People at the Centre: Remote, but Not Distant

Employee Engagement and Performance in the "New Normal" of Remote Working

We provide a summary of the discussion between David Regan, director in the Labour & Employment Practice at Squire Patton Boggs, and Mel Robinson, senior director and HR business partner at ADP, on 16 September 2020 on their respective businesses' experience of engaging remote working employees during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

The "New Normal"

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, it forced businesses to transition to remote working overnight. Many successfully did so, and now the dialogue is shifting from questioning employees' ability to work from home to asking whether it is necessary at all for them to return to the office given the many benefits remote working has brought.

While there are undoubtedly challenges to overcome, the ability to foster an environment of mutual trust and establish a clear sense of purpose and values will be key for organisations wishing to build a work culture that engages and brings the best out of its workforce. With a greater call for businesses to play their part in "building back better" and account for how they are leveraging their human capital within the environmental, social and governance (ESG) framework, the role of human resources has never been more vital to building resilience for the long term.

What challenges did ADP face when transitioning to remote working?

Changes to Interaction

ADP's sales team traditionally thrived through in-person interactions with their clients and prospects. While virtual interactions are a useful tool in many respects, the team did miss the connection of meeting clients in person.

Preparation

ADP's UK-based office had already seen news reports of the situation in Italy and therefore started to prepare before everyone had to work remotely. They reviewed their business continuity plan and ensured that the security and privacy elements of remote access were in place quickly.

Responsibilities

It was important to help employees feel connected as a team, as it was a huge cultural transition to move from being in the office to working from home. Managers and teams needed to understand and accept that there were productivity challenges for employees, and that they were trying their best to work in the circumstances. There were conflicting priorities for those at home, with some employees having to home-school their children and others having caring responsibilities. In addition, the stress of living through a pandemic could easily lead to employees' mental health suffering if appropriate care was not taken. Working from home during a pandemic is not easy, and ADP made it clear, as an organisation, that they understood that.

Despite these challenges, employees were driven by a purpose and focus on their work. As a payroll organisation, ADP's work is critical to ensure that more than one million employees are paid every month. The teams quickly adapted to work at home during the global pandemic in order to make sure that their clients' employees were paid.

Did the pride element feed into the employee engagement cycle?

Yes, ADP found that the pride and purpose that their employees found in their work was a key factor in driving productivity forward. Before the pandemic, ADP had sought to define their values and purpose as an organisation clearly. This work shone through during the pandemic, and continues to do so. Additionally, the message came through from senior leadership that ADP will pull together and if anyone needed help, someone in the organisation would assist them.

How do you tailor your management and engagement to different staff within your business?

The ADP Research Institute recently carried out a survey on more than 11,000 (non-ADP) employees globally that demonstrated the increasing importance of flexible working to employees. The research was published in "The Workforce View 2020: Volume Two post-COVID-19: The outlook immediately after the COVID-19 outbreak" ("ADP Survey"). The ADP Survey analysed workers' opinions on discrimination, flexible working, pay sacrifices and the gig economy in May 2020 and compared the findings against a survey on more than 32,000 (non-ADP) employees carried out in January 2020.

The ADP Survey found as follows:

- In May 2020, 44% of respondents said that their employers had official flexible working policies in place. This is an increase from a similar pre-COVID-19 (January 2020) survey, in which only 24% of respondents said that their employers had flexible working policies in place.

- While there was an increase from January to May 2020, Europe is still behind Latin America and Asia Pacific on the formalisation of flexible working policies. While the COVID-19 pandemic has acce

- If you are reopening your workplace, please see IBM's best practice guide on the factors to consider before allowing employees to return to the office. lerated employers in Europe into formalising their flexible working policies, there is still a long way to go.

- ADP found that 54% of respondents felt pressure in May 2020 to return to the office. This contrasted with the fact that many actively did not wish to do so yet, due to concerns over either COVID-19 or childcare responsibilities.

