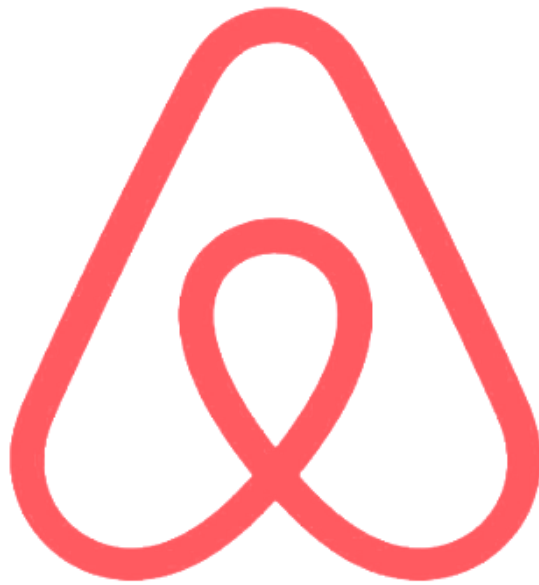




# Belong Anywhere?

THE AIRBNB DESIGN-DRIVEN APPROACH TO  
DESIGNING WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES

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## I. Introduction

This chapter introduces the subject of this master thesis and its problem statement. The research question is presented, and the delimitations and the overall approach is accounted for.

Technology is developing at an exponential rate. What this means is essentially, that we are living at a time where technology and society are evolving faster than businesses can naturally adapt; appropriately dubbed “the era of digital Darwinism.” New technologies, such as artificial intelligence, robotics, additive manufacturing, drones and robotics, are replacing workers, and last year, McKinsey estimated that existing technologies could automate 45 percent of current job activities (Chui, Manyika, & Miremadi, 2016).

However, what some seem to forget is how we got here: these innovations are the result of human creativity, enabled by evolution. As technology has, and continues to, gradually replace workers, jobs are becoming increasingly, cognitively complex; requiring more psychological involvement and adaption from the employees. Employee contribution has become a more critical business issue, because the competitive landscape requires companies to produce more output, with less employees (Ulrich, 1996). To succeed, or even to survive, companies need to unlock the full potential of their employees.

Regrettably, my personal interest in the relationship between engaged employees and innovation grew from a recent job experience; convinced that I had found my dream job, I moved halfway around the globe, eager and filled with excitement. I was so frustrated; here I was, stuck in a tiny office with paper thin walls, locked to a poorly functioning stationary computer with software from 2003, doing unchallenging tasks, for a boss who was completely oblivious to my expectations, feelings, wants and needs. The thought of going to work would make me sick, so I packed my belongings and left the company and Silicon Valley.

What *does* make me happy I through? Silicon Valley had been my dream. I love to travel I thought; I love to explore new places and meeting new people. As it turns out,



I am not alone; 72% of American millennials (born between 1980 and 1996) prefer to spend more money on experiences rather than material things (Eventbrite, 2016).

Living a meaningful, happy life is about creating, sharing, and capturing memories earned through experiences that span the spectrum of life's opportunities. With millennials now accounting for over one fourth of the total US population, the high focus on experiencing supports the growth of an economy driven by the consumption of experiences (Eventbrite, 2016).

### **I. Problem Statement**

Kahn defines engagement as the state in which individuals express themselves “physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (Kahn, 1990). Employee engagement has been linked to increased innovation, productivity, and bottom-line performance (Harvard Business Review, 2012). However, only 32% of U.S employees identify themselves engaged. A number that remains stagnant, although organizations have made considerable investments in employee engagement programs in recent years (Mann & Harter, 2016).

In the New York Times Bestseller “*Drive*” Daniel Pink (2009), argues that there is a mismatch between what science knows about motivation and what businesses are doing to motivate their employees. Drawing from a number of studies conducted by researchers Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan in 1970s and onwards, he describes that humans have an inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise their capacities, and to explore and to learn. However, businesses, stuck in the past where work was less cognitively complex, continue to pursue ineffective practices, that might even impede employee engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Pink, 2009).

Similarly, Jacob Morgan (2017) explains the widespread failure of organizations in engaging employees, with the focus on organizational scores without consideration to the expectations, needs, and wants of employees. His argument is backed by an extensive research project, that draws on more than 150 studies and articles, as well as interviews with over 150 executives (Morgan, 2017).

Creating memorable customer experiences starts from within because employee behavior plays a determinative role in shaping brand experiences (Caru & Cova,

2003). A comprehensive study of 28 years of data determined that Fortune's list of "best companies to work for" outperformed their peers by 2–3 percent per year (Edmans, 2012). Therefore, to create great customer experiences, companies must focus on their internal customers (the employees), because when a brand creates meaning for employees in their day-to-day personal and professional life, the positive experience conveys to the customers (Schmitt, 2003). To successfully do so, companies need to "engage not only the body of employee but also their soul and mind" (Schmitt, 2003, s. 226)

Although the flight would take me almost 9,000 kilometers away from San Francisco, to Copenhagen, my journey towards making sense of my experiences let me a just a few kilometers north from Silicon Valley, to Airbnb's headquarter on 888 Brennan Street, San Francisco...

## 2. Research Question

Airbnb, which can best be described as a digital platform for people to list, discover, and book travel experiences around the world, was ranked #1 on Glassdor's "*Best Places to Work*" list in 2016, and as #35 in 2017(SOURCE), based on an extensive analysis of reviews from some of their approximately 3,100 employees. This thesis investigates how Airbnb deliberately designs experiences for its employees, and how these experiences are perceived by employees by answering the key question:

**"How is the employee experience at Airbnb designed, and in what way may the employee experience contribute to, or impede, employee engagement?"**

To answer this question, this paper rests on the definition of employee experience as "the intersection of employee expectations, needs, and wants and the organizational design of those expectations, needs, and wants" as proposed by Morgan (2017). The employee experience, he argues, is a combination of the technological, the physical and the cultural environment, which can either contribute to, or impede, employee engagement (Hall, 2017; Morgan, 2017).

### 3. Objectives

The purpose of this research is to gain an enhanced understanding of how the design of the technological, physical, and cultural environments, that make up the employee experience, can be linked to employee engagement.

It is my hope that the findings provide the employee engagement team at Airbnb with a deeper understanding of the challenges that they are facing, including the causative factors, or the mechanisms behind what might lead to employee disengagement, to help them improve employee engagement in the future.

However, the findings of this thesis should not be restricted to Airbnb; the advantage of the case study is that it can ‘close in’ on real-life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice (Flyvbjerg, 2006). By understanding the link between employee experience and engagement, in the setting of Airbnb, readers of this thesis may develop “context-dependent knowledge,” leading to an enhanced understanding of what drives employees, (Flyvbjerg, 2006, s. 222) which may in turn pave the way for more empathic and rewarding approaches to designing work experiences, which may be useful for companies of all sizes, all over the world.

### 4. Delimitations

The thesis identifies how the three distinct environments that make up the Airbnb employee experience contribute to, or impede, employee engagement, through an evaluation of how its employees voice their sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness, as proposed by Self-Determination theory (SDT).

This thesis does not provide a framework for actively using the findings; the aim is solely to provide a deeper understanding of the how the technological, physical, and cultural environments, that make up the employee experience, leads to, or halts emotional investments of employees. Consequently, this thesis will not recommend any specific actions or recommendations to Airbnb, or any other companies for that matter.

Because San Francisco is headquartered in San Francisco, the thesis takes a US-perspective, however, due to the global reach of the company, international perspectives are incorporated, to draw a more nuanced picture of Airbnb, as well as to provide the necessary context.



## 5. Overview

**Chapter 2** accounts for how employee experience design is emerging as a novel approach to human resource management, through a review of how academia and organizational priorities have evolved.

**Chapter 3** explains the analytical approach and discusses the most essential choices of this paper. This section is both a description of the applied methodology, and at the same time an examination of the considerations in regard to the chosen scientific approach and the selection of literature.

**Chapter 4** provides the historical context of Airbnb, necessary for understanding its present structure, mission, culture and values, which are an integral part of the present-day employee experience.

**Chapter 5** bridges between chapter 4 and chapter 6, by explaining how Airbnb started to employ design-thinking methodologies and focus on experiences, which rationalizes their present-day structure which includes an Employee Experience Group.

**Chapter 6** investigates how the employee experience at Airbnb is designed to conclude on the first part of the research question.

**Chapter 7** explains the mechanisms of engagement, in order to provide the context for concluding on the second part of the research question.

**Chapter 8** discusses how the employee experience at Airbnb contributes or obstructs engagement, in order consider the second part of the research question.

**Chapter 9** draws from the conclusions of chapter 6 and chapter 8, in order to ultimately conclude on the research question of the thesis.

## 2. The Evolution of HRM

The purpose of this chapter is to explain why and how organizational priorities have shifted over time, to provide the context necessary for understanding how employee experience design has emerged as a novel approach to human resource management. As society evolves, organizational priorities change. The following sub-sections explain the societal transformations, as well as key academic contributions, that has led to the employee experience design approach.

### 1. Utility

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, which began in Britain in the late 1700s, manufacturing was often done in people's homes, using hand tools or basic machinery. The industrialization, which spread to the United States and the rest of Europe after 1800, turned predominantly agrarian, rural societies, into free labor markets with large-scale industrial organizations, and the socioeconomic relationship of wage work was born (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2006).

The Industrial Revolution influenced almost every aspect of life; powered, special-purpose machinery, and factory-mass-production brought about an increased volume and variety of manufactured goods, and improved the standard of living for some, whilst it resulted in deteriorating employment and living conditions for the poor and the working class. As society struggled with these massive economic and social changes, labor problems arose; low wages, long working hours, monotonous and dangerous work, and abusive supervisory practices led to high employee turnover, violent strikes, and the threat of social instability (History.com, 2009).

**Classical economics**, which originated during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century with **Adam Smith** (1723-1790), and developed through the works of David Ricardo's (1772-1823) and **John Stuart Mill** (1806-1873), regarded wages as the result of supply of demand, adjusting instantly to market conditions. Although the classical economists acknowledged that workers are motivated by more than money, their abstractions were based only on the economic aspects of reality, suggesting their undifferentiated and passive role as "utilities" in the production process (Britannica).

By the mid 1800s, **Karl Marx** (1818-1883) challenged this capitalistic view of labor by rejecting the notion that workers should endure the costs of market forces.

Marx argued, that the value of production comes from workers input, and insisted that workers should own the means of production, warning that the injustice of the capitalist exploitation would eventually lead to a revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system and its replacement by a socialist state (Britannica).

Around the turn of the century, British political economists **Sidney and Beatrice Webb** (1859-1947 & 1858-1843) argued that a combination of worker and community forces would gradually achieve a socialist state. Harmonizing with Marx, they argued that workers would need to organize in unions, to accumulate the bargaining power needed to improve their economic and social conditions. However, they maintained, that social progress would eventually harmonize worker, employer and community interests, through unionization, collective bargaining and legislative protections (Britannica).

**Industrial relations**, defined as the management of relations between the employers or managers of an enterprise and their employees (HarperCollins Publishers), can be traced back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a middle ground between classical economics and Marxism (Britannica).

In sum, the Industrial Revolution brought about massive economic and social changes which led to a new socioeconomic model of wage labor. The new capitalist model meant that the relationship between employer and employee was limited to the utilities, or basic need of getting the job done, and the work itself would often be repetitive because of the division of labor of factory manufacturing (Morgan, 2017).

## 2. Efficiency

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, productivity grew, and as businesses were expanding, there was a shortage of labor. In response to the need for workers, the focus became on how to improve the performance of the individual workers. **Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1915)** became the father of what came to be known as scientific management, in a period where the employer-employee relationship became all about improving efficiency. Based on a systematic study of people, tasks and work behavior, Taylor's theory broke the work process down into the smallest possible sub-tasks, to determine the most efficient method feasible for completing a particular job. Taylorism stresses that organizations should identify the best way to do a job, train workers to handle each element in a pre-determined manner (instead of basing their work on their own

personal preference), and set up an equitable system of rewards for improved productivity (Dininni, 2017).

While Taylor was the leading thinker, **Henry Ford (1863-1947)** was the main practitioner of scientific management. By dividing the vehicle production into uncomplicated repetitive steps, eliminating the need for skilled workers, Ford Motor Company converted the automobile from an expensive curiosity into a practical conveyance that profoundly impacted the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1914, Ford introduced the first moving assembly line at a Ford Plant at Highland Park, Michigan, increasing labor productivity tenfold, and permitting striking price cuts – from \$780 in 1910 to \$360 in 1914 (Hounshell, 1984).

In 1913, Ford hired more than 52,000 men to keep a workforce of only 14,000, a turnover that drove up production costs and lowered productivity. To retain workers and keep the cost of production down, Ford, more than doubled the salary of his workers in 1914, and in the 1920s, he introduced the forty-hour workweek (Downes, 2013). However, the increase in salary came with several character requirements, enforced by a committee that would visit the employer's homes, to ensure that they were living upstanding and moral lives. Further, women were not eligible for the bonus unless they were single and supporting the family, and men were not eligible if their wives worked outside the home (Filler, 2013).

Despite the often-romanticized version of this tale, improving the conditions for the workers was the result of a simple cost benefit analysis that looked to reduce labor costs and improve production efficiency (Filler, 2013). Further, it is important to note that employee benefits programs of welfare capitalist firms, like the Ford Motor Company, touched only a distinct minority of the workforce at the time. During the World War I years of 1917-1919, union memberships doubled and strikes quadrupled, while government wartime labor agencies intruded in employer's labor practices to an unprecedented degree. Employers, anxious to keep their workplaces free of unions and government regulation, responded with increased investments in personnel departments, while articles on the human factor of work surged (Kaufman, 2008).

In sum, the scientific management techniques led to enormous increases in work productivity and efficiency, through the discounting of many of the human aspects of employment. Work was repetitive and there was a strong division between mental and manual labor. As a result, the worker's role was to a rigid adherence to methods and

procedures, which delimited any realistic bargaining around wage rates and the possibility of moving up the ladder, generating an economically based approach to motivation of employees by linking pay to geared outputs. While Taylorism in its pure form is archaic today, Taylor was the first to treat work, including management, as a science, and his findings have had a far-reaching impact on the world of work (Statt, 1994).

### 3. Efficiency Through Satisfaction

As companies realized that monetary incentive was not the only factor to increased production, other alternatives to Taylorism and Fordism emerged. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, a series of experiments to study the effects of physical conditions on productivity were carried out at the Western Electric Company plant in Hawthorne, Illinois, led by Prof. **George Elton Mayo (1880-1949)** and his protégé Fritz Jules Roethlisberger (1898-1974). The experiments, which were conducted on two groups of workers, established that the fact that the workers were subject of a study, including the opportunities this gave them to discuss changes before they took place, had a larger effect on the worker's productivity than the deviations of physical conditions. Further, the research concluded that factors such as choosing one's own coworkers, working as a group, being treated as special (by working in a separate room), and having a sympathetic supervisor were positively related to worker productivity.

Although the Hawthorne Studies have been criticized for flaws in both method and interpretation, the observations and findings of the Hawthorne experiments represent a shift in the study of management from a scientific to a multi-disciplinary, human-relations approach, which sparked what became known as the **Human Relations Movement**, shifting the focus from increased individual efficiency, to increased efficiency through greater work satisfaction (Anteby & Khurana, 2007). As a result, **Personnel Management** emerged as a clearly defined field in the United States by the 1920s. The field was largely concerned with the technical aspects of hiring, evaluating, training, and compensating employees, thus very much limited to an administrative function, with the overarching objective of improving productivity through individual worker satisfaction (Kaufman, 2008).

## 4. Performance Motivation

After World War II, when countries and economies began to recover and expand, the development of consumerism was well entrenched in the U.S. and idealized throughout most of the rest of the world. Although Fordism, as a system of mass production and consumption, continued to dominate developed economies during the 1940s-1960s (O'Hara, 2013), academia developed a more nuanced view on employee motivation.

In 1950, the American psychologist **Abraham Maslow (1908-1970)**, pioneered the field of humanistic psychology with his “Hierarchy of Needs” (1943, 1954), comprising a five-tier model of human needs, depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid (Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 1954). Maslow proposed that people are motivated by five essential needs; the most fundamental layers of the pyramid contain what Maslow dubbed deficiency needs, which are basic psychological and safety needs (such as food, rest and safety), and just atop are the needs for belongingness and esteem, including love and intimate relationships, prestige, and feeling accomplished. According to Maslow, everyone is capable of and has the desire to move up the hierarchy, but one must satisfy lower level deficit needs before progressing on to meet higher growth, towards the level of self-actualization at the top (McLeod, 2007).

In 1960, MIT management professor **Douglas McGregor (1906-1964)** imported some of Maslow’s idea into the business in his book “The Human Side of Enterprise” (McGregor, 1960). McGregor positioned two ways managers could view employees: Theory X assumes workers are inherently lazy; Theory Y assumes they are self-motivated. McGregor urged companies to adopt theory Y: Assuming that individuals go to work on their own accord, because work is the only way in which humans can satisfy their high-level of need for actualization and self-respect. Through his contribution, McGregor proposed that it is ultimately in the management’s interest to set the workplace conditions to allow people to not only do well at work, but to want to do well (McGregor, 1960).

In the same era, and in similar spirit, **Frederick Herzberg (1923-2000)**, a psychologist-turned-management professor, proposed that hygiene factors and motivational factors determine how people perform on the job. Hygiene factors include extrinsic rewards, such as pay, working conditions, and job security, and their absence creates dissatisfaction, while their presence alone does not lead to job



satisfaction. Motivational factors, things like enjoyment of the work itself, genuine achievement, and personal growth, are instead, what really boosts satisfaction and performance, and where managers ought to focus their attention (Herzberg, 1959).

These studies and observations laid the foundation for the transition from the administrative and passive personnel management approach, to a more dynamic human resource management approach, which considers workers as a valuable resource (Pink, 2009).

