

Employee advocacy: What is it? What of it?

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While some organizations are reaping the benefits of employee advocacy, many others are waiting on the sidelines, possibly fearing backlash (trolling, 'boycott', etc), whenever and if at all that happens.

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Employee advocacy implies employees acting as 'part-time marketers' for their organization, advocating its purpose, products/services, policies/perks, stories, etc in their respective social/professional circle. In essence, employees provide a view of the 'inside of the organization'. Besides positive word-of-mouth, employee advocacy entails defending the organization against criticisms/controversies that it gets 'embroiled' in, especially in the age of digital media.

Of late, organizations have given immense importance to digital media. They spend huge resources in building followership on social networking platforms like Instagram, Facebook/Meta, LinkedIn, etc through advertisements, celebrity promotions, and influencer content. But these are costly and often deemed in-authentic. Employee advocacy is a less-costly and more-authentic alternative. It offers multifaceted benefits if implemented properly. Each employee has a network of connections to which she/he can advocate her/his organization in a 'personal and assuring' way.

When employees are encouraged to promote the organization, their engagement levels increase and they feel more connected with their workplace, further resulting in increased productivity and retention. The target audience more easily trusts information shared by employees as they are deemed to be aware of the actual workings of the organization.

However, orchestrating an employee advocacy programme is not without any troubles. Crucial ones along with tested recourses are discussed below.

Programme's purpose – The organization must first communicate the significance, purpose, and benefits of the employee advocacy programme it is embarking on. To gain employees' confidence, transparency and approachability are critical as it becomes easy to ask questions, which helps gain trust and 'buy-in' from employees. The organization should substantiate its communication with studies/statistics that point towards the positive outcomes of advocacy. The organization also needs to ensure that employees participate voluntarily and not from compulsion. Lastly, it is very important to test the waters first and then deep-dive.

Work culture – The early thrill and excitement to advocate for one's organization usually fade away. An organization that is only about work and no-play (wellbeing, connections, etc) is at an increased risk of facing a scenario where employees care less about the organization. A positive, nurturing, and meaningful work culture can facilitate the required enthusiasm. It basically boils down to employee experience. A happy and satisfied employee will be more inclined to go the extra mile.

Inactive leaders – People look up to their leaders for guidance. If the organization's leaders' activity does not reflect excitement, then employees' excitement is liable to drain. Thus, it is necessary that the organization's leaders realize the significance of their position and actively advocate.

Employees' inhibitions – Another challenge encountered is employees' inhibitions to share office-related content on social media. According to a survey conducted by 'The Marketing Advisory Network', approximately 30% of employees are reluctant to share content about their professional lives. Possible reasons being: (i) employees' fear of being perceived as an 'organizational robot', (ii) feeling that sharing won't make any difference, (iii) feeling of 'what's in it for me', and (iv) unwillingness to share one's professional life with 'outsiders'. To address this challenge, organizations can undertake the following measures:

- Provide incentives to employees participating in such programmes.
- Conduct micro-competitions, for instance, provide a Hashtag and ask employees to share around it. The employee who fetches the most engagement can be rewarded.

These efforts can foster a sense of belongingness and meaningfulness amongst employees, ultimately increasing employee engagement. This challenge can also be converted into an opportunity to garner autonomy by providing employees with the freedom to personalize the content. Adding a personal touch to a post makes it more authentic. It can resolve the fear of being seen as an organizational robot.

There are also employees who are not sure of exactly what/how to post owing to a fear of posting something irrelevant/inappropriate or due to technical inexperience. HR and Marketing teams should lay down comprehensive guidelines/policies that clearly describe what/how to post. Training, especially for non-tech-savvy employees, is also very crucial throughout such programmes. Some kind of reverse mentoring initiative where the more tech-savvy employees mentor the rest proves beneficial.

Content quality – Content is queen/king. The quality of content plays the most crucial role in advocacy programmes. To catch the attention of the organization's target audience, content needs to be relatable, memorable, 'light', and 'below-the-radar'.

While some organizations are reaping the benefits of employee advocacy, many others are waiting on the sidelines, possibly fearing backlash (trolling, 'boycott', etc), whenever and if at all that happens. The misconception about employee advocacy is that its challenges outweigh its benefits. However, in reality, these challenges can easily be addressed by taking certain measures, as outlined in this article. Once addressed, employee advocacy has the potential to exponentially increase corporate brand awareness/engagement among different stakeholders of the organization at a lower cost with enhanced authenticity.

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