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CREATING SUCCESS IN A WORK FROM HOME ENVIRONMENT

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Success In A Work From Home Environment

With the global pandemic showing no signs of reversal, any significant quality of life improvement is unlikely to arise until a sizeable majority of the world's population is vaccinated. It is also unlikely, then, that the global workforce will see any wholesale regressions towards a pre-pandemic work arrangement any time soon.

Our previous article looked at the costs and benefits of adopting a work-from-home model (WFH). We drew implications regarding why the WFH model may work better for some industries and job functions and not others.

To recap, the primary benefits for companies adopting a WHF model include:
- a more resilient workforce that benefits from optimized schedules via decreased commute times and increased rest times
- an inevitable optimization in technological infrastructure that serves dual purposes:
    i. allowing workers to seamlessly work from home while optimizing the company's prospects through major technological upgrades
    ii. an increased pool of prospective candidates, as the WFH model eliminates many geographic barriers to finding talent

And the primary benefits of an on-site environment are:
- the psychological heuristics that allow workers to maintain a consistent work-day routine
- an increased sense of direct supervision that can mitigate wasted time while maintaining a sense of urgency
- clear boundaries between work and leisure, as the on-site environment minimizes social and domestic interactions

While various industry leaders generally seemed to have mixed sentiments regarding WFH, we concluded that a hybrid model – that is, one that incorporates the benefits of both on-site and WFH while mitigating the costs of each respective model – would be best in many situations.

Adopting the hybrid model allows companies to allocate more on-site resources to those who cannot work from home while allowing remote workers more autonomy to do their jobs.

The Present State of Work From Home

Now that the WFH model has been implemented and, to some degree, tested during the last several months, we have observed a paradigm shift in the overall attitude towards WFH. Both high-level managers and their employees have expressed praise and responded positively to the WFH model, and it appears these opinions will continue to lean in WFH's favor.

Mid-Level Manager Support

While middle managers have historically frowned on the idea of WFH, the recent and forceful shift into this model has many reconsidering their past objections. Despite research showing the contrary, many mid-level managers previously assumed productivity would decline if they adopted a WFH model. Because the global pandemic forced their hand to favor business continuity, however, they are now seeing how their fears and skepticism to WFH were unfounded.

Employees Love WFH

Though only a small fraction of employees regularly worked from home before the pandemic, the surge in WFH employees caused minor disruptions, as a drastically new environment meant workers now had to adapt to this new model of work. The initial adaptation was slow, but workers are now more inclined to work from home. WFH allows workers more autonomy, more time with family, and less time commuting to an office or worksite. With the rising popularity of WFH, it is unlikely that workers will give this privilege up very easily.

Optimization and Sustainability

An ancillary benefit of the WFH model is that now many workers and managers realize the potential WFH has for cost savings and reducing a company's environmental footprint. The reduction in motor vehicle traffic from commuters has significantly improved the air quality in many cities worldwide, along with a significant decrease in time lost commuting. Additionally, with more of the global workforce working from home, the cost reduction in commercial real estate and site maintenance, along with the increased productivity and scalability potential, has left many defining this trend as "the new normal."

Trends

Even with just one year of data, we can see that the WFH model has received a positive reception.

- Over 3/4 of office workers work from home full-time and want to continue this trend at least one day per week.
- Over 2/3 of WFH employees say they are very successful working from home, and managers say their performance is the same or better.
- Industries are recognizing the value in time and resources saved by adopting a WFH model.

The current trend clearly favors a WFH environment, and over 55% of business leaders say it can succeed in their industry.

Now that the benefits of WFH are widely regarded and accepted by the public, industry leaders now want to focus on how they can implement a WFH model efficiently and productively.

Moving Forward

Suppose we use the pandemic as a meta-analysis type case study for WFH. In that case, we can see that a significant number of organizations were ill-prepared in implementing WFH in an agile and efficient way. In a PWC survey in March 2020, 60% of US CFOs felt that their lack of preparedness for remote work hurt organizational productivity.

While resiliency in business is often a highly sought-after trait, rapid adaptation, or "organizational agility," is often overlooked. This is not due to a major oversight in management; rather, it is due to a lateral quandary often placed on the backburner.

Organizational agility is often focused on a company or industry's core competencies; as such, most organizations are unlikely to expend a significant amount of resources on a scenario of relatively low probability. That is until a global pandemic sweeps the earth.

Barriers to WFH

As with any new prospective startup or expansion of scope, there are often barriers to entry that a company will need to overcome. In most cases, if the costs to overcome such barriers are too significant, it may not be worth investing the time and resources on such an endeavor.