## 5. Human Resource Management

Although some argue that **Human Resource Management** (HRM) began with the Industrial Revolution, and the introduction of wage work, the populist view is that HRM originated in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this observation, HRM is understood as “an approach to labor management that rests on a strategic orientation,” which focus on employees as capital assets, emphasizing the attainment of employee commitment through participation and team work (Kaufman, 2008).

The paradigm shift, which took place in the late 1960s to early 1970s in the United States can be attributed to a combination of factors; Globalization had spurred increasing competition in the national and international marketplace, and the old models of how to manage productivity growth and change seemed to be inadequate (Kaufman, 2008). The increasing flow of imports undercut American producers; many companies were forced to close, or moved to low-wage countries to compete on costs. At the same time, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, new legal requirements, dealing with safety, equal employment opportunities and the like, forced radical changes in selection, evaluation, and promotional procedures among others raised HRMs status and budget. On a macro-level, the economy moved away from producing goods to providing services, and the service-producing sector began to account for an increasing proportion of workers (Meisenheimer II, 1998).

In this context, HRM emerged a key strategic issue, representing the recognition that organizational performance was dependent on harnessing the value of employees, through investing in them and gaining their commitment to organizational goals (Skinner, 1981). Two distinct schools have developed within HRM: The harder performance management oriented view, stressing the rationalism of strategic fit, and a strong focus on identifying business needs and managing accordingly, and the soft,

emphasizing individuals, with self-direction and self-regulated behavior at the center (Armstrong, 2007).

Hard HRM, which emphasizes that people are important resources through which organizations achieve competitive advantage, reflects a long-standing capitalist tradition in which the worker is regarded as a commodity. These resources have therefore to be acquired, developed and deployed in ways that will benefit the organization (Armstrong, 2007).

The soft side of HRM, focusing on the individuals, can be traced back to the Human Relations Movement and the studies of Mayo in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Soft HRM involves “treating employees as valued assets, a source of competitive advantage through their commitment, adaptability and high quality” (Storey, 1991).

The soft approach stresses the need to gain employee commitment, through involvement and communications, and attention is drawn to the key role of organizational culture (Armstrong, 2007). However, it is important to note that the distinction can be blurry, and that “even if the rhetoric of HRM is soft, the reality is often hard, with the interests of the organization prevailing over those of the individual” (Truss, Mankin, & Kelliher, 2012). During the 1970s and 1980s the soft focus was primarily on employee satisfaction, and it was more about the employee than the employer employee relationship and its connection with performance (O-Byrne, 2013).

## 6. Lean

By the mid-1980s US organizations were finding themselves facing competitive pressures from abroad. To reduce costs and increase efficiency and productivity, a growing number of firms began to downsize (Whetten & Cameron, 1994). In many cases high-tech equipment and computers/expert systems replaced people and new and flatter organizational structures emerged to increase competitiveness in global markets (Joynt & Warner, 2002).

As a result, employment was restructured and many were left without a job, while those remaining got greater responsibility and more demanding job requirements, creating what we now refer to as knowledge workers. Personnel training increased, managers started to cross-train personnel, so they could be

assigned to the growth needs of the organization, and the employees themselves, and the idea of self-managed work teams grew to replace the individualism that had previously dominated the work environment (Joynt & Warner, 2002).

US companies started adopting the highly successful Japanese methods of management, encapsulated in the term *kaizen* (continuous change and improvement) (Hyman & Mason, 1995), and workers began to work in groups, using their cross-training combined with new high-tech equipment and processes to dramatically increase productivity, and especially quality (Joynt & Warner, 2002). Lean-thinking contrasted the previous mode of mass-production and it increased the ability of companies to adapt external conditions and as a result, the quality of goods and services started to improve (Joynt & Warner, 2002).

## 7. Commitment

However, the restructuring of the 1980s negatively impacted employee retentions and as a result, researchers began to elaborate on the meaning of commitment and identify its multiple dimensions, as well as examine its links with HRM policies and practices (Barling & Cooper, 2008).

Among the more widely recognized antecedents, is the *Organizational Support Theory (OST)*, proposed by **Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson, and Sowa** in 1986. The theory takes offset in the individual's understanding of organizational culture and links it to how it influences the individual's attitude and ultimately its consequences for the organization. The study proposed that perceived organizational support (POS) strongly depends on employees' attributions concerning the organization's intent behind their receipt of favorable or unfavorable treatment. POS initiates a social exchange process wherein employees feel obligated to help the organization achieve its goals and objectives and expect that increased efforts on the organization's behalf will lead to greater rewards. Moreover, POS fulfils socioemotional needs, resulting in greater identification and commitment to the organization, an increased desire to help the organization succeed, and greater psychological well-being (Kurtessis, et al., 2015).

During this time, a growing body of reasearch suggested that organizations that invest in their employees are rewarded with organizational commitment. Although the majority of studies focused on outcomes relevant to the organization,

there was an increase in research on employee-relevant outcomes (e.g. health and well being) in the 1990s. For the most part, these studies demonstrated a positive relationship between an employee's affective commitment to the organization and their own physical and psychological well being (e.g. Romzek, 1989; Wittig-Berman & Lang, 1990)(Barling & Cooper, 2008).

### 8. Strategic HRM

As the economic landscape underwent radical changes throughout the 1990s, with increasing globalization and technological breakthroughs, the Internet and hyper competition, **Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM)** gained relevance. SHRM is the process of linking the HR function with the strategic objectives of the organization to improve performance. Although the field of strategic SHRM was not directly born out of the Resource-Based-View (RBV), it has been instrumental in its development, due to the RBV's shifting emphasis in the strategy literature, away from external factors toward internal resources (Hoskisson, Hitt, & Wan, 1999; Dunford & Snell, 2001).

**Edith Penrose** (1924-1996), who is widely regarded as the founding figure of the RBV, published *The Theory of the Growth of the Firm* in 1959, but it was not until the rise of strategic management literature that her contribution gained notice (Penrose, 1959; Pitelis, 2011). In the RBV, the firm is viewed as a bundle of resources, build up over time and managed by an administrative unit. Growth is limited by the managerial and entrepreneurial resources available to the firm (Penrose, 1959). Hence, the management and the services available to the management, set a fundamental limit to the amount of expansion that can be either planned or executed, even when all other resources are obtainable (Penrose, 1959). The resources possessed by the firm are the primary determinants of its performance, and these may contribute to a sustainable competitive advantage of the firm (Tokuda, 2005).

The increasing pressure on attracting and retaining talent led to what McKinsey coined "The war for talent" in a study about how companies get their competitive advantage through attracting, developing and retaining talent at all levels (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001). During the late-1990s dot-com boom companies in the high-tech industry, particularly centered around Silicon Valley, began offering employees not only generous pay, but also lavish, and even outlandish,

perks like massages, free food and flexible hours in the bid to draw talent (Sherman, 2014).

### 9. Engagement

The concept of employee engagement was introduced by **William A. Kahn** in 1990 (Kahn, 1990) but it was not until before the turn of the Millennial, with the advent of the positive psychology movement, that companies followed suit, including Gallup, that started to measure the employee engagement levels in 2000 (Gallup, 2016; Schaufeli, 2013).

By the 2000s, jobs had become more cognitively complex, time pressured, team-based and collaborative, and increasingly contingent on social skills and technological competence, which required a substantial psychological adaptation and involvement from the employees (Heerwagen, 2016; Schaufeli, 2013). In essence, employee contribution “becomes a critical business issue because in trying to produce more output with less employee input, companies have no choice but to try to engage not only the body, but also the mind and the soul of every employee” (Ulrich, 1996).

Kahn defines engagement as the state in which individuals express themselves “physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (Kahn, 1990). While commitment refers to employee's satisfaction as well as identification with the organization, employee engagement goes a step further, and involves the employee making discretionary efforts towards attainment of organizational goals (Kruse, 2012).

Kahn identifies three psychological conditions which promote employee engagement: meaningfulness, safety, and availability (Kahn, 1990). When employees experience a sense of meaning in their work, this presence or engagement is more likely to result. To find work meaningful, the individual must feel that their work aligns with, or relates to, some broader, enduring, important, and desirable objective or value. When work is meaningful to the individual employee, he or she becomes more inclined to dedicate their efforts, which manifests as presence or engagement. According to his theory, rewarding co-worker relations may lead to greater meaningfulness. Further, engagement surfaces when an employee feels safe; problems or hardships are either unlikely or manageable, and their dedication and application to their role will not culminate in undesirable or negative consequences

from management or others. Lastly, individuals can maintain this dedication and application to their work only if they can access the necessary resources, referred to as psychological availability (Kahn, 1990).

### 10. Experience

Around the same time, the term Experience Economy was first used in an article by **B. Joseph Pine II** and **James H. Gilmore** (1998) to describe the evolution in the economy, in which companies intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event (Pine II, 1998). The Experience Economy is here, they argue, due to rising “competitive intensity, which drives the ongoing search for differentiation (Pine II, 1998, s. 6),” implying that creating customer experiences has become a means to attain higher degree of “customer satisfaction and profitability” (Sims, Williams, & Eliot, 2007). Good and services, Pine & Gilmore argue, are no longer enough: consumers want experiences (Pine II, 1998).

Creating memorable customer experiences starts from within because employee behavior plays a determinative role in shaping brand experiences (Caru & Cova, 2003) Therefore, to create great customer experiences, companies must focus on their internal customers (the employees), because when a brand creates meaning for employees in their day-to-day personal and professional life, the positive experience conveys to the customers (Schmitt, 2003). To successfully do so, companies need to “engage not only the body of employee but also their soul and mind” (Schmitt, 2003, s. 226)

The employee experience is defined by **Kaveh Abhari** (2009) as what employee receive during their interaction with career elements, that affect their cognition (rational acquisition) and affection (internal and personal acquisition) and leads to their particular behaviors (Abhari, 2009). To deliver excellent experiences to employees, which in turn create positive customer experiences, companies must adopt management strategies that goes beyond what is conventionally touched by HRM, by rewarding more employee-experience in form of both professional and personal development (Schmitt, 2003; Abhari, 2009).

**Jacob Morgan** (2017) elaborates on the concept of employee experience by defining it as a as “the intersection of employee expectations, needs, and wants and



the organizational design of those expectations, needs, and wants,” and he reasons that of three distinct environments, within any organization regardless of industry, size and geographical location, make up the employee experience. These are identified as the technological environment (referring to the tools that the employees use to get the job done), the physical environment (how it is to walk into the door of an organization) and the cultural environment (how employees feel inside their organization, including organizational structure, leadership style, compensation and benefits) (Morgan, 2017).

## II. Employee Experience Design

Designing organizational experiences that meet the “expectations, needs, and wants” of employees demands for an agile and iterative methodology, that focuses on a deep understanding the employees (Morgan, 2017).

Design thinking is a design methodology that provides a solution-based approach to solving problems, and it is useful in addressing complex problems that are unclear or unknown, through the process of understanding the human needs involved, and re-framing it in human-centric ways, by the creating of many ideas, that are iterated through processes of prototyping and testing (Dam & Siang, 2017).

Design thinking minimizes the uncertainty and risk of innovation by engaging customers or users through a series of prototypes to learn, test and refine concepts, and design-thinkers rely on customer insights gained from real-world experiments, not just historical data or market research.

There are many variants of design thinking processes in use today, all grounded on **Herbert Simons** model from 1969, that consists of seven stages and activities (Simon, 1969). Design-driven innovation is an approach to innovation based on the observations of the experience economy; people longer just purchase products, or services, they buy “meaning” and their needs are not only satisfied by form and function, but also through experience, or meaning.

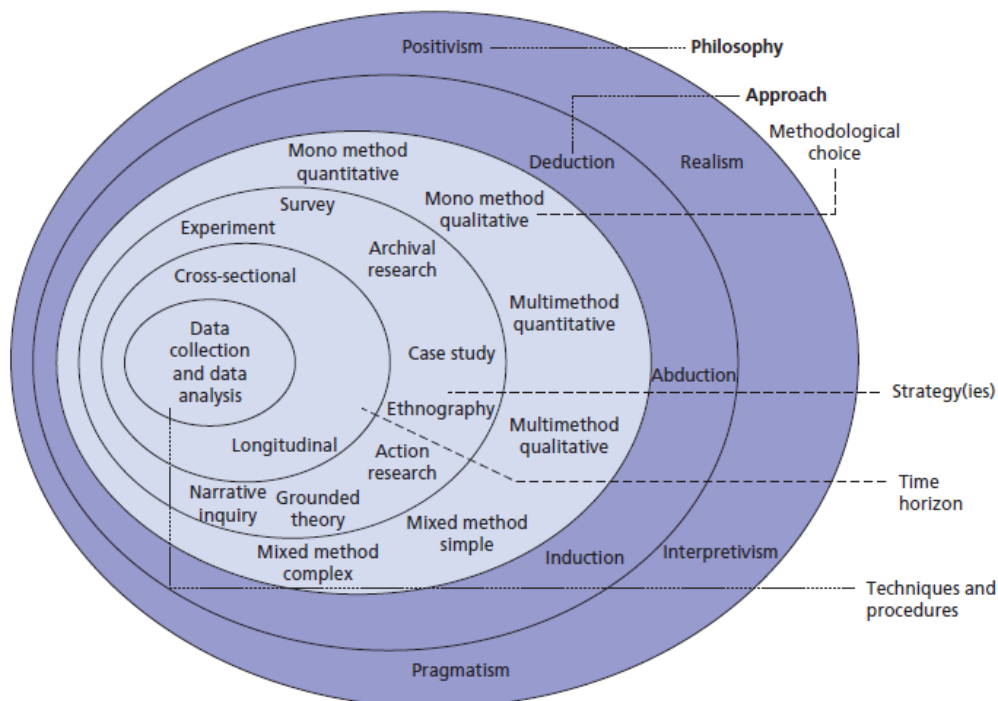
Until now, design thinking has mostly been used to create a customer-focused approach to designing and marketing products. However, Deloitte’s 2017 Global Human Capital Trends report recognizes design thinking as one of the top trends to follow (Deloitte, 2017).

### 3. Methodology

This chapter describes the foundation for this thesis, including the rationale, of the selected research paradigm, approaches and methods, used to identify, select, process, and analyze the data used to conclude on the research question. The chapter provides transparency to how the research was done, and it concludes by critically evaluating the study's overall validity and reliability.

#### 1. Research Design Layers

The methodological considerations of this thesis were guided by Saunders et al. (2009, s. 106) research onion model (Figure A1). The model illustrates the six stages that must be covered when developing a research strategy, starting from the outside with overarching decisions on the research philosophy, and the research approach, in the first two outer layers. The next three layers are concerned with the research strategy, choices on the methods used and time horizons. The last and sixth layer includes “data collection” techniques and “data analysis” procedures (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 107) This chapter follows the model's structure, starting with its outer layers and finally reaching its core.



**Figure I:** The research onion (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 108)

## 2. Research Philosophy

Research philosophy is an over-arching term relating to the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge and can be defined with the help of research paradigms (Saunders et al., 2009). A “research paradigm is the set of common beliefs and agreements shared between scientists about how problems should be understood and addressed” (Kuhn, 1962 ). Paradigms are opposing worldviews, which reflects and guides the decisions that researchers make, which can be characterized through their ontology (what is reality?), epistemology (what is knowledge, and what can you know about reality?) and methodology (how do you investigate reality?) (Nygaard, 2012).

There are at least three different competing paradigms within the social science; positivism, constructivism and latest pragmatism, which emerged as a deconstructive paradigm advocating the use of mixed methods in research (Armitage, 2007). The scientific approach of this paper is derived from the assumptions of the pragmatic paradigm.

According to positivist ontology there is a single reality, which can be measured and known, whereas the constructivists believe that there is no single reality or truth, and therefore reality needs to be interpreted (therefore sometimes referred to as interpretivist paradigm). The view that research method was “either or” dominated until the 1960s when a movement of researchers started to “mix” methods from positivism and constructivism. The use of mixed methods and the resulting debate eventually lead to the emergence of a third set of believes (the third way) of pragmatism (Armitage, 2007).

Pragmatists believe that reality is constantly renegotiated, debated, interpreted, and therefore the best method to use is the one that solves the problem. Epistemology is often multi-purpose, and the “what works” tactic will allow the researcher to address questions that do not sit comfortably within a wholly quantitative or qualitative approach to design and methodology (Armitage, 2007). Supporting this view, Darlington & Scott, 2002 argue that in reality a great number of decisions of whether to take a quantitative or quantitative research approach are not based on philosophical commitment, but on a belief of a design and methodology being best suited to purpose. The pragmatic paradigm is based on a rejection of the forced choice between the traditional science paradigms and it embraces the use of methods and

findings in a way deemed appropriate by the researcher (Armitage, 2007). The pragmatic approach has been chosen to because of its allows for the investigation of the research question, which seeks to uncover the dual-sided reality of how Airbnb designs the employee experience (something that can be known), and how it contributes to, or impedes, employee engagement (which is interpreted by the individual).

### 3. Research Approach

The research approach, or the strategy for obtaining data, can be deductive, inductive and/or abductive in nature. The research approach is the procedures for research that span from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The deductive approach tests the validity of assumptions (or theories/hypotheses), whereas inductive approach contributes to the emergence of new theories and generalizations. Lastly, the abductive approach is used to explain incomplete observations or surprising facts, specified at the beginning of the study (Saunders et al., 2009).

The research conducted in this thesis was done using an inductive approach. The inductive approach uses a research question to narrow down the scope of the study, and the aim is usually focused on exploring new phenomena or looking at previously researched phenomena from a different perspective (Gabriel, 2013). In this case, to understand the approach Airbnb uses to design its workplace experiences, and later to discuss how this environment impacts employee engagement.

