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Why business leaders must think inclusively in considering a hybrid working model

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Flexible working used to be an issue that caused business leaders and managers a considerable amount of angst. And while the pandemic has necessitated the need for both employee and employer to be more flexible in their thoughts and processes, the issue is far from resolved.

Some leaders are undoubtedly still resistant to change; some also want to go back to the way it was. A recent report from Deloitte[1], for example, shows that only a third (33%) of women say that their organizations have flexible working policies, and more than nine out of ten (94%) feared that making a formal request for flexible working would seriously impact their future chances of promotion.

And yet over the past two years, many employees have become used to a hybrid model, and how it supports a better work/life balance. They have similarly become accustomed to the significant savings in cost and working hours from not having to commute. It is understandable, therefore, that they are reluctant to give up their newly won freedoms which leaves their leaders in something of a quandary.

But rather than a threat to the workplace of the future, why should leaders of businesses and organizations see flexible and hybrid working as an opportunity?

Three categories of hybrid workers

Firstly, they need to recognize that those in favour of hybrid working tend to fall into one of three categories: primary care givers – those responsible for children or elderly relatives for example; heavy commuters – those with a long, expensive and often stressful daily journey into work; and the more sensitive – those who may struggle with either mental or physical health, and who benefit from quiet and their own 'space'.

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[1]Women @ Work 2022 – a Global Outlook

What all three category types have in common is that they all comprise a resource with enormous talent and potential. Put another way, they all constitute a risk that their talents will be lost if their employees fail to be more flexible in their working practices and/or return to the 'five-days in the office every week' model pre-pandemic.

At a time when talent is a scant resource, looking after these people is a new imperative, and that will require some leaders to adapt their approach in the future. Future leaders will have to be more caring and inclusive in their actions. They will need to be clear in shaping and communicating their expectations of others. And they will need to adapt their own style of leadership, to lead by example, to inspire the people around them, as a leader they can trust.

Of course, many of the best leaders already demonstrate these traits, but certainly not all. A general lack of trust in society does not help and contributes to an increasing lack of trust in the workplace. Creating an environment of trust and inclusivity, therefore, where individuals feel genuinely free to make suggestions and propose ideas and solutions for better ways of working will be essential, but none of those ideas will be forthcoming without that basic level of trust being in place.

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The vital importance of inclusivity

This concept of inclusivity is particularly important; hybrid working means individuals being 'absent' from the workplace, at least physically, and there is a natural tendency for leaders to 'forget' employees who are 'out of sight; out of mind'.

The report from Deloitte suggests that almost 60% of women who work in hybrid environments feel they have been excluded from important meetings, and almost half say they do not have exposure to their leaders, a critical enabler of sponsorship and career progression. Only a quarter of those women surveyed for the report say their employer has set clear expectations of how and where they should work, which is particularly stressful for those who need some certainty in order to plan childcare, for example.

It needn't be so. Inclusive, supportive organizations are proven to gain a competitive advantage. Leaders, in particular, have a crucial role in this. Being inclusive in a hybrid workplace context requires leaders not only to be able to read signals and observe behaviours but also to act upon them; it requires them to enhance their listening skills and improve how they communicate, and ultimately it requires them to become a source of clarity in setting goals and expectations as well as a source of inspiration for the employees.

Leaders who foster genuinely inclusive cultures, and who support the health and wellbeing of their employees, deliver much greater employee satisfaction, and employees tend to stay with those organizations for longer. They also tend to report a much more positive experience of hybrid working.

Shaping the future workspace

Hybrid working at its best can be a tool to unleash the true potential of an organization. It means not only adapting the days and hours that we work, but also the workplace itself.

Many leaders are currently debating whether the space they had prior to the pandemic is still needed now, when actually the conversation should be about how to make the space that you do have more conducive to work. It will likely mean that the physical space in the future may be near enough the same size, but likely to be fitted out and utilized in a very different way by the people who work there.

Leaders who see the concept of hybrid working only in the context of 'efficiency' are fundamentally missing the point. The debate should never be focused mainly on the efficiency of the workforce, but rather consider its 'effectiveness'. Systems and technologies can help improve efficiency over time, whereas it will still be people – regardless of where they work – who will secure the effectiveness of the decisions and of the implementation plans.

The winners in the future will be those organizations who embrace this idea first, who ensure the proper policies and processes are in place that encourage new ways of working, and in doing so attract and retain the talent we all so desperately need to succeed in the future.

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