Many companies do not have that option when it comes to working from home. While it may be easier for some companies not to adopt a WFH model, for most non-essential workforces, WFH is the difference between business continuity and failure.

Eliminating Key Barriers

Our previous article covered the added benefits of implementing a WFH policy, including the fact that the infrastructure required could also serve as a much-needed technology upgrade that many firms lack. Hardware upgrades enhance not only the capabilities of remote work but also the company's operations overall. The good news here is that, based on a survey by Global Workplace Analytics, 77% of North American workers state they are successful working from home, and 81% of all employees working remotely state they are satisfied with key technology enablers (e.g., electronic document management, teleconferencing and collaboration tools, data security, etc.) required to work from home.

While technological upgrades may be a necessary precursor to working from home, several key barriers limit the potential of WFH; thus, mitigating or even eliminating these barriers can ensure an optimal transition towards a remote work environment.

In the same survey conducted by GWA, the data reveals that the largest relative variance between working at home and working on-site falls into three principal areas of concern:
1. Coaching and Mentoring, **Variance = 30%**
2. Collaboration with Colleagues, **Variance = 26%**
3. Organizational Awareness, **Variance = 23%**

The variance listed is the absolute percentage difference between those who feel performance in the subject area is better at home versus the office. A favorable variance signifies that more employees feel their performance in said fields is better in an on-site or office environment than in the home.

Coaching and Mentoring

Of the three most-concerning topics, a comparative lack of coaching and mentoring drives the largest variance between the two work environments, with 81% of employees stating that performance regarding coaching, mentoring, and employee management is better at the office, versus only 51% stating it is better working from home.

On a conceptual basis, this variance makes sense. Those working from home are often isolated from colleagues and managers for longer periods, so the ability to give and receive feedback regarding work performance falters significantly in a home-based environment.

As the topic with the largest relative variance, it is crucial to understand why this variance exists and how to close the percentage gap. Coaching and mentoring are vital aspects of workplace aptitude, so much so that according to a 2017 study conducted by Ken Blanchard Companies, individuals are more likely to trust in

and perform their best work for managers whom they perceive as their advocate. As such, coaching and mentoring employees helps significantly in developing new skills and delivering consistent results. If working from home hinders these results, it must be urgently addressed.

The good news is that companies planning on implementing WFH do not need any significant policy reconstruction if they already have a reliable coaching and mentoring system in place; they need to adapt that same system to suitably meet remote employees' needs.

For companies that do not have a robust mentoring system in place, or for those who can benefit from a restructure, there are three strategies that can be implemented to close the variance to some degree:

1. **Hold regular, purpose-driven sessions.**
2. **Allocate more informational and training resources online.**
3. **Coach to improve, not teach.**

While remote workers may feel isolated from management, managers can assuage this isolation by holding regular coaching sessions with all employees. The added benefit of regular coaching sessions is that it allows those employees to save all non-urgent matters for their scheduled coaching sessions. This allows for the validation of employee concerns while efficiently utilizing the manager's time.

Many employees may be unfamiliar with the day-to-day logistics of working from home, particularly if it is an entirely new concept for them. Managers can empower their teams by allocating proper informational and training resources for them online. Having this information is vital for employee autonomy at home and can significantly reduce the time spent engaging back and forth on trivial matters. Although implementation will vary based on company size and industry, we can look to one of the internet's tried and tested forms of user support: forums. Employee forums can be of particular help for larger companies and teams, allowing the inquiries of one employee to be available to all employees who may have similar questions in the future.

When it comes to coaching, it is critical to understand that coaching should be meant for employee guidance and growth, not as a training session for a job's operational aspects. Having abundant learning resources available for remote employees allows for a greater allocation of managers' time to grow and inspire their team.

Collaboration With Colleagues

Much of the workforce relies on team-based collaboration, and the fact that 86% of surveyed workers were satisfied with collaboration efforts at the office while only 60% were satisfied working at home reveals a significant drop in team collaboration from a home environment.

We often take for granted what face-to-face interaction can do for workforce morale. The opportunity to communicate and engage in another colleague's presence is difficult to replicate, even with video conferencing and chat.

Regardless of the complexities of such a barrier, there are ways to mitigate its adverse effects on team collaboration.

Facilitate Tactical Meetings

Video conferencing via platforms like Zoom seem to have ameliorated virtual collaboration. However, they have also added to the redundancies and perceived triviality of regular office meetings due to their relatively novel display. If a particular group of employees was not accustomed to the virtual environment of such meetings, the further novelty of such meetings might strengthen the entropy.

In order to get the most out of virtual meetings and further enhance a team's collaborative efforts, it is crucial to have an agenda in place beforehand and to delegate key individuals to facilitate the meeting. This allows the meeting to be more productive, drive constructive decision making, and keep the team on track.