In the inductive approach, there is no framework that initially informs the data collection, and the research focus can thus be formed after the data has been collected, which was the case in this thesis (Flick, 2011). Although this is conventionally where the inductive approach forms new theories, the aim is then not to formulate new theories. The strategy of this thesis was to start with observations, search for patterns, do an analysis, and lastly, discuss the findings by in regard to theory. It is important to note that this thesis' underlying premise, the understanding of the employee experience as the intersection of employee expectations, needs, and wants and the organizational design of those expectations, needs, and wants, guided the formulation of the interview questions, and that inductive approach does not imply disregarding theories when formulating research questions and objectives (Gabriel, 2013).

#### **4. Research Methodology**

In line with the assumptions of the pragmatic paradigm, methodology was chosen based on what was best suited for the purpose. There are three approaches to research: quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. The pragmatic paradigm acknowledges mixed methods of data collection and data analysis procedures within the research process (Creswell, 2003).

According to Andersen (2006), quantitative research is mostly based on facts and study relations between sets of facts, while qualitative data is based on all other information than numbers. Qualitative data provides insight instead of a statistical analysis. Common ways to do qualitative research is through interviews and observations where for quantitative is through surveys (Andersen, 2006).

To best answer the research question, this thesis uses a multi-method qualitative approach of complimentary data. In this method, the research is divided into separate segments, each producing separate dataset that is then discusses to conclude on the research question. This is mainly due to the bi-fold nature of the research question, but also to contextualize the interview findings, and their comparative prominence in the broader context of Airbnb. However, it can be argued that the research approach is both mixed and multiple methods, because two methodologies were combined to create a single dataset, to conclude on the second part of the research question (Flick, *Introducing research methodology: A beginner's guide to doing a research project*, 2011).

#### **5. Research Strategy**

The function of a research strategy is to ensure that the evidence obtained will enable the most unambiguous possible answer to the research question. When designing research, it is essential to identify the type of evidence required to answer the research question in a convincing way. Further, a good research design is structured in a way that the evidence also bears on alternative rival explanations and enables us to identify which of the competing explanations is most compelling empirically, rather than simply collecting evidence that is consistent with a particular theory or explanation (NYU, 2017)

In line with pragmatic reasoning, the single case study design, was selected as it was deemed the most appropriate to answer to the research question. Yin (2003),

defines a case study as; “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2003, s. 13). The case study is advantageous in investigating the relationship between the technological, the physical, and the cultural environment and its impact on employee engagement, because it allows for the scrutinizing of real-life situations as they unfold in practice (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The “single case study” allows for the in-depth study of a single case, versus several cases as the method of “multiple case studies” allow. (Yin, 2003)

In his paper “Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research”, Flyvbjerg (2006) explains how “the view that one cannot generalize on the basis of a single case” is a misconception often undermining the case study as a scientific method (Flyvbjerg, 2006, s. 224). “That knowledge cannot be formally generalized does not mean that it cannot enter into the collective process of knowledge accumulation in a given field or in a society [...] Formal generalization is only one of many ways by which people gain and accumulate knowledge [...] More discoveries have arisen from intense observation than from statistics applied to large groups” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, s. 227). A descriptive, “phenomenological case study without any attempt to generalize” is a powerful way to gain “context-dependent” knowledge, and hence, formal generalization should not be perceived as the only legitimate method of scientific inquiry (Flyvbjerg, 2006, s. 227).

As stated in the delimitations, “this thesis does not provide a framework for actively using the findings,” and the aim is therefore not to generalize. The “single case study” approach is well suited for the overarching objective of enhancing understanding of how the technological, physical, and cultural environments, that make up the employee experience translates to employee engagement in the case of Airbnb. Although 2017 has been dubbed “the year of the employee experience” (HR Trend Institute, 2017; Deloitte, 2017), it appears that no academic single case studies on the subject have been published prior to this one. Therefore, this thesis contributes to a novel field of employee experience literature in the form of a qualitative, “single case study” (Yin, 2003).



## 6. Time Horizon

The Time Horizon is the time framework within which the project is intended for completion (Saunders et al., 2009). Two types of time horizons are specified within the research onion: the cross sectional and the longitudinal. The cross-sectional time horizon is one already established, whereby the data must be collected. This is dubbed the “snapshot” time collection, where the data is collected at a certain point, and it is used when the investigation is concerned with the study of a particular phenomenon at a specific time (Flick, *Introducing research methodology: A beginner's guide to doing a research project*, 2011). Contrary, a longitudinal time horizon for data collection refers to the collection of data repeatedly over an extended period, and is used where an important factor for the research is examining change over time, making it suitable for examining change and development (Saunders et al., 2009).

The time horizon for this study is bifurcated: for chapter two, reviewing the evolution of HRM, the horizon is longitudinal, whereas the remainder of the thesis research is cross-sectional, meaning that it intends to provide a “snapshot” of how the employee experience at Airbnb is designed, and how it contributes to, or impede, employee engagement.

## 7. Techniques & Procedures

This chapter presents the techniques and procedures at the core of the research. Two types of data were used in this research: primary data and secondary data. The followings section accounts for the data collection of primary and secondary research and the applied procedures for data analysis.

### Primary Research

Primary data is that which is derived from first-hand sources. This can be historical first-hand sources, or the data derived from the respondents in survey or interview data (Bryman, 2012). However, it is not necessarily data that has been produced by the research being undertaken: data that is derived from other researchers may also be used as primary data, or be represented through analysis (Flick, *Introducing research methodology: A beginner's guide to doing a research project*, 2011). The primary data is therefore best understood as the data that is being analyzed as itself, rather than through the prism of another.

### Data Collection: Interviews

Interviews were chosen as the initial, primary method of data collection, because they would allow for in-depth insight into the topic, synthesizing various elements of personal experience. The interviewees were selected using a purposive method; individuals with job titles implying their engagement with the employee experience design at Airbnb was contacted over LinkedIn. 18 people were contacted, 6 people replied, and only 4 eventually ended up agreeing to do an interview. The purposive method of data-collection is classified as a non-probability method, because it does not involve random selection, and it is hence more suitable for the in-depth analysis of a case study, because it enables the discovery and identification of patterns and causal mechanisms.

Due to distance (three of the four interviewees reside in San Francisco) the interviews were done via Skype audio calls. Prior to each interview, an interview outline was constructed, customized to investigate general knowledge about being employed at Airbnb, as well any position-specific insights to the processes of designing the employee experience. Departing in the underlying premise of the paper, the questions were intended to explore the technological, physical and the cultural environment.

The interview questions were used merely as an outline, the interviews were ‘semi-structured,’ which allowed the conversation to be open and progressive in nature. This method allowed the interviews to reflect an awareness of the interviewees’ experiences of Airbnb, including position-specific knowledge. This was particularly beneficial in comparison to the use of a structured interview because it offered the possibility for unscheduled probes (Berg & Lune, 2001). This allowed for the discovery of areas of Airbnb and initiatives that the interviewer would have otherwise not learned about.

### Data Processing: Interviews

The original plan was to gather around 10 interviews, starting with employees working in employee experience, moving on to employees in all sorts of roles, to assess, both how the employee experience was designed, but also how it was experienced, both by the people directly involved in designing it, as well as a sample of employees representing different business roles. However, it proved extremely

difficult to get interviews, and as a result the research methodology was iterated: key note speeches, video interviews and podcasts featuring high-level executives were chosen to supplement the data generated from the interviews. The specific media files were chosen due to their un-edited nature, allowing the use of them as primary sources of information.

All interviews were recorded using the Skype plug-in software “*Callnote*” and later transcribed using a simple re-play tool to allow the transcriber to go back and forth in case of uncertainty (Appendix A). The first three interviews lasted around 60 minutes, and the last one, which was conducted in-person, took about 35 minutes. A number of the media files were transcribed in similar fashion to allow for an easier analysis process (Appendix B).

### Data Collection: Employee Reviews

To best answer the second part of the research question, employee reviews posted on “Glassdoor” were included in the research, to produce a separate dataset. Glassdoor is an online employee-review website, where employees and former employees anonymously review companies and their management, surpassing more than 33 million users and 10 million employer reviews (Smith, 2017). At the time of collection (August 14, 2017), Airbnb had 504 employee reviews.

Managing a large number of qualitative data is often repetitive and tedious, conditions ripe for error. Using a computerized method of data-collection and processing helps address this issue. The employee reviews were scraped from the website in Python, using a code found on a blog, authored by a data-science Ph.D.-student, who had conducted a similar collection of data for another company (George, 2016). Due to the cross-sectional design of the study only reviews posted in 2017 were included in the data collection, reducing the pool of reviews to 98. The reviews extracted from the website were extracted in separate documents, categorized by whether the text was submitted in the “pro” or “con” column of the review.

### Data Processing: Employee Reviews

The scraped data was then processed through data mining, which is “the computing process of discovering patterns in large data sets involving methods at the intersection of machine learning, statistics, and database systems” (Chakrabarti et al., 2006). The

analysis of the words was done using a "Natural Language Tool Kit," allowing for an analysis of word frequency (Bird, 2009).

A list of the 40 most frequent three-word phrases was then pulled for "pros" and "cons" respectively. Hereafter, useless phrases were removed manually to filter out noise. The remaining words on the "pros" and "cons" lists were then turned into word clouds using the open-source website Wordle.net. The word clouds then served as a point-of-entry, by providing key words, guiding the subsequent qualitative analysis of the pool of reviews.

### Secondary Research

Secondary data can consist of both quantitative and qualitative data, and it should be reviewed with the same caution as primary data (Saunders et al., 2009). Collecting secondary data can help us structure ideas, develop new concepts, widen new directions to data, sketch population and organize the appropriate approach to the research (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

#### Data Collection: Literature

Secondary data was used to conduct the review in chapter two, accounting for how the concept of employee experience design was born. Further, a large number of secondary sources were used to support the analysis of the case.

The advantage of using secondary data is that it enables the researcher to make optimal use of resources at hand, such as money and time. Furthermore, the secondary data used in this thesis is of high quality relying to a large extent on peer-reviewed literature which improves the reliability of the research's findings (Ghauri, 2005).

The secondary data helped to create an understanding of the research context and current status quo on the chosen thesis topic in literature. Subsequently, in combination with the primary data it enabled evidence with contending explanations, strengthening legitimacy of the work (NYU, 2017).

#### Data Processing: Literature

The use of mixed methods was selected as a conscious strategy employed to assess the validity of the theoretical framework and improve the quality of the findings. Adopting a mixed-methods approach to enhance the quality of the research is also known as triangulation (Flick, 2011).

In triangulation, the chosen methods remain autonomous and operate independently of each other with the issue under study as their only meeting point. Neither method is seen as superior to the other, and the order in which the methods are used in is less relevant. (Flick U. , 2009)

Triangulation can be done in four ways: by using several different qualitative methods to corroborate the findings; by including both qualitative and quantitative data in the research; by including and studying the subject from different theoretical perspectives; and by having several researchers with different theoretical-methodological backgrounds working on the subject.

In this thesis, triangulation is done by including by comparing a large number of quantitative data sources in the research. (Flick U. , 2009) The use of triangulation has been selected due to its ability to produce better knowledge, seeing as it helps provide a fuller picture of the subject under study (Flick U. , 2009).

### **8. Reliability & Validity**

Construct validity expresses the degree to which the study is constructed to measure its purpose (Kember & Leung, 2008). The premise of this paper defined the employee experience as “the intersection of employee expectations, needs, and wants, and the organizational design of those expectations” (Morgan, 2017), and to answer the first part of the research question a large number of primary and secondary sources were used in triangulation. By drawing on key note speeches, video interviews and podcasts featuring high-level executives, the researcher risked portraying a romanticized picture of Airbnb, because these executives have been chosen to publicly speak about the company. To mitigate this issue, this data was supplemented by anonymous employee interviews and secondary sources, including a large number of articles, which contributed in drawing a more nuanced picture of Airbnb through triangulation.

Internal validity refers to how accurately the measures obtained from the research was actually assessing what it was designed to measure (Kember & Leung, 2008). To ensure that the research answered not just how Airbnb designs the employee experience, but also how it is perceived by employees, data drawn from 98 online reviews was included in the research. However, online reviews should not be taken at face value without consideration to the reliability including reviewee bias.

The three primary motivations for writing online reviews are solidarity, status and autotelic behavior (McQuarrie, et. al., 2013). The first refers to the sense of community or solidarity, that review writing provides, which can be enhanced through feedback mechanisms such as comments and likes. When posting a review on Glassdoor you identify yourself, but your identity is limited to job area and title to other users. Users may “flag” reviews as helpful, but the ability to comment is disabled, fueling the argument that sense of solidarity is weak among users who write reviews on Glassdoor. The second motivation is status – at Glassdoor, users reviewing a company that they either have worked for, or is working for, are rewarded with a one-year free membership to the website, which includes a job database as well. Because most of the context on Glassdoor is available to everyone without a membership this may not be a strong motivator either. The third motivation is “autotelic behavior,” or expressive rather than functional benefits. Reviewers whose motivations are autotelic take pride in the quality of their reviews, and their primary motivation is to produce engaging content for anyone who cares to read it (McQuarrie et. Al., 2013).

A study of the motivational differences between infrequent and frequent reviewers found that users who irregularly review online were more likely to write rants, while higher-volume reviewers were likely to express attitudes on the polar ends of the spectrum (Tancer, 2014). Supplementing this awareness, people are more likely to write a review if they have had a bad experience, and their decision to do so usually takes place after “a series of failed efforts at recovery,” and a sense of betrayal – not mere dissatisfaction- fuels online complaining (Tripp & Grégoire, 2011).

With this in mind, the more well-written and extensive reviews were regarded as more consistent with the views of the “average” employee and excerpts from these were predominantly used in the discussion. Negative rants were regarded just as important, especially in drawing attention to important issues, however, their relative significance – in expressing the majority view – was critiqued and evaluated accordingly.



## 4. The Beginning of Airbnb

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the background answering the first part of the research question. The following sub-sections account for Airbnb's journey to becoming the company it is today, which provides the essential context for understanding its present structure, mission, culture and values, which are an integral part of the present-day employee experience.

### 1. Solving a Problem

Co-founders Joe Gebbia and Brian Chesky, who met while studying design, came up with the idea of what came to be Airbnb in 2007, while they were both 27 years old and sharing an expensive flat in San Francisco. Struggling to afford their rent, they knew a large design conference was coming to San Francisco, booking up the city's hotels, so they decided to make a few bucks by turning their space into "a designers' bed and breakfast," by renting out three airbeds on their living-room floor and offering their guests breakfast (Airbnb). They created the website [airbedandbreakfast.com](http://airbedandbreakfast.com), and six days later they had three guests sleeping on their floor, charging them each \$80 dollar a night.

Convinced that they were on to something bigger, they decided to target conferences and festivals across America, getting local people to list their rooms and travelers to book them. Chesky had recently left his job as a designer in LA, and Gebbia had experimented with entrepreneurship by building a website for product designers to find sustainable resources and by designing a cushion for back pain.

In 2008, Gebbia's former flat mate, Nathan Blecharczyk, 29, left his job as a software engineer to develop the website. Blecharczyk, a Harvard Computer Science grad, had funded his college fees, and more, with the proceeds of an Internet software business he founded when he was 14 (Salter, 2012; Appendix B).

### 2. Cereal Entrepreneurs

After nearly a year of trying to build their not-quite-yet-a-startup, the founders had collectively accumulated \$40,000 in credit card debt, trying to recreate their one weekend magic of that initial conference. They had had a few crazy ideas along the way, but it became the most outlandish initiative that ended up making the largest

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impact. A week after the official launch, the Airbedandbreakfast.com had 800 listings, but the site was not generating any money.

Learning that the Democratic National Convention on August 25, 2008 would draw an expected 80,000 people to Denver, which only had about 28,000 hotel rooms at the time, Chesky saw an opportunity; “Obama supporters can host other Obama supporters from all over the world” (Hindman, 2012).



The Cereal boxes that kept the company alive: Obama O's and Cap'n McCain's.

The Airbedandbreakfast.com website officially launched on August 11, 2008 (Schonfeld, 2008). Finding hosts proved to be the easy part, getting people to rent those rooms proved to be more difficult. As part of a PR stunt, Gebbia and Chesky, having both graduated from the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design, bought bulk quantities of cereal and designed packaging branded as “Obama O's, the Cereal of Change,” and “Cap'n McCain's, a Maverick in Every Box” (Salter, 2012). They then sent the boxes to hundreds of the most well-known tech bloggers, hoping that they would proudly display them on their desks and that they, or their colleagues, would eventually write their story. Shortly thereafter, they started selling the political cereal at \$40 per box. The Obama O's were extremely popular, so much so that they had to give out Cap'n McCain's for free with each purchase, bringing home more than

\$30,000, which was enough to keep the company going for another couple of months (Salter, 2012; Appendix B).

### 3. Y Combinator

By November 2008 growth was still sluggish, and Blecharczyk followed his now-wife to Boston. The whole experience had been redesigned around taking only three clicks to book a stay, but the investors were still not convinced; introductions to 15 angel investors had resulted in eight rejections and seven investors ignoring them.

While Chesky and Gebbia were having dinner with Michael Seibel, then CEO of the broadcasting-site Justin.tv, Seibel convinced them to apply the early-stage seed accelerator Y Combinator, or YC. Although they had passed the deadline, they applied and got an interview. Chesky and Gebbia convinced Blecharczyk to fly back to San Francisco for the interview, but they failed to impress YC founder and CEO Paul Graham with their idea. Chesky later recalled Graham having said; “People are actually doing this? Why? What’s wrong with them?” However, as they were about to leave the interview, Gebbia handed Graham a box of cereal, and told the story of how they had funded the company. Ironically, the cereal was what ended up securing them a spot; “If you can convince people to pay forty dollars for a four-dollar box of cereal, you can probably convince people to sleep in other people’s airbeds,” Graham later confessed to Chesky (Gallagher, Airbnb's Surprising Path To Y Combinator, 2017a).

