



Are You Running a Chocolate Teapot Factory?

How to refocus commitment towards adding value

How can you ensure that the work that your employees are doing is useful and adds value to the business? You could look at factors such as employee engagement and productivity – but you might be looking in the wrong place.

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Briggs and Sons set up a factory to produce chocolate teapots. They paid for a top designer to craft an elegant teapot, bought the latest state-of-the-art plant and equipment, employed enthusiastic staff with excellent references, highly-experienced quality controllers, and packers assisted by cobots, to dispatch the goods. They even hired branded consultants to measure employee engagement, and everyone agreed that morale, commitment and productivity were all sky-high.

There was just one problem, when the teapots were delivered to the customer and used for the first time, the boiling water that was poured in melted them into a pool of liquid chocolate, rendering them unusable. The owners had focused too much on the enthusiasm of the workers and how efficiently they carried out their tasks, and not paid attention to the need for, or the usefulness of their work. Ultimately, the employees' efforts were, to quote the British idiom, „as much use as a chocolate teapot”.



It requires a fundamental mindset shift from analysing the efficiency of work to focusing on its relevance and value to the business – in other words, its effectiveness.

The chocolate teapot factory is, of course, an absurd example, yet every day, in many companies, we are lulled, in a similar way, into a false sense of security by the sight of a committed workforce meeting expectations, often doing more than is asked in order to do a brilliant job. In fact, many of us, including bosses, business owners and managers, are working harder than ever. As far back as 2013, Harvard Business Review revealed a report finding from the Covey Leadership Center that many American executives had kissed goodbye to the 40-hour working week and were averaging 72-hours. In the UK, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) found that many workers, despite their keenness, were less productive than they could be due to having to follow bureaucratic rules and procedures, and a poor match of their skills to tasks. Thirty-seven percent of the employees they surveyed felt under excessive work pressure, yet employers were often looking in the wrong direction for ways of improving productivity or reducing their workload.

In our blind quest for employee engagement, we have become seduced by enthusiasm and positive character traits, confusing efficiency with effectiveness, personal productivity with profitability, purposefulness with usefulness. What does that mean in terms of inputs, outputs and the net result?

THERE'S ONE MORE PARAMETER TO CONSIDER – LET'S GO RUNNING!

We are constantly encouraging employees to go the extra mile, cheering them on to keep going long after they've passed the finishing line. Running 500 metres in a 400-metre race is clearly pointless, yet every day, in most organisations, workers are busy trying to over-deliver or for no extra charge, making a chocolate teaspoon to go with the chocolate

teapot. In most cases though, it is not that they are not „fit for purpose” but because the wrong quantity, or the wrong item has been delivered.

Look at it this way, imagine you want to go self-sufficient and produce your own food. You engage a gardener to plant two fruit trees and a row of potatoes. When you return home in the late afternoon, the gardener informs you that he only had time to plant one of the trees because he thought it would be a nice idea to create a flower bed, which he proudly shows off, awaiting your praise. (He's an engaged employee, showing initiative and expecting appreciation to be shown.) The thing is, planting trees and potatoes is boring and not at all challenging or rewarding, (as revealed in the employee attitude survey) besides, the gardener wants to demonstrate his skill in flower bed design, feeling that he is not fulfilling, and you are not recognising his potential. There's no denying the flower bed is a work of art but it's not what you asked for and worse still, you'd earmarked that plot for a vegetable garden and instead, you now have a bill for flowers. Stepping out of the garden, what are the manifestations of this scenario at work?

- Here are some typical work-based examples
- Monthly reports, with fantastic graphics – beautiful to look at but nobody understands them or knows why they receive them.
 - Meetings - where everybody is involved for a whole morning, even when only 10 minutes applies to them personally.
 - 100 emails a day, or more. „I just copied you in to keep you in the loop”.
 - Training course evaluations that focus on „did the course meet the objectives?” rather than „did the course add value to the company?” Or „How can we ensure learning transfer from the training room to the workplace?”.

- Time recording and other systems that employees complete, even although the data is never analysed - nobody has time, and nobody has been allocated the analysis task yet.
- Workers, with the best intentions, doing more than is asked for, working long hours to prove their commitment, and striving for perfection in everything they do, for example, spending 10 hours to achieve a 99 percent standard of work and an extra 10 hours to chase the missing 1 percent.

Wait a minute, isn't that last example what we are looking for - true commitment and dedication to detail? Check back to the inputs and outputs table to answer that.

So how can we ensure that workers plant the fruit trees that we've asked for and do (only) the work that is needed? Or conversely, that managers act in a way that enables staff to use their time adding value, for in the meeting example, and the spirit of the inverted triangle, the staff are the customers of a „service” delivered by the manager.