Replicate the "Side by Side"

In a study by Harvard Business Review, the authors found that the physical presence of other colleagues often leads to "positive peer pressure." This positive peer pressure enables workers to complete tasks on time and to remain focused. Of course, it may be impossible to replicate a physical side by side arrangement completely, but managers can attempt to reproduce the psychological aspects of this sensation through the use of live collaboration tools such as shared documents and screens.

When two or more employees work on a project simultaneously, it can mimic the effect of physical collaboration to some degree through the concepts of shared goals and outcomes. Managers can take additional measures to simulate an office-like environment by using live audio communication between employees. This goes further than a simple phone call as it allows the employees to communicate and work together in real-time.

There are many creative solutions to this problem depending on the nature of work and how workers collaborated before working from home. Team leaders should be encouraged to ideate novel solutions to these problems, mitigating the adverse effects of working from home on collaboration.

Organizational Awareness

Organizational awareness combines many aspects of mentoring and collaboration, but we must address it separately as it focuses mainly on the intangible aspects of an organization. Aspects such as culture, emotion, dynamics, and influence all fall under the umbrella of organizational awareness. While they may sound trivial, they are a critical aspect of workplace morale and business continuity.

There are no easy solutions to solve the organizational awareness problem, particularly the variance in perception working at home versus the office. Of those surveyed, 80% said they were satisfied with their ability to keep up with and be aware of what was going on at their workplace, versus 57% stating their satisfaction working from home. While this variance is the smallest of our three primary barriers, it is still significant to warrant solutions.

Because so much of organizational awareness is intangible, the best solutions would require consistent feedback from employees regarding what is working for them and what is not. This is where regular coaching sessions can have a meaningful impact: it functions as a vital tool for constructive feedback. Structured meetings and "side-by-side" simulation can also mitigate the barriers imposed by a relative lack of organizational awareness, as it can keep more employees engaged with one another and provides opportunities for open communication.

Perhaps the biggest drawback for individuals working from home is the social one: the absence of "office gossip," "watercooler chats," "smoke breaks," or whatever one may choose to call them. Employee socialization is a key factor that increases office morale and boosts productivity. Similar to mitigating collaborative barriers, managers should be encouraged to implement voluntary virtual or off-site activities for employees, giving them some semblance of social interaction with colleagues, which is not directly tied to the work they do. Some ideas which have had favorable reception include virtual:

- Escape Rooms
- Murder Mystery Parties
- Happy Hours
- Movie Nights

While this is not directly tied to workplace optimization, allowing colleagues to socialize with one another in some fashion can boost cooperation and strengthen relationships, which leads to a more productive workforce.

Implementing and Maintaining WFH

Now that we have a requisite understanding of the barriers to WFH and how to mitigate or eliminate them, this next section will focus on implementing and maintaining an optimal WFH environment that will alleviate the common hurdles of the transition.

What drives WFH Success?

At the fundamental level, what propels a successful WFH atmosphere comes down to drive and resources. Drive is facilitated primarily by self-discipline, so if a particular employee were driven before implementing WFH, their motivation and drive would likely continue in their remote environment. Resources encompass the remote infrastructure we have covered earlier in this article, along with the small, seemingly trivial items that make an office environment more productive.

Self-Discipline

Self-discipline is an attribute desired by all employers, though the degree to which employees exhibit this trait varies drastically. An employee who was not very driven and often labeled "lazy" at the office will likely regress further into undesirable behavior if left to operate in an unsupervised environment, such as WFH.

The implementation of WFH has likely revealed many cracks in an organization's hiring and supervision processes. It is often difficult to discern undesirable traits in a busy environment without key performance indicators in place for each employee. As a result, it will be extremely difficult to expect self-discipline from an employee working from home if they were never self-disciplined to begin with.

For those organizations with a more relaxed policy regarding performance, now would be a good time to implement specific KPIs to ensure employees remain on-task and on-schedule. For those employees who have shown a consistent track record of performance based on well-established KPIs, WFH is likely to push employees to perform even better, as the adaptation to a new environment can enable certain individuals to overperform to compensate for a perceived lack of consistency. Keep in mind, however, that any initial boost in performance is likely to regress to what was exhibited at the office once employees have grown accustomed to working from home.

Forcing Discipline

It is commonly said that some of the smartest employees are often the laziest. Even Bill Gates is quoted as saying he would rather hire a lazy person to do a difficult job "because the lazy person will find an easier way to do it."

