

The Interactive Workforce

In 1985 Live Aid had a fantastic impact on the crisis in Ethiopia by heightening public awareness and raising a staggering amount of money. But of almost equal significance to the sum of money raised was the way in which it was raised. It was one of the first occasions when a television programme had interacted with the viewers by asking them to do something - in this case donate money.

Since then there have been a host of programmes that have taken the notion of interactivity further, such as Big Brother, where viewers vote to evict contestants from the programme, and more recently the development of interactive television has enabled viewers to select their preferred camera angles for sporting events.

This "market of one" concept is not a new trend, it is now more than 20 years since Ford of Australia introduced a production management system that enabled customers to track their car as it was produced and even alter the specification while on the production line. More recently Dell introduced the concept to the PC market such that customers do not buy a standard PC, but rather commission a specific PC to be built.

But what has all this got to do with employers and employees?

The answer is that millions of people are being increasingly conditioned to expect the world to adapt to them, yet contracts of employment typically work the other way round, requiring conformance from the employee and preserving flexibility for the employer. While this may seem a good idea for employers, the problem is that one size does not fit all.

In the past, the response to the power of employers to impose terms and conditions on workers has been for workers to negotiate collectively through the Union. But collective bargaining is also under threat from the same individualist trend. After all, a collective settlement for anything will typically only suits those who are "below average"; everyone else will see it as a compromise.

But employers are starting to take note. Many businesses now conduct annual employee surveys - some even act on the findings! Others have introduced flexi-time, flexible benefits and even



job-sharing as a means of catering for individual needs and to draw more people into the workforce. But, important as these initiatives are, I would argue that they are simply scratching the surface.

Today's technology enables the views of employees to be collected on an almost continuous basis and for terms of employment to be tailored to suit each individual. But more importantly, it enables large organisations to tap into the collective knowledge and intelligence of the whole workforce in a way that was previously not possible.

But is it really such a good idea to involving so many people in the running of our businesses? In my opinion the answer is yes provided that you have the necessary technology and an appropriate management culture.

Technology - We live in a permanently connected age where even remote workers can be in constant contact with their manager and colleagues. Through the use of this technology, organisations can provide complete information to anyone, no matter where they are. For example, I am currently working with a company that is equipping its sales people with PDAs so that all the details of a particular customer can be downloaded to them before they make each sales call. This will enable the Account Manager concerned to make decisions relating to that account based on the collective knowledge of the organisation, rather than simply on their personal knowledge.

The information will also enables decisions to be taken on more complex criteria than simply price and gross margin. For example, utilization rates, receivables history, return on capital and so on.

Once a sales call is completed, the technology used enables the central database to be updated immediately so that the organisation's management can also make decisions based on up to date information.

Used in this way the technology will enable the sales person to represent the organisation, whereas previously they only really represented the products of the organisation.

Management culture - It is no good sending your staff out armed with the information necessary to make significant decisions if they do not have the ability or authority to use it.

The effective use of this technology therefore requires that the organisation has strong leadership skills at all levels. For example, Cadbury-Schwepps use a value-based management system that results in everyone from the Boardroom to the factory floor having a good understanding of the commercial dynamics of their business. This helps ensure that the decisions taken by anyone in the business are consistent with the companies overall objectives.

In my experience, the combination of an empowering management culture and good information, disseminated appropriately throughout the organisation, makes for a highly effective business.

The interactivity that modern technology provides means that the process of decision making that was once the preserve of management, is now something that can take place at all levels in the organisation.

This in turn improves employee engagement and company loyalty while at the same time reducing the pressures on senior management. It also makes the organisation more responsive to changing market circumstances and ensures that the actions of everyone are more closely aligned with the overall strategy.

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