

# Inclusivity, Purpose And Managing Remote Teams

**At the heart of all good work is purpose, connection and collaboration. These three core concepts are crucial in business. And yet, as we come out of the pandemic, businesses are struggling to adapt to change as they fail to recognise these assets in their employees. If leaders are to tackle the ongoing crises of low retention and employee dissatisfaction, they must get back to the core principles of what makes work worth doing.**

## The Meaning Of Work

In a survey of 1,000 managers, our research identified that leaders will consistently rate purpose, connection and collaboration as those most lacking at their place of work. At the same time, employee turnover is reaching new highs as demand for workers grows and adaptive businesses are able to offer workers the autonomy and responsibility they need.

Above all, companies are failing because the performance indicators they do focus on are entirely distinct from the incentives needed to keep a workforce happy, productive and good at what they do.

The trench between perceived success and actual success at work is becoming wider. Company leaders told us that 85% of true performance indicators have no bearing on perceived company performance. This is to say, what strategists think is important feels worlds away from the reality of the shop floor.

This is by all measures a tragedy. At the heart of work in the day-to-day sense is the employee experience. By 2030, low staff retention rates are forecast to cost the US economy \$430bn annually as managers rush to fill in for employees walking in and out without seeing the point.

Our data shows that improving how a company carries out its purpose will have the biggest impact on perceived company performance and employee experience. That is, by clarifying and agreeing on what it is that we want to build, we can be reassured that our input is worthwhile.

Despite this, over a third of respondents feel their company is not doing this well.

A relationship evolves gradually over a lifetime. But a successful business may take on many forms and owners over generations. The figures show that larger companies with more than 500 staff struggle to reign in a consistent shared idea of identity and purpose. Ultimately, this translates to poor communication with stakeholders, mixed-messages with employees and stagnant growth.

The challenge is how to articulate a clear sense of direction when the finish line keeps moving. Our second point - connection - is vital here. It is not only in the long-term that we see the effects of our work, but also between days. Especially as many of us transition to remote working, leaders must work with their team to develop authentic and dynamic relationships.

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Leaders fundamentally fail to understand the incentives that motivate people to come into work day-in, day-out. Nine in ten business owners wrongly believe that workers will leave a job for more money. Only 12% will. A vast majority say that they would, in fact, be willing to accept a pay cut if it meant working a better job.

Nobody who has worked a job they did not enjoy before can be surprised by these figures. It should be obvious that connecting to our work and colleagues is not achieved

over a Teams meeting or a Friday afternoon early finish. True inclusivity and engagement will require managers to move beyond the whole and to get to know their organisation's working parts. Those core fears of alienation find new meaning in the post-coronavirus world as employees return to a workplace that does not reflect the most human of needs for purpose and connection.

As we rethink our approach to office work in particular, there is an opportunity to reflect on what really matters in our working lives. The lean, minimalist model - flexible hours, remote working, increased outsourcing - is perfectly viable, but will need to build up and out of employee experience if it is to be sustainable.

Leading into our third point, collaboration and consultation will be key in creating jobs and work that is built to last. As it stands, there is a gap between communication at the strategic level and at the operational level. Where leaders are focused on traditional expediency - 50% expect subordinates to have the same understanding of their business identity as they do, - employees are struggling to see how they fit into the bigger picture.

The key is to flatten hierarchies, to adjust to the challenges of modern business in making the way we work transparent and inclusive of a workforce that is getting better at articulating what it needs to perform well. Businesses growing too fast to function optimally - 'diseconomies of scale' - must learn to reign in the ropes, setting the pace and direction from the front.

As it stands, the areas employees feel their companies do best in have no bearing on their outlook for overall performance and rarely do they map onto positive employee experience.

Research shows that it is trust, engagement and communication that drives the positive employee experience, ensures staff retention, and ties the intentions of leadership to the praxis of the workforce. These are crucial to rebuilding the bridges between purpose, connection and collaboration in work.

## Building Back Better

There is an idea that the human brain is capable of maintaining up to 150 meaningful relationships at any one time. The challenge for business, then, is how to ensure that teams of over 500 people can synchronise,

especially as the traditional reinforcements of a shared workspace and common working hours et cetera lose importance.

As employees take jobs for people they have never met in person, how can businesses ensure that their workforce buys into that grounding identity that keeps it all ticking over?

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This brave new world is redefining how we think about work, offering a once in a generation shot to remedy and improve upon the traditional practices of business. In a practical sense, leaders must make use of data-driven transformation to push their companies into the 2020s.

Businesses are not necessarily becoming more democratic. Rather, the age-old frustrations of work have been exposed by changing practices and a sudden spike in demand for workers, prompting many to uproot.

To utilise - and not suffer from - this changing climate, businesses must now embrace radical inclusivity, a holistic picture of what makes up a strong and adaptive business, letting employee perception influence decision making and allowing feedback to evolve and reconsider the fundamental question of purpose.

To understand if your business is inclusive and has purpose, it's helpful to carry out an analysis using a diagnostic tool, but ongoing self assessment is also valid.

This kind of active listening goes beyond

staff surveys and focus groups. Fears that employers are not committed to developing talent are prompted by irrelevant and outdated training sessions. Perks offered for new hires are evidently not hitting the mark as companies fail to keep up with changing social, professional and economic climates.

In Australia, we are seeing working practices change dramatically as employers respond to employee needs with remote and hybrid models of working. In one survey, nearly 80% of respondents said that they would prefer a hybrid approach, balancing time spent in office with independent working from home. This is not a strictly new phenomenon; in October 2019, research elsewhere found similar results. Instead, this heightened focus on remote working only shows the perceived need for change following the demonstration that hybrid working is both viable and effective. Traditionalists are struggling to find arguments to cling on to the old manner of doing things.

Australian insurer Medibank recently announced a vision which would include a hybrid model of working, supporting employees to develop their autonomy and work at times that optimise productivity. The aim - in their words - is to make the office "a place of purpose; to collaborate, connect, and if needed concentrate".

Again, prior to the pandemic, start-ups and medium sized businesses started to combat the hollow trends of the modern workplace, reporting increasingly that purpose is not a pool table; businesses that lure employees in with material incentives cannot win the hearts and lives of their workforce without something more binding. Cheap gimmicks may buy temporary brownie points but fail to make the impact of substance needed in sustainable business.

Those looking towards a modern system of remote working would do well to heed the lessons of Zapier, a three-hundred strong workflow automation company that has moved entirely online since the pandemic: remote work is not made impossible by design but by stagnant company culture. Managing remote teams requires not only the adoption of new tools, but a total re-think of how we leaders approach trust and transparency. Attitudes must be flexible if our businesses are to be.

If the first year of the new decade taught us anything, it is the importance of flexibility in adjusting to and profiting from sudden and forced change. In many cases, businesses who struggled to resurface in the last year did so because they were unable to unshackle themselves from entrenched processes. Businesses who have managed to ride the wave did so by using change to prompt growth, putting faith in the strengths and knowledge of employees to keep things moving forwards.

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