



ebay



## When Change Came, eBay Burnished its Brand with Employee Engagement

*Committees Focused on Branding, Social Innovation, and Engagement Helped the Austin Top Workplace Gain and Sustain 'Powerful Momentum'*



Nothing challenges success like change, and at [eBay](#) there's been plenty of it. The company that pioneered e-commerce marked its twentieth anniversary in 2015, the same year it spun off its PayPal subsidiary in a deal that seemed to strengthen both organizations. The move brought an even greater focus on brand building; and to make it happen, eBay looked again to its more than 10,000 employees working at locations around the world.

One such location is Austin, Texas, where the expanding 475-person office is carrying out ambitious plans to build connections with the broader community by highlighting the alignments of its workplace culture and brand with those of the local community. It established and empowered employee committees focused on branding, social innovation, and engagement. And it used the [Workplace Survey](#) to gather feedback, collect ideas, and measure progress.



The Austin site is led by Zac Jacobson, eBay's senior director of Business Excellence and Customer Insights. He said, "I've never been in a company that's as focused on employees as eBay is, and specifically focused on employee engagement. It's very much a part of eBay. I think that's deeply embedded in the business that we run."

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A quarterly, internal engagement program and all the follow-up activity that entails is "part of the culture and part of the management expectation," said Jacobson, who started with eBay in 2011 following roles in strategy and operations, mostly at communications companies. [Jacobson said in January](#) that through employee committees, "We empowered our employees to do great things and to apply their passion to something meaningful."

In 2016, there was an even larger challenge: "We had separated from PayPal a year ago," Jacobson said. "We really needed to establish an independent eBay brand." He said, "We needed to build an understanding of eBay in the Austin community as a leading corporate citizen — not just as a great place to work, but a place that actively commits to and makes the communities that we work in better places."

To do this, eBay needed to democratize engagement to drive participation. Jacobson said, "At the end of the day, engagement is community. You can't have high engagement if you have low participation."

Once greater engagement was achieved, Jacobson and his team wanted to encourage an environment of responsibility, accountability, and continuous improvement. He said, "Each one of us has the things that drive engagement. But it's different for different people. What we're trying to activate is the idea of bringing your passion and showing up the way that you want to show up. We want to provide an open environment where people can find that space."

## Building Connections Through Empowerment

Spend an afternoon in the Texas Hill Country or a rush-hour in the capital's notorious traffic and it's easy to see that Austin is place where more and more people want to be.

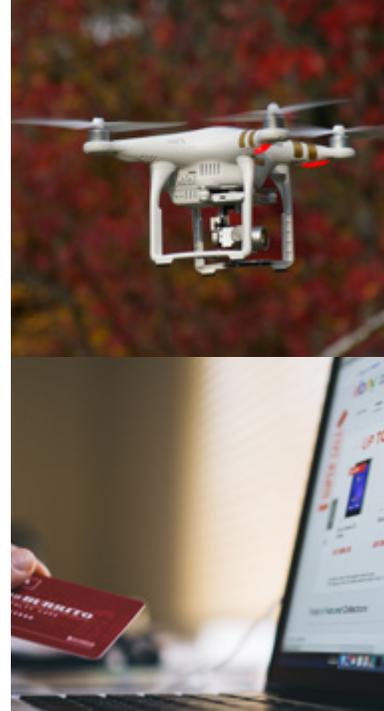
"Austin is a booming, competitive labor market," Jacobson said, "so we think about being a [Top Workplace](#) in the context of both eBay and Austin. As it turns out, there is a very strong connection between eBay's culture and brand and the Austin community culture and brand."

"Those two cultures combine in a powerful way," Jacobson said. "We figured out ways to tap into that to make that come to life, to make that real."

Finding alignments between company and community values is happening company-wide. "What we've done well in Austin is pivoting it to an external focus," Jacobson said. "We've managed to connect internal and external. I think that's becoming part of the powerful momentum we're creating."

Much of that momentum is built through employee committees on branding, social innovation, and engagement that weren't merely created and left to their own devices. "You actually authorize these committees. They have resources. They have a budget," Jacobson said. "We gave them their own accountabilities. We conduct operating reviews, and we drive that across the whole site."

The Branding Committee was established to spread the eBay brand through the Austin area. Jacobson said, "The idea there is not only making the logo and the brand come to life in





the community, but engaging with actual customers of eBay and creating customers by hosting events where people can sign up new customers and encourage buying and selling from them.” He said, “That fits in very strongly with the Austin culture, which is very much about local business.”