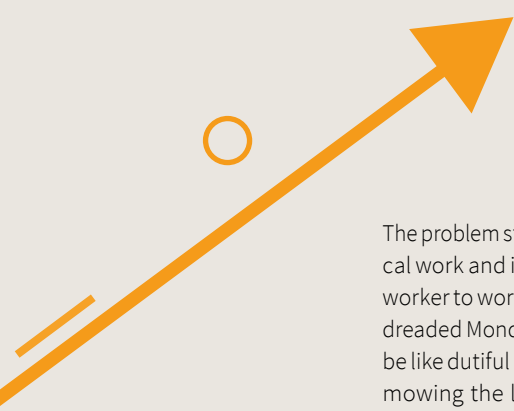


DEFINITIONS, ACTIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

ACTIVITY	INPUT	DESCRIPTION	OUTPUT	RESULT
Efficiency	Attention is paid to streamlining production methods.	Things are done in the smartest way with the fewest stages required but what is being done is not questioned.	More of the same work is produced to use the extra capacity created by the efficient method.	
The extra work may not be needed.	Increased productivity may be profitable - or it could exceed demand or need, resulting in higher costs despite efficiency.			
Effectiveness	Attention is paid to identifying the tasks that are most needed and useful and which are less useful or unnecessary.	Only tasks that are necessary and useful are done, unnecessary tasks are dropped.	Useful work is produced, spare capacity is created.	Output closely matches demand, resources are used wisely and reallocated to profitable activities.
Personal productivity	Managers and individuals focus on time management and the efficiency of their working practices.	Measuring of inputs and outputs, time taken, jobs completed.	Documentation recording inputs and outputs, more work produced.	Correlation between individual productivity and company productivity is assumed, but rarely measured.
Purposefulness	Attention is paid to engagement and the extent to which workers approach their work with a sense of purpose.	Measuring of commitment and engagement, data gathered on how interesting and rewarding employees find their work.	Documents recording levels of engagement, happiness, labour turnover.	Increased company focus on engagement as an end in itself.
Usefulness	Attention is paid to whether a task is required by its internal or external customer and the extent to which it adds value.	Measuring of internal and external customer needs - do we need it and if so, how much?	Only work that is deemed necessary by its recipients, or identified as profitable or essential is carried out.	Better resource utilisation, cost-efficiency and higher profits.



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The problem starts with „legacy work”, that is historical work and inherited duties, handed down from worker to worker, such as monthly reports and the dreaded Monday morning meeting. Employees can be like dutiful gardeners turning up in the morning, mowing the lawn, weeding, watering, planting, etc. – doing what they’ve always done without supervision or dissent. They may enjoy their work and do it well but perhaps we don’t need all those things doing every day, and maybe we don’t need some of them at all. How can we find out? How can we ascertain their value and clarify whether they are just purposeful (done with good intentions) or useful (resulting in a profitable outcome)? It’s not as complicated as you might think but we need a process.

1) Recognition

Like an alcoholic, we first need to accept that we have a drink problem. In the work context, that means recognising that there are many unnecessary tasks being performed, with the best intentions, on a daily basis, that waste time and cost the company money.

2) Problem definition

What is the root cause? The core of the problem lies in the lack of internal customer feedback to confirm the necessity or sufficiency of work and an absence of processes to measure these factors.

3) Assessment process

We need an easy-to-use assessment tool to list activities, identify the recipients of work and ask those people their opinion of the value of the „product” they receive. This can be done using tools and apps available on the market, such as ValueView.

4) Measurement of variance

Using the same tool, recipients give feedback on two factors: usefulness and sufficiency. For example, information received, could be essential, such as financial statements and legal compliance audits, may be essential, whereas a broad, environmental scanning report describing the current housing market, may be informative but not crucial.

The concept of sufficiency is a little harder to grasp for you might assume that it is a zero-one situation in which we either have enough of something or we don’t, but that’s not the case, it a scale of degree, and one that goes beyond 100 percent. Think of running a bath - a small puddle of water in the bottom won’t be much use, then there will a range of levels in the middle that will vary depending on the bather’s preference but overflowing the bath beyond its capacity will result in a clean-up job and a repair bill from the apartment below. Sufficiency, therefore, describes not 100 percent full, and certainly not overflowing – 110 percent (a surfeit), but a quantity below 100 percent that meets our needs, for as with the bath, a lower quantity may still get the job done satisfactorily.

5) Correction

Turning off the tap when we have enough bath water is clear but how does that translate into the workplace? Having recognised that more is not always necessarily better, we need to match deliveries of work to the internal products needed in the required quantities. That could be to stop sending some information or at least reduce its frequency of distribution. Some tasks perceived to be unnecessary by their recipients could be dropped altogether, while others could be modified, shortened, simplified, or increasingly, automated.

6) Reallocation

By cutting out unnecessary work, as well as increasing cost-efficiency, we create extra capacity. What can we do with it? The analysis of recipient feedback not only identifies excesses but also shortfalls where demand for an activity exceeds the supply. Resources can be reallocated to tasks that are under-resourced, priorities for the business and more profitable. In short, we can stop wasting time on low-value work and channel energy into activities that have a significant impact. In terms of the evolution of what a company delivers and how, the size of the workforce and the skills we require from it will be everchanging, and continue to change at pace, therefore, recruitment strategies must be responsive, and imaginative, forward-looking employee development and constant reskilling, will be essential.

Moving beyond merely matching the internal supply and demand market, we also free up time for product and system development and innovation, which may be more challenging but also more rewarding for staff while moving the culture from may be informative but not crucial „doing things better” to „doing better things”. It requires a fundamental mindset shift from analysing the efficiency of work to focusing on its relevance and value to the business - in other words, its effectiveness.

7) Recalibration

It is important to note that work is no longer built on stable, constant footings but sits on ever-shifting tectonic plates. The result is that what may have been useful, value-added work last year could be of limited importance now and will be irrelevant by next year. Therefore, we can no longer take for granted the usefulness of a task or its contribution to cost or profit, particularly in the context of disruptive technologies, the automation of more and more activities, and shorter product life cycles.

REMODEL, DON’T REPRODUCE

The only chance of future-proofing the business will be to regularly measure and adjust what we are doing, to make sure that it is still producing value and that it is taking us to where we want to go. Doing this can help us to discontinue lines of work before they reach their sell-by date. That is at the time that they start to produce diminishing returns, no matter how enthusiastically they are being done. That way, we will not mistake hard work and good intentions for genuine necessity and financial contribution to the bottom line, nor run the risk of operating a highly efficient and productive but ultimately useless, chocolate teapot factory. ●



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