

How can creativity fix a broken workforce in the new era of hybrid working?

We're at a crossroads right now when it comes to working. Stressed-out employees are looking for new ways of working, creating a void that most companies are unsure how to fill.

This movement, dubbed The Great Resignation by psychologist Anthony Klotz, means that up to 40% of global workers are considering quitting their jobs amid a wave of epiphanies over family time, remote working and better work-life balance.

"It's about taking control of your work and personal life, and making a big decision - resigning - to accomplish that," Klotz tells CNBC Make It, explaining the trend. "This is a moment of empowerment for workers, one that will continue well into the new year."

How companies walk the line between remote and in-office working is a central part of this bigger picture. The pandemic has seen 87% of UK businesses adopt hybrid working habits, and employees now value "work from anywhere" flexibility as much as a 10% pay raise.

Yet, pleasing staff in this respect is not as simple as it seems. Next to an entrenched culture of office working, the hybrid model has not had a chance to evolve - and problems are only just starting to surface.

The gender divide

Chief among these is the risk of a divide emerging between in-office and remote teams. As Bank of England policymaker Catherine Mann warned in November, this could result in a “two track” approach in workplaces – a virtual track and a physical track – that puts certain groups, including women, at a disadvantage.

It's no secret that the pandemic has reinforced existing gender inequalities, with mums bearing the cost of the shift to remote working. As many women juggled the double-whammy demands of remote working and childcare during the course of the crisis, a massive 76% of mums reported negative mental health.

Mann's point is that this scenario could continue, and worsen, in a post-Covid world. If, as primary caregivers, women are more likely to work from home, they may also inadvertently face the fallout of that shift through a lack of visibility, and careers that fail to progress.

The answer to this impending dilemma is not to scrap remote working: clearly, it's an option that many workers both want and expect. Bosses instead need to double down on their engagement strategies, deliberately building a “one track” approach whereby remote and in-office teams come together in a cohesive and inclusive team culture.

An ‘us versus them’ mentality

Creating a stronger sense of belonging is also key to addressing misconceptions that exist between in-office and remote working groups.

Nearly 70% of managers believe that remote workers are “more easily replaceable than onsite workers”, according to a recent study from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). This is despite the fact that remote workers routinely work more hours now than before the pandemic.

Meanwhile, the work-from-home brigade are beset by issues such as loneliness and fear of being left out. The same SHRM data showed that 53% of remote workers worry about missing in-person team meetings and other office activities, while a third are concerned about being overlooked for promotions and pay rises.

On the flip side, in-office workers may feel resentful that they have to bear the brunt of endless meetings, or FaceTime with the boss, as their remote colleagues avoid the same level of scrutiny.

Combating presenteeism

Rising stress levels will do little to evade these problems, either. Research suggests that home workers have increased their working week by almost 25% as a result of the pandemic, and routinely log off at 8pm.

Previous insight by not-for-profit institute RAND Europe indicates that *this kind of presenteeism* is driven by stress, lack of sleep and poor financial wellbeing – all issues that will have been aggravated by the pandemic.

Faced with this very mixed picture, employers face a dual-sided challenge. Firstly, they must unify the workplace, reinforcing relationships and a core sense of culture. And secondly, they should achieve this by encouraging teams to get creative and collectively shake off stress.

Perhaps, most of all, this comes down to cultivating a sense of playfulness. Play is defined by psychiatrist Stuart Brown, founder of the US National Institute for Play, as activities that are “purposeless, fun and pleasurable”.

Play can spark endorphins, stimulate creativity and facilitate deep connections, with a focus on the present moment and experience that coaxes us out of a constant state of “doing”.

Creative power play

The problem is, as adults, we tend to dismiss all but competitive forms of play. We’ve forgotten what it is simply to down tools and have fun for the sake of it. Of course, with a global pandemic in the picture, it’s hardly surprising that we don’t leap into play mode. Yet creative play may also be the key to unity in the post-Covid workplace.

A recent McKinsey report found that employees now value relationships and a sense of belonging above all else. I believe that to create this kind of inclusive culture, and give employees what they’re looking for amid a wave of resignations, we need a new calibre of team-building experiences.

At Kaido, we work with companies including Google, the NHS and the Department of Health & Social Care to reinvent play through creative team activities. Companies can tailor our digital wellbeing programmes, which are designed to bring remote and in-office staff together through fun, daily interactions.

Remote book clubs, chocolate-making workshops, online yoga: lockdown brought with it a wealth of virtual engagement strategies. Our concept extends

this approach in a hybrid era, with shared team challenges, content tips on everything from nutrition to sleep, and a points system with prizes in the mix.

The idea is to get everyone, no matter where they're based, together in a fun, accessible setting, curating a culture that energises and connects. Over 75% of teams who used Kaido *felt more motivated* as a result, and 88% noticed an improvement in their health.

The takeaway from this is clear. In a post-Covid setting, work means far more than just performance and job titles. A new generation of discerning employees are seeking fresh levels of flexibility and connection. By zeroing in on creative engagement experiences, companies can harness both ideals, delivering a culture that is grounded in meaning.

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