

HR's role in solving the UK's productivity puzzle



Introduction

The UK's enduring problem with productivity remains a key issue. Despite the fact the UK reportedly works long hours, valuable output is low. The shortfall in the UK's productivity compared to that of other countries has long been an economic headache – the gap is thought to be as much as 30 per cent.

Another factor to add to the equation is that, despite significant increases in employment levels, productivity has actually worsened. It's something all companies need to face head-on, but with such a complicated issue, where do we start?

The Office for National Statistics [published a report in early 2019](#) highlighting positive statistics for employment rates. This unfortunately shone a light on the struggles the UK continues to face. The upside is there is an estimated 444,000 more people working than the previous year, which means unemployment is slightly down at 4.0% – that's the lowest since December 1974 to February 1975.

4.0%

unemployment is down to 4.0% – the lowest since 1975

The main source of measuring productivity is 'output per hour' and in the report, this was

down by an estimated 0.2% which is weaker than previous years.

0.2%

Output per hour was estimated to have **decreased by 0.2% in 2018** – this represents the slowest growth rate of productivity in two years

Why has the UK experienced such a prolonged productivity problem?

The economy in Great Britain hasn't been able to fully recover since the global financial crisis of 2007/2008. This crisis is widely considered to have been the worst of its kind since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

A global economic downturn – the Great Recession – followed the crisis in 2008 and since this time the economy has essentially flatlined and seen very little improvement. This has been dubbed the '**productivity puzzle**'.

If the pre-financial crisis productivity growth trend had continued as it was, productivity would now be about 16% higher than it actually is. Salaries and living standards would also be a lot higher than they are.

Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman said in 1994:



Productivity isn't everything, but in the long run it is almost everything. A country's ability to improve its standard of living over time depends almost entirely on its ability to raise its output per worker.

Paul Krugman



Contradicting statistics

Interestingly, in late 2018, it was suggested by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development that the problem wasn't as severe as previously thought after they [published figures](#).

The OECD revealed that rather than being 16% less efficient than the average American worker, the average British worker was only 8% less efficient.

This comparison was made with other countries too. It was previously thought the average British worker was 19% less efficient than the average French worker, but the OECD actually had this at 11%.

However, as previously mentioned, the [Office for National Statistics Office](#) reported in January 2019 that productivity from July to September 2018 was actually only 0.2% greater than during the same period the previous year.

This isn't remotely close to the improvement the OECD reported, showing just how difficult it is to even get the facts right with such a complex puzzle. Plus, even the OECD stats above merely show that we're not as far behind as we feared, which isn't much cause for celebration.

Still, while this may be a complex puzzle, it's a crucial one to solve – and especially pertinent for progressive HR departments who are tasked with using data and technology to help get more from the workforce. Over the course of this report we'll investigate just how important productivity is and how the UK compares to other nations. We'll also look at the role of the workplace in terms of wellbeing and happiness, flexitime, the four day week, meetings, onboarding, training and technology.

Poor productivity, and how to rectify it, has been a continuous headache for politicians and economists in the UK for a decade, so what can HR do to help?



Chapter One:

How does the UK's productivity compare?

When you take into account the UK's reputation with regards to productivity, it's unsurprising to discover that we don't stack up favourably in comparison to other countries.

[Statistics provided by the Office for National Statistics](#) in April 2018 show the final estimates of international comparisons of UK productivity for the whole of 2016. It doesn't make great reading for UK economists and politicians.

Labour productivity is usually measured as value of goods and services produced for each hour worked. In 2016, the average British worker produced:

- ↑ **8.7% higher** than Japan
- ↑ **0.6% higher** than Canada
- ↓ **10.5% lower** than Italy
- ↓ **22.6% lower** than the US
- ↓ **22.7% lower** than France
- ↓ **26.2% lower** than Germany
- ↓ **16.3% lower** than the rest of the G7

What must be taken into account with these comparison figures is cultural differences. For example, workers in Japan have an infamous

reputation for overworking themselves. In their culture it is [socially acceptable to fall asleep](#) in meetings and at their desks.

There have even been reports of the country facing a ['death by work' crisis](#) – this problem is so widespread they even have a word for it. That word is Karoshi. From these statistics the United Kingdom reportedly produced 8.7% higher than Japan in terms of labour productivity, but is that surprising when you take into account the Japanese working culture?

Being 16.3% less productive than the rest of the G7 collectively is a substantial gulf and there's no doubt that the UK has a real problem with productivity that needs solving, but how reliable is the data?

When discussing the gap between the UK and the rest of the G7, Lancaster University academic Dr Anthony Hesketh stressed the need to factor in cultural differences:



The French don't actually report that they do a 50-hour week, they report 35 because they are unionised and have regulations. We report 70 plus hours a week when we work less than that. It's a culture thing so the figures aren't always accurate.

