active Listening*

One of the most needed soft skills is the act of listening well. Active listening is a specific communication skill that involves giving undivided attention to the speaker. It requires intense concentration and attention to everything the speaker is saying, and that attention must be conveyed both verbally and nonverbally. It involves both kinds of communication, including attentive body language, following skills, and reflecting skills. Some obstacles that can prevent active listening include judging, suggesting solutions, and avoiding the other's concerns. Rather than learning this skill, it is about removing the obstacles that are constantly faced and taking a neutral and interested position in a conversation (Roberston, 2005).

In contrast, passive listening involves succumbing to the obstacles overcome in active listening. This includes making immediate judgements, not paying close attention to the conversation, physically portraying disinterest, and ignoring the discussion in favor of one's own opinion (Roberston, 2005). For the Walt Disney Company, this skill can be evaluated during the phone interview and face-to-face interviews, whether in person or virtually. This skill is

important as a Cast Member because in order to fulfill the mission of the company, the happiness of every customer should be the priority. Active listening is a key part of engaging well with guests and communicating genuine interest and investment. Interviewees without the skill of active listening often do not make to the final round of interviewing, but candidates who demonstrate a skill for active listening are seen as engaged in conversation and interested in the topic at hand. Active listening clearly emphasizes the importance of a strong personality and work ethic that can be inferred in conversation and the necessity of this skill in the workplace.

### *Emotional Intelligence*

Known as the ability to identify and manage one's own emotions and the emotions of others, emotional intelligence allows employees to build and bolster relationships. Emotional intelligence is the key to both personal and professional success. It allows employees to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically. Emotion is an integral part of organizational life and is often functional for the organization, and the proper management of emotions can lead to increased job satisfaction (Miao et al., 2017).

Engaging in emotional intelligence can create a pleasant human environment for work. Colleague and customer relationships thrive when one party is heard and understood by the other, and emotional intelligence allows employees to empathize properly. When an employee is emotionally intelligent, they exhibit empathy, accountability, humility, friendliness, and unselfishness. According to a study done by Gibert, Tozer, and Westoby (2017), emotional intelligence is always important in the workplace and there are several ways it can be improved, although it can be difficult to train. Walt Disney employees must display a certain amount of emotional intelligence as this is required for creating harmony between Cast Members and guests. Rather than matching a guest's frustration during a long wait time, in hot and humid

weather, or due to potential lack of efficiency, ideal Cast Members would instead put themselves in the position of the customer and field their requests or concerns with patience and a friendly tone. When assessing employees for their emotional intelligence, questions concerning past frustrating experiences or past problem solving could be asked.

### ***Global Soft Skills***

Soft skills are considered valuable in the global marketplace in addition to the domestic workplace. Global soft skills are crucial to international business, because they create a bridge for community across cultures and countries. Being able to communicate a message effectively and respectfully across cultures is a skill that is sought after in international business. Global communication has been revolutionized through the advancement of technology and the connections formed through global communications networks and media are creating a worldwide culture (Hill & Hult, 2020). From a hiring perspective, global soft skills are a desirable quality with the Walt Disney Company. Because Walt Disney World receives visitors from around the world, it is crucial to understand how to communicate across a language barrier, how to clearly and concisely aid a guest, and how to always be respectful of other cultures. Understanding cultural differences, learning global communication, and utilizing cross-cultural literacy allows employees to properly communicate to a diverse set of customers as well as employees who work around the world. For example, Disney employees are taught to point using the index and middle finger, as opposed using only the index finger. This is because pointing with one finger can be considered rude in some countries, and Cast Members always want to be courteous in every interaction and avoid unintentional offenses.

In a global context, Disney excels in creating and maintaining a worldwide brand that connects and inspires people from many different cultures. Cultural awareness and global

communication are top priorities for Cast Members to utilize because so many guests from around the world visit Walt Disney World. Disney prioritizes creating happiness for every customer, no matter their cultural background. Besides making entertainment and merchandise available in the United States, Disney has expanded their theme parks around the world, including Tokyo (1983), Paris (1992), and Hong Kong (2005). Every Cast Member is held to the same standard of guest service, whether that is taking place in a different country or understanding, respecting, and catering to cultural differences from international guests in the United States.

