



How to get your employees
to really be “at work” post
COVID?

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Context

Here is a statement of what seems blindingly obvious: employees can only be productive if they are “at work”. However, what does “being at work” really mean in these new post COVID times?

With more employers now moving to a remote or hybrid working model, the old command and control approach – simply checking if an employee is sitting at their desk for seven hours – doesn't cut it anymore. The new model is supporting your employees to have the energy to be actively at work (wherever that may be) for as long as they need to deliver.

So the old two-dimensional “at work” phrase can no longer be used as a green light for old style command and control managers to let loose their micro-management tendencies and apply disciplinary procedures to ensure compliance.

Definition

The new definition of having enough employees “at work” is:

‘An organisation with all positions filled, by people who are fully competent, motivated and committed, with enough personal energy to deliver what they are being asked to do.’

Recruited

There is zero productivity from a role which is vacant. Indeed, because other team members are picking up the slack, it also negatively impacts on their performance.

Selecting new members of staff remains a hit-and-miss process. Plausible candidates, overconfident managers, confirmation bias and guesswork all combine to a randomised approach.

At Work Horizons, we advise organisations about process and professionalism, together with our partner, Skeeled, because having people with the correct skills and aptitude, can increase the efficacy of the team. Poor recruitment decisions can be devastating and demoralising.

Attending

Attendance is easily measurable. In manufacturing, attendance is important as you need the employees on the line for a fixed amount of time, to achieve their objectives.

But the situation is different with desk-based jobs. Attendance in desk-based jobs is about achieving an objective in the most effective and efficient manner. We now know that this can often be done in a flexible manner. So it is likely that by monitoring attendance, results can ultimately be delivered.

Presenteeism

Even if the old system were still relevant in the post COVID world, we still have the issues of presenteeism. That is, people are physically but not mentally at work.

Regardless of their physical, mental and emotional state, staff force themselves to go to their place of work. They are there, and that satisfies the short-sighted manager.

Are they contributing? Not much. Productivity is less important than the absence figures. Are they motivated and energetic? Not really. But they are keeping their desk or workstation occupied.

Are they potentially spreading illness? They are; and not just to colleagues, but to customers as well. However, if non-employees become ill, it doesn't affect attendance statistics. If the last year has taught us anything, it is that the transmission of a deadly virus has been hastened by sick people going to work

Are they distracting? They are because they want everyone to know how ill they are and what martyrs they are. Grumbling and moaning in the office permeates everyone's consciousness.

Clearly, this is counter to all the logic of health and safety and duty of care. Presumably, the thinking is even a 20% contribution is 20% which wouldn't have been acquired if the ill people were off sick. This, if considered in the very short-term, is correct. Longer-term it is utterly incomprehensible.

Primed and productive

If we assume our people are recruited, and have the skills to be highly productive, our focus needs to be making sure they have the right conditions to have the energy to deliver their best work.

So where does that all important employee energy come from?

Our partners at Younger Lives have been focusing on the link between energy, wellbeing and productivity, both for the individual and as a corporate composite. Dr Holly Whelan (cofounder of Younger Lives and specialist in evidence-based behaviour change) explains how being able to be truly "at work" is dependent on understanding the four critical factors that drive and drain energy:

1. Physical health
2. Emotional wellbeing
3. Supportive workplace environment (including good line management, work life balance, job control as well as a physical environment)
4. Support home environment

Data-led decision making

The key is having the data to know which areas may be draining or driving your own personal energy, but also as a leader, being able to understand how different teams (on aggregate) are strong or need support and therefore where the right support might be best deployed to help.

Younger Lives' Work Life & Me product, provides a data-led digital framework. It can educate, audit and signpost employees and teams to the right support from expert suppliers. It delivers a confidential personal energy report to individual employees, and aggregated team reports to isolate problems and help leadership decide where best to deploy resources. It also provides an engaging and intuitive measure that can track progress and how effective different interventions are at improving energy and, if the organisation wishes to, link to other key data such as absenteeism, productivity etc.

Matching interventions to individuals

Once you know where and why an issue exists, you then know where to spend time and resources to solve it. Work Horizons and their partners really understand this, and have been working in this space for years:

Physical health and mental health are now known to be equally important for individual wellbeing and productivity, with 50% of all absences relating to poor mental health. In 2019 there were over 800,000 people suffering from work related stress, depression or anxiety.

However, whilst individual responsibility is important, it can only go so far – we also need to recognise our collective responsibility within the work environment. Are we asking people to achieve the unachievable? Is the workplace unhealthy? Is micro-management unbearable? Are we dealing with bullying and harassment? Are we the bullies?

We can address the obvious issues such as health and safety at work in a straightforward manner. We may be able to provide gym memberships, for example. However, we also need to be more proactive in:

- Training leaders
- Providing support of the type our partners at Westfield Health provide
- Having clear policies and procedures

But more than all of these, let's create a truly great culture for the whole organisation.

Culture

Most organisations have a culture made up of numerous sub-cultures. Whilst the senior team may set their overview, the vision and values will have been interpreted and diluted by the team. Embedding the prescribed ways, we operate requires more than a laminated sheet displayed in reception.

People want to work for organisations which have purpose, great products or services, and in which everyone behaves according to the principles described. The most recent evidence says this applies to all groups, but is even more noticeable in younger employees. In the fight for talent this is an area to address.

Leadership

An old adage is, people leave bosses, not companies. There remains a great deal of truth in this. The manager who seeks total control, complete subservience, makes all of the decisions and demands loyalty will lose staff.

Even when the logistics of life mean staff stay employed, the micro-manager will elicit only a small percentage of what the potential staff have to offer.

Moving from management of people to leadership, is a significant leap. At its core is trust, and that is trust in both directions.

The big differentiators for any organisation are leadership and team working. Amongst the tools we use are executive coaching and Patrick Lencioni's Five Behaviors of a Cohesive Team.

Retained

Losing talent is a pain. Too often the business moves on to finding a replacement without understanding the causal factors.

The Finance Director may ask how much it costs to hire someone new, in terms of advertising or agency fees. Little attention is paid to the management time, relationships with clients, distractions from the soon to be gone person, the extra effects on the productivity of the rest of the team, the time it takes a new hire to get up to speed, the loss of knowledge and the knock-on impact.

Whilst the cash figure may be manageable, the real figure can be in excess of £100,000 per leaver.

Summary

Our people need to be recruited, attending motivated, and have the personal energy to be productive. This is really what allows them to be truly “at work”.

The situation will become even more complex as hybrid working develops, and will require digital and data-led solutions, plus a new leadership approach.

Knowing the possible issues, doing the research and addressing the issues are fundamental to success. Naturally, Work Horizons and Younger Lives, are positioned to support organisations, leaders and teams to deliver excellence.

Work Horizons

At Work Horizons we are highly experienced in HR strategy, helping organisations to address profound challenges and make the shift to a more purposeful, productive working culture. If you would like to discuss any of these ideas, we would be delighted to hear from you.

Please visit workhorizons.com or call 0121 663 1710.

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