Dr Anthony Hesketh



It's more about the questions you ask and the data you collect, organisations need to up their game with collecting data. They're relying on macro data.



Dr Anthony Hesketh

The collection and use of effective data is something that HR departments across the country can get to grips with and help to solve for their own individual cases.

Regional productivity

Looking regionally, the ONS released data in February 2019 covering the estimates for measures of labour productivity regionally in the UK in 2017.

UK Average	100
London	133
South East	108.2
Scotland	97.5
East of England	93.4
North West	92.2
South West	89.5
North East	89.2
West Midlands	88.1
Yorkshire and Humber	85.2
East Midlands	84.8
Wales	84.2
Northern Ireland	83.5

London dominates the labour productivity estimates, showing how entrenched regional inequality is in the UK. In fact, the Greater South East of England is even one of the most productive locations in Europe. This is due to a large concentration of high-productivity

exporting companies. The gap between the capital and the rest of Great Britain has grown over the last decade highlighting the need for quality infrastructure projects for the regions.

The think tank [Centre for Cities](#) highlights why there is such an issue with regional inequality, stating: "Firms choose to locate their high-skilled operations in cities which can offer them access to a high-skilled workforce and other relevant businesses, and will base lower value components in places where land and labour is cheaper.

"Barclays bases its high-value banking activities in London and its low-skilled call centre in Sunderland."

Scott Corfe, Chief Economist at the Social Market Foundation think tank, shared this eye-catching map of the UK based on the ONS data on Twitter:

Scott Corfe @ScottCorfe

In our latest @SMFthinktank map, we look at new data on productivity across the UK economy, released today by @ONS. A deeply concerning picture across most of the country, with productivity well below the national average (which is dragged up by places such as London).

2:00 PM - Feb 6, 2019

See Scott Corfe's other Tweets



Scott Corfe
@ScottCorfe

Not only does London account for over half (59%) of Britain's financial services exports, but it also accounts for 57% of exports in the increasingly important ICT sector. Encouraging businesses outside of the capital to export must play a key role in rebalancing economic growth.

♥ 2 1:07 PM - Feb 12, 2019

[See Scott Corfe's other Tweets](#)

Looking at the statistics is a great way of identifying that there is a problem but that's just one piece of a very large, and complicated puzzle. How much does the average worker know about their output and how productive they are?

Pat Ashworth, Director of AdviserPlus Learning Solutions suggests that not many are aware of the problem: "I would guess that there are very few people in the UK that know we don't compare well with the rest of the G7 in terms

of productivity – do people really know how productive they are?"

According to Pat, companies need to be doing more to help their workforce understand what's expected from them in terms of productivity: "The onboarding process needs to explain in great clarity what makes great productivity and what constitutes bad productivity."

I would guess not many employees would know how productive they are so that needs introducing from the offset.

Pat Ashworth, Director of AdviserPlus

"It's almost like 'what does good look like?' isn't it? So that needs defining early on."

Comparing to the output of other countries is a great indicator of where the UK sits in terms of productivity – whether cultural differences play a part or not, there is no doubt that there is an issue.

What are the problems, though, and is anything being done?



Chapter Two:

Why is productivity so low?

There are many theories as to why the UK's productivity has flatlined and why we see such small levels of improvement.

As the statistics indicated, employment is the highest it's been for many years but this is considered to be misleading due to population also being at an all time high, as Grace Blakeley discusses [in The New Statesman](#).

"The true problem is not a lack of jobs but a lack of adequately paid ones. Ten years on from the financial crisis, Britain's wage performance was dismal: among OECD countries only Greece and Mexico fared worse," she explained.



With labour so cheap, many businesses have chosen to hire more staff rather than invest in new machinery.

Grace Blakeley, [The New Statesman](#)

New technology and machinery actually makes the workforce far more productive with the right training in place and businesses haven't invested in this area.

Not only have companies invested far too little, many of the jobs created since the economic crisis have been low-skilled. With wage growth so low, companies have had little to gain by laying off less productive and lower skilled workers.

In [an article for the Business Leader](#), economics and productivity expert at UWE, Professor Don Webber also believes that we may even be measuring productivity incorrectly:

"I believe we are looking at a measurement issue when it comes to UK productivity.

"The value of output is an imperfect measure of productivity. A business's ability to increase productivity is dependent on three things – to push down costs, push up prices and sell more units. That's how we measure an increase in productivity but that says nothing about the businesses' ability to convert inputs to outputs."

So-called 'zombie companies' are also considered an issue as their borrowing costs have been cut due to very low interest rates – meaning these companies are able to meet their interest payments but never chip away at their actual debt. These 'zombie companies' would have become bankrupt in the past, and their continued existence suppresses growth.