While this statement may be more tongue-in-cheek, it is a word of warning for employers seeking to force motivation through the use of monitoring software and tracking devices. In theory, such devices could ensure compliance; however, they are notorious for containing loopholes and workarounds plentiful in online forums and social media websites.

Rather than forcing compliance while implementing WFH, managers should delegate tasks, set timelines, and outline reasonable performance indicators to keep employees engaged and delivering results.

Resources

Though we have covered the technical resources required for optimizing collaboration and organizational awareness, it is easy to forget about the ancillary resources which make an office or on-site environment ideal for working.

Utility-based resources such as high-speed internet, fluorescent white light, and climate control can positively impact work performance, as they often provide the ideal environment for speedy, focused, and comfortable working conditions.

Physical resources such as ergonomic chairs and keyboards, dual-screen monitors, and a well-stocked printer and supply room can offer a tangible yet hidden level of support for workers, ensuring they are on task and not distracted by constantly switching between windows, changing the toner in the printer, or regularly readjusting their sitting positions after long hours.

While these ancillary resources may seem insignificant in the grand scheme of things, they are critical support resources, and managers should consider allocating a budget to supply remote workers with these tools and services. For those organizations who have moved to a 100% WFH model, old office furniture and supplies can be redistributed to employees to simulate as much of an office environment in their homes as possible.

While implementing all of these resources may not be feasible to some organizations due to budget or logistical constraints, they should be considered and implemented to some degree.

Health, Stagnation, and Opportunity

With all factors considered, it appears that working from home leads to increased focus and productivity for high performing employees as they have more control over their immediate work environment. The reduction of office distractions and interoffice chatter allows WFH employees to work continuously with fewer interruptions throughout their workday.

While WFH may be a net positive for companies both in terms of productivity and profit, we must also recognize that WFH provides the added benefit for employee health. By analyzing survey data from GWA, we have discovered that three-quarters of WFH employees report a better work-life balance, as they have more flexibility managing work and non-work-related tasks. Additionally, nearly 70% of WFH employees report their overall wellbeing has improved in terms of stress, sleep, and exercise, with over 50% stating they are eating healthier too.

WFH has certainly changed the work-life dynamic, but what we are most concerned about are the long-term implications of working in a remote environment. Working from home means employees are consolidating their environments, which can presumably lead to monotony over time. This, of course, will vary between each individual, and as we continue to study the WFH trend, we may glean valuable insights into how employees manage WFH in the long run.

Based on the data we have now, 85% of WFH employees in North America report increased productivity, which is highest among Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. Interestingly, only 44% of Gen Z state they are productive working from home. This is intriguing because, as the youngest generation, they tend to be the savviest with social media and technology. Contrary to our primary assumption that the significant decline in this generation is based on the notion that they may prefer a more social and cooperative atmosphere, this generation may, in fact, not have as many years of work experience under their belt as their older predecessors; thus, they may still be adapting to the work environment overall.

Stagnation may be a concern, but equally crucial is the acknowledgement that the opportunity pool will continue to increase as WFH becomes more stable over time. Employers may have the added benefit of selecting from a larger pool of talent; employees, too, have these same options in reverse. Because workers are no longer geographically constrained working from home, their prospective employment opportunities have also increased.

Managers should be aware of this phenomenon and actively seek to retain high-performing individuals who will continue to work from home. The primary focus should revolve around mitigating the barriers mentioned earlier, such as increased mentorship, training, and technology investment.

To retain top talent, however, companies need to understand that the demand for high-performing workers will increase as WFH continues to expand. Managers should therefore seek to assist employees with career planning, particularly for internal advancement opportunities. Job enrichment is another key factor in which managers can use their coaching time to analyze their employees' strengths and increase each employee's functional role. This serves as an added benefit of reducing redundancies while creating a dynamic and engaging atmosphere for employees.

Job rotation is another angle that should be considered, if applicable, to allow employees to gain valuable skills in various functions, thus preventing stagnation while also creating a robust and resilient remote workforce.

Moving Forward

As you assess your current model for work from home, as an employer:
1. Are you leading by example?
2. Are you creating clear rules and boundaries?
3. Are you establishing a clear communications plan?
4. Are you maintaining company culture and organizational awareness?
5. Are you enriching and engaging your employees?

Answering these questions will be vital to maintaining an efficient and productive WFH transition. Although the transition will be a learning process for both companies and employees, having a system of 360 feedback is paramount to achieving WFH success. There will be inevitable pitfalls and roadblocks along the way as you navigate this novel environment, and addressing the concerns of managers and workers will ensure all sides are heard, and those issues can be dealt with appropriately.

We would love to know how your company is navigating WFH. What aspects have you had the hardest time with? How did you address them? And where do you see the future of WFH?

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