### ***Cultural Diversity***

Companies desire employees who can demonstrate cultural diversity within their workplace. Cultural and diversity awareness is crucial in the workplace because it allows employee differences to be acknowledged and appreciated. It fosters a cohesive environment, where employees value each other for their diversity. In the workplace, some ways to employ cultural awareness are to appreciate team diversity, communicate well with diverse people, see issues from the perspective of others, and show respect for values of others' (Gibert, Tozer, & Westoby, 2017).

Cross-cultural literacy is the understanding of how cultural differences across nations can affect the way business is practiced. (Hill & Hult, 2020). Cross-cultural awareness requires knowledge, respect, and tact, as well as technological skills. An employee who possesses these abilities is valued because they bring the opportunity of globalization and a wealth of cultural knowledge that set their company up for success in the global community. Cross-cultural literacy allows employees not only to acknowledge differences and to communicate across cultures but also to understand those differences and how they specifically impact business.



Cross-cultural literacy is a valued soft skill because employees who possess it are aware of cultural differences specifically in a business setting, respect and acknowledge those differences, and are able to communicate effectively in a global business context.

### **The Hiring Process**

After creating a strong company culture and defining the soft skills to seek in potential employees, the next step is to create a reliable hiring process that attracts the right people, evaluates both their soft skills and hard skills, and determines if a candidate will be a right fit for the job and for the company. First, a proper recruitment method should be established, so that the proper candidates can be reached. Once a proper pool has been set, the candidates should be assessed for their skills, relevant experience, and if there is any passion for the company. After this, the candidates can be narrowed down further to determine who is the right fit for the company and who is the right fit for the job. If these steps are completed properly, the top candidates for the available position will be found and can be offered the position.

### ***How to Hire***

In order to create a strong team of employees, the first step is to have a hiring process that results in the most qualified candidates. While this process can be expensive, it is far more beneficial to create a comprehensive system for screening and hiring employees than hiring the wrong employee and experiencing the consequences (Garcia & Kleiner, 2001). Garcia and Kleiner describe the hiring process that includes defining the job, matching the job to the applicant, analyzing applications, interviewing and testing the candidates, and selecting the best candidate for the position.

The first step for hiring is to clearly define the role or position that is being filled. This would include a job analysis and a job description. The job analysis would define what is

required of an employee to fulfill that position and the job description would provide specific tasks, responsibilities, and authorities that make up the position (Heneman et al., 2020). Once the job has been defined, it should be matched to the applicants. Hard skills and soft skills are analyzed to determine what is required to fulfill the role, and those qualities are then reviewed for each applicant. In addition to hard and soft skills, matching the person to the company is crucial. A motivated employee will identify with a company's mission, vision, and goals, so it is preferable to hire an employee who shares a company's values.

After a role has been properly evaluated, the next step is to review the applications of the candidates. Whether a computer scans the resumes, or they are reviewed personally, each application is checked for the qualifications noted in the job description. Applications that do not meet the general requirements are eliminated, and then more specific traits are evaluated, like character or personality traits, such as being detail oriented or possessing strong communication skills. For the applicants who complete this first round of screening, a series of interviews and testing follow. Interviews can be done through the phone, virtually, or in-person, and they are meant to learn more about a candidate's past experiences, current knowledge, and future desire to work for a company (Garcia & Kleiner, 2001). If testing is utilized, it is often implemented to assess the skills required for a certain position or to determine if a candidate has the personality to match a role. Situational testing, personality testing, and even drug testing can be used. Finally, a company must select the best applicant for a position based on the findings throughout the hiring process (Garcia & Kleiner, 2001).

### ***The Disney Hiring Process***

Disney is searching for employees who seek to create happiness for guests, which fulfills their mission statement. Applicants apply on a Disney-specific job website, where they can

include their past experiences and education on the application, as well as their resume and references if required for that position. Once an applicant passes the initial application, they move to a multiple step interview process. In the interview process, the employee in HR at Disney evaluates soft skills, life skills, and tangible passion for the company, through a web-based interview, a phone interview, and possibly an in-person interview. For example, the Disney College Program application and interview process examines an applicant's potential personal fit, as well as the organizational fit. The phone interview is a medium to determine the level of excitement interviewees have for the Disney brand, and interviewees can express their desire to be chosen as a Disney Cast Member. In addition, interviewees can share their qualifying experiences and their shining personalities that would ultimately make them a good fit for this position. If the interview is successful, the individual then becomes part of the final selection process. After selected, the employee is then sent to extensive training within Disney. However, because Disney desires to hire specific employees who fit their brand, Disney uses a specific recruiting method to limit their applicant pool.

