

Productivity in the public sector

John Harney outlines approaches to secure greater productivity

As a business coach, I have spent all my working life going into different organisations. The first question I often encounter is a query about my experience in the particular field of business. People want to know what experience I have in their area of business because they see their sector as distinct from others. However, what people don't realise is that from a productivity perspective all organisations are essentially the same.

We know that people want to enjoy their jobs. They want to feel that sense of accomplishment at the end of each day and if they do, they perform far better. So now the crucial question is how do we introduce a culture of productivity and still ensure that employees get enjoyment out of their work?

What is productivity anyway? How do we define the concept? When we say that a person is very productive what do we associate with that? What do we mean? Here are some suggestions:

- They produce more work than other colleagues
- They get things done efficiently where colleagues seem to take longer
- They get tasks completed; they seem to know what to do

What makes a person 'productive'?

How does a 'productive' person behave? What makes their behaviour different?

- They are often short and concise in their discourse. They tend not to linger on repeat discussions and yet often take great interest in details of the way things get done, particularly those things that are not running smoothly or which haven't quite been mastered.
- They display a positive can-do attitude toward their tasks and toward helping others to find ways to streamline and do things more efficiently or with better outcomes.
- They have an interest in improving the way things are done. Of this type of person you will here a supervisor say that, "This person is management material". They are possibly thinking: "Wow! If the boss would let me promote this person my life would be so much easier and I could move up the ladder". The boss, on the other hand, is wondering why the rest of his or her employees are not as motivated as the particular individual.
- This person is usually also happy! Happy to come to work because they are enjoying themselves at work - they are performing and they know it. They

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are solving problems, getting loads done. They feel valued because they are getting recognition. Is this person naturally this way? Is that how we as managers look at the different people in our teams? Can we turn the average person into a great person? Do we believe that we can actually influence peoples' behaviour? Can we work with a person over time and turn an average performer into a great performer?

Let us examine the possible reasons why this person is performing. People will say this person is organised. What they actually mean if you dig down is that this person has a plan of work that they follow. They have figured out the best way to do each different task, a procedure that they follow that is the most efficient way of completing the task. They take pride in completing the task in the best way and in the time they have allowed themselves. They don't like being interrupted in mid task because they have set themselves notional targets and they want to feel good about themselves at the end of the day. They want to feel that they had a good day and if they don't get through what they expect for

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the day they are not satisfied.

The path to productivity

Let's summarise what the key characteristics are:

- The plan of work for the day
- Best practice procedures for each task
- A notional time expectancy for each task
- A feeling of accomplishment when tasks get completed
- A happy productive team player

So in order to get all the team more productive the supervisor needs to ensure that each person is happy in their job and that means that they have an expectation of themselves which is attainable and for which they get regular recognition.

This is the essence of enhancing productivity. The objective is to get as much of the work of your department or organisation into this framework and then watch as the team make the improvements.

What makes the workplace more productive?

Have you heard of the 'Theory of Interruptions'? Some organisations loose from 15 per cent to 30 per cent of daily work time and don't even recognise it as such.

You are sitting at your desk working steadily at something when someone comes up to your desk with a query. You stop what you are doing take the question, give some assistance and then try to get back to what you were doing; however you have lost your train of thought. So you go back to the start of the last task and after 3 or 4 minutes you are back up to speed. The interruption itself only took say 2 minutes but you have actually lost over 5 minutes. If this happens to you 10 times in the working day that a colleague interrupts you because they cannot advance and need assistance you have lost the guts of an hour or 15 per cent of your day! The other side of this is that you are the one who has to get assistance in order to get your work done so you have been told to go to your colleague for help. On the face of it this seems like the right thing to do but the truth is that both of you are losing significant amounts of your day!

Good processes and good training eliminate these losses. As a coach, when we work in an organisation we spend full days tracking interruptions to the flow of work and what factors are causing the downtime. These are usually fairly innocent things that can be corrected by changing a process, creating job aids or formalising routines.

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