### 4. Do Things That Don't Scale

Admitted to the YC, the three were reunited for the three-month term, and the founders received \$20,000 in seed funding, in return for a six percent stake in the company (Gallagher, Airbnb's Surprising Path To Y Combinator, 2017a). Graham had told the team that they needed to be profitable by Demo Day, and to envision this goal they printed out an imaginary revenue graph and pasted it on their bathroom mirror: “this is the first thing we are going to look at when we wake up in the morning, and it is the last thing we will look at before we go to bed. We are going to be dreaming about revenue. And we really did” (Chesky, 2017).

During their first mentoring session Graham gave the team some important advice: “do things that don’t scale” (Chesky, 2017) and to go out and meet the users in the real world. “I will never forget it, because it changed the trajectory of the

business,” Gebbia later recalled. “It allowed us to think hyper-creatively about the business [...] everything turned around” (Gebbia, 2013). He further advised them to build a following: “It’s better to have 100 people that love you than a million people that just sort of like you. Find 100 people that love you” (Tracy, 2013). As a way to get hosts to fall in love with the company and boost growth, they used the money from the investment to go to New York, where they met with users, promoted the site and attempted to raise more capital (Graham, 2012).

As the founders got more in touch with their users, the brand evolved from its initial, strictly functional promise of delivering a more affordable option to hotels, to include more emphasis on the human side of the experience. Consequently, the slogan was changed from “Forget hotels,” to “A new way to travel” (Parr, 2015)

Upon their return to San Francisco, they had a profitable business model with 10,000 users and 2,500 listings to present to investors, and the site's content had expanded from air beds and shared spaces to a variety of properties including “entire homes and apartments, private rooms, castles, boats, manors, tree houses, tipis, igloos, private islands and other properties” (Rao, 2009b).

## 5. Early Growth

On March 18, 2009, the founders pitched at YC Demo Day and officially rebranded as Airbnb (Rao, 2009a). They were finally able to persuade investors, and Sequoia Capital invested \$600,000 in seed (Crunchbase). Airbnb is finally “ramen profitable,” they were making enough to pay their living expenses, and as Chesky recalls “we could stop eating the leftover cereal” (Salter, 2012).

The capital meant that they could start hiring employees, and by June of 2009 Chesky moved out of the three-room apartment where it all started, to live exclusively in Airbnbs, in order to make room for the now 15 employees while they were searching for a new office space. Doing so allowed Chesky to learn about Airbnb from a traveller’s perspective firsthand, while meeting and talking to the community of hosts driving the business forward (Wauters, 2010).

The same summer, Airbnb was not gaining much traction in New York and Gebbia and Chesky travelled to New York to understand why, by staying with 24 different hosts. They quickly learned that bad photographs were preventing people from booking and came up with a low-tech solution to the problem; they rented a

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\$5,000 camera and went door to door, taking professional pictures of as many New York listings as possible. The approach was highly successful, and by month's end revenue had doubled in the city (Carr, 2012).

Providing high-quality photos became imperative to growth, "When we fixed the product in New York, it solved our problems in Paris, London, Vancouver, and Miami," Gebbia later said. This led to the Airbnb photography program, which was officially launched in the summer of 2010, allowing hosts to schedule a professional photographer to come and photograph their space free of charge (Carr, 2012).

In November 2010 Airbnb raised another \$7.2 million in Series A funding led by Reid Hoffmann of Greylock Partners, alongside seven other investors, and announced that the capital would be used to "fuel product innovation", "accelerate expansion around the globe", and to "advance the rapid growth and hiring of a world-class team" (Airbnb, 2010).

## 5. The Transformation of Airbnb

The purpose of this chapter is to bridge between the previous chapter, telling the story of Airbnb, and the following section, which considers the first part of the research question. The following sub-sections explain how Airbnb started to employ design thinking methodologies to create experiences, providing the context for understanding its present-day practices, including its structure that includes an employee experience department.

### 1. Snow White

On February 24, 2011, Airbnb announces its 1 millionth booking. The first international office opens in Hamburg in the early summer of 2011, and within months, due to the growth of international users, Airbnb offices are opened in London, Paris, Milan, Barcelona, Copenhagen, Moscow and São Paulo (Lee, 2012). By the end of 2011 Airbnb had raised another \$112 million in Series B funding, started their international expansion, and taken over a critical portion of the rental market. The executive team was preparing for the next big move.

Over Christmas, Chesky had picked up a biography of Walt Disney. In it, he found an idea that would change the way Airbnb launched products and would eventually help steer Airbnb's next move toward its mobile product. "I realized that Disney as a company was actually at a similar stage where we are now when they created Snow White," he said. Disney had had success with shorter cartoons, but Walt Disney aspired to create a feature-length film with enough depth that people would care about, not just laugh at, the characters; "he wanted to tell a complete story," Chesky said (Kessler, 2012). Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs began in the mid 1930s with a storyboard, a technique the animators at Disney had invented a few years earlier. A comic-book-like outline of the story helped all the film's collaborators understand the vision as they took on the new format. Chesky similarly wanted to use storyboarding to understand the Airbnb customer experience as the company planned its next steps.

Airbnb started the project, appropriately code-named "Snow White," by creating a list of the emotional moments that comprise an Airbnb stay. They built the

most important of those moments into stories. Chesky described that the process of storyboarding included asking a lot of questions:

*“Like are these hosts men or women? Are they young, are they old? Where do they live? The city or the countryside? Why are they hosting? Are they nervous? It’s not that they show up to the house. They show up to the house, how many bags do they have? How are they feeling? Are they tired? At that point, you start designing for stuff for a very particular use case.”* (Kessler, 2012)

The Snow-White team then wrote down every idea that they had come up with on post-its, and arranged them under the most appropriate frame. The process revealed that there was an overrepresentation of ideas focused on the website, and not very many connected to the offline process. The process of storyboarding provided a roadmap for figuring out what a customer expects in each of those situations, what they were doing to meet those expectations, and where they had an opportunity to create a “wow” moment. “We noticed a lot of gaps. It became our number one priority to fix those areas where we weren’t doing what the customer expected of us,” Blecharczyk said (Blecharczyk).

Airbnb hired Pixar animator Nick Sung to produce final storyboards documenting the Airbnb experience from different perspectives. In the host story, for instance, there’s a moment when the characters think about what they could do with the extra income. In the guest story, there’s a “moment of truth” when they arrive at the Airbnb space they’ve rented and immediately decide if doing so was a good idea. One of the storyboards begins with a character hearing about Airbnb for the first time at a cocktail party, and ends with that character telling someone else about the service at a cocktail party (Kessler, 2012).





The customer journey ending at a cocktail party (Riopelle, 2015)

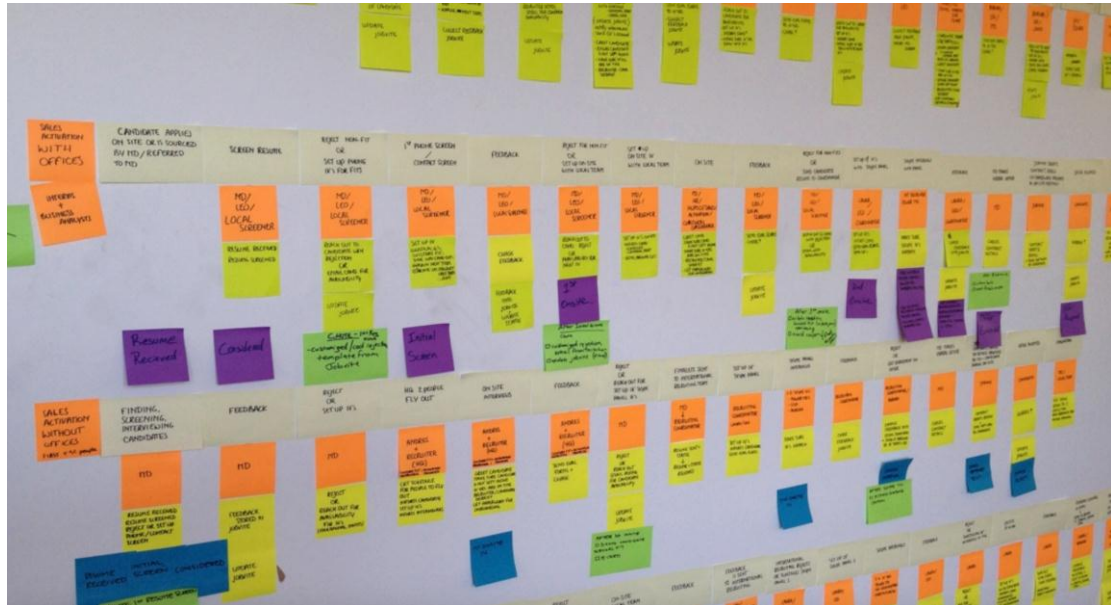
The story boarding process identified a missing link between Airbnb's website and the real-life customer experience: “We saw it play out in the storyboard. We realized the key is mobile.... Mobile is that link between online and offline.” As a result, Airbnb shifted their focus to optimizing their now widely utilized mobile platform, and by September 2012, 26% of its traffic was coming from mobile devices (Kessler, 2012). Although Snow White started as an experiment, it became clear that story boarding was an effectual way of migrate ideas into a decision funnel they would eventually reflect “all the brilliance in the business” in the product: “If this is a book we are only on chapter two. There is so much more here” Gebbia said (Gebbia, 2013).

## 2. Re-Designing the Candidate Journey

During 2012, Airbnb grew from 50 employees to 500 and the hyper-growth was taking its toll; “Candidates were falling through the cracks,” Jill Riopelle, now Director of Global Recruiting recalls. Riopelle, who joined Airbnb as a recruiter in January of 2012, set out to change the candidate experience with her team of recruiters and Gebbia, for a period of six-months. By leveraging on their lesson from project Snow White, they did the story boarding exercise to map out the candidate experience from discovery, frame by frame, to either offer or rejection. This was a complete different way of working: “For recruiters this is hard because they are really used to their process and their pre-conceived notion of what candidates wants and

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how it goes,” Riopelle recalls, “We figured we needed to see the experience through the candidate’s eyes” (Riopelle, Talent Connect Sydney 2015: Hyper-growth: Airbnb's Recruitment Transformation Journey, 2015).



Post-it's from the mapping of the candidate experience (Riopelle, 2015).

Gebbia encouraged the team to not think about scalability or pain points, “I don’t want to talk about obstacles, I want to talk about how the ideal state looks like because if we don’t know that we don’t have a goal” (Riopelle, Talent Connect Sydney 2015: Hyper-growth: Airbnb's Recruitment Transformation Journey, 2015).

## Gather Insights

The first step they did was a rendezvous of insights; “At first we started by grasping people who generally looked lost [because they were new] and pulled them into an interview room to ask them about their experience,” Riopelle explained.

As they got a little more thoughtful to the process, they set up a candidate journey map in the lunchroom, with all the frames, and gave people red and green post-its. On the red post-its people could write things the experienced they had had that they did not like, and on the green ones they could put the moments they had enjoyed, things that really went right. Mapping the candidate journey revealed their struggle: “I remember if you looked at it, on the right-hand side was where people got

their offers, and that was green, but on the left-hand side it was all red,” Riopelle recalls. The second thing the team did was to go online and apply to a bunch of other companies to see what it was like to go through their application process, and how the communication was like. “We learned so much about the impact from the communication that you get back from these companies,” Riopelle explains (Riopelle, 2015).

### Define Critical Moments

The insights from these two human-centered design methods were reviewed and turned into four valuable lessons, or “critical moments that are universal,” which were then used to improve upon the candidate journey at Airbnb. The first lesson was to set expectations for the process of recruiting often, so candidates know how long it will be before they hear something. The second, was to maximize what made Airbnb different; “As with any fast-growing company we were constantly running out of interview rooms so we often had people interviewing out in the open. We were super apologetic to the candidates.” What they realized from the insights, was that this was something that the candidates had loved, because it allowed them to experience the culture: “When they felt the culture by being there we didn’t really have to make any selling of it because they understood it,” Riopelle recalls. The third lesson was to leverage on their brand voice: “felt really bad to get the exact same email back from multiple different companies,” so the recruiting coordinators spent a lot of time redoing their template, which is something they still do periodically. The fourth insight was the importance of getting rejections right; “You are going to reject far more people that you ever make an offer to,” Riopelle explained: “Now we reject candidates via email and invite them to call for feedback. It’s a win-win: it gives them time to digest, it makes the conversation more productive, and that in turn makes them feel more positive toward Airbnb” (Reilly, 2014).

At the end of the process, the wall of post-it’s was turned into an outline of the candidate journey, highlighting the desired outcome, as expressed through what they wanted candidates to “know and feel” throughout the various story points of the journey (Riopelle, 2015). The idea behind a desired outcome outline, is that it is then up to the individual recruiter, with their hiring team, to figure out how to achieve that goal at each step along the way. Further, the outline serves as way to distribute

responsibility, ensuring that the various stakeholders (the recruiter, the sourcer, the coordinator, the hiring team and talent partners) included in the process know what their role is. This is to ensure a successful journey, even though the different steps along the way might look very different, depending on the role the candidate is interviewing for. If the desired outcome is achieved, the candidate journey is considered successful (Riopelle, 2015).

### 3. Bringing the Candidate Journey to Life

During the design of the candidate journey, the team had added a section to the application site, asking about applicant's experiences with Airbnb, which provided them with some valuable insight: 53% of the applicants had no prior experiences with Airbnb. By comparing statistics, the recruiting team found that they talked to more people than any other team in the company, which underscored the importance of the candidate experience (Riopelle, 2015)

Armored with this new knowledge, they had to bring the company along. Riopelle and her team presented the candidate journey to the rest of Airbnb the week following the launch of the customer experience story boards: "We were not using recruiting terms, we were using the same terms that they had used, that the business already understood, and it really resonated with people," she explained (Riopelle, 2015).

The other crucial element of bringing the candidate journey to life was to hire a team of recruiters that believed in it to execute on it. Riopelle recalls, "we would give them the candidate journey, and we would give them a frame and we would say "how would you design this frame, how would you work with this?" (Riopelle, 2015) This exercise was helpful, because the idea behind the candidate journey is to provide an outline to align people with the same vision: "you don't hire smart people just to tell them what to do," she explained. The new framework would also be used once people were hired in training sessions (Riopelle, 2015).

To measure the outcome three surveys were put in place: an open-ended short form to all the candidates who applies but gets rejected, a more extensive one to everyone who has had an interview but does not progress, and finally, a survey to all new hires regarding the process, which is given on the Friday of their first week. Instead of asking more traditional questions concerned with the speed of the process

and how the recruiter acted, the questions are designed to evoke outcomes; “what’s important is the end-result of how people feel,” Riopelle explains (Riopelle, 2015). The results and insights from the surveys, both good and bad, are shared every quarter, which helps motivate the recruiting teams, and improve upon the candidate experience (Riopelle, 2015).

### **4. Connecting Employees, Hosts and Guests**

The implications of Snow White reached beyond re-designing the customer and employee experiences: the new method of working led to the realization that Airbnb was reliant on a community of guests, hosts and employees to create great experiences, which led to reorientation of its entire mission and center of gravity to better articulate what made using the platform so unique (Gallagher, Airbnb's Surprising Path To Y Combinator, 2017a).

In January of 2013, Douglas Atkin, author of the book “The Culting of Brands: Turn Your Customers into True Believers (2004), was hired as a consultant “to figure out what Airbnb was all about” (Atkin, 2014). Atkin, who had been studying the “culting” of brands for years, by interviewing members of various cults or cult-like brands, from Hare Krishna to Apple, argues that community is the engine of loyalty and that cults and cult-like organizations make up the extreme forms of community. By looking at the extreme end of the spectrum it is easier to understand the fundamentals of belonging, and that the key lesson from cults can be applied to all communities; People join cults not to conform but to become more individual. He elaborates;

“When you find other people, who share your passion and, like you, feel different in the same way, you feel “at home.” You psychologically relax and feel secure that no one’s going to laugh or ridicule the things you’re passionate about. In fact, they love you for your differences. That creates—I kept hearing this again and again—a psychologically safe space to become yourself.” (Passiak, 2016)

To tap into why people would share their homes with strangers, Atkin and his team began by posing the questions, “Why does Airbnb exist? What’s its purpose? What is its role in the world?” (Atkin, 2014). They interviewed 480 employees, guests and hosts around the world, and the insights gathered from this, as Atkin puts it, would become “the rudder that guides the whole ship” (Gallagher, Airbnb's Surprising Path

To Y Combinator, 2017a). The team found that employees, guests and hosts wanted to engage with people and culture; “they wanted to be insiders” (Gallagher, Airbnb's Surprising Path To Y Combinator, 2017a). The idea of creating “belonging” began to emerge, and Atkin was hired as Global Head of Community, to transition Airbnb into “a community-driven super brand” (Atkin, 2014).

### 5. Connecting the Employee Experience

Driven by the idea of “belonging,” Mark Levy was chosen as Global Head of Employee Experience in January of 2013, to unite the efforts and teams, working to support the employees, under one organization. Levy explained the rationale: “*we need to create a way in which our employees feel like they belong here – that belonging starts here and moves out*” (Appendix B).

Prior to the appointment of Levy, Airbnb had set up *Talent and Recruiting*, to take care of traditional HRM functions, as well as a *Ground Control* team, “the secret sauce” responsible for “bringing the culture to life” (Appendix A). However, the teams were scattered around the building, and they reported up to different leaders. Following the restructuring, Levy explains; “anything that’s setting our employees up for success or has an opportunity for us to bring our culture alive should all sit within the Employee Experience group” (Appendix B). “Whether it’s through building a healthy and satisfying food program, providing our employees with the latest technology, recruiting the best and the brightest to work for us, or ensuring that our buildings are spaces for an optimal work environment, the Employee Experience team touches every facet of Airbnb,” the Airbnb website reads and continues; “We aim to drive the company’s health and happiness - and we have lots of fun doing it” (Airbnb Employee Experience). On the setup, Levy explains; “it’s really looking at the end-to-end experience rather than just the more traditional kind of policing event that HR can be known for and why I don’t like being called HR” (Appendix B).

