

HRD

THE ONLY INDEPENDENT STRATEGIC HR PUBLICATION

the **HR**DIRECTOR

AUGUST 2023 | ISSUE 226

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“PROGRESS COMES THROUGH
CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS
AND BEING RESPECTFUL OF
DIFFERENCES IN CULTURES”

JAMES MILLER
CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER
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LIVING THE DREAM

Who would have thought flexible working, from home, four-day weeks would become the norm for many people worldwide? Back then, if asked if they would like to work like this, most would have answered a resounding “yes!” So, here we are, “living the dream”! But is it the serendipitous fantasy so many desired? For millions it is and for millions of others, it isn’t. Now there is talk and some mandate for going back to conventional times, but Pandora’s box is open.

"GUILT PLAYS A MASSIVE ROLE, BECAUSE MOST EMPLOYEES ARE DOING EVERYTHING THEY POSSIBLY CAN TO ENSURE THEY HAVE COVERED THEMSELVES FOR EVERY SECOND OF EVERY WORKING DAY"



ARTICLE BY KARL BENNETT, WELLBEING DIRECTOR - VIVUP (& CHAIR OF EAPA)

Who could possibly have predicted that for some people, flexible and remote working practices - and the technology that supports it - could have impacted mental health so extraordinarily? Trauma, isolation, loneliness, uncertainty about our roles and our worth, little ability to learn, liaise or brainstorm with colleagues spontaneously in person - the simple behavioural comparison check that we all use when we're around others - are diminished. We don't know how we stack up, fuelling worries about job security and so we try to prove worth and value. It's all leading to a kind of paranoia, that leaving the laptop even for a minute will look like desertion. Plagued with uncertainty, guilt and loneliness, many employees are responding by working longer hours at home. The sense of guilt and stress loaded among employees is immense. Presenteeism and burnout are pandemics of their own.

So, who is really winning here? On the face of it, it looks like employers are benefitting most, because employees are working longer hours and are near-constantly available, not to mention the cost-saving from paying less rent for physical work sites and associated overheads. But let's be clear, this is not the fault of employers, many are trying very hard to counteract the issues, by telling their workforce to manage work/life balance better, take regular breaks, clock off after office hours and switch off entirely during weekends and during holidays. But somehow, the messages are failing to land. Guilt plays a massive role, because most employees are doing everything they possibly can to ensure they have covered themselves for every second of every working day. There is a destabilising perception that if their employer can't see them, they have to be constantly available. Then there is loneliness - not the stereotypical perception of someone sitting alone with nobody visiting - this is the loneliness of not having the support of colleagues, of not being involved and included at work, of not being able to ask quick questions over a desk, of checking with line managers for clarification and not being directly part of something. It's easy to see

why this type of loneliness can lead to uncertainty of doing a good job, of being on the right track and of being capable. We just don't have the ability to be objective about our own productivity, skills and capabilities. One thing is for sure, employees have a long way to go before their emotional state catches up with these new working styles.

Employers need to address these issues and now. Far from 'culture-washing' or 'wellbeing-washing', there needs to be practical, proactive actions to initiate real change. They also need to have real systems and processes in place around internal wellbeing conversations they have with their people. Measuring the 'temperature' of workplace wellbeing by asking employees through anonymous

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surveys, holding informal talk sessions or creating drop boxes for staff to leave anonymous feedback is absolutely crucial, but it needs to be done regularly and consistently with a set strategy and clearly aligned goals. One-offs just won't work. Afterwards, clear action needs to be taken in response to the data and communicated with employees and building recognition that the state of work needs to change and employees need downtime. Implementing a period of time in the working day - which is put in everybody's diaries and which is free from internal calls and emails, allows employees to do what they need to, unrelated to work. It might be having an uninterrupted cup of coffee, walking the dog or doing some yoga. It also means clearly communicating with employees about organisational plans, even if employees initially perceive those plans as negative, when they're likely not. For example, asking people back into the office on certain days because the data

clearly shows it's better for work/life balance - and not because employees aren't trusted - needs clear, careful and direct communication. Don't be afraid to acknowledge fears, nor address elephants in the room. Managing teams in-person requires different skillsets and communication methods to managing teams remotely. It's relatively easy to notice an individual who may be struggling if you're in the same room and can see their facial expressions and body language, but it's not so easy over email or a video call.

Managers need to make a continual and concerted effort to reach out to teams to check they are well and also to provide positive feedback, after a task has been accomplished well. Don't just make contact if a task or piece of work needs to be redone and be aware that many remote workers will be feeling uncertain and anxious about their capabilities. Peer-to-peer support systems embedded into your culture and aligning with your values can also help. Creating and nurturing such a culture doesn't happen overnight, it requires buy-in as well as active participation and encouragement from senior management and line managers. It's about having clear values within an organisation and ensuring people buy into them at all levels. For those who are struggling, it's fundamental that they can access proactive and preventative wellbeing employee assistance programmes for support. Awareness through clear, regular communication and signposting, are some of the most simple and important parts of HR's role. Lest we forget, for millions of employees, the remote working model works incredibly effectively, especially if the right wellbeing solutions are in place. No more sitting in traffic jams, expensive and time-consuming public transport and cheaper lunches. But for others, working remotely has turned into a case of 'be careful what you wish for', as working from home and in isolation from colleagues and line managers - with no way of benchmarking productivity and skillsets - can have a significant impact on mental health.

FOR FURTHER INFO
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