A mindful return to office life

MBC signatory event – a summary of key themes

A starting point for discussion:

At the start of the pandemic employers asked their employees to make huge changes and sacrifices to keep businesses going, adjusting to work from home, while caring for children, vulnerable people and others. Employees rose to that challenge. That represented a seismic shift in the 'moral bargain' between employer and employee. The burden of those changes likely had a disproportionate impact on female staff, who tend to shoulder the majority of the caring responsibilities, as well as junior staff, who would not have home offices or maybe have met their colleagues.

Benefits materialised, such as the lack of commute and the possibility of not having to live in a particular location, leading to a better work-life balance. Talent pools widened and hierarchies changed. The barriers to participation in the workplace came down. As a result, many are questioning why a return to the office is required. This new moral bargain requires that employers address return to workplaces in a deliberate and mindful way, balancing the disparate needs of staff and taking account of the benefits working from home had created, and ensuring in so far as possible, that those barriers are not re-erected.

Employers also need to factor in the benefits of interaction, such as learning, creativity, collaboration and creating a sense of belonging which employees who have joined during the pandemic may lack. Employers might also consider that they have a duty to businesses in the city centre facilitated by physical offices being open.

An HR perspective:

Learning and development is a key issue as of course is the sense of engagement and belonging one gets from physical interaction. In professional services the provision of client service will inevitably be a key consideration. Trust lies at the heart of much of the debate. It was central to the creation of the new moral bargain and will be critical as we continue to adjust going forward. Fairness is essential, recognising within that the different needs of different employees – and that agility will mean different things to each of us. Spontaneity is one of the things we have lacked and missed while working from home. And there are early signs that potential recruits are being more assertive in terms of wanting to assess how much of the promise of the new role and culture would be true in reality.

An employer's perspective:

In a very real sense employees and employers should share the same perspective as opposed to a one vs the other dynamic. It is and always has been a question of trust but perhaps the view of what was acceptable, or even possible, has shifted as a result of Covid, and with it the degree of trust an employer might feel able to place in the employee. There has been an acceleration of enlightenment.

It remains the employer's right and responsibility to provide some guidance on the parameters of our new found agility and to set out the expectations for presence in the workplace which was essential for all the reasons previously stated. This is for the benefit of employee as much as employer.

Tricky questions remain to be answered such as the London weighting on a salary for someone who joined in the city but now works primarily from a home some way away.

A diversity perspective:

Businesses had been trying to be more diverse for years. When considering the reopening of offices, three issues required attention: the return-to-work process; safe spaces and culture; and progression.

be brave.

Openness and respect   Smart meetings and emailing   Respecting rest periods   Mindful delegation

There is a broad spectrum between those who cannot wait to be back in the office and those for whom it engenders anxiety and fear. The moral bargain needs to accommodate that wide spectrum. It is not enough to dictate hard and fast rules that must apply to all. Organisations do though need to be clear about their expectations over the next one or two years to allow people to adjust and plan. There was a risk of staff disengaging if the return was rushed.

Considering safe spaces, for some the workplace is a safer place than at home, a place where they feel more valued and included, and for others the opposite may be true. To enable a return to the workplace, managers and others had to work hard to ensure that the workplace is a safe place for all so we can manage the anxiety of transition.

Different working patterns, with some working from home, had always risked unconscious assumptions and perceptions about relative level of contribution, around work allocation and in relation to reward and career progression decisions. Those who are seen to be present, who have that proximity to power, risk being favoured over those less seen, who may often also be underrepresented minorities of varying kinds. This risks being multiplied by hybrid or agile working arrangements and employers need to double down on the processes and conversations they have around these key areas to ensure that they are, and are seen to be, objective and fair.

And what else:

It may be that the office favours those who are extroverted, assertive and public decision makers who traditionally therefore had risen to the top of organisations, and who formed a group of similar thinkers. With a more hybrid model there was the opportunity for that to change.

Has there been a reversal from an assumption we should work in the office unless there was a reason or need to do so from home, to an assumption we work from home unless there is a need to be in the office?

Senior people need to be encouraged to attend the office – everyone else needs them and they may have higher levels of inertia if left to their own devices.

Employers should create safe places, whether 1:1 or through facilitated workshops, for staff to simply discuss their concerns and share psychological tools about overcoming those anxieties. Key to this was an environment where these anxieties could be shared safely, acknowledged and respected.

There will need to be time allowed to work through the individual circumstances of different employees – eg caring for the pet acquired during lockdown, some staff refusing vaccination and so on.

A key issue is to take the time that we have to allow people to adapt at their own pace, recognising that for some people that very slowness and any associated ambiguity may itself be a source of anxiety.

Employers need to make the workplace a tempting place to return to and may also need to adapt the physical space to reflect the use to which we may put that space – eg greater collaborative space as opposed to rows of desks. work that requires focused individual attention may continue to be best done at home.

One pillar of the MBC talks about meetings. The effective chairing of meetings, both to make efficient use of the participants' time but also to ensure inclusion and safety for all those attending, is more demanding than ever in a hybrid context. This is a skill which should not be taken lightly or assumed and warrants training in its own right.

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