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A BRAVE NEW WORLD
REDEFINING WORKPLACE CULTURE POST-COVID

We thought we would be in a new normal by now. And yet, with the onset of the pandemic a distant memory, societies and organizations are still grappling with existential questions around how to forge a new way of living and working. Business leaders have pivoted priorities and redesigned parts of their organizations to respond to market changes spawned by Coronavirus. New structures and systems have been developed, but strategic and operational changes will not take root unless they are also supported by cultural changes.

The Covid crisis radically challenged the belief that the physical office must be the primary location for 'work'. On top of this, lockdowns provoked people to fundamentally re-evaluate not just how they work, but why they work. Dubbed the 'great resignation', unprecedented numbers of people worldwide are handing in their notices, with a Microsoft study uncovering that 41% of the global workforce is considering leaving their employer this year. So, if one thing seems certain, it's that the uncertainty of the past 18 months is set to continue.

Whilst businesses may have initially had to make difficult decisions around redundancy and furlough, organizations are now looking at their talent pipeline and retention rates with concern as the impact of the great resignation makes itself felt. As we collectively renegotiate our relationship to work, the opportunity is to take advantage of the disruption that has been forced upon us and create a new workplace culture that will enable future success. If companies fail to grasp this opportunity, they might find themselves without the people they need to execute their post-Covid strategies.

CULTURE CHANGE POST-CRISIS

Hybrid working – the norm not the exception

Historically, work and location have been inextricably linked. Prior to Covid, despite a wealth of literature on the benefits, most companies failed to implement meaningful flexible working practices as it was deemed too difficult to navigate the challenges associated with a hybrid or remote workforce. Post-pandemic, the long-held belief that a traditional office-centric culture is critical to productivity or success has been upended. Companies that have shifted their culture to care most about the work that is done, not where it's done from, are already seeing the benefits of a more flexible approach.

Giving employees the flexibility to determine which environment is most conducive to goal achievement can boost employee satisfaction as well as productivity. Trusting employees to work outside the confines of an office creates a new social contract which places less emphasis on inputs and more accountability on your people to deliver results. This will require a notable shift in organizational culture for some. Looking ahead, leaders should be intentional with setting hybrid working expectations, such as the office being a collaboration hub or place to come together to celebrate achievements and milestones. This will help re-cement relationships and support colleagues to face into new challenges ahead.

Technology as an enabler of greater diversity and inclusion

Covid was the catalyst for many organizations to not only invest in technology to enable remote working, but to realize its potential for transforming how colleagues connect and collaborate. It is now easier than ever to access knowledge and expertise across teams, geographies and specializations. To fully harness the diversity of thought within organizations, leaders must create the conditions for cross-functional working to help remove the mental silos that were reinforced previously by physical office space.

It is becoming apparent that requiring specific locations for jobs is an unnecessary roadblock to greater diversity. As tech-enabled set ups make remote roles a viable possibility, companies and candidates are less constrained by geography or social factors. Those living outside of urban clusters, people with accessibility issues or others who, for a myriad of other reasons, can't or don't want to be physically present, have an opportunity to bring their diverse perspectives to companies whose cultures embrace virtual working.

To foster a truly inclusive workplace, office spaces need to be redesigning for seamless and simultaneous collaboration with colleagues, regardless of whether they are a few feet or several thousand miles away. The spoils of re-imagining the employee experience in a 'digital-first' world include

access to larger, diverse talent pools, a workforce that better reflects the customers it serves, and engaged employees who affect positive societal change as well as positive business performance.
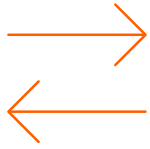
An end to the false dichotomy of employee well-being vs business performance

Taking a day off from work to prioritize your mental health might have seemed like an impossibility just a few of years ago. Parents struggled to squeeze in the school run and a culture of literally 'being seen' in the office to advance was rife. Despite some companies heavily marketing their well-being perks, this could feel performative when day-to-day policies didn't provide the flexibility needed to sustainably juggle responsibilities outside of the workplace.

Perhaps one of the silver linings to emerge from the crisis is that employee well-being and business performance are no longer viewed as opposing forces to be balanced. Covid threw into sharp relief that business performance is directly impacted by your employee's health and happiness. Many companies expanded healthcare packages, subsidised childcare or tutoring costs, and expanded mental health provision to help colleagues cope with the strain of the crisis and to ensure there was sufficient business continuity amongst the upheaval.

There is now also a greater sense of permission and freedom to intersperse the workday with other aspects of 'life'. It's common place to take the dog for a walk at lunch or join team meetings by phone as part of a screen break. This integration has now come to be expected, especially by millennials, and could well define the new normal for your organization. These changes need to be baked into an organization's culture for the value of maintaining one's well-being to be seen as a business enabler.

Maintaining an adaptive mindset

An important lesson through the crisis has been the pace and agility demonstrated in the face of disruption. When faced with a sink or swim outlook, the ability to pivot was crucial for survival and required challenging many of the existing cultural norms and ways of working. The learning that leaders need to take forward is the ability to hold on to this challenger mindset and encourage it, even in the absence of a crisis to provoke accelerated change. It is about continuously challenging the assumptions that may be slowing you down e.g. statements like "we have always done it this way". Encouraging the voices of difference, the devil's

advocate in the team, which came so naturally during the worst of the crisis, is another learning from this period to value.

Leadership teams must also ensure a level of humility so they can continue to respond in an agile manner rather than rigidly shoot for perfection. In the same way that new software is tested for bugs, leaders need to be vigilant in their efforts to understand if policies are working or not, and then course correct as needed. Leaders can set the cultural tone to learn through these new challenges where there are no obvious answers.

YOUR ROLE AS A LEADER

The crisis brought home to us that changes in culture and ways of working support changes in business and strategy. However, it is far easier to default to old habits and ways of working than create space for differences, especially those that may be complex to navigate. We know that what employees and stakeholders value and aspire to has changed considerably. It's a workers' workplace and the post-pandemic future of work is rooted in flexibility, transparency and accountability. Leadership must keep employees engaged by supporting them to be at their best and making them feel valued. The opportunity is to create a culture that integrates the focus on performance with compassion for your people. Strategy and culture go together - the "how" of change is as critical as the business imperatives, and your role as a leader calls for setting and owning both.

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