*Comp and Benefits, Learning and Organizational Development, Facility Safety & Security* and the *Food Program* were soon added to the Employee Experience Group, and later joined by *Global Citizenship* and *Diversity & Belonging* (Appendix B). The teams within Employee Experience does not work in functional silos, but across teams, Levy explains, and elaborates that the shared focus is on “our values, our mission and our culture” (Appendix B).



During the summer of 2013 Airbnb moved out of their 3.700 m<sup>2</sup> office space, into a 15.800 m<sup>2</sup> 100-year old renovated warehouse to make room for approximately 2000 employees. To make sure that the space reflected the culture and how the employees function, the founders insisted that the designers from Gensler spent four months working in, and observing the employees at the old office, before designing the new one. The new headquarter becomes a cornerstone of the new vision of belonging: “We wanted the space to feel like home,” Gebbia explains, and elaborates: ‘Why wouldn’t the office be as comfortable as your home, if you’re going to end up spending most of your working life there?’ To make sure that the space reflected the culture and how the employees function, the designers from Gensler spent four months working in, and observing employees at the old office, before designing the new one (Stinson, 2013).

The new open plan office space features, among other things, an atrium with a massive living wall climbing up the brick facade, eight private meeting rooms, that are exact replicas of some of the coolest listings around the world, as well as kitchen-like cafeterias, or dining rooms, lounge area and even a library for employees seeking peace (Stinson, 2013). Aaron Taylor Harvey, who was brought on board as Environments Design Lead in April of 2014, explains that the recreations of homes from around the world serves as a reminder of the physical ramifications of their digital work: “those little rooms remind us of the global reach and the intimacy of the results of travelling with Airbnb.” As he elaborates, the new building became an important step of the vision: “It is the first way that Airbnb saw to connect the philosophy, and the meaning of the product, to the space that we all work in” (Harvey, 2014).

## 6. Organizing the Community

In the summer of 2013, the Attorney General of New York ordered Airbnb to hand over 15,000 hosts records which they believed were violating housing laws. Airbnb refused to do so, and reached out to the hosts for help: “If you want a community to take action you have to ask them to do things,” Atkin explains. He elaborates: “the ask is the first principle of movement making and grassroots organizing.” Atkin explains that the way to go about it is to lower the barriers to entry, and then “gradually ramp people up the commitment curve with incrementally harder



asks,” which in turn leads to “incrementally more commitment, and deliver incrementally more rewards” (Atkin, 2014).

Airbnb asks hosts in New York to sign a petition to legalize sharing in New York, with the goal of collecting 20,000 signatures, which is eventually signed by 234,000 people. The next thing Airbnb asks the community to do is to share their stories, so that the Attorney General can see that it is not about illegal hotels, but ordinary people, who are supplementing their income by sharing their homes. These asks are followed by incrementally harder asks, including participating in an action meeting, crowdfunding an ad to raise awareness, as well as write op-eds and speak to the press (Atkin, 2014). Eventually Airbnb reached an agreement with the Attorney General, which allowed the state access to some host information, but Airbnb continues to deploy grassroots organizing of its community all around the world.

Simultaneously, “Airbnb Groups,” Airbnb’s first self-organizing tool that enables “hosts to connect and meet with other hosts” is launched, engaging 98,000 members by the winter of 2014 (Atkin, 2014).

To create more of an intersection between employees, hosts and guests around “belonging,” Airbnb invents Airbnb Open – an annual host convention that includes workshops, keynote presentations, and festive celebrations, where hosts learn hospitality tips from industry leaders, improve their knowledge of Airbnb's platform, connect with others, and share feedback and tips. The event is one of several initiatives designed to bring everyone up the commitment curve, towards being a brand ambassador (Appendix B). Essentially it is all about designing an event that represents Airbnb and allows “Airbnb to be a host to its hosts” Harvey explains (Harvey, 2014). Levy explains; “we took our playbook from employees and then we used it with our hosts. So, bringing people up the commitment curve, and so now we talk about how do we acquire hosts, or recruit hosts, how do we on-board our hosts, how do we develop our hosts, and how do we retain our hosts, using an employer engagement playbook for that type of activity” Levy explains (Appendix B).



The commitment curve: from unfamiliar with Airbnb to employees (Appendix B)

### 7. Don't fuck up the culture

The business was growing at an exceptional speed: during the first 9 months of 2013, the total number of stays on Airbnb went from 4 million to 9 million (Lawler, 2013). In October, Airbnb raises another \$200 million in Series C led by venture capitalist Peter Thiel of Founders Fund (Crunchbase).

Upon visiting the office, Chesky asked Thiel for his single most important piece of advice, whereby Thiel responded in one concise sentence: “Don’t fuck up the culture.” Thiel explained that the culture was one of the reasons he had invested in Airbnb, and that he believed it was practically inevitable to maintain it once the company reached a certain size (Chesky, 2014).

Building on Atkins observations and the advice from Thiel, Airbnb transformed its brand and reoriented its entire mission around the notion of “belonging.” By July 2014, “Belong Anywhere” was extended from an internal mission statement to the company’s official tagline, and a new logo, called the “Bélo,” which had been carefully conceived to resemble a heart, a location pin, and the “A” in Airbnb, was launched along with a new mobile app and website. In a blog post, Chesky explained that Airbnb would stand for something much bigger than travel; it would stand for community and relationships and using technology for bringing people together. Airbnb would be the one place people could go to meet the “universal human yearning to belong” (Gallagher, Airbnb's Surprising Path To Y Combinator, 2017a).

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The Airbnb brand has grown tremendously since Gebbia and Chesky rented out three airbeds on their living-room floor: As of September 2017, more than 200,000,000 people had booked a stay with Airbnb in one of the more than 65,000 cities around the world (Airbnb.com, 2017). Almost 90 million people visited Airbnb.com in July of 2017, making it the second most visited travelling and accommodation website in the world (Similarweb.com, 2017).

## 6. Designing the Employee Experience

The purpose of this chapter is to answer how Airbnb designs their employee experience. The following subsections examine the employee experience, starting with the candidate's journey. The chapter then examines first the technological, then the physical, and lastly, the cultural environment to conclude on the first part of the research question.

### 1. The Candidate's Journey

Every year, Airbnb receives, and reviews, around 180,000 CVs from hopeful applicants (Airbnb.com/careers, 2017). In addition to that, Airbnb has a team of outbound recruiters who proactively source for candidates with particular skills through websites like LinkedIn, as well as deal with internal and external referrals (Appendix A).

Although a lot has happened since Riopelle and her team began redesigning the candidate experience in 2012, storyboarding, and the outlining of desired outcomes, still plays a pivotal role in how Airbnb recruits. Entering the recruitment quadrant of Airbnb's headquarter is testament to that; hanging there is a 3-meter-long storyboard, illustrating the ten critical moments of the candidate's journey (Anders, 2015).

### Referrals

As a Technical Sourcer explains, "we take the referrals very, very seriously." The referrals are not necessarily better candidates but; "if they're being internally referred by somebody, it's a better candidate experience." The recruiters aim to reach out to referrals within 24 hours, or "at least get the initial chat with them." To incentivize employees to refer great candidates, a travel voucher of \$500 is given if a candidate is hired (Appendix A).

### Inbound Applications

Although the candidate's journey is more of a vision for the desired outcomes, rather than actual guidelines, the objective is a bit different for inbound candidates; the same Sourcer explains, that she usually tries to get back to the candidate within a week (Appendix A). However, she explains that several Inbound Sourcers were hired

recently, to keep up with the pace; “people were in the bucket for such a long period of time because no one was really going through them” (Appendix A).

### Time Horizon

The automated response, which was sent in reply to a job opening in June, reveals that Airbnb aims to respond every applicant within 3-4 weeks; “At that time we’ll get in touch regarding your application and let you know if there is a match or not.” The email further reads; “During this time, feel free to get to know us a bit more!” and links to “Common questions (and answers) for job applicants,” the Airbnb Blog, as well as the company’s LinkedIn page (Appendix E).

### The Interview Process

The idea behind the candidate’s journey is that it is up to the individual recruiter, with their hiring team, to figure out how to achieve the desired outcomes. The recruiting teams are given autonomy, as long, as the desired outcome is achieved, which means that the journey might look very different, depending on who the candidate is interviewing with, and what role the candidate is interviewing for (Riopelle, 2015).

In the first link of the confirmation email, Airbnb describes the process;

*“Just like working here, the interview process is both rigorous and fun! Depending on the position, it may involve taking a test, making a video, or joining us for an event. Once the interview process has begun, we make it a priority for candidates to meet with multiple individuals on the current team. It’s important to us that you and the team have every opportunity to ask the questions needed to make sure the position is right for you”* (Airbnb.com/careers, 2017).

### Recruitment Steps

When a candidate is deemed interesting, a phone interview is usually arranged; “I ask people why Airbnb? What interested you about the company?” A Technical Sourcer, who is working with inbound candidates from the San Francisco office explains. She elaborates, that this is to get a precursor of any red flags, like “if they mention IPO at all,” or if the candidate admits; “I’m just applying to all the major tech companies.”

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Some candidates want to do their initial phone interview in person; “that’s really, really great because we’re able to like – basically able to accommodate that and have them meet the team in person” she explains.

For technical roles, the initial interview is usually followed by a technical coding assignment, or onsite coding challenges, which may take between five to six hours (Appendix A). Upon her own journey to become a Technical Sourcer she reminisces; “for me, it was four interviews. I think one of them was like a technical challenge for me. If they knew that I can navigate around anything like that, and then another one is more like an experience interview” (Appendix A).

An employee, who was hired as a Community Organizer in June, recalls that she had nine interviews over a period of one and a half months before getting the offer; “I have to admit that I kind of lost my optimism towards the end, because I wasn’t sure how the process was like.” In her specific case, she had two phone interviews, before being invited to the office, where she had to do a role play, a presentation, and an ordinary interview. She recalls that upon her return, she was certain that she would get an answer the following week, but instead she got the message that three more interviews had been scheduled. After the two interviews, another week went by, and she received an email that she needed to have two “Core Value Interviews.” The Core Value interviews were conducted by employees who “had no idea about the position I was applying for,” and “they asked some pretty crazy questions” she explains (Appendix A).

## Culture First, Skills Second...

“People come to Airbnb because they believe in our mission,” Levy argues. The Core Values and the mission play an important role in preserving the culture; it is the filter for “how we look at things, how we take action, how we hire people and, and how we create our employer experience” (Appendix B). The Core Values, which have been reduced from six to four the past year, include “Be a Host”, “Champion the Mission”, “Be a ‘Cereal Entrepreneur’” and “Embrace the Adventure” (Appendix B).

### Be A Host

Levy explains; “we are a hospitality company and we expect every one of our employees to be a host to each other, to be a host to anyone they are encountering, as

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a representative of Airbnb,” adding; “we also use it as a lens by which we are looking at designing our leadership point of view - host-like leadership” (Appendix B).

### Champion the Mission

On Champion the Mission, he elaborates; “if you don’t get up every day excited about how to change the world, disrupt travel, and connecting people, then it’s not the right company for you, and we don’t like working with you, because it’s just too much in our blood and it’s what keeps us connected, and what inspires us every day” (Appendix B).

### Be a “Cereal Entrepreneur”

Be a “Cereal Entrepreneur” refers to the founders scrappy and creative way of funding the company through the sale of re-designed cereal boxes, and the career site reads; “be bold and apply original thinking, imagine the ideal outcome, be resourceful to make the outcome a reality” (Airbnb.com/careers, 2017).

### Embrace the Adventure

On the last value, Embrace the Adventure, Airbnb states the following on their career site; “be curious, ask for help, and demonstrate an ability to grow, own and learn from mistakes, bring joy and optimism to work” (Airbnb.com/careers, 2017).

### Work like a designer

Until recently, Every Frame Matters and Simplify were also listed as company values, referring to the design-centric method of working, which became the customary way of working succeeding Snow White project, as well as the goal to “keep things from getting too complex” Levy explains (Appendix B).

### Core Value Interviews

The mission and Core Values are “the very core to our employee engagement [...] it’s the basis by which we assess all of our candidates” Levy expounds (Appendix B). The Core Value, or “cross-functional” interviews, are designed to find “people who share



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a high-performance work ethic and belief in the company's mission," a Hiring Manager explains (Otani, 2015).

Like the newly-acquired Community Organizer mentioned, the interviewers may ask some "pretty crazy" questions. The following questions are recollected from previous candidates (Tech Skool, 2016);

- If you had to teach or give a TED talk what subject would you talk about?
- What would you say at Airbnb's funeral?
- Please address entire company in an email and let them know why we are discontinuing ordering unicorn from the menu?
- What can you teach me in a few minutes?
- How would you explain Airbnb to your grandmother?
- Tell me something extraordinary you did in the last month?
- What's the craziest idea you've ever had?

Before getting an offer, candidates must complete two Core Value interviews, which take place after any number of position-relevant interviews, tests or assignments, and are conducted on site, so the candidate can experience the culture (Appendix A). Passing the Core Value interviews is everything, because the cultural fit comes first (Appendix B).

## Mission over Money

A Technical Sourcer explains, that she has encountered "phenomenal engineers" who were rejected during this step of the process. "If they seem like they're very much about the business and [...] like they're all in growth and things like that, that's not really what we want," she explains. Airbnb want missionaries, not mercenaries, Levy explains; "The minute people start talking about job titles or are more interested in the equity over changing the world through connecting people via local and authentic travel experiences, we know that they are probably barking up the wrong tree. We're very true to our core values in the hiring process." He adds that it is "the one place" where Chesky is comfortable with Airbnb being homogeneous; "everyone should believe in our mission which is a world where we can belong anywhere" (Clune, 2016).

### Diversity & Inclusion

Although Airbnb may discriminate those who value money more than the mission, the company has taken a stand on discriminating based on national origin, sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation; “There’s no belonging without diversity and inclusion. To create a world where people can Belong Anywhere we must take real steps to build a workplace where everyone feels welcome and all voices are heard” (Airbnb.com/Diversity/).

### Diversity in Recruitment

A Program Manager in San Francisco explains; “diversity is the number one priority in our recruitment efforts,” and adds, “we celebrate everyone’s individuality” (Appendix A). In 2016, Laura Murphy, a former director of the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) office in D.C, conducted a comprehensive review of the platform and the Airbnb community, on behalf of Airbnb, which acknowledges discrimination and proposes a series of product and policy changes to prevent and address the issue (Murphy, 2016). As a result, Airbnb commits to make a series of changes, including raising the number of employees from underrepresented populations from 9.64% (2016) to 11% by the end of 2017, as well as implementing the ‘Diversity Rule’ to ensure that “that all candidate pools for senior-level positions include women and candidates from underrepresented backgrounds” (Murphy, 2016).

### Affirmative Action

A Technical Sourcer explains the focus on diversity and inclusiveness brought her to Airbnb; “one of the main reasons I joined Airbnb was because of the diversity in recruitment program” (Appendix A). The 2016 EEO (Equal Employment Opportunity) report found that the 43% of the employees at Airbnb were women, a 3% decline from the previous year, with an increase of women in senior leadership and technical roles from 22% to 26% (Airbnb.com, 2016). The same Sourcer explains how hiring the right number of women and minorities is; “[...] actually more important than hiring,” and adds how the team will go extra lengths to get women excited about joining in technical roles; “we’ll set up like a cell call with an engineering manager to pitch her a little harder just to make sure she gets excited about the engineering here” (Appendix A).

### Minority Organizing

Further, Airbnb sponsors company organized groups for, amongst others, women, employees of color and the LGBTQ community. As a Program Manager explains, “these groups are consulted and encouraged to actively participate in what matters to them at Airbnb and at host events” (Appendix A) To contribute to employee belonging, all bathrooms at the offices are marked as unisex or self-identified male or female (Appendix A).

### Rejection

The final stage of the candidate’s journey culminates with either rejection or offer. One of the lessons Riopelle and her team made when they re-designed the candidate’s journey, was the importance of giving good rejections, that leverages on the company’s brand voice.

### Rejecting with Grace

Maeve Blessing, Recruiting Programs Manager at Airbnb, explains that the recruiting team is very mindful of how they reject candidates because candidates are customers; “If candidates don’t work out as employees, [we] don’t want to lose them as great hosts or customers.” Therefore, the Airbnb recruiting team treats recruiting much like customer support - quick responses are important, and recruiters answer to all applications (Greenhouse.io, 2017).

Airbnb has made a conscious decision to reject candidates via email, Riopelle explains and elaborates, because “it gives them time to digest it” (Riopelle, 2015). The recruiting coordinators oversee updating the templates periodically, to reflect the Airbnb brand (Riopelle, 2015). The following rejection email was received 21 days after an application was submitted:

Application for Community Organiser - Denmark & Nordics (Independent consultant) at Airbnb



Indbakke x



**Amy Bowes** <amy.bowes@airbnb.com>

26. jun. ☆



til mig ▾

Hi Sidsel,

Thanks so much for your interest in the Community Organiser - Denmark & Nordics (Independent consultant) here at Airbnb. We think you have some great qualifications for this role, however, I just wanted to let know that we have filled this position.

We truly appreciate you taking the time to apply, and encourage you to keep an eye on the website for roles that might be of interest to you in the future.

Best of luck in your job search and future traveling adventures.

Thanks,

Amy



EMEA Recruiting Team

How are we doing? Please provide your honest [candidate feedback here](#)

Example of rejection email received on June 26, 2017.

The response, which addresses the candidate by first name, concludes by wishing the candidate “best of luck in your job search and future traveling adventures,” indicating what the company is all about.

