

T talent management

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FROM LADDER TO LATTICE

Social and demographic changes are transforming how careers are built.

NAVIGATING CHANGE TOGETHER

Effectively managing talent through change will go a long way to ensure that employees are aligned with the overall business strategy and are committed to doing their part to achieve business goals.

The uncertain economy forced many companies to cut costs in the face of declining revenues. The resulting impact set in motion cycles of disruptive organizational change. Some managers have struggled to handle the pace of change, and engagement, retention, productivity and performance are all suffering as a result of poor communication, erosion of trust, lack of customer focus, ineffective strategic thinking and the inability to link the workforce with business strategy.

How are employees feeling amid this barrage of continual change? A survey of 2,904 workers conducted by Right Management in August 2010 revealed that employees are working longer hours (Figure 1), and 79 percent reported their workloads increased as a result of layoffs at their company. Fewer than half of employees leave their desk to take a lunch break each day.

Increased workloads, decreased confidence in corporate direction and growing mistrust of leadership have raised employee negativity while lowering productivity. Consequently, a significant number of employees are likely underperforming because of poor engagement. That's why employers must focus on managing change, engaging employees and building skills and behaviors that both employees and employers need to thrive in today's dynamic business climate.

Recognizing Signs of Negativity

Productivity can suffer in a workplace characterized by criticism, spiteful gossip and lack of teamwork. Surveys of 1,404 HR professionals conducted by Right Management in September 2010 showed that more than 61 percent of organizations suffer from excessive negativity that harms performance and productivity. Nearly 2 out of 3 senior executives and human resource professionals indicated that negativity in the workplace makes it difficult for workers to focus on their jobs.

In many cases, negativity is ignored. Most people don't like confrontation, so it's easier to turn a blind eye and put up with it or, even worse, begin to contribute to the negativity. Instead, managers should address negativity by coaching alternate behaviors — ones that are more productive to the situation, such as not complaining without offering suggestions, helping employees to be more self-aware and not tolerating whining.

Employees find it challenging to adjust and adapt quickly to change. Organizational change initiatives are typically not supported with follow-through communications to reinforce the decision, explain the rationale or provide support to those affected. This creates employee stress and adds to the ambiguity around their role or connection to the future success of the organization. When employees lack clarity, they founder and stress levels rise. When employees are bewildered by change and struggle to cope, negativity grows. Productivity suffers as negative discussions and rumor mills take priority over normal business activity (Figure 2). Inward focus, mistrust and uncertainty harm customer service, and lowered morale permeates throughout the organization.

The worst thing talent managers can do is remain silent and tolerate bad attitudes. Rather than being seen as people who can lead others to a better future, leaders who are viewed as contributing to negativity are seen as part of the problem, which can undermine authority, optimism and effectiveness.

Breaking the Cycle

Talent managers are in a strong position to break the workplace negativity cycle by educating and inspiring others to embrace a positive attitude. It's essential that managers develop key behaviors necessary to lead change effectively, such as communicating openly, honestly and frequently while also encouraging authentic discussions with employees. Organizations that do not manage change well are more likely to lose talent. Some practices to lead others positively include:

- **Set expectations.** Help employees have a clear understanding of what's expected of them at work. This involves regular discussions to clarify goals, workloads and deliverables.
- **Communicate the vision.** Provide employees with a line of sight for how they can contribute to meeting customer needs. This involves alignment with the firm's vision and mission and a clear understanding of what each individual employee can do to contribute to the organization's purpose.
- **Develop employees.** Offer training and career development to help both managers and employees feel

FIGURE 1: WHY ISN'T 40 HOURS ENOUGH ANYMORE?

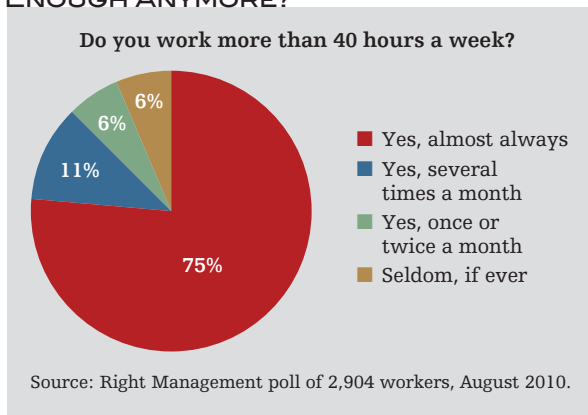


FIGURE 2: CHANGE ADVERSELY AFFECTS WORKER ATTITUDES

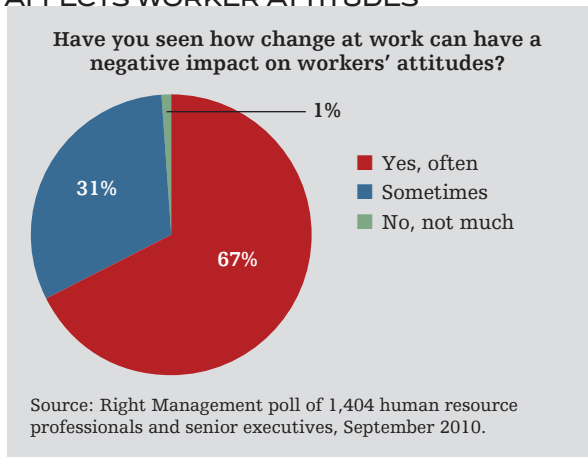
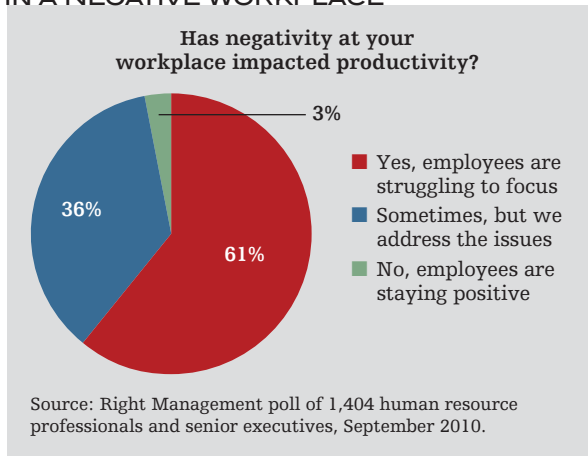