### ***Recruitment***

Disney seeks employees who are passionate about creating happiness and making magic for guests. Rather than hiring employees with no connection or passion for the company, Disney prefers their Cast Members to have special memories with and a tangible love for the brand that customers can see and in which to interact. If a Cast Member can create a connection with a guest through an experience of their own, it cements a relationship with that customer. Not only is Disney a successful and memorable brand, but it also holds a special place in the hearts of its workers. One way that the Walt Disney Company recruits employees is by limiting the majority of the pool of applicants to those who specifically seek out Disney for employment. This is done

by offering open job positions on their company site as opposed to seeking employees on broader job websites. By limiting the applicant pool, Disney seeks to attract potential candidates who specifically want to work for Disney, not people who are just applying to available positions.

### **Training the Disney Way**

A successful team of employees have now been hired. The next phase is transforming these employees into passionate Cast Members through the special Disney Training Program. Training should give employees the skills they need to accomplish their tasks as well as achieve the organization's overall goals and objectives (Truitt, 2011). This training can be divided into two segments: initial training and continual training (Noe, 2017). Initial training should involve a basic overview of the company and its values, preliminary tests and evaluations for the position, an explanation of the job description initially provided, a thorough walk-through of the job, and finally, on-the-job training. Once this training is completed, an employee should feel capable in performing their position with the ability to ask for help if needed. Considering continual training, companies have learned that to achieve the highest return from human capital, businesses must invest in continuous training and development (Truitt, 2011). This training and development could include both required training in addition to opportunities offered for employees to improve their skills and perhaps advance within the company. By utilizing both initial and continuous training, a company can ensure its employees are well prepared for their positions and are invested in regularly.

#### **Initial Training**

Disney's five-stage training process covers "global orientation, line of business preparation, local orientation, on-the-job training and ongoing career management" (Freeman,

2014, p. 13). A unique aspect of Disney training is that employees are trained not only to accomplish the job they were hired for but also to become leaders no matter what role they have. Valuing employees beyond their job sets Disney apart in this initial training process, because employees are seen as assets that deserve quality and continual investment. For training, Disney simplifies its company values into the “Five Keys” of Success (Daley, 2018, p. 20). In addition, Disney resorts implement five guest service principles to illustrate the deeper level of intimacy the company expects its employees to form with customers. Combining online and on-the-job training is another reason for the success of Disney training, because this hybrid method of training appeals to a wider range of employees who learn at different speeds through different methods. New Cast Members are introduced to the Walt Disney Company through an interactive orientation. Training for a specific role is done through a classroom setting in addition to digital training. Finally, on-the-job training includes an overview tour of their location then practical engagement of their new role by Walt Disney World trainers. By valuing employees as long-term investments, concisely communicating their principles, and creating a hybrid learning environment, Disney creates a caring atmosphere for initial training.

### ***Disney University***

The first area of training is at Disney University, Disney’s training facility. Disney University is fully equipped with classrooms and workspaces and thoroughly decorated with Disney memorabilia in order to encourage and excite its trainees. Traditions, Disney’s company orientation, is a four-hour class dedicated to introducing new employees to the company culture (Lipp, 2013). It is in Traditions that each new trainee learns about the history of the company, the mission of the organization, as well as what it is like to work as a Cast Member. The new trainee also gets the opportunity to walk around and observe current Cast Members in action.

After orientation, training continues with role and location specific training. Disney University training is available not only to internal employees but also to external companies seeking better training. Programs for external companies focus on their branded specific personnel management, leadership development, and customer service management. Because this training is available to other companies and Disney markets their training, they therefore acknowledge the success and the achievements of their employees in accordance with their company culture (Allerton, 1997).

### **Continuous Training**

The process of training is continuous. For Walt Disney World, continually training employees communicates both their investment in their employees as well as their dedication to the future of those employees. Within continuous training, there are two categories: federally mandated training and training required or available by Disney. Federally mandated training includes any training that is required by the government to maintain a safe and healthy work environment. This can include training for operating machinery, to maintain licenses for handling food, tobacco, or alcohol, or to ensure employees retain their knowledge on safety procedures. Training required by Disney can include performance assessments, post-closing daily team reviews, or simple manager-employee reviews.