### Measuring the Outcome

Further, the email contains a link to a “*Candidate Satisfaction*” survey, where the candidate is invited to give feedback (Airbnb Recruiting). The associated survey includes questions such as “what is the one thing that Airbnb Recruiting could improve most about your candidate experience?”, as well as the ability to rate the overall candidate experience between “extremely dissatisfied” and “extremely satisfied” (Airbnb Recruiting). According to Riopelle, the results and insights from

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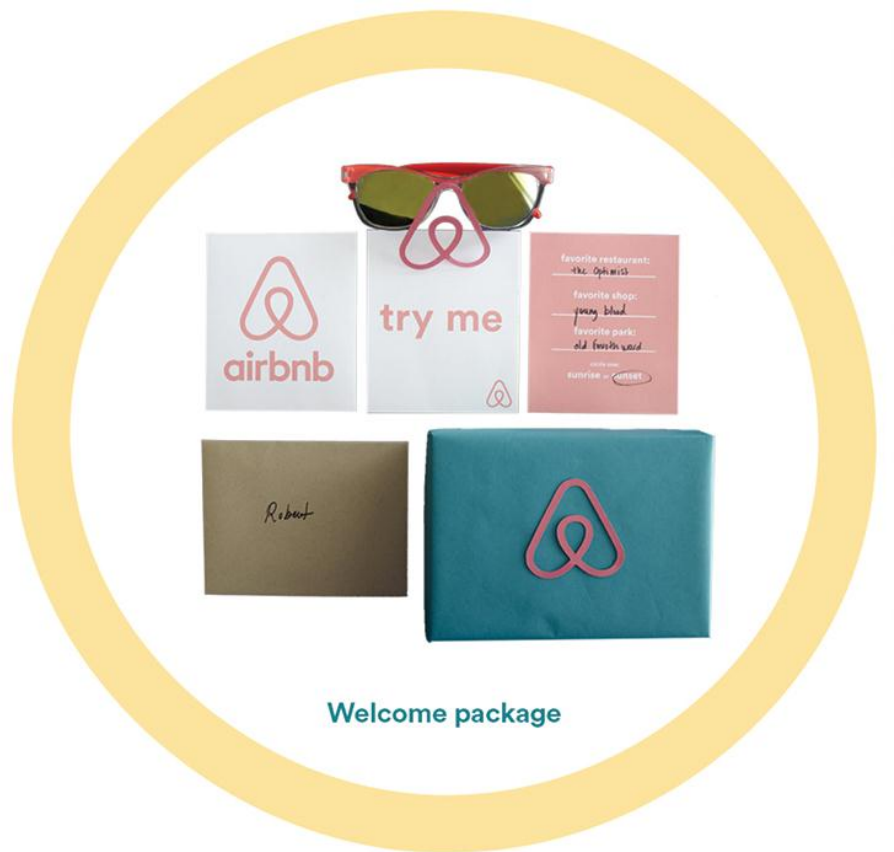
the surveys, both good and bad, are shared every quarter, which helps motivate the recruiting teams, and improve upon the candidate experience (Riopelle, 2015).

### Check-In

Once a candidate, who has made it through the number of interviews and challenges deemed appropriate by the recruiting team gets an offer, a week-long, “*check-in*” process that focuses on the Airbnb values, business strategies, an introduction to each function, and ways of working, awaits (Clune, 2016). To evaluate the journey, all new hires are surveyed on their experiences with the recruitment process during the Friday of their first week (Riopelle, 2015).

### The Unboxing Experience

To design the on-boarding, or check-in, experience, Airbnb has teamed up with Greenhouse, a software-as-a-service company, specializing in recruitment optimization (Greenhouse, 2016). On the importance of on-boarding, Dane Hurtubise, who is VP of New Initiatives at Greenhouse explains; “Consumer brands have long recognized how powerful the unboxing experience is for customers. The first moment a new hire arrives on the job is an analogous experience. As such, it’s a unique opportunity for employees to create excitement around the company, the new hire’s role, and, at the same time, confirm and validate their decision to work with you” (Greenhouse, 2016). As a part of this “unboxing experience,” new employees receive a box containing a MacBook, along with a welcome box that includes stationary, sunglasses, a welcome note and some items related to the core values (Yang, 2016).



The Airbnb employee Welcome kit.

### Creating Connectivity

New hires are usually go through check-in with a team of others who are in the same shoes; "we create belonging by enabling them to form a group that hopefully stays together as they progress here through their careers," Levy says, and adds; "we schedule different kinds of lunches and meetings to help people to understand the colleagues they're going to be working with. We ask all new hires to share a fun fact and why they came to work here, not just about their job, but who they are, what they are into and how they ended up working at Airbnb" (Clune, 2016).

The check-in process might vary a bit from office to office; An employee, who was hired as a Community Organizer in June through the Berlin office, recalls that she was invited to an off-site event in Portugal the week following her offer, with the rest of the Policy & Mobilization office; "it was super awesome because I had the opportunity to put a face on most of them." She explains that they lived and cooked together in Airbnb apartments and adds, "it was kind of like meeting a family, or like

they had known each other for many years” although that was not the case (Appendix A).

### Equal but Different

However, to her knowledge her situation was quite unique, many of her co-workers did not physically meet the rest of the team for up to a year (Appendix A). Upon returning, she spent a week reading a bunch of material that was given to her, and the following week she went to the London office for a one-on-one with her Team Lead, and to meet with the Campaign Team. She was hired as a contractor and explains that the process is different if you are hired as a full-time employee; “if you are a regular employee, you go through an on-boarding program – it would probably have been in Dublin – where you visit and then you have a few days where you go through a bunch of things” (Appendix A). A Technical Sourcer, who is as a contractor herself, explains that the mission of belonging makes Airbnb different from other large tech companies who separates regular employees and contractors away from each other; “here, it’s very different” (Appendix A).

Although regular employees and contractors work side by side, the on-boarding process only last a day for contractor at the San Francisco offices; all contractors start on a Tuesday where they are taken on a tour and shown a video of how Airbnb started. After that, they are given an instruction to how the computers and the network works, and then they are lead to their individual managers (Appendix A). Another small difference is that while regular employees receive a red badge, contractors receive a green. A contract-employee thinks that distinguishing between employees is a bad idea; “if Airbnb believes that everybody should belong anywhere, they shouldn’t make that much of a difference between people” (Appendix).

Among regular employees the process also varies greatly depending on the role of the newly-hired employee; engineers start with a three week long boot camp, and are given a mentor from the beginning. During the period they get to meet, and work with, all the 12 engineering teams, before they decide which team to join (Appendix A). When the program is up, Airbnb hosts a mini graduation ceremony “complete with mortarboards tossed in the air” (Truong, 2015).



### Be A Pirate

As part of the check-in process the company encourages new employees to ship new features on their first day; “It earns them their sea legs and shows that great ideas can come from anywhere” Gebbia shares. Airbnb became a profitable business once the founders stopped worrying about the scalability of their solutions, and new employees are told that it is okay to do something that does not scale; “you go be a pirate, venture into the world and get a little test nugget, and come back and tell us the story that you found” Gebbia explains (Gebbia, 2013).

The “pirate-approach” has yielded results in unexpected ways; one Airbnb designer came up with the idea to change the star function symbol to a heart, allowing users to add properties to a wish list, which was then tracked and increased user engagement by over 30% (Gebbia, 2013).

### Sub-conclusion: The Candidate’s Journey

Airbnb has designed their candidate experience through the process of story boarding, resulting in a rather unpredictable process, that varies greatly depending on the recruitment team in charge, geographical location, job function, as well as employment terms. For regular employees, the check-in, or onboarding process is quite extensive, and there is a focus on both aesthetics (the unboxing) and expediting the formation of social bonds (collective process).

## 2. The Technological Environment

At Airbnb, data science belongs everywhere, and although employees are encouraged to start with a creative hypothesis, implement a change and not worry about scalability; Airbnb is data driven, and collects metrics on iteration after iteration.

### Freedom Within Framework

Airbnb’s philosophy of creating “freedom within a framework” by allowing employees freedom in how they go about designing tasks extends to their choice of tools and programs needed to get the job done (Riopelle, 2015; Appendix B). A Technical Sourver recalls getting “the whole set up in Mac” on her first day, and

explains that she takes the computer home “all the time,” because it is” much better” than her own (Appendix A).

A Program Manager explains that she mostly uses Google services (Gmail, Google Docs Google Sheets) which she also prefers to use while off work, and another employee explains how many of the regular employees communicate via the team communication platform *Slack*, which external employees have to ask to get access to (Appendix A). Another employee explains, “we also use an array of meeting tools; Google meetup and WebEx when we are like 36 people on a call. We don’t use Skype,” adding that people are free to use their own tools, “we all have different tools that we like to use internally.” She explains that there is no access restriction on her computer, and the tools she has been introduced to “make pretty good sense.” Further, that there is a lot of flexibility, and sometimes “some employees come up with a really good tool and share it with others” (Appendix A).

## Design is How Something Works

“Steve Jobs used to say design isn’t how something looks, it’s how something works” Chesky explains, and elaborates; “I think when you realize design is how something works you imagine almost everything needs thought in design. You don’t just design a website, or an application, you design everything a company. And you design your organization, you design, you design buildings and everything” (Greylock Partners, 2015). On Jobs’ understanding of design, Chesky explains; “once you realize everything can be designed you don’t have to pull everything out of a box – your company does not have to look like every other company – everything can be re-invented,” yet adding that “not everything should be reinvented” (Greylock Partners, 2015).

Airbnb recently developed and launched an intranet to update everyone on employee birthdays and anniversaries. It also hosts a page for each employee and office so people can get to know each other and build their internal networks; “it is kind of like the Airbnb site where you have a profile - you can have a picture of yourself, maybe a picture of your dog, you can write something funny about yourself, your contact info, and things like that. You can always look everyone up” a Community Organizer explains, adding that she does not really use it because she has met with everyone that she works with (appendix A).

Levy explains that, “it has been a bit of a dogs breakfast” when it comes to sharing information because “people have been able to use anything and everything” and that is one of the reasons “why we’re trying to create much more a centralized way for people that post, give and get information” (Appendix B).

### Inspiration starts from Within

When it comes to designing, employee facing software “inspiration starts from within: the same love and thought that goes into building customer facing product goes into our employee facing product” a Software Engineer job ad reads (Airbnb Careers). The team in question, which claim to be “a start-up within a start-up” claim to own “anything related to operationalizing Airbnb to keep it running as a marketplace,” through immediate product feedback, allowing them to “rapidly iterate and deploy” (Airbnb Careers).

### Democratizing Data Science

To empower every employee to make data-informed decisions, Airbnb launched a “*Data University*” during Q3 of 2016, owned by volunteers from the data science department (Feng & Coffman, 2017). The Data University’s vision is “to empower every employee to make data informed decision,” and the program is available to everyone, including externals, and is designed to be “accessible and relevant to anyone at Airbnb” (Feng & Coffman, 2017). Just like many other great ideas at Airbnb, the idea leaped from the process of asking questions; Why was only 30% of Airbnb’s employees using the internal platform? After talking to people throughout Airbnb it turned out that “the bottleneck to scaling data informed decisions was actually data education for users” (Feng & Coffman, 2017).

During the first half year since the *Data University* was launched, more than 500 employees have taken at least one class, and the average employee has taken more than four classes. As a result, the usage of internal data platform went up by 50% (Feng & Coffman, 2017).

### People Analytics

To measure the impact of initiatives targeted towards diversity and belonging at Airbnb, the People Analytics Data Science team, lead by Susan Biancani, is in charge of everything from “nuts and bolts” operational aspects, such as dash boarding (visual display of HR metrics), reporting, and the exploration of efficiencies, as well as more abstract, “deep dive questions, including, “what creates belonging among employees, what influences the day-to day experiences of employees and how they relate to each other,” as well as “how they identify with the company and with the mission,” Biancani explains (Biancani, 2017) The team supports all facets of the Employee Experience organization at Airbnb, through quantitative insights, paired together with qualitative insights to support the mission of belonging from within by leveraging on insights.

### Belonging as a Metric

Every year Airbnb conducts a large employee survey, which is followed up by periodical “pulse surveys,” Biancani expound. One of the questions asks employees to evaluate the statement “I feel a sense of belonging at Airbnb, “on a Likert scale (between from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”), Biancani explains, adding, “we have found that our belonging scores were pretty high, but not quite where we wanted them to be” (Biancani, 2017). To get a better understanding of where the employee experience team should put their efforts the team added a follow-up question which was “what most contributes to your sense of belonging,” which produced around 1200 individual answers.

### The Recipe for Belonging

Biancani and her team broke the answers out according to scores and hand coded them for themes, to investigate which themes most strongly differentiated those who felt a high sense of belonging versus those who did not. “People who feel they belong have a lot of social connections at Airbnb, they feel like they are part of a team, their co-workers are friendly and welcoming, they also feel like their work is meaningful and its clearly connected to the mission of the company, and finally they feel like their values are aligned with the company’s values,” she explains (Biancani, 2017).

### Social Insights

Because of the insights, an ongoing project aimed at improving the articulation of the Core Values, including how to measure the values and hold each other accountable to them, has been initiated, and the *People Analytics* team have added new survey questions specifically built around those insights, to track changes over time. Further, the team is trying to “better understand social connections among employees,” and they are working on ways to track whether employees form new social connections through social events such as One Airbnb; “we haven’t completely worked out the strategy for tracking that, but it’s an area of active planning at the time (Biancani, 2017).

### Sub-conclusion: The Technological Environment

At Airbnb, employees have the freedom to use whatever tools they desire to do their job and many choses to use Google services. Design is not only through of in terms of aesthetic appeal but functionality, resulting in a resent focus on building employee faced IT. To empower all employees to make data-informed decisions data is accessible by everyone, including contractors, and employees can freely participate in its internal Data University classes. Although employees are encouraged to think creatively, survey data contribute in evaluating employee initiatives, and to get a better understanding of the need and wants of employees.

## 3. The Physical Environment

Everything at the Airbnb offices is carefully thought through to drive experiences and maximize the culture; “The culture is everything – without an active, engaged culture, you don’t get innovation and you get this kind of static, repetition of ideas,” Aaron Taylor Harvey, who designs the space, together with wife Rachel Harvey, explains. The couple, who first landed Airbnb as a client for their interior architecture firm in the beginning of 2012, were brought on board as in-house designers when Airbnb decided to open a Customer Experience Headquarter in Portland, Oregon (Taylor Harvey & Harvey, 2015).

### Designing with Questions

To design the new call center, which is usually associated with a highly structured and monitored workplace – the contemporary bastion of Taylorism, the team used a plethora of design methodologies to gather insights; “If Airbnb were to redefine the work environment the way we define travel, we had to enter the design with no assumptions and many question” Harvey Taylor says (Hingst, 2006; Taylor Harvey & Harvey, 2015).

To gather insights, the couple went to Portland where they spent two weeks gathering insights from employees in a variety of ways that would enable them to understand the Customer Experience (CX) workflow; “we did brainstorm sessions and we asked them what would make an office a functional and an enjoyable place to be every day. We also did one-on-one conversations to start to understand what are the themes that we are going to be talking to these groups about. Once we understood the themes, such as needing to know where to go every day, or wanting to understand how you navigate the office, not just in a social way, but also in a functional way, we wrote this digital survey and sent it out to everyone” Harvey explains, adding that for her, who is a bit of a shy person, “surveys are a really great way for everyone to get the opportunity to voice their opinion” (Taylor Harvey & Harvey, 2015).

### Understanding Insights

What they found, was that people wanted variety in the space, “they really wanted to be able to work in a variety of ways, and they wanted that freedom to choose how they were working” Taylor Harvey expounds. According to Harvey the built environment is much more than a physical space, it is “an expression of culture, and at best, the values and principles and hierarchy, that a culture pretends to be about, are expressed at that space.” He explains that within the last 50 years, offices have gone from cubicles with management corner-offices, to open planning, with limited space for alternate seating, resulting in employees feeling stuck. Taylor explains that density will remain a problem in urban areas, and that the challenge is to “create a high-density space that feels good to be in.”

### Inventing Solutions

To accommodate this need, a new type of furniture, dubbed “the standing landing” was invented. It is essentially a bar-height desk space, where one can hang their jacket and belongings and charge their laptop overnight, but the surface area is only half of that of a desk, allowing the remaining area to go back to the collective.

By bringing ideas from the sharing economy, in which Airbnb operates within, into the office, Harvey Taylor explains; “we can give everyone a single place to land, but many places to work” (Taylor Harvey & Harvey, 2015). The many furniture pieces, which makes up the interior of the office, was developed in collaboration with local designers, through a process of “many levels of digital and physical prototyping” (Peterson, 2014).

The Environments Design Lead explains that people’s need for high-contrasts spaces played an essential role in the design of the space; “if you are saying hey you can work anywhere throughout the day, you better have a meaningfully different experience when you move. If you are just moving to work at another white table why would you ever move?” To accommodate the need for variety the team created “distinct zones that feel like a library, or feel like a big bright café, or whatever,” allowing employees to freely migrate between the distinct surroundings (Taylor Harvey & Harvey, 2015). At the Portland office this includes a treehouse, which is modelled after a listing in London, as well as a cove-like space replicating a popular listing in Atlanta.

### Co-Creating Space

The meeting rooms have been replications of listings since Airbnb outgrew from Chesky and Gebbias’s apartment, and whenever new spaces are being opened” employees can volunteer to co-create or project manage meeting rooms” a Program Manager explains. Employees can spend their working hours modelling new work spaces and are even awarded a travelling stipend for their involvement; “I don’t remember how much,” an employee said, recalling that you get “a certain amount” for helping. Next to every meeting room is a photo of the actual listing, along with the names of those who helped design the room (Appendix A).



### Mirroring the Culture

The Portland office reflects not only the unique Airbnb culture, it is in consistency with the work culture of its inhabitants, the CX employees, who “have a pretty wide range of freedom in terms of how they can creatively solve problems,” Taylor explains, as the CX journey, similarly to the EX journey, enables the individual employee autonomy in achieving the desired outcomes (Taylor Harvey & Harvey, 2015). There is this kind of “parity” between the group of employees and the space and the group of employees and their function, her husband elaborates (Taylor Harvey & Harvey, 2015).