Jacobson said, “Everyone in the Austin area recognizes us as an active leader. We’ve also seen buying and selling activity in and around Central and Southern Texas grow as a result.”

The Social Innovation Committee has two components with one charitable and the other focused on green initiatives. “This really taps into the part of the community that wants to make the world a better place,” Jacobson said.

And, he said, “For a certain part of our population at our site, this is a huge driver of engagement because they feel like, ‘I’m not only with a great company, but I’m with a company that cares about its impact on the world.’ For people who are wired that way, that’s pretty irreplaceable.”

+9%  
ENGAGEMENT

*eBay Austin scored 9 percent higher than other organizations in the Information Technology benchmark.*

Source: 2016 [Workplace Survey](#)

Jacobson said, “The idea behind the Engagement Committee is communicating and doing things that specifically connect people to eBay, and to having it be a great place to work. In some sense, it’s almost the glue that holds the rest of the thing together. What you’re really trying to get at is: What are the things that matter? What are the things that really do connect people? What are the things that give people a voice? What are the things that connect people to their passions? Let’s target those things, and do those things really, really well, especially when they bind us internally and bind us externally. The Engagement Team is the one that’s really thinking about that and driving that.”

Despite all that employee involvement, employee surveys still play an important role, Jacobson said.

“We survey because, A, we really care, and, B, because we’re learning, we’re growing, we’re changing,” he said. “The thing about being the best is you’re not the best once. It’s a way of being, and you commit to that. When I think about the road ahead, the questions I ask are: ‘Can we sustain this? Can we keep that focus? Can we sharpen it?’” It’s this mindset that has helped eBay Austin to earn the [Top Workplaces](#) award three consecutive years.

## Lessons Learned Begin and End with Community

Asked what lessons have been learned from this building of momentum, Jacobson points first to the fact that organizations can indeed bring together employees with passions and the parts of the community that share those passions and want to make the world a better place.

“It’s finding those people with those passions internal to the company, but connecting them in an organized and structured way, and providing a lot of resource budget and support for them to do that externally.”

Second, he said, employees working in committees have to be mentored rather than managed and encouraged to participate in a meaningful way, even if that means making changes when needed.

“This is nobody’s full-time job. It is truly volunteer effort,” he said. “Sometimes people volunteer and they have good intentions, but they’re not able to follow through. Maybe they had job



demands come up they couldn't predict. Maybe it's not the right fit, and they didn't bring the right things to the table."

He said, "Sometimes the committees get off track and we'll have to have some somewhat difficult conversations and say, 'Hey, you're kind of heading in the wrong direction here. How do we help you get back where you need to be?' without it feeling like you're taking away their decisions and their authority."

A third lesson is about community. "Work community has changed a lot," Jacobson said. "Several years back, Austin was a technology site. We were a much smaller site and we were driven by a smaller group of people. We had people who held master's degrees and PhDs in computer science, data, and analytics. Engagement looks a certain way with that kind of team."

He said, "All of a sudden, you have hourly employees, call-center employees, younger employees. It's different, and the things that wind those watches are different. You have to make the committees and the action come to life in a way that stays relevant to everyone."

## Looking Ahead: "We're Not Slowing Down"

Where is the Austin Top Workplace headed with its engagement activities? "We're not slowing down," Jacobson said. "Going forward, we're trying to do two things."

First, not surprisingly, is sustaining the momentum that has been created. He said, "Individuals can move or change, but the mechanisms we've built have to be sustaining so the results are sustaining."

Second, he said, "we want to sharpen the reason, sharpen the why. "We know we want to be a Top Workplace. That was the objective to now. The next question is, 'Why do you want to be a Top Workplace?' What's the reason we're in pursuit of that, and how do we know that we're delivering on that?" Good leadership, Jacobson noted, is, "an odd paradox of aspiration and paranoia." He said, "People who care about what they do, and who want things to be well, balance that mix."

The great fear for me is we're doing something great here, and all of a sudden, we stop feeding it, giving it sunlight, and caring about it. And all of a sudden it starts to go the wrong direction. To me, it's so much easier to put that effort in now while it's going the right direction, and just keep it going forward."

Jacobson said, "That's part of the learning journey. It's not static. You're not done. There's no finish line to this. You're just continuing to learn and take another step."