FIGURE 3: PRODUCTIVITY SUFFERS IN A NEGATIVE WORKPLACE



more confident in their ability to do their jobs. This will reduce stress and ultimately increase productivity and performance.

- **Value employees.** Demonstrate commitment and loyalty to employees through regular career discussions. This also will help to maintain accountability for appropriate employee behaviors and identify support that may be needed for areas of development.

Here are some tips for talent managers to reduce negativity and create more positive work environments:

- **Assess.** Understand your own reactions to changes and your authentic beliefs about where these changes are taking the organization.
- **Start with yourself.** Check your language and behaviors; show zero tolerance for negativity; and lead by example.
- **Keep lines of communication open.** Keep employees informed about what's happening in the organization and be available to listen to concerns.
- **Don't validate or encourage negativity.** Counsel the complainer and challenge negative and pessimistic thinking and beliefs.
- **Ask for solutions.** Recognize positive behaviors and ask open-ended questions, then listen and help develop solutions.

There are significant implications for not helping employees adapt to change and manage increased responsibilities and workloads. Consider the impact on:

- **Employee health and wellness:** Stress levels escalate, negatively impacting health and wellness. Signs to look for include higher absenteeism, increased turnover and lowered productivity, all telltale indications that performance is dwindling.
- **Job dissatisfaction and performance:** Lower employee engagement threatens overall performance through deterioration in quality of work output, customer service and attention to detail, declining customer satisfaction, lost opportunity costs and problems incurred because of mistakes and inefficiency (Figure 3).
- **Leadership credibility:** Lack of trust in leadership's ability to make good business decisions impedes the ability to lead effectively and execute on strategy. If leaders aren't supported with respect and commitment from the team, trust will erode and performance will falter.
- **Workplace culture:** Resentment brews from individuals working longer hours as well as guilt from those who aren't and may feel pressured to do so.

DASHBOARD continued on page 48

Focus on managing change, engaging employees and building skills and behaviors that both employees and employers need to thrive in today's dynamic business climate.



DASHBOARD continued from page 43

Negative judgment is projected toward the organization's leadership team, which isn't establishing appropriate working boundaries and guidelines with employees.

- **Focus:** Prioritization and focus gets skewed. Leaders need to coach employees to make their own decisions and to effectively prioritize their work so they are focusing their time and energy on top-level projects that positively contribute to performance.

Managing Talent in the New Normal

As organizations recover from the global financial crisis, the reality is flatter organizations, constricted hiring, cash conservation, heavier workloads and disgruntled employees.

The conditions today are here to stay. Managers need to provide guidance and coaching to employees to help them be more agile and work in this changing, increasingly pressurized work environment.

Some practical suggestions for talent managers include:

- **Increase collaboration.** Work on collaboration skills, such as utilizing cross-functional teams, learning how to manage diversity well or adopting software sharing services to increase effectiveness.
- **Be realistic.** Help employees by setting realistic expectations so they're more likely to be successful in completing tasks within reasonable time frames.
- **Promote self-management.** More and more, individuals are expected to be self-directed. For instance, consider the increased ranks of virtual workers and the autonomous skills required to be successful in such an environment. Nurture self-management skills in employees, such as adaptability, autonomy, decisiveness, dependability, tolerance for stress and resourcefulness.
- **Communicate frequently and consistently.** Communicate with authenticity and stay in touch with workers consistently and regularly. Hold brief weekly calls or meetings to make sure team members are aware of priorities, updates on the business and their role in making it successful.

- **Be flexible.** Create flexible structures to accommodate different lifestyles and work motivators. Employees want control over where, when and how they work, as well as the career choices they make. Embrace a "one-size-fits-one" approach and understand the different motivators and needs for individual employees. One employee may benefit from flexible work hours to accommodate the needs of parenting school-aged children, while another employee may flourish from permission to work out in the morning and stay later in the day.

- **Reward accomplishments.** Don't focus on rewarding individuals for the time they put in at work, but rather for what they achieve and accomplish. If one individual's goal is to retain customers through excellent service, allow that employee the freedom to achieve this, perhaps by working flexible hours to meet customer needs as they arise and not sticking to an 9-to-5 schedule.

- **Prioritize.** Equip employees with decision rules to be able to identify what's important so they can focus their time appropriately. Empower employees so they have the ability to decide the priorities and subsequently have a greater vested interest in what they're doing. But empowerment turns to abandonment if leaders aren't providing road maps for people to use in the decision process. For instance, if a company's values focus on customer service, teamwork, innovation and work-life balance, a leader must inform people which values are the top drivers, otherwise employees may not know how to react when work situations force them to choose one value over another, such as customer focus and work-life balance.

Effectively managing talent through change will go a long way to ensure that employees are aligned with the overall business strategy and are committed to doing their part to achieve business goals. Preparing workforces to respond confidently and competently reduces negative reactions, mitigates the risk of turnover, improves morale and boosts productivity. **TM**

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