How to support employee productivity and inclusion in a fast-changing workplace

*Many of the changes to the workplace over the last few years were unexpected, requiring strong leadership skills to navigate unknown territory. Based on previous interviews they have done with 100 employees across financial and professional services, **Yolanda Blavo** and **Jasmine Virhia** list five actions leaders can take to improve productivity and the inclusion of all employees.*

Yolanda Blavo and Jasmine Virhia will be speaking at the LSE Festival event How the Workplace is Changing: productivity, inclusion, and beyond, Monday 12 June 2023 12.00pm to 1.00pm.

Recently, leaders have had to adapt to a myriad of changes in the workplace, ranging from the transition towards more hybrid and remote working as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic to the transformative advancements of AI in the workplace. Many of the changes to the workplace over the last few years were unexpected, requiring strong leadership skills to navigate unknown territory.

Inclusive leadership is one of the critical skills leaders will need to continue thriving in an ever-evolving workplace. Inclusive leadership can be operationalised as providing employees with equal opportunities, visibility and voice. Promoting inclusivity fosters a welcoming work environment and supports business outcomes. Cultivating an inclusive culture can improve employee engagement, performance and creative problem-solving.

To understand how to maintain productivity in the workplace while simultaneously supporting inclusivity, we (alongside Dr. Grace Lordan and in partnership with Women in Banking and Finance) conducted a qualitative study consisting of interviews with 100 employees across financial and professional services. Between the spring and summer of 2022, these professionals shared their diverse experiences regarding the changes to the workplace owing to the pandemic and proposed suggestions for leaders.

Based on our analysis and their recommendations, we have provided five actions leaders can take to improve productivity and support the inclusion of all employees.

Experiment with more autonomous working

Granting employees with more autonomy regarding how they organise their work schedule and where they work can improve work engagement and can support the inclusion of all employees, especially those with caring and parenting responsibilities and those with disabilities. Based on our research, we found that allowing employees the freedom to structure their days allowed them to be very intentional about how they approach their tasks. For example, many of the employees preferred to complete work that requires

more attention and take calls from home. In contrast, they found going into the office beneficial for collaborative purposes. Although 95% of employees expressed a preference for the hybrid structure, there was unanimous agreement among all participants that there was no ideal singular approach to organising work and time.

Since our research was conducted, [some organisations](#) have required employees to be in the office for more days than they are permitted to work remotely. Finding the right balance between working in the office and remotely can be difficult for employers. We posit that leaders should experiment at the team, function, and firm levels to find the balance that supports productivity. For example, leaders could experiment with having their team members work remotely three days a week and have them come into the office two days a week. They could evaluate productivity levels for a period of six months, and if productivity has decreased, they can try out a different combination of the number of days in the office and remotely.

Identify and cut out time sinkers

The shift towards hybrid and remote working has altered the way in which leaders monitor productivity in the workplace. Some leaders have been hesitant to trust employees to be productive when they cannot physically see employees working. However, self-reported productivity remained the same or increased for our participants working remotely. A major hindrance to productivity the participants raised was a lack of trust and increased micromanagement. This finding implies that leaders should trust employees to do their work and minimise excessive communication, such as constant emails or meetings.

Attending meetings that could have been an email takes away time that employees need to do their actual work. Leaders could consider cutting out unnecessary meetings and

sending fewer messages to employees throughout the day. Recently, [Shopify](#) has devised a policy to reduce unnecessary meetings canceling over 76,500 hours of meetings involving more than two people. This policy was implemented to give employees time to work on other tasks, enabling them to use their time more efficiently.

If leaders want to know how employees are progressing with their work, they could ask employees to audit where their time is spent throughout the week instead of inundating employees with messages. This can allow leaders to work with employees to figure out how to better manage their time by identifying tasks that should require more or less attention. It can also be an opportunity for employees to express if they need further assistance or guidance with their work.

Move away from presenteeism

As of 2023, [presenteeism](#), which refers to individuals working well beyond their designated hours, has surpassed pre-pandemic levels and is rising. Narratives of presenteeism can lead to people being rewarded for [hours worked](#) as opposed to the quality of work they produce. This can put certain groups of employees, such as [working mothers](#), at a disadvantage since they may not be able to work long hours.

[Numerous studies](#) have shown an increase in hours worked does not translate to increased productivity. In fact, estimates have shown that presenteeism cuts individual productivity by [one-third or more](#), causes people to [become less engaged with their work](#) and [reduces their overall job satisfaction](#). Therefore, leaders must relocate their focus from hours worked to measuring employees' outputs, particularly when autonomous working increases gains for businesses and employees.

Set clear expectations of productivity

Leaders should ensure they are not overloading employees, as burnout and overwork result in decreased productivity. Realistic time frames for work to be completed should be set, and leaders need to be available to provide additional guidance if needed. Assessing how engaged employees are with their work will provide an indication of how motivated and productive they are. Unsurprisingly, people tend to thrive in areas they find enjoyable. Therefore, it's beneficial to incorporate job crafting, enabling employees to customise their roles and align them more closely with their interests.

When assigning a task, leaders should consider whether the task is developing the skills or knowledge of the employee. By providing opportunities for upskilling, leaders will contribute to the longevity of employees' productivity that ultimately leads to increased organisational success. It is important to keep in mind that productivity may look different based on function; therefore, it should be defined at the team level. Further, leaders should work with their teams to come up with their own unique definition of productivity and set clear expectations, particularly regarding output.

Automate tasks when possible

In our full report, we urged leaders to anticipate future changes to the workplace due to technological advancements and to consider how they can support inclusion. There have been notable advancements in the workplace since our study in 2022, thanks to the integration of technological tools like ChatGPT. These innovative tools enable individuals to automate monotonous tasks, including sending emails and scheduling meetings. By automating more repetitive tasks such as these, leaders can free up valuable time to focus on supporting employees' needs.

Key takeaway

For leaders to be successful in a constantly changing workplace, they need to be clear about their expectations, focus on outputs, and learn how to make the most of their time to provide their employees with sufficient guidance.

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