

How startups can avoid the trap of digital presenteeism

The pandemic induced shift to remote and hybrid working gave us the chance to completely change the way we work. We had a golden opportunity to create a new paradigm, with more freedom, flexibility and autonomy. Yet just two years later, far too many companies appear to be falling into the same old trap, with 'digital presenteeism' becoming an increasing problem.

Anyone who has ever worked in an office will most likely have experienced the traditional culture of presenteeism. It comes with a strong pressure to be physically visible at work, often for long hours, looking at least somewhat busy, even if you're not actually being productive at all. In fact, typically has the opposite effect, with research from Vitality estimating that as many as 38 productive days per employee are lost each year to presenteeism.

While most business leaders recognise these harmful effects, according to the CIPD, only a third of those who have observed presenteeism among their employees have taken steps to discourage it. And now, this 'bums-on-seats' culture has simply been replicated online.

That's not to say this is an entirely new phenomenon. Ever since the

widespread adoption of email you would see staff sending emails at all hours of the day, in order to signal that they were busy 'working'.

But the rapid growth of productivity software, which has been supercharged by the pandemic, has made it much worse. From messaging apps to document editors, it is all brilliantly designed to facilitate friction free collaboration, which has the unfortunate side effect of making it even easier to send that early morning reply, or a late night thumbs up emoji. Even the very simple act of setting your status to 'Active' or 'Available' means you can see when people log-on and off, before a message has even been sent.

This is borne out by the data, too. In 2021, *Microsoft surveyed more than 30,000 of its users* across 31 countries. It found that people were sending 42% more messages after hours compared to the year before, and three times the number of messages on weekends.

While some of this activity may be worthwhile and necessary, I suspect a fair chunk of it is just to show people that you are ostensibly still busy doing 'stuff'. Work today is arguably more performative than ever.

So, what's to blame?

Fundamentally, this is an issue of trust. In most modern workplaces, we're now working across a sea of apps, with research from Asana estimating that the average knowledge worker in the UK switches between 10 apps each day. This has made the workplace fragmented and full of information silos, which makes it hard to know what's going on across an organisation. In response, we feel pressure to go the extra mile to make our impact visible, out of fear our colleagues might not think we're working hard enough.

Again, this isn't a new problem. We've always wanted to prove our impact at work, which is why presenteeism isn't a particularly new phenomenon. But now we're in the fog of the virtual office with uncertainty about what people are actually up to, so the pressure to prove ourselves is more acute.

The data also reflects that new reality. Qatalog carried out some research among 2,000 knowledge workers from the UK and US which revealed that 63% of workers find it harder to build trust with each other when working remotely, while a further 66% said a lack of visibility had led them to question the actions of colleagues and leaders. Successful companies are built on a sense of collective endeavour, and when people can't actually see what their colleagues are doing, doubt starts to creep in.

Why it matters

If companies don't move quickly to tackle these problems, the consequences can be seriously damaging. Startups can be intense at the best of times, and people need time to recharge. An 'always-on' culture makes this almost impossible, leading to unhappy and unproductive employees, or even burn out.

This kind of experience has already forced millions to reassess what they want from work, resulting in the so-called 'great resignation'. Tech workers in particular are demanding more flexibility than ever before, with a growing list of companies, such as Panasonic, Atom Bank and Bolt, responding by offering 4-day working weeks.

Ultimately it's the people that make any startup successful and, with the war for talent as fierce as ever, those looking to attract and retain the best talent simply can't afford to get it wrong. In this new world, the ability to work asynchronously at a time that suits each individual is fast becoming the new battleground among the world's biggest tech companies.

This isn't altogether surprising when you consider the two options. Would you choose a presenteeism culture, with an expectation to be present at all times across different tools and platforms. Or would you prefer an asynchronous culture, where people are empowered to work on their own terms, at a time that suits them?

Is there a solution?

To fix this, we need a mindset shift that breaks from pre-pandemic norms and embraces a radically new working culture rooted in trust. As outlined in Qatalog's *Workgeist* report, this requires companies to move away from constant supervision and clock watching, and instead prioritise accomplishment, ability and capability. The aim should be to make more organisations goals and output oriented, which is what creates real economic value, rather than worrying about how long people are working for, which often incentivises presenteeism behaviour and associated side-effects.

But a mindset shift alone might not be enough to make this happen. Companies also need systems in place that provide transparency into the actual work happening, rather than the noise we often get distracted by. Shared visibility of your team's goals and objectives is also key. This gives you and your colleagues assurance that people are achieving their goals, and don't feel compelled to be constantly present.

All of this helps to build trust, which enables the true flexibility and freedom

that most of us crave.

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