Employees are given opportunities for growth through nonmandatory training seminars, ultimately encouraging an employee to move up within the company. This training can include courses to review initial training, updating employees on policy changes, or one-on-one meetings with leadership to invest personally with employees. Additionally, Disney offers optional seminars that employees can take to in order improve their soft skills or learn how Disney operates as a company. For example, Disney College Program participants are encouraged to

take complimentary courses to learn about the Walt Disney Company and their specific operational practices. Offered like college courses, these participants can receive weekly time off to engage with these courses, where they further their knowledge about Disney as a business and receive certificates of completion to represent their investment.

Concerning training at every level, Walt Disney World specifically promotes and cultivates soft skills in its employees. Not only does Disney seek out soft skills when hiring employees, but also, they train soft skills in onboarding training and in continual training. Disney sees the value of employees with soft skills that are applicable in every arena of life, and they seek to foster those skills. Trainees are first taught how to communicate with customers, then taught essential customer service skills. Next, classic tasks are explained, and the trainees engage in role-play activities in order to cement the everyday tasks in a mock business setting (Robles, 2012). When on-the-job training takes place, problem-solving interactions are introduced and practiced. Trainees demonstrate their skills both on a written test and through interactions. After training is completed, weekly meetings are held to evaluate the skills used that week and how to improve them. For example, engaging with guests in a meaningful way and using names whenever possible is a crucial part of being a Disney Cast Member. These skills are not always natural and must be practiced. Disney fosters that learning environment in the workplace by encouraging employees to continually engage with customers and ask meaningful questions to create bonds with guests.

### **Retaining the Disney Way**

The final element of a creating a strong company workforce is employee retention. After hiring and training employees, a company has invested a considerable amount of time, money, and resources to solidify a team that is committed to their company and performs well (Merhar,

2020). As a result, businesses should recognize the value in employee retention, which is maintaining those curated employees instead of constantly hiring and training new ones (Heneman et al., 2020). Voluntary employee turnover can be costly, with each employee loss costing between 50% and 75% of their yearly salary, since that money must now be invested in recruiting and training a new employee (Merhar, 2020). However, the total cost of losing this employee also includes the cost of hiring a new employee, onboarding, lost productivity, lost engagement, training cost, and cultural impact. Employees are an appreciating asset, increasing in value over time because of assimilation to a company, and the voluntary loss of those employees can damage a company (Bersin, 2013). Because payroll is the highest overall expense for most companies, reducing employee turnover is crucial to maintain a thriving business.

Walt Disney World fosters employee retention in three key areas: company culture, offering opportunities for growth, and increasing job satisfaction through perks and benefits (Advantage, 2019). As previously discussed, the foundation of dedicated employees is a compelling company culture, one where employees can identify and work toward common company goals. Within continual training, offering opportunities for growth gives employees the power to gain relevant skills, make connections within the company, and pursue growth in position as well. If an employee feels there is no growth opportunities within their company, they are more likely to leave in order to find that opportunity. One way Disney combats this is by offering a separate career website only for current Cast Members. This incentivizes employees to remain with Disney so that they can find other positions to gain new knowledge, to grow in their skills, or to see another side of the Walt Disney Company. Finally, offering benefits besides salary is a way to improve job satisfaction and, as a result, increase employee



retention. Walt Disney World gives employees free entry into any Disney theme park around the world, offers the ability to earn either guest tickets or a free subscription to Disney+, and gives substantial discounts on food, resorts, and merchandise. For Disney employees, they have the ability to create happiness for guests as well as themselves with these incentives.

### ***Employee Engagement***

Employee engagement is a crucial element in employee retention, because it communicates the value that employees have in relation to their workplace. Also, it builds a relationship between employer and employee. Another element of employee retention is emphasizing the importance of a customer in the employer/employee dynamic. If this importance is emphasized at first in hiring and training and continually in the workplace, a business can create a team environment where employers and employees can work together achieve a common goal (Johnson, 2016).

Organizations can positively affect their company culture by adapting employee engagement to demonstrate dedication to the wellbeing of employees. In order to continue a strong company culture, companies must find new and innovative ways to connect with their employees. To understand how employees work, their motivations, both intrinsic and extrinsic, should be examined. An employee is intrinsically motivated when they have the desire to perform a duty for its own sake (Kuvaas et al., 2017). In contrast, an employee is extrinsically motivated when they perform a task to either achieve positive consequences or avoid negative consequences. In other words, an employee can be motivated by their inner passions and desires or to gain or avoid certain consequences. In order to reduce employee turnover, companies can find ways to motivate their employees both intrinsically and extrinsically.