Consequently, different offices have different needs; “Portland is only customer experience. They are engaging with people who are having trouble. All they need is a MacBook and a headset. They don’t need all this stuff that has existed in offices for 150 years” he explains (Harvey, 2014). The San Francisco office is a little more traditional because the jobs housed there are more traditional, so the space should accommodate some of the more typical office needs like “the five of us need to meet right now, the six of us need to meet right now, two of us need to have a one-on-one,” combined with this need for physical spaces to fabricate, construct, and make things, because most of the design is created at the headquarter. (Taylor Harvey & Harvey, 2015)

### Tailoring Needs

There are 18 offices (Airbnb.com/careers, 2017) all over the world and every room is different and is modelled to represent various cities around the world, which means that there is no recipe for designing an Airbnb office; “there is no single solution – sharing should always be at the heart of it, we are a company built on sharing space, but we can make no real assumptions about what exactly works for each locale, there is always cultural differences, and there is always kind of work-focused differences” Taylor Harvey explains (Taylor Harvey & Harvey, 2015). At the San Francisco office, every floor of the building represents a different city; “The first floor is Amsterdam, the second floor is Tokyo” an employee who joined a couple of months ago recollects, adding “the last one is a Dutch country and I can’t remember which one it is” (Appendix A).

### Empowering Employees as Hosts

On the city-themed concept Harvey explains; “Airbnb is all about celebrating the unique in the place you’re going to.” She elaborates, “the open office is about the city, and then the conference room is about the product, so it’s about celebrating the fact that yes you are in a unique city, but we are offering this connection to global, unique places” (Taylor Harvey & Harvey, 2015).

This idea behind the environment, where meeting rooms are used to create experiences that bring out the otherwise very digital product in a tactile way, started with the first real office, and the job of the Environments team is to push the boundaries of defining what it means, “so by having employees help us decorate, or really host those rooms, we are kind of playing on this – it is not just a decorated room - but it is something that people really care about in the office and they helped us built it” she explains. “It is way to connect the user, the us, the employee, to what we are providing as a brand,” by allowing employees to become hosts in their own environment, her husband adds (Taylor Harvey & Harvey, 2015).

### Designing Iteratively

Every office design is a continuous evolvement from previous insights, and every new design is evaluated, iterated and improved upon (Appendix B). The Portland office was no exception; “it didn’t work well initially because what we built was a city but we didn’t build neighborhoods,” Levy explains (Appendix B). The idea of the standing landing evolved from the need to address the lacking sense of belonging expressed by the employees, to provide a space where they could come back to and congregate with their teams (Appendix B).

### Modelling for Multi-Purposes

Similarly, the Portland-project provided were translated into the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor build-out of the San Francisco office; “people are becoming critical to the open space planning – people don’t just need collaboration, they need focus.” The Environment’s teams challenge has been to create a workplace that allows various ways of working (w intensively, collaboratively, alone and in groups) without creating physical walls

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everywhere. Taylor Harvey explains; “I think that visual transparency and sightlines across space are really important to Airbnb” and details that it enables collaboration because you can physically see your co-workers “and go engage with them if something pops into your head” (Harvey, 2014).

### Belong Anywhere

To address the need for privacy the library is a no-talk zone, and small cubbies, which is essentially soft versions of cubicles, have been strategically placed around the office to address this need, so people do not feel overwhelmed (Harvey, 2014). In contrast, kitchen table areas, dining or living rooms are available for those who favor collaboration and “an open space that may feel much more like you’re in an airport waiting for a plane to take off” (Appendix B).

On how this plays out in practice a Program Manager from the San Francisco office explains; We do not have permanent desks, we work around our mission of ‘anyone can belong anywhere’ which means that we’re able to claim space,” adding that this means that, “we assimilate to new spaces and rooms throughout our work day.” On the general environment, she says; “The office spaces we have are mind-blowingly awesome and well thought through” (Appendix A).

### Sub-conclusion: The Physical Environment

At Airbnb, the employees take the center stage in the design of the space and design decisions are based on insights from interviews, observations and surveys, through an iterative process of testing out what works. The environment is designed by in-house architects, and employees from all positions can volunteer to co-create new office spaces, which includes replicating famous listings from all over the world. Employees can move from high-contrast environments, throughout the day, to cater for individual wants and needs, and allow for shifting work modes throughout the day. The space reflects the culture; employees can “belong anywhere” by claiming space in the open environment, which is designed to be empathic to the local culture, inspired by various cities around the world.

## 4. The Cultural Environment

In a letter, addressed to every employee at Airbnb on October 21, 2013, Chesky wrote “Culture is simply a shared way of doing something with passion” (Chesky, 2014). Although there are many various definitions of culture, most definitions have some common denominators in defining culture as something shared between a collective, in this case Airbnb.

### Chief Brand Evangelist

For Chesky, now CEO, working at Airbnb is not a job, and he personally interviewed the first 300 employees of the company. Even now, he makes sure that he meets every employee (Sujir, 2015). He describes how his responsibilities have shifted from daily, hands-on implementation, to nurturing and protecting the culture, by creating the strategy and vision to guide the organization forward, and explains that he sees his role as “Chief Brand Evangelist.” He explains the responsibility of a Chief Brand Evangelist is to spread the message; “In everything you say and do, you must be the living, breathing embodiment of your company’s core values. If you aren’t or don’t, then your team will quickly leave them behind as well. You may then look up in shock to realize you are heading a company you barely recognize” (Greylock Partners, 2015).

### Host-Like Leadership

At Airbnb, a Program Manager explains, “We tend not use the word manager and management - We say leadership,” adding; “Being managed and being lead or mentored are two perceptions of the same topic” (Appendix A). She continues to explain “Managers are organizational specific,” and in some cases, you might have “what we call “dotted lines” to other leaders” (Appendix A).

Levy explains, “we expect every one of our employees to be a host to each other, to be a host to anyone they are meeting, as a representative of Airbnb,” and adds; “we also use it as a lens by which we are looking at designing our leadership point of view - host-like leadership” (Appendix B). A Community Organizer who works remotely explains, “I talk to my lead once every week,” adding that they also have a group call with around 30 people every Monday; “that way you are always up to date with what everyone is doing, high-fives are given, and we have a shootout

round where you can thank colleagues for helping you out, teaching you something or the like” (Appendix A)

### Learning to Lead

Chesky believes that his young age, and limited experience prior to starting Airbnb, allows him to come up with novel ideas, however, this means that he has had to learn on the job; “that’s the price sometimes of these things” (Greylock Partners, 2015).

The same can be said about the host-like leadership at Airbnb; “we’re kind of just getting more sophisticated in some of those areas and so we’re working on something we’re calling a Career Framework which looks like titles, levels and then job descriptions and we’re working at how do we better articulate for our folks” Levy explains, adding that it involves asking questions like; “where does their role sit within the function that they may be in? And then where does it sit within the organization? And then how do they navigate their way through more of a career than a career ladder” (Appendix B).

One way that Chesky leads is by drawing on his ethos, by sharing personal stories, which allows him to form deeper, more meaningful connections with his employees. By drawing on his own personal experiences, like stories of how he and the other founders sold cereal to fund the business, along other quirky anecdotes from his past and present, inspiring people to follow his lead (Greylock Partners, 2015).

### Healthy, Hearty Meals

An important part of the culture at Airbnb is to gather around the free-for-everyone, organic, healthy meals, which are served three times a day; “the meals aren’t just perks it is a way for people to get together” Harvey explains (Harvey, 2014). At the San Francisco office, the Food Program is catered by in-house staff, and employees are free to help themselves to beverages and healthy snacks around the clock (Appendix Glassdoor). The selection is exclusively house-made and includes the choice of “Redbnb” – a healthy alternative to Redbull made from hibiscus, green tea and yerba mate (for caffeine), lemon, lime, mint, and ginger, sweetened with organic cane sugar (Bull, 2016). In true Airbnb-fashion, every meal is based on a listing or a place Levy explains, “so it might be breakfast from Korea, lunch from Mexico, and dinner from somewhere in Buenos Aires” (Appendix B).

### Be a Patient

Gebbia, who is now Chief Product Officer, had an experience while working on a designing a medical device, while still in design school, that has been turned into an important value; “we would go talk with all of the stakeholders, all of the users of that product, doctors, nurses, patients and then we would have that epiphany moment where we would lay down in the bed in the hospital. We’d have the device applied to us, and we would sit there and feel exactly what it felt like to be the patient, and it was in that moment where you start to go aha, that’s uncomfortable. There’s probably a better way to do this” he recalls (Gebbia, 2013).

“Be a Patient” is now one of the core values of the design team but all employees are sent on a free trip “their first or second week in the company and then they document it” Gebbia explains adding; “we have some structured questions that they answer and then they actually share back to the entire company. It’s incredibly important that everyone in the company knows that we believe in this so much” (Gebbia, 2013). From this same belief, all regular employees receive a \$500 travel coupon every quarter, which can only be redeemed on the platform (Glassdoor/Airbnb).

### Work-Life Balance

Working at Airbnb “is not the classic 9-5 job” a Program Manager explains and elaborates, “It’s a rollercoaster ride that will give you learnings for a lifetime” (Appendix A) It all comes back to the idea of creating “freedom within a framework” Levy explains, and that Airbnb is a relationship-oriented company without a defined policy about when and where employees are expected at the office. People might feel like they need to show up to get work done, “but we don’t require that. We’re very flexible when it comes to you know, focus at our parents or focus at our having a baby or you know things like that.” Supplementing; “but people tend to want to be here [A] because of the environment we created and [B] because of the people that they like to be with” (Appendix B). A contractor, who works as a Talent Analyst in San Francisco, explains that she usually goes to work somewhere between 8 and 9.15. She then works for eight hours, with the flexibility of attending an event or yoga class during the day, as long as she would make up the hours (Appendix A).

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However, a Program Manager explains that words she uses most to describe working at Airbnb are “: crazy, inclusive, changing, fast, fluid, this is the future” and Levy admits; “it’s probably the hardest I’ve worked in my whole career but it’s also the most fun that I’ve had” (Appendix B).

For those who have furry friends Airbnb is the place to be; Airbnb is a dog-friendly workplace Levy explains, adding; “on any given day we got 25 dogs running around, and it’s a way to feel like you belong, it makes you feel like you’re home, it can be a little distracting, there are some accidents sometime.” And it is not only at the headquarter where dogs are running free he adds, “it’s actually one of the most interesting things; when we have to negotiate a lease around the world one of the things we always try to do is work in the dogs” (Appendix B).

## Elephants, Dead Fish and Vomit

An employee survey conducted in 2015 suggested that the culture was not as open and honest as the founders had hoped for. To address this issue, Gebbia came up with the idea that he called “elephants, dead fish and vomit” - a nomenclature the company has adopted to open a dialog. Gebbia demystifies; “Elephants are the big things in the room that nobody is talking about, dead fish are the things that happened a few years ago that people can’t get over, and vomit is that sometimes people just need to get something off their mind and you need someone to just sit there and listen (Gebbia, 2013).

## Fun Fridays

To bring people together across teams, each office holds an informal meeting every Friday afternoon (sometimes it might be on a Thursday) where the all employees can ask questions and share their work; “it’s a great way to connect at the end of the week, talk about the things that you’ve accomplished, get ready for the weekend, and at least in San Francisco, our Friday meetings end up turning into Happy Hour every week,” Levy explains (Appendix B). All offices have beer and wine, and the European headquarter, located in Dublin, even features a traditional Irish pub (Appendix B).

## Transparency



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To ensure transparency, the Employee Experience group is in charge of distributing notes from the weekly executive meetings, within 24 hours, to every single employee, collectively known as the Airfam: “we distribute that very broadly and people really appreciate knowing what we’re talking about and ask questions, share thoughts and ideas,” Levy explains, elaborating; “Our rule of thumb is that nobody should hear about anything externally, until we’ve told them internally,” Levy says (Appendix B; Clune, 2016)

### World Ad

Every other week, Chesky, leads what is referred to as World Ad, where various employees from all around the world participate and share what they are working on. “We bring the entire company together” Levy explains, adding that the event usually takes place in San Francisco and is streamed live, but has been taken on the road a few times as well (Appendix B). However, how the entire company should be understood might be disputed; a contractor believes that the reason behind the different colored badges is to “make sure that only people who are full time employees attend [World Ad], because there is a lot of confidential information,” explaining that, as a contractor, “you are allowed only if your manager approves it, and only if you have a really good reason to attend.” Although not confirmed by any official figures, she estimates that “almost 25% of the people who work at the headquarters are contractors” (Appendix A).

### Working as a Collective

A Ground Control Program Manager, who has been working at Airbnb for more than five years, explains that at Airbnb “We work hard and we work as a collective” (Appendix A). As one of the outcomes from gathering insights related to the work environment, every team at the San Francisco office has a neighborhood where they “belong” and can “camp”, but are free to work wherever they please (Appendix A; Taylor Harvey & Harvey, 2015). She explains that Cross-functional work is natural at Airbnb so you often get to work with other teams and on multiple projects. Regular employees and contractors work side by side, often taking on multiple roles (Appendix A).

### Community Building

Airbnb regards its community as its employees, hosts and guests and has a number of initiatives in place designed at bringing the community closer; “I’ve found at other companies I worked for that, when you want to engage your employees, if you help them to see how they can help others, it really makes them proud of working for the company that gives back, and you also have some great opportunities and moments when you’re out together, working in the community, to really build relationships,” Levy recalls (Appendix B).

### Giving Back

Airbnb has a *Global Citizenship team* dedicated to “leverage our company’s unique assets for social good” (AirbnbCitizen). The team’s job is to identify in which ways employees can help as well as to set it up (Appendix B). The website [airnbccitizen.com](http://airnbccitizen.com) reads; “From philanthropy to employee volunteerism, to our host community and the use of our technology, we are always working to embody our mission of creating a world where you can belong anywhere (AirbnbCitizen). To actively encourage volunteering, Airbnb employees receive four hours of paid time off every month to volunteer in their local communities, while contractors are given some leeway in their schedule if they want to participate on their own time; “managers are really nice about it” a contractor explains (Appendix A). She herself got her hands dirty with gardening to give back to the city of San Francisco (Appendix A).

### Be a Host

Another *Global Citizenship* initiative is “Open Homes” which provides free or low-cost, short-term stays for individuals and families during times of need or celebration “such as medical patients traveling for treatment, low-income students traveling to visit universities, or social entrepreneurs traveling to change the world.” To do that, Airbnb works to identify hosts who are willing to reduce their nightly rates to share the cost of the trip with Airbnb (AirbnbCitizen). In the wake of the global refugee crisis Airbnb extended the program, to offer temporary housing for displaced people for free, and the site identifies four areas of need: refugees; disaster; medical needs; and homeless (Gallagher, 2017b) To encourage hosting, both those in need and in

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general, employee hosts enjoy the benefit of free exchange and laundering of linens, and Airbnb throw events to honor the employees who open up their homes. Levy explains; “at the end of the day we want everyone in our company to have experienced the journey and understanding of what it’s like to belong anywhere, through the eyes of the host and the guest” (Appendix B).



The commitment curve: from unfamiliar with Airbnb to employees (Appendix B)

## Ground Control

On a less serious note, the Ground Control team, which is often referred to as “Airbnb’s Secret Sauce,” arranges “AirShares” in which employees can teach each other new things; “if you know something interesting or want to share a skill, we always make space for that. We set up a session, we advertise it, and we allow them to share it with others,” Ken Hoskin, who is the Head of APAC Talent, explains (Kalra, 2017).

After Riopelle and her team re-did the rejection templates sent out to candidates, many asked for advice to gracefully reject someone online, which turned into a vastly popular AirShare in “rejection for online dating” (Riopelle, 2015). Ground Control further organizes and promotes meet-ups for employees and local hosts to connect, swap tips, and share experiences, and throws parties to celebrate recognitions or employee celebrations (Appendix A). To expand the idea of knowledge sharing further, Airbnb has rolled out a global learning platform, accessible to all employees (Kalra, 2017).

### Personal Development

In 2016, following the hiring of more than 1,000 new employees in 2015, Airbnb made a strategy of “Growth by Design” to preserve the culture and plan for how the business can grow without “necessarily growing our cost or our head count” Hoskin says (Kalra, 2017; Appendix B). A part of the strategy is to strengthen employees through “learning, internal mobility and sustainable performance” Hoskin explains, adding; “we need to be a lot more purposeful in supporting the change from recruiting to developing” (Kalra, 2017; Falk, 2017).

### Learning

To expand on the notion of knowledge sharing, which underpins Airshares, Airbnb has rolled out a global learning platform, accessible to all employees (Kalra, 2017). Further, the Learning and Development team organizes Fireside Chats, which bring in industry leaders to share their experiences and wisdom; “from CEOs to musicians, these leaders always have something invaluable to teach us” the Employee Experience website reads (Airbnb Employee Experience).

### Internal Mobility

As recognized by the *Growth by Design* strategy internal mobility can be an issue when a company grows rapidly. On why people leave Airbnb a Talent Analyst explains that “most of our terminations were voluntary terminations, and the main reason was that people were either going back to school or they had received really, really good job offers elsewhere,” she clarifies; “Usually they had been at Airbnb for so long, and they were really happy, but they decided to move somewhere else, maybe with a little more growth potential at that point” (Appendix A). Upon asked whether internal mobility has been a problem lately a Program Manager, who started in 2012 says; “I have personally not had a challenge with internal mobility. I’ve been in different jobs and even got a transfer to San Francisco [from Copenhagen], so I can’t complain.” Adding that, “however, for some this is a challenge that our Director of EX is addressing.” (Appendix A).