- Indeed, the majority of employees surveyed said that they would be happy to continue working from home.

While the pandemic is unlikely to end office culture, it is clear that employees want the option of greater flexibility (e.g. two days in the office and three from home) or fully working from home. Current flexible working approaches will need to be formalised in order to provide employees with certainty and for organisations to attract talent.

Some employees have noted that they feel like those employees present in the office are more likely to be given a project or a piece of work, as homeworkers are "out of sight, out of mind". How can employers manage this concern?

There is definitely the potential for a "two-tier" workforce in organisations where there is a mix of employees working from home and attending the office.

ADP advised their employees to work from home, even prior to the government's recent announcement. However, employees are missing the visibility of the office, as well as team meetings. Set against that, there is still a sense of nervousness from employees, who are concerned about returning to an office environment. Ultimately, many businesses and employees are not ready to take the risk.

ADP have used several different employee engagement models in the past, most recently transitioning to a more holistic model. How did they transition from a traditional model to a more holistic model, and how has that been tested by lockdown?

The Move From a Traditional Model to a More Holistic Model

ADP traditionally used an annual engagement survey of a set number of questions to send to staff each year to provide their feedback, as do many employers.

ADP decided to take a new approach and in the EU, Latin America, Asia Pacific and North America, they rolled out an engagement tool called the Standout Model, to drive a new philosophy of being a strengths-based organisation.

The tool contains a profile that identifies people's strengths, including an analysis of what empowers them and what comes naturally to them. The tool is designed for an employee and manager to interact and discuss those strengths.

The manager uses the strengths to understand how to get the best out of the employee, and in order to tailor what work they can give the employee to get the best results. Work that does not feed into the strengths of that employee can then be given to a team member who has a strength in that area.

Challenges and Benefits of the Model in Lockdown

The tool has been invaluable during the COVID-19 pandemic where managers and employees did not have face-to-face contact.

In particular, the employee can check in online with their line manager about what they enjoy and what they dislike doing each week. This is not, however, about employees shying away from key elements of their role. It is about helping managers and employees identify (i) a balanced workload for employees that mainly plays to their strengths and (ii) appropriate areas for training.

The tool also enables a manager to run a survey for their own team to find out how they are feeling, and whether any support is needed.

Have employees been more productive than managers would expect them to be when they are provided with work that plays to their strengths?

ADP have identified that employees are more motivated and engaged when they are given work that they want to do, that they thrive in and where their strengths lie.

Engagement between management and employees is important. What support can be given to managers to help them have regular check-ins?

The Standout Model allows a manager to review a quick snapshot of what each employee is working on, and what their priorities are.

Ultimately, management want their teams to feel connected while working remotely. It is difficult to establish the right balance between enabling communication and not creating additional work when everybody already has many responsibilities. The key is to design a process that enables this without making "check-ins" be "by rote".

From your experience in the UK and globally, what are the key elements that businesses should focus on as they develop a healthy remote environment and culture?

Flexible working will be key, as it is a new way of working and will accelerate what people want and need in terms of the future of the workforce. Organisations need to allow flexibility and have the infrastructure to work remotely and balance it with face-to-face interactions, where necessary.

Businesses should also focus on digitalisation. They need to be clever about how they attract talent, and then on-board talent in a virtual environment to ensure that the employee understands the organisation's culture. Important questions to consider with regard to retaining talent are (i) how do you convey the talent in a virtual environment; and (ii) how do you change and develop people online in the remote world?

For HR practitioners, the skillset of emotional intelligence will be more important in the workforce.

The ADP Survey found that the amount of unpaid overtime that workers are doing has increased by an hour since COVID-19. Many people are working late to accommodate responsibilities (e.g. as parents or carers), which is having a detrimental impact on mental health, productivity and feelings towards their job. Is ADP doing anything to monitor the hours that their employees are working?