Walt Disney World engages their employees intrinsically by hiring employees who connect with their mission as well as creating an environment where the work is rewarding. From an extrinsic perspective, there are always consequences for a lack of performance, but Disney offers advantages to employees who go above and beyond in their positions. For example, Cast Members can be recognized for their hard work and dedication by receiving the Legacy Award, where they are able to wear a blue nametag for the remainder of their time with the Walt Disney Company (Atwood, 2014). Since every Cast Member wears a nametag, this distinctive color lets every guest and employee know that this employee is hard working and excellent at their job.

Generally, one way to engage with employees is by establishing trust between leadership and employees. The more an employee can trust their employer to be honest in communicating with them regarding policy changes, job security, future plans, and current adaptation, the stronger the bond is between an employee and their employer. The result of this trust will be better employee engagement, a strong relationship with the company, and better alignment with the company culture. Another way to engagement with employees is through nonmonetary incentives. These incentives should be matched to employees, so that employees feel valued and appreciated. A model that demonstrates nonmonetary incentives is the GREAT Model. GREAT encompasses five sections of incentives: growth, renewal, enabling, aspirational, and transparency (Mani, 2020.) Offering avenues for growth, the opportunity to recharge, enabling employees to live their desired lives, and creating fairness in the workplace are great ways to appeal to employees and show appreciation.

### *Customer Service*

In order for a company to successfully retain both customers and employees, a company must focus on having a strong center for customer service and seek employees that have a passion and dedication to the company. Having attention to detail in hiring, providing continuous training, and engaging with employees on an emotional level are three priorities Disney highlights that other companies can implement in their hiring and training processes (Freeman, 2014). For Walt Disney World, having a strong customer experience is the top priority. The customer experience is especially crucial because the experience is no longer a single interaction, but an experience built through a myriad of touchpoints. Some areas within the customer experience include marketing, customer satisfaction, customer management, service quality, and relationship marketing (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Disney has an outstanding process of recruiting and training their employees, resulting in excellent customer service because of their intentional emphasis on the customer and their dedication to employee development.

### **Walt Disney World and COVID-19**

Beginning in 2020, many companies began adjusting to a new way of performing business. When the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the world, the way business was conducted had to change in order for employees and companies to operate safely. One question to ask is how does working in a COVID-19 environment affect the hiring, training, and retaining of employees? For hiring, the process became more virtual, but the same qualities in employees are preferred. Noting the increase in virtual meeting technology, qualified candidates from around the country can be considered for positions they may not have applied for in the past. For training, the difficulty of wearing masks and social distancing was introduced. Added training is

required to ensure these safety protocols are followed and enforced, both by employees and customers. For retaining, the workplace environment became much more difficult to operate in, especially for frontline workers, who are required to wear masks all day. From this perspective, communicating with employees on their safety concerns, their comfort levels, and their overall health concerning COVID-19 is crucial to maintaining an engaged workforce. From an overall company perspective, COVID-19 has had negative effects in theme park operations, while other branches of the Walt Disney Company have seen improvements. The streaming service Disney+ opened in 2019, creating new revenue and more job openings. Since Disney+ went online, employees who work with Disney+ saw a dramatic increase in activity in the past year and a half. They exceeded 87 million subscribers by February 2021, 20 million more subscribers than their four-year forecast has predicted (Vena, 2021). This general success for the Walt Disney Company has encouraged customers and employees that operations are able to continue and thrive as before.

### **Conclusion**

In order for a company to find fulfilling and lasting success, they must create a team of employees who are passionate about their jobs and who place their focus on the customer. Creating a company culture that nurtures and inspires its employees, Walt Disney World Resort forms this team with intentional efforts in hiring, training, and retaining. Walt Disney World has demonstrated through their employees and through their processes what it takes to establish an employee base who are dedicated to the work they do and the people they serve. By emulating Disney's way of hiring, training, and recruiting its Cast Members, other businesses can develop a culture of contribution where employees find joy in the work they do, take pride in the company of which they are a part, and serve their customers with excellence.

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