### Sustainable Performance

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To proactively address stress and burnout, Airbnb's Sustainable Performance initiative launched medio-2016; the initiative focuses on supporting an integrated life for employees, as well as testing new ways of working. Levy explains; "this includes offering things like Headspace, Life Dojo, or yoga, and revisiting our time-off policies to ensure that we were supporting parents or longer-tenured employees who need a break" (Falk, 2017). On testing things, he explains that Airbnb has toyed with "no-meeting Wednesdays," which allows people to have time to think, as well as a training program in email and meeting efficiency to ensure that "these time-consuming activities are more thoughtful and productive" (Falk, 2017).

### Connection the circle

Just like the "check-in" process for new hires, the "check-out" process for departing members of the Airfam is regarded as a "critical moment" in the employee experience journey (Riopelle, 2015). Gebbia explains; "everything at Airbnb is a continuation of what it's like to be a guest in somebody's house," adding; "we think about how each stage makes people feel" (Anders, 2015)

A Talent Analyst, who left Airbnb to do her Masters, explain that Airbnb conducts exit surveys, and that her role included having "check-out" meetings to make sure the employees knew their benefits and the process after termination. Further, she would ask them to share their experiences and next moves, adding, "that data is really important for the people analytics team" (Appendix A). She explains that generally there is no "check-out" meeting for contractors, but it may vary from manager to manager, and whether the contractor is hired for a certain project, or in a more permanent role (Appendix A). However, even after termination Airbnb wants former candidates to feel like they belong, and to measure that, Airbnb has a system that tracks when former candidates refer new hires, and the valuable lead-generators are awarded a \$500 travel certificate (Anders, 2015).

### Sub-conclusion: The Cultural Environment

At Airbnb, the culture, embodied through the mission and Core Values guide everything; international meals, job autonomy, community building, including volunteering, knowledge sharing, employee celebrations, as well as how people collaborate in and across teams. The host-like leadership, encouraged by the mission,

breeds a flat hierarchical structure where learning and development is obtainable through co-creating, volunteerism and knowledge sharing. A recent increased focus on learning, internal mobility and sustainable performance, supported by statements from employees, suggest that retention, due to the lack of growth and development opportunities and burnout, may be a growing issue.

### **5. Sub-Conclusion: Designing the Employee Experience**

Airbnb places all efforts related to the design of the employee experience under one roof, which allows for a holistic approach to the design of an environment, that is carefully thought through to drive experiences and maximize the culture.

To do so, Airbnb uses design thinking methodologies to emphasize with its employees, and initiatives are iteratively developed from insights. Insights are turned into story boards, or employee journeys, a framework for how the employee, or potential employee, is supposed to feel in a certain situation.

The candidate experience is guided by critical moments, resulting in a rather unpredictable process. The check-in process is quite extensive and there is a large focus on both the aesthetic and social side, however this is not the same for external employees.

Employees have the freedom to use whatever tools they desire to do their job, and design is not only through of in terms of aesthetic appeal but functionality. Employees are empowered and encouraged to make data-informed decisions, and stimulated to think creatively; “do things that don’t scale”/”be a pirate.” However, analytical insights and survey data play an important role in attaining empathy and evaluating employee initiatives.

The physical spaces are built on employee insights, through iterative processes, conducted in-house, and employees from all positions can volunteer to in the co-creation of new spaces. The contrasting environments cater for individual wants and needs, and shifting modes of working, and reflects the culture of “belong anywhere”. The culture is a huge part of the employee experience, and the mission and Core Values influences everything from perks, benefits and personal-development opportunities. The notion of host-like leadership breeds a flat hierarchical structure where learning and development is obtainable through co-creating, volunteerism and knowledge sharing.

## 7. Untangling Employee Engagement

The premise of this paper rests on the theory of employee experience as the result of a combination of the technological, the physical and the cultural environment, which can either contribute to, or impede, employee engagement (Hall, 2017; Morgan, 2017). To evaluate how the employee experience at Airbnb may contribute to, or impede employee engagement, it is necessary to explain the underlying mechanisms of engagement.

### 1. Self-Determination Theory

A number of studies, conducted by researchers Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan during the 1970s and onwards, emerged as a framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in the publication *“Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior”* in 1985, and it has since been researched and practiced by a network of researchers around the world (Deci & Ryan, 2008). SDT is a macro-theory of human motivation and personality that concerns people's inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs.

The propositions of SDT focus on how social and cultural factors facilitate or undermine people's sense of volition and initiative, in addition to their well-being and the quality of their performance, and it has been widely studied within families, classrooms, teams, organizations, clinics, and cultures, making it an obvious theoretical lens in the study of Airbnb (SelfDeterminationTheory.org).

### The Premise of SDT

The theory begins ascends from the assumption that people are active organisms, with evolved tendencies toward growing, mastering ambient challenges, and integrating new experiences into a coherent sense of self. These natural developmental tendencies do not, however, operate automatically, but instead require ongoing social nourishment and supports. The social context can either support or thwart the natural tendencies toward active engagement and psychological growth, and it can cause lack of integration, protection, and fulfilment of need-substitutes (SelfDeterminationTheory.org).



### Universal Needs

According to theory, three universal psychological needs motivate the self to initiate behavior, and these needs are essential for psychological health and well-being. These needs are: competence, autonomy, and psychological relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). SDT distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivation defined as motivation that comes from within: interests, curiosity, care or abiding values, leading to cognitive and social development, that acts as a source for enjoyment and vitality (Deci E. L., 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Extrinsic motivation can reflect a desire to gain rewards or avoid punishment (external regulation); to “boost one’s ego or avoid feelings of guilt (introjection)”; “attain a valued personal goal (identification)”; or express “one’s sense of self (integration)” (SelfDeterminationTheory.org).

Identification and integration involve a high level of volition and are considered forms of autonomous regulation, along with intrinsic motivation. “External regulation and introjection involve more external influence and less authenticity, and are considered forms of controlled regulation” Autonomous regulation, or engagement, has been demonstrated to lead to “higher levels of performance, persistence, initiative, and creativity” (Deci E. L., 2000).

### Competence

Competence is an individual’s willingness to effectively engage with the environment. This can include a propensity to explore and manipulate the environment to engage in challenging tasks and to extend skills (Van den Broeck et. al., 2010). In other words, a person needs sufficient amounts of challenge to feel useful, and wants the challenges to be of such nature that the person can learn from them. Competence can produce both satisfaction and frustration: the first allowing a person to adapt to complex and changing environments and to improve skills, and the latter causing a feeling of helplessness and discouragement (Van den Broeck et. al., 2010).

### Autonomy

Autonomy can be described as a person’s sense of having a choice and psychological freedom over his actions. SDT assumes autonomy to be something subjective: an

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action doesn't have to be decided by oneself, but rather, one needs an intrinsic, meaningful rationale to complete a task. In a working environment, autonomy can relate to freedom over working hours (time management), tasks (task management), control over actions, etc. (Van den Broeck et. al., 2010).

### Relatedness

Relatedness is the individuals need to feel connected to others: “to be a member of a group, to love and care, and to be loved and cared” (Van den Broeck et. al., 2010). The needs become satisfied when a person feels communion with others, when they feel they belong. Close and intimate relationships are a requirement, and it is even expected that people have a tendency to socially integrate with others (Van den Broeck et. al., 2010).

## 2. Sub-conclusion: SDT

SDT proposes that employee engagement is the combination of the fulfilment of the universal, psychological need for competence, autonomy and relatedness. The theory delineates, that in order for employees to feel engaged, they must experience that their needs for competence, autonomy, and psychological relatedness are sufficiently met. This includes, believing that their presence is useful, feeling appropriately challenged, experiencing that their work is meaningful, and that they have autonomy in how they go about their work, and that they sense belonging in the workplace. The absence of these things may generate some psychological states and behavioral reactions that may impede employee engagement.

## 8. Assessing the Airbnb Experience

The purpose of this chapter is to assess how the employee experience at Airbnb may contribute to, or impede, employee engagement, in order to conclude on the second part of the research question.

### 1. Relatedness

For employees at Airbnb to experience a sense of belonging, they must feel like they are a part of the “Airfam” and that they are taken care of, loved and cared for. In the 98 reviews, the ten words that appear the most in the pro-section are; “great” (66 times), “people” (47 times), “food” (32 times), “culture” (29), “benefits” (28), “company” (26), “good” (25), “perk” (24), “free” (21) and “travel” (20) (Appendix G). “Great” is mostly used in connotation with “perks” and “benefits”, and the reviews highlight everything from the free food, health care, the office space, social events and equity.

In a workplace, relatedness is deeply associated with the employee feeling liked, respected and valued; by providing perks that employees view constructively Airbnb is building relatedness through caring for its employees. However, as SDT states, this extrinsic form of motivation has a more profound effect when the employee experience it as an insufficiently met need (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

However, perks alone are not enough: individuals need to feel connected to others, and close and intimate relationships are an important part of satisfying the universal and innate need for relatedness. At Airbnb, people are often highlighted as a favorable attribute on their own, and the most emphasized attributes are that people are smart/talented, passionate/mission-driven or caring/good/kind. 30% of the reviews mention the culture in a favorable context, 12% of all reviews use the expression “great culture,” others describe the culture as “inspiring”, “inclusive”, “liberal”, “strong” and “engaging.”

The following are examples of positive remarks: “I believe Airbnb's focus on finding the right people for the right job has created a best in class team, culture and work environment”, “People are caring, macro-level empathetic, hard-working, and are able to solve tough problems in an intelligent way (everyone learns)” and “truly

can't say enough about the quality of people both from technical, but more importantly personality standpoint". One refers to the culture as "a thing" and adds; "If you're a "Gilfoyle" you'll probably hate it here" referring to the un-friendly and undoubtable odd character from the HBO sitcom "Silicon Valley" (Imdb.com).

However, as outlined by chapter 6, not everyone is entitled to the same experience; one employee claims that "full-time temporary employees are treated as 2nd class citizens," while another employee stresses that "external employees face a lot of restrictions to access to company tools and certain culture events even though the expectation is to be a full member of the team." Stressing this issue, an employee raises the concern that Airbnb is: "hiring an absurd amount of contractors and then continue to renew their contracts for 1+ years instead of hiring them full time." Another review claims that lower wage employees are being monitored ("they actually check your access cards to see when you clock in,") adding, "so much for belong anywhere, you are watched like a hawk by "talent"". An employee from the APAC office criticizes the way "lower levels of employees" are being treated, adding that "there has been a change of so many cleaners who'd rather quit than to continue working there" (Appendix F).

Although these reviews represent concerns expressed by only a small number of employees that may feel betrayed or wrongfully treated, they raise an important concern because the mission of belonging is the highest priority of Airbnb. A strong encumbering aspect of belonging is to satisfy the human need for relatedness, and these comments may raise a concern as to whether belonging extends to everyone at Airbnb.

Although the culture is slightly overrepresented in the pro-section (29 to 27) a considerable number of employees seem to be holding off the Kool-Aid: Some reviews describe the work environment as "toxic" and the culture as "chaotic." Others criticize what they experience as fierce competition, and as far as calling it as "a pseudo "Lord of Flies"" and "a proper Dog Eat Dog environment," where "employees are fighting to survive, recognition is based on relationships (not work)" (Appendix F).

Many reviews indicate that things have changed, including: "the culture is definitely gone", "the culture has disintegrated", "they are destroying the culture." (Appendix F).

The ten words that appear the most in the con-section are: “work” (56), “company” (55), “people” (50), “manage” (45), “employee” (30), “manager” (30), “culture” (27), “time” (21), “Airbnb” (21) and “very” (20) (Appendix G).

In 31% of the reviews, people are mentioned in a negative context, and the most commonly raised themes are that people are only looking out for themselves, that it can be hard to raise concerns, and that rewards and promotions are given to those who are popular, rather than hard-work, skills and results.

The following are examples of negative remarks related to the people: “people tend to avoid direct confrontation and being nice in the first place, then you might find yourself backstabbed”, “people don't even think twice about side-lining those who they think aren't cool enough” and “A people hiring B people and B people hiring B-people” (Appendix F).

## 2. Autonomy

Another important psychological need coupled to employee engagement is the need for autonomy. Autonomy can be described as a person's sense of having a choice and psychological freedom over his actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In a working environment, autonomy can relate to freedom to decide over when and where you work, the tasks you do and how you go about solving the tasks, but it can also mean having a meaningful rationale to complete a task (Van den Broeck et. al., 2010).

As apparent by the analysis in chapter 6, the mission “to create a world where anyone can belong anywhere” and the four Core Values (“Be a Host”, “Champion the Mission”, “Be a ‘Cereal Entrepreneur’” and “Embrace the Adventure”) are an integral part of designing the culture at Airbnb.

Identifying with the company mission and values can contribute to an increased feeling of relatedness (because you feel like you belong), but it can also contribute to one's sense of autonomy, because it provides an intrinsic, meaningful rationale to one's work (Van den Broeck et. al., 2010).

In 21% of the reviews, employees explicitly highlight the mission and/or the vision, some along with the Core Values, examples include; “strong mission and culture”, “Core Values are strong and real”, “hosting permeates the buildings”, as well as “with a clear mission statement as a company, work feels meaningful, as even my level contributes to this grandiose vision of a better world” (Appendix E).

Further, 8% of the reviews highlight the founders and/or the top management specifically; “founders are visible, accessible and engaged”, “mission driven leaders and people” and “the executive team is impressive and all are visionary in their own ways. It's always inspiring to hear them speak/present.” (Appendix E).

To put this in context, none of the reviews highlights the mission, vision or values as undesirable features of the culture, however, some are arguing that recent executive hires from Google and Facebook are a threat to the mission of ‘belong anywhere’. Examples include; “[they] have destroyed what culture and atmosphere there was”, “they mock the culture and are no way a part of it” and “lots of people pretend to be caring about core values, cultures, goodness but actually what they care might just be stock units and compensation,” the last review adding that; “this is frustrating to me as I sincerely joined because of some idealistic belief” (Appendix F).

These opinions are very much related to the perception that the culture has changed, which leads to the most frequently negatively-conjugated terminologies: “manage” (45) and “manager” (30) which combined appear 75 times, mentioned in 45% of the reviews appearing in the con-section (Appendix F).

SDT states that in order for employees to feel engaged, they must experience that their needs for competence, autonomy, and psychological relatedness are sufficiently met (SelfDeterminationTheory.org). The absence of autonomy, or freedom from external control or influence, may lead to lower levels of performance, initiative, creativity and ultimately or impede the employee’s level of engagement (Deci E. L., 2000). While “to manage” and “manager” are not direct antonyms of autonomy, they terminologies imply that someone else in control, hereby suggesting constraint on autonomy.

A closer look at the reviews reveal that the highlighted issues are mostly related to inexperience and rather the opposite of control. Employees most frequently refer to management and middle management as; “inexperienced”, “terrible”, “poor”, “young”, “disorganized” and “weak” (Appendix F). In contrast, only 5% of the reviews appraise the management or leadership in connotation with the words “open”, “supportive”, “consultative” and non-confrontational” (Appendix E). However, the assessment of review bias revealed that people are more likely to write a review if they have had a bad experience, when they feel betrayed (Tripp & Grégoire, 2011).

This supports the argument that the culture at Airbnb allow employees to have autonomy, or “freedom within a framework”, as Levy explain, through not having defined policies about when and where employees are expected at the office (appendix B).

Comments supporting this view include; “you can pick your team as an engineer!”, “extremely liberal culture”, “extremely approachable and friendly and the atmosphere”, “make your own schedule”, “casual work atmosphere” and “flat hierarchies” (Appendix E).

### 3. Competence

However, negative remarks regarding the management are not unimportant; the premise of SDT holds that people are active organisms, with evolved tendencies toward growing, mastering ambient challenges, and integrating new experiences into a coherent sense of self. These inherent growth needs need social nourishment and support, and the perceived level of such may contribute to or delimit an individual’s sense of engagement (SelfDeterminationTheory.org).

As previously disclosed, 45% of the reviews mentioned “manage” or “management” in a negative context (Appendix F). This is by far the single-most discussed topic of the 98 reviews, indicating that this may be a serious issue at Airbnb. To understand the problem with management more in-depth the following section intend to draw a more nuanced picture.

In connection with the most popularly expressed view on management as “inexperienced”, employees explain; “they promoted some people to management that really need more training”, “managers are home-grown and don't really know how to manage”, “management is inexperienced, many first-time managers who have no idea how to motivate or handle people”, and “promoting green employees into management positions.” (Appendix F).

Believing that the management in place is inadequate may thwart one’s perceived self-belief in one’s ability to grow and master new challenges, which may negatively impact one’s sense of competence. The lack of experienced managers may invoke a feeling of helplessness or discouragement, leading to frustration for some who feels like their need for support is being neglected.



## 9. Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to draw on the sub-conclusions made in chapter 6 and chapter 8, in order to ultimately conclude on the research question of the thesis.

Overall, Airbnb's employee experience is designed to mimic the service offered by the company. The commitment to these ideals begins as early as the interview process. During this time, potential employees are asked informal, personalized questions - such as what they would say at a TED talk or at Airbnb's funeral. Experience is emphasized here. It is not about a person's qualifications so much as the meaning one derives from the experience of obtaining them. These qualities are emphasized during the interview process so that the company attracts employees who share the organization's values – namely, that value of being a quality host. Airbnb expects its employees to be quality hosts in the same way it expects its users on the site to offer a welcoming environment at their homes. The attitude is supposed to manifest itself in the way employees treat fellow employees and customers. Thus, the business effectively blends its overall mission into the employee experience.

Although the intentions are good, there is room for improvement. The employee experience offered at Airbnb is meant to provide both inclusivity and autonomy to its workers. However, it appears that the company is increasingly compromising their values, through recent hires and the utilizing of contractors. Much like the way in which the company's service operates, Airbnb has been accused by shuffling employees in and out of the organization rapidly, hiring a high level of contractors, whose services they renew along the way. As such, some may criticize the culture at Airbnb for being hypocritical which hinders perceptions of competence and relatedness, which are strong deterrents of employee engagement.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Airbnb is making efforts to offer an emphatic work experience, whose culture matches the overall service expected from the business, highlighting that Airbnb is an engaging, overall great place to work.

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