Firm Demand for Soft Skills: A Renaissance of Human Factors – A Personal Reflection

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Amid a continuing, turbulent period and the telework reality for many organisations, leaders find themselves questioning whether low proximity and low quality go hand-in-hand but that is not necessarily the case. With colleagues located worldwide, teamwork and the development of the 4C's is bringing the human aspect back to the forefront of the upcoming industrial revolution. Further developing communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking will not only drive profit but these soft skills in steep demand will drive corporate cultures to seek out and develop the leaders fit to work alongside both humans and machines.

Age of Employee Turnover

With the workforce increasingly comfortable using emerging technologies, managing employees both on-site and at a distance, the next industrial revolution has brought about the age of employee turnover. In 2021, 91% of Millennials reported a probable career change within 3 years but engaged employees reported as 1.8 times more likely to stay with their current company one year from now (Paulsen 2021; Payactiv 2021). With rapid changes in technology, one constant remains: the people skills needed to support high-tech societies cannot be overlooked.

As humans and machines join forces to equip leaders of the future, the question about what type of leader will thrive and engage employees eclipses the conversation. One could argue that the future is now and action must be taken for leaders to use lessons learned regarding productivity, retention and more to catch up and meet the standards of a hybrid workforce (MacKenzie 2021). In brief, employers can either bring back the soft skills to build work relationships allowing employees to feel connected to company culture and values or maintain less efficient practices risking staff feeling undervalued and dissatisfied (Dennison 2021; D'Urso 2021).

It Begins With Communication

Though technology allows people to stay connected worldwide, the emergence of emojis and shorthand text are some examples of society attempting to make virtual communications less superficial and bring the human emotion back into the conversation (Evans 2020; Phil 2021). Communication does not stop at speaking professionally among colleagues but extends to management and how information is transferred within organisations. When leaders communicate, the words chosen pass on their values and leaders should not be afraid to open the conversation to having those values challenged (Luthra & Dahiya 2015). Communication should be simple, authentic, and allow both parties to feel heard, appreciated, and understood (Adams 2019; Mayfield, M, Mayfield, J & Walker 2021). Doing so inspires both parties to leave the conversation motivated to seek out facts, come up with solutions, or to continue the behaviour that drew out the opportunity to discuss thoughts and ideas to begin with (Adams 2019; Mayfield, M, Mayfield, J & Walker 2021). Furthermore, communication is a two-way street so leaders should be more attentive to delivery when offering negative feedback and employees benefit from viewing criticism as constructive to performance rather than a smear campaign of one's character (University of Toronto 2019). In fact, 86% of executives and personnel reported that miscommunication or lack of collaboration were top reasons for failure in their organisations (Steven 2021).

Collaboration: Teamwork Makes the Corporate Dream Work

Though a "winner-takes-all" pay structure can be used to attract good talent, organisations should remember the value of corporate culture, encourage social cohesion and ensure colleagues work in support of one another since teams have proven more beneficial than solo contributors long-term (Kourtesopoulou & Kriemadis 2020; University of Kansas 2021). Relationships with direct managers have been shown to impact employee life satisfaction. Therefore, collaboration can increase creativity, performance, and improves employee morale contributing to employee retention (McKinsey & Company 2020; Sumrak 2022). Moreover, increased collaboration has reported better communication in companies resulting in 4.5 times higher talent retention (Teamstage 2022).

Creativity

If creativity and innovation drive organisational success, then artificial intelligence and emerging technologies are taking on repetitive tasks to make space for human creativity to flourish. While limitless exposure to technology without structure can lead individuals down a rabbit hole, artificial intelligence is an example of technology's ability to enhance the human experience in the workplace by reducing mundane tasks and making learning opportunities more accessible so time can be dedicated to optimising current work processes and work relationships (Emtec Digital Think Tank 2021). Creativity can mean many things. Therefore, developing the soft skills that contribute to creativity like emotional intelligence and empathy will allow the workforce to feel motivated, appreciated, improve teamwork, and better manage conflict (Rathore, Chadha & Rana 2017; Pringle 2020). Additionally, emotional intelligence can improve "[organisational citizenship behaviours]" and contribute to a positive work environment encouraging growth and creativity (Dirican & Erdil 2019).

Critical Thinking

Though critical thinking is scientifically based, it must be blended with creativity, collaboration, and communication to manage the social capital of an organisation and bring ideas to life in physical form (Sözbilir 2018; Alvarez-Huerta, Muela & Larrea 2022). However, critical thinking is not all science, it can encourage deeper, more intellectual level conversations with colleagues, improve decision-making abilities, quality and efficiency in the workplace (Tripathy 2020). Critical thinking serves both in professional and personal development as it requires an individual to be more self-aware, develop foresight, practice active listening and ask questions with purpose (Islam 2015). Additionally, the growth of knowledge and creative endeavours is stunted if an organisation's environment does not support freedom of expression (Indrašiene et al. 2021). Looping back to communication, the responsibility extends to the entire workforce to encourage and own the development of the 4Cs, but it starts with leaders. This means that leaders, not exclusive to management, but any motivated person within the organisation, must lead by example.

In conclusion, physical distance between colleagues should not equate to psychological or emotional distance or be seen as disadvantageous to organisations. Equipping the workforce with the right soft skills will build virtual organisational cultures supporting improved employee wellbeing, productivity, and quality of work. This reflection ends with an open question to readers, what impact do you see the 4C's having in your organisation?

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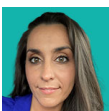
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