There have been interventions at ADP when it is clear that someone is working consecutively late at night, as it is not healthy. Particularly in lockdown, there was not much else to do sometimes other than work. However, it is important to exercise and take care of yourself.

While there are no official reports monitoring the hours that employees are working, it is the responsibility of managers to see if their employees are sending emails late at night, or appear particularly stressed. If a manager sees an email coming in late at night, this should prompt checking in with the employee to see if they are managing.

Questions From the "Floor"

Training juniors: how one keeps progressing juniors in the business to keep them engaged. Do you have any insights regarding the training of juniors?

ADP have a number of inside sales associates in Barcelona and had already developed a strong online, on-boarding experience explaining the culture, products, solutions and the marketplace. At entry level, it is important to stress the conduct and ethics.

This is then followed up with (i) line manager coaching; (ii) breakout sessions with teams; (iii) online seminars on different topics, such as remote working; (iv) checklists on how the employee can set themselves up remotely; and (v) providing the new starter with a business mentor and on-boarding buddy.

ADP have received positive feedback on this process. Going forward, they plan to tie online learning to the on-boarding process in order to make the employee experience cycle quicker.

At Squire Patton Boggs, similarly to other law firms, juniors deal with lots of drafting and analysis. Some teams within the firm have struggled with providing trainee solicitors with a learning experience remotely, as they feel that by the trainee not having a more traditional way of training, they are missing out. However, online learning is embedded within Squire Patton Boggs' culture and, therefore, it was not as much of a shock as it might have been.

However, there are other ways of training juniors, such as by video call, where a more senior member of staff can share their screen and then go through a document. Training can still be carried out remotely; it just requires a different mind-set and a little bit more effort.

Please talk about the experience with the Standout Model and the approach of a strengths-based focus. How does that work with employees also developing skills that they are weaker in?

The strengths-based approach still includes areas that employees need to improve as a development piece. The Standout Model focuses on bringing the best out in people. The development areas will never be a strength, and it is about giving people the opportunity to excel at their strengths.

As ADP's teams are a considerable size, it is perhaps easier to provide employees with work that focuses on their strengths. How is a strengths-based approach managed in smaller teams?

If you have too many employees with the same strengths in one team, you may not have a balanced team. Beyond the strengths are different tasks and skillsets for each role. Rarely do you have people with the same strengths that also enjoy doing exactly the same tasks. Everyone is unique.

How can organisations ensure that remote workers do not become remote from the company?

In March, everyone changed how they worked overnight to keep their businesses running – everyone had to quickly find their feet. Employers had to put in interventions and support, and they learned quickly that it is important for employees and management to take time out to communicate and provide assistance when needed.

Going forwards, it is likely that emotional intelligence, resilience and interpersonal skills, as well as being able to connect with people and project manage across different elements, will come more to the fore.

What challenges do you foresee for employers moving forwards if people remain working remotely? As people start to return to the office on a full-time basis, how do you keep employee engagement going forwards?

If the employer knows and communicates that employees are doing their best, the employer receives loyalty, effort and a desire to contribute back to the organisation from employees. As an HR practitioner during the pandemic, your purpose was to support employees and business, so HR was never more vital.

If an employee is doing a hybrid role in the office and at home, what are the health and safety obligations?

The Health and Safety Act 1974 states that employers must ensure the health and safety of all their employees as far as is reasonably practicable.

Employers must do a risk assessment on an employee's workplace, whether office-based or remote. If the employee is doing a hybrid role, where they are still not technically working from home, arguably there is no requirement to do an assessment on the home workspace. However, as soon as any working-from-home arrangement becomes permanent, a risk assessment must be undertaken. The rules also vary by jurisdiction – please see the Squire Patton Boggs snapshot FAQs on homeworking post-pandemic, which gives a snapshot on key issues for employers to consider in certain countries globally when implementing homeworking policies and/or considering homeworking requests around their organisation.

If you are reopening your workplace, please see IBM's best practice guide on the factors to consider before allowing employees to return to the office.

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