

Effective employee engagement and flexibility key to maintaining workplace relationships

As the country continues to battle with Covid-19, we still have some way to go in the current lockdown and restrictions. While there has been some good news in terms of vaccines and decreasing levels of infections in recent days, the number of patients in hospitals is still worryingly high. The optimistic view, currently, is that we will begin to see some easing of restrictions in the near future. While current signals are that schools will start a phased re-opening from mid-month, there is much more caution around lifting other restrictions, such as opening non-essential retail, even beyond the suggested end date for the current lockdown measures, 5th March.

What does that mean for employers and employees and how can employers continue to motivate their workforce, who are most likely working from home for the best part of a year?

During the early phases of the Covid-19 lockdown there was a general sense of camaraderie, which translated through to colleagues and how they engaged with remote working and supporting each other. There was a certain novelty about working from home and coffee over Zoom proved to be an excellent way for people to stay in touch. Organisations within the Community and Voluntary Sector moved quickly to provide the resources needed by employees to work from home, which instilled a feeling of confidence. However, by the end of the year, fatigue was becoming more evident with a blurring of work and home life. But as an employer how can you ensure you support your teams appropriately and keep them engaged and motivated?

Keeping Employees Engaged

Employee engagement is the mental and emotional connection employees feel towards their places of work, all of which drive their motivation, productivity and ultimately efficiencies. Given the amount of people working outside their normal place of work, it was no surprise that 68% of organisations surveyed, as part of the Adare 2020 HR Barometer, see employee engagement as a top priority for this year.

An engaged workforce has a number of benefits, better retention, improved productivity and boosted staff morale. These impact positively on the organisation when employees are clear on the overall organisational purpose, expectations of their roles and the impact of their function to the overarching strategic objectives, are supported as a whole and communicated with regularly, all of which bind the employee with the values and culture of the organisation and promote employee engagement.

Effective communication

Effective communication is important in terms of providing support and reassurance to employees at time of uncertainty. Employees working remotely will already be under stresses that they wouldn't normally be used to such as lack of social interaction, structured working environment,

financial worries and childcare issues and poor, or non-existent, communication will also contribute to stress, sometimes leading to conflicts and disputes.

We all know and understand at this point that communicating in a virtual work environment is different than in a workplace; we rely on email and direct messaging much more and miss out on the social cues associated with face-to-face interactions so maintaining normal workplace etiquette is still important to avoid misunderstandings.

Managing expectations

Setting out regular agreed workloads and priorities is important to ensure expectations are realistic for both employees and managers. There needs to be acknowledgement that remote working is not necessarily suitable for everyone so to avoid frustration, focus on outputs or outcomes rather than the time taken to do specific tasks. For many employees, they are still juggling other responsibilities, so flexibility is key to get the most from employees as well as maintaining work boundaries so that everyone has a clear differentiation in their working day between work hours and break and rest times.

Right to disconnect

Employers and managers must respect an employee's right to disconnect from work; to be able to "switch off" and not be expected to respond to emails or calls outside of agreed working hours. While the health crisis accelerated the discussions on remote working, the 'Right to Disconnect' has been something the Government has been looking at for some time as part of its *Remote Working Strategy*.

The right to disconnect is already in place in a number of other European countries and comes from a 2003 EU Directive that covers different aspects of working time. A new Code of Practice is being drafted and will provide guidance for employers and employees regarding best practice on disconnecting or disengaging from work emails, calls or other forms of communication outside agreed working hours.

Flexibility around childcare

An added complexity with the current restrictions is lack of childcare for employees and how it is impacting on the working day. Our experience is that the majority of employers are reasonable and will try and find solutions working with their employees providing additional flexibility, whilst seeking to ensure the needs of the organisation are being met. The empathy and understanding demonstrated by employers during earlier lockdowns provide a good blueprint for how to effectively manage challenges such as childcare while schools and creches are closed.

It could be seen as short-sighted of employers not to try and accommodate employees while schools are closed; it is a short-term measure after all. There are some options that employers can explore such as flexible start and finish times, flexible working week including working over weekends to free up weekdays are all relatively straightforward ways of accommodating employees as much as possible. Parental leave, annual leave or unpaid leave are also options,

although given we are at the start of the calendar year, these may not be as suitable for many organisations or employees.

However, it must be noted that there is no obligation on employers, financial or otherwise, to provide childcare solutions for employees. And, while in lockdown, there are no changes to the employer employee relationship. Employees must continue to commit to doing the work as per the terms and conditions of their employment and if unable to do, for childcare as an example, employers are encouraged to understand the reasons preventing them to do so.

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