REINVENTING HUMAN RESOURCES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

The pandemic changed the way we work faster than anyone was expecting. For most, the move to remote work went surprisingly well. By all indications, it's here to stay. Now businesses must revamp their productivity and employee engagement strategies to match this new way of working. On the bright side, doing so will prepare companies for the century ahead.

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Employee engagement and productivity have always had a complicated relationship. Engagement increases productivity—but too much engagement tips the scale to burnout. In this new era of work, HR teams are scrambling to create new engagement and productivity strategies for remote workers. The most successful strategies will complement increased reliance on technology with a humanistic approach to management—buoying employees in this difficult time and benefiting organizations in the long run.

How we got here

Seven months in, the novelty of being able to work from home is starting to wear off. Although employees have the kind of flexibility they wanted, they are also juggling health and well-being concerns, childcare and schooling issues, economic uncertainty, and blurred work-life boundaries.

Likewise, employers are over the initial hurdle of moving to remote work at scale and are now thinking about maintenance and long-term strategy. Among top HR issues are how to keep up productivity and employee engagement remotely.

Productivity

Remote working has been a boon for productivity, especially for knowledge workers. However, continuing this high level of productivity is challenging for employers and employees alike.

The first challenge is how to *maintain* productivity. At home, workers may be more productive because they have more autonomy, control, and flexibility over what they do. Managers must adjust their approach to facilitate this productive work style. For instance, in the office, a high-touch, collaborative style might have served managers well, but that approach can feel smothering to workers at home.[1]

However, productivity may wane as pandemic burn-out sets in and as people feel more isolated. Many people are working odd hours, sometimes around their children's schooling. Many are also dealing with interruptions at home that prevent focusing on work and further blur work-life boundaries. In addition, remote work increases isolation, which creates challenges to collaboration and feeling a shared sense of purpose. Not feeling part of a team also negatively impacts productivity, especially in terms of new ideas and innovations. Managers must adjust their approach to address these issues—and they must design their engagement strategies around these new facts of work life.

Second, perennial concerns with measuring productivity have been exacerbated under new remote working regimes. Thus, many employers have accelerated the move to surveillance software to track, for

instance, keystrokes and time spent on apps. Employees, in turn, feel micromanaged and not trusted.

Employee engagement

Although productivity may be top of mind in the short term, attending to employee engagement is the long game here. Employee engagement, or the motivation to do one's job well and commitment to the organization, increases loyalty, retention, and productivity. Numerous studies have shown it also has a positive effect on the bottom line.

> Keeping employees engaged while working remotely should be the long-term focus of organizations

Employers have long feared that remote workers are less engaged. Their fears seemed to be well-founded—a study published in Harvard Business Review before the pandemic found that more than two thirds of remote workers aren't engaged in their work.[2]

However, the pandemic has shown that this conventional wisdom around remote employee engagement might be wrong—remote workers are engaged. The evidence of engagement comes from the increased productivity levels, as engagement supports productivity.

Of course, the pandemic created a unique remote work circumstance. Suddenly, the entire workforce became remote, it wasn't a few employees here and there. All workers are on equal playing field for collaboration and communication. Before hybrid remote environments, employees didn't have the same seamless experiences across home and office. Now they do—at home. Additionally, employees who moved to remote work already had formed connections and relationships in the office. The residual effects of these relationships might have buoyed

engagement for at least the first few months of the pandemic.

The challenge now is how to maintain this cohesion and these relationships—especially as companies plan returning to the office and as new workers are brought on board. The kinds of connections that foster engagement are now all virtual— gone are impromptu brainstorming meetings, water cooler talk, and the easy friendships that often come in an office environment. Gone also are the face-to-face meetings with managers and mentoring, which helps keep employees feeling valued.

Processes, productivity, and people

These productivity and engagement issues illustrate the strains between science-based approaches to management and humanistic approaches,[3] which have been amplified by the pandemic. Scientific approaches are concerned with processes and productivity, such as assigning points on performance reviews. The humanistic side is concerned not only with "tempering"[4] the negative effects of quantifying productivity but also with taking care of employees so they are supported, connected, and engaged. The pandemic thus creates opportunities to find ways to either bring these approaches into harmony, draw more heavily on one or the other, or create alternative approaches.

Recommendations

Today's work world requires a more humanistic approach to management. Working remotely is depersonalizing and isolating, both of which are counteracted by a human touch. The care, concern, and connectedness shown during pandemic can become a way of work life. Below are recommendations for managing

remote workers so they are productive and engaged. Even if you have done the basic steps of moving your engagement activities online, consider how else you can connect with and support your team.

1. Communicate trust by saying and doing. In many ways, productivity and engagement issues boil down to trust. Trust is important—it breeds productivity, loyalty, and engagement. Employers must trust workers to be productive when they are off site, and they must balance ensuring productivity without micro-managing. They must communicate that trust verbally and by, for instance, looking at output instead of quantifying every step in a process. Give employees more freedom and autonomy to manage their own work. Remote workers, for the most part, are more self-managed, and hence will look for more flexibility in future roles. Create a flexible workplace to convey trust in how, where, and when people work.

2. Lean harder on technology. Technology is what enabled remote work, at scale, so quickly—explore and experiment to see how it can improve productivity and engagement. For instance, invest in automation and AI to free people from repetitive tasks so they can work more quickly and be more innovative and creative. Use the new features Zoom and Teams, for instance, continually roll out that support engagement and help people manage their own work—such as Teams's virtual commute.[5] On the HR side, the technology interface that accompanies remote work opens up new opportunities to provide, and understand, granular employee experiences. HR can lead in looking at human–technology interactions, designing tailored self-service experiences, nudges, and innovating HR services for remote workers. In addition, HR analytics can move to center stage to gather real-time data on work for sharper decision making.

3. Lean harder on soft skills.
Personalize and humanize the remote working experience by checking in with people on your team to see how they're doing. Ask employees how they are feeling, not just what they accomplished. Understand the unique challenges at home that may affect productivity and engagement—for instance, are they managing remote schooling of their children? Schedule virtual luncheons with individual team members or groups. Start impromptu chats to get a quick, informal pulse. Use silly giphys and emojis to communicate the affective element of conversations that can get lost in virtual environments.[6]

4. Get creative with covering surges and unplanned work. Rather than asking your permanent employees, who may already be working long hours, to take on additional responsibilities, consider using non-permanent workers. Companies in the white collar world are increasingly using gig workers to increase capacity and output. Apply lessons from increasing productivity and engagement in your remote workers to your gig workers. For instance, actively find ways to increase trust and loyalty. But gig isn't the only way: Take the opportunity to develop your permanent employees,[7] especially as a way to retain them if their job function is difficult remotely. Cross-skill workers to adjust for ebbs and flows in work—share talent across units. In fact, aggressively reskill and retain a focus on learning at all levels to transform your workforce. This not only helps to prepare for changes in workflow, it will help keep your talent ready to make the most of new digital-based technology.

We are at a defining moment of work in the 21st Century. The pandemic forced companies to take advantage of available technology and move to remote work en masse. Companies are experimenting with new working styles and management built around this technology. HR leaders are at the helm here and should proceed carefully and consider the impact it has on the human side of work. At its best, the same digital-based technology that enabled remote work will be used in tandem with management strategies that will improve employee engagement.

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