

Post-lockdown? Don't expect a flexible work revolution

Most companies suck at flexible working. Yeah, they talk the talk. “Come join us! We’re modern! Open-minded! Work the way that suits you!” They have all the tech in place (though that’s not much of an accolade: my kid’s dance teacher sorted out live classes via Zoom in just a few hours). But do they really want people to work flexibly?

Nope. If you really want to do flexible working and do it well, you need to change your culture. And that is a lot harder than signing up for Zoom and tweaking the copy in your job descriptions.

Outcomes not outputs

The most fundamental shift that most companies struggle with, is how to measure the work that is done. That can be pretty tricky in the office environment. You can’t just count how many widgets someone has made and check they’re all of a decent quality. For a start, we’re often doing complex and varied work. Each task might require a different amount of time and its deliverables might not be that tangible. They might not deliver value for six or twelve months. Measuring this stuff is HARD. So, we mostly haven’t bothered.

Instead, we look at whether someone is at their desk. Do they look busy? Are they churning out lots of emails? Never mind whether they're adding actual value to the business, just look at the output!

This doesn't work when everyone is working remotely or at different hours (asynchronously, if you like big words). It is also completely destructive of the value to the employee of remote work. You can't relax, take breaks, focus on your kids, or work at the hours when you're most productive if instead, you're concerned about being *seen* to be productive.

Making flexible work a success requires investment in the way we task work and measure it. We need to package work differently, not just trust that someone is valuable because they're putting the hours in.

The trust deficit

Once you've done that, you need to start trusting workers to deliver. Great flexible workers need two things: responsibility, and autonomy.

Responsibility means that workers own tasks that are clearly defined and that they are expected to deliver against. They need to have the tools to deliver against those tasks: training, information, support. And they need to have a role in defining the expectations.

Autonomy means that they have your trust to make decisions to deliver against their task. It means that if they achieve the ends set, inside the bounds you have defined, then everything else is up to them. They get the work, but they also get the glory. If they stray outside the bounds or don't consult when they should, that's a different matter. But inside the rules, anything goes.

That means that if their working day consists of a six-hour Netflix binge and just a couple of hours productive work starting at 10 pm, it's none of your business. As long as you're fulfilling your duty of care around their health, if they meet your expectations then they are golden.

Top to bottom

Making this work in an organisation requires change at all levels. Lots of CEOs express the desire for their business to work like this. Lots of workers say they want to work this way. Neither usually commits to making it happen for real. It's only the middle managers who are really honest. They want their people where they can see them, whether it's at their desk's or on a video call because they aren't at all confident that they can manage them otherwise. They came up in a world where sheer effort was rewarded and that is what

they know.

If your company really wants to make flexible working, work (and you should), then you need a culture-shift from top to bottom. The CEO must let go of some control and accept that some of their power needs to be pushed to the edge of the organisation. You need to teach managers how to lead a flexible team and measure work differently. You need to invest in their workers, with skills development, and capturing operational best practice in a format that can be shared and used. You need to accept that you will get more from your workers if they have the autonomy and responsibility to perform than you will with someone looking over their shoulder.

But this stuff takes time. It's vital but hard. Which is why we shouldn't expect a remote working revolution when the lockdown is over. Because without these steps, lots of companies will snap back to their old ways of working when the time comes.

Tom Cheesewright is the Applied Futurist, helping people and organisations around the world to see the future more clearly, share their vision, and respond with innovation. Tom's clients include global 500 corporations, government departments, industry bodies and charities. Using a unique set of tools that he developed, and now teaches and licenses to others, Tom finds the critical intersections between today's macro trends and the existing stresses in each client's organisation and sector.

Tom's first book, High-Frequency Change, was published in 2019 and was shortlisted for the Business Book Awards 2020. His new book, Future-proof Your Business, is out now on Kindle as part of the Penguin Business Experts series.

Article by TOM CHEESEWRIGHT