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Building the future of work together

Bought out, Burnt out and Bored out – how to guard against worker apathy and create a motivated and productive workforce

By Denis Pennel

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A recent Gallup survey revealed that just 13% of workers are engaged in their jobs. If this is to be believed it suggests that the vast majority of people do not feel sufficiently connected with the work that they do and, as a result, are likely to be less motivated and less productive.

Almost ten years on from the global downturn it is fair to say that the fall out for business has taken its toll on employees. For nearly a decade now we have faced a volatile and uncertain business environment with the fortunes of companies and stock markets flailing wildly from hero to zero and back again.

In responding to these events some companies have had to trim their budgets and with them their workforce. We have seen downsizing across all sectors of the economy as organisations have sought to run their businesses with fewer resources in an effort to maintain margins and become more agile. The impact on employees has been significant. They are being asked to achieve more with the same resources and high rates of unemployment mean that there is no shortage of people to take their place if they can't cope with the increased stress and workload.

In many sectors this thinly-stretched, doing-more-with-less culture has become the new norm. In combination with globalisation, mergers and rationalisation it has led to large numbers of workers being bought out so that they now work for a company that they didn't choose to join and with whom they have little affinity. The long hours that are being required of them with a greater workload and no financial increment are leading to increasing levels of stress and burn out.

Burn out of course is nothing new - remember the thrusting 1980's and the rise of the Gordon Gecko mentality of 'lunch is for wimps'? A phenomena that is new however, is the emergence of

Bore out. This typically affects workers in their 40's and 50's, well- established in their careers. They see themselves on a treadmill with no hope of real change or evolution in their working lives. However, unlike previous generations who might have expected to reap the rewards of seniority, they find themselves working harder than ever for the same remuneration, and required to carry out boring work. Some are so desperate that they are choosing to throw in the towel and leave behind the corporate life of secured salary and pension for the relative insecurity, but less mind-numbing path, of the independent worker or freelancer.

So how has this happened? Time was when it was temporary workers who were assumed to be less engaged and motivated, although recent surveys show that 81% of agency workers are satisfied with their work. How did it come about that the company stalwarts, seen as the backbone of organisations are becoming bored and totally unmotivated?

Again the origins lie in today's business world, increasingly run by accountants and bean-counters, where there is a sometimes obsessive focus on data. Workers are required to file reports on almost every area of their activity as companies compare ROI figures from offices from Chicago to Chennai in an attempt to establish learnings and best practice. The trouble is that not only is constant reporting and justification nerve wracking, it is also very dull.

Losing senior workers to burn out and bore out is not the sign of a healthy company, and furthermore the mindset of Generation X, who are coming up behind them in the workplace will simply not tolerate it. They will vote with their feet and move to another job or give the labour market a miss for a while and go travelling around the world.

Organisations need to focus on ways to motivate and energise workers and to create a vision beyond the numbers that actually makes them want to get out of bed and come to work in the morning. Surely there is enough data demonstrating the link between motivation and productivity to make this a persuasive business strategy?

Companies must rebalance the discussion and give people purpose and vision. There is little point in spending time and money on shiny brochures and up-beat videos on the company's "Mission and Vision", if the reality among the workers on the ground tells a very different story.

The past 10 years have been tough for companies and they have had to reach deep in order to survive and come through it. They certainly deserve a whole lot of credit for doing that. However I believe that the time has now come for them to start investing in the future and in the human capital that will be so crucial to their continued success in the years to come.

Denis Pennel
Managing Director, World Employment Confederation
 @PennelDenis