There is a real need for these previously discussed low-skilled workers to go through training to bring their skills up to a greater, and more productive standard. A study called '[Impact of Training and Development Programs on Employee Performance](#)' from the International Journal of Science and Research identified the need for training for employees and employers.

"The major goal of employee training is to enhance and improve skills, attitudes and knowledge in order to higher performance and productivity."

The cited benefits of training included heightening the quality of work, change management, reducing employee turnover and increasing morale and motivation.

Another key benefit was highlighted by the study: "Thirdly, one of (the) advantages of training is the reduced cost and time because a well-trained employee will be able to achieve tasks within a shorter period of time and with minimum cost."

While things do need to be done at government level, companies have the opportunity to tackle the productivity problems they face head on with HR processes. A great many of the issues that face the UK at a national level are the sorts of things HR departments are stepping in to tackle at an individual level in their own organisations.

Are companies making changes for productivity?

These theories have been identified by many companies and put into practice to make a transformational change in their productive output.

Post Office

Post Office has experienced productivity savings of over £500,000 thanks to a collaboration with AdviserPlus. It found that it needed to manage absence in order to improve business performance, and while it

£500,000

Post Office has experienced **productivity savings of over £500,000** thanks to a collaboration with AdviserPlus

already had the MyHR Help service in place, which is an outsourced employee relations advice line delivered by AdviserPlus, it needed more assistance.

In the four years from 2013/14, sickness absence had risen from eight to fourteen days and a rise in mental health-related absence was also noticeable. This was costing Post Office about £1.5m each year.

Martin Kirke, Group HR Director at Post Office, said: "We needed some help – we knew absence was on the increase, with a worrying rise in mental health related absence, but cases weren't being raised – so we asked AdviserPlus how additional intervention from our MyHR Help service could support us."

Data gathered reinforced the fact that the number of cases being opened by MyHR Help was low, therefore cases were not being managed and employees were not being supported.

Working with Post Office, AdviserPlus delivered four new services – Line Manager Training, a Pro-Active Advice Line Service, MI and Visual Analytics and a HR Knowledge Portal. This approach has meant more thorough processes are being carried out with ten times as many sickness absence cases opened per year.



Despite more cases being opened, mental health absence has fallen by 25% over the same period of time.

Implementing processes to empower managers as a result of evidence-based HR has helped Post Office achieve more than £500,000 in productivity savings.

Perpetual Guardian

20%

The company reported it had increased productivity by a huge 20 per cent as a result of the trial and would be making it a permanent option for all full-time employees

New Zealand Trust company Perpetual Guardian conducted a landmark trial of a

four-day working week (continuing to be paid for five days) in March and April of 2018 with impressive results. The company reported it had increased productivity by a huge 20 per cent as a result of the trial and would be making it a permanent option for all full-time employees from November 2018. All full-time employees are entitled to one 'rest day' per week, providing they hit their productivity targets.

"We have proven the concept and developed a model workable for our business, and we have established a KPI for the leaders in our business to ensure productivity and customer service are maintained," Founder and Managing Director Andrew Barnes said.

The Auckland Business School studied the trial and did note that some employees found having to complete tasks in a shorter time frame stressful. Not all of the results were positive for Perpetual Guardian, but the overall product worked effectively enough for this trial to be adopted full-time.

Wellcome Trust

After following the Perpetual Guardian trial and study closely, the science research foundation based in London is now considering the shift to a four day week.

Some parts of the [Wellcome Trust](#) already have productivity policies in place such as no emails in the evenings or at weekends. However, with a possible four-day-week trial planned for some or all of its 800 staff in Autumn 2019, this could mark a more significant shift for UK businesses.

Other examples

Consultant Beverley Shears, former Group HR Director of the Ministry of Justice, shared with us an example of a company displaying a forward-thinking approach:

"Tesco did have one store open with a process whereby employees chose the hours they'd like and set up a new store based on that.

"The trouble was it made people disgruntled when the store required all hands to the pump and they were needed to help out and work."

In another example, Beverley highlighted the processes of a large department store:

"John Lewis haven't revolutionised the working week but have still created a great culture. A retail position means you have to be on the shop floor, so you can't have flexitime.

"They have a system whereby you accrue time for a sabbatical and your job is left open to come back to."

Neither of these companies are able to offer flexi time or a four day week due to being customer-facing roles, so they have thought on their feet to come up with another solution for staff.

Through exploring some of the theories as to why productivity is low in the United Kingdom we can identify the potential issues and how they can be improved through HR processes. The fact that businesses are looking to reinvent the working week suggests that many think the traditional working structures we engage in aren't fit for purpose.

We've seen what's worked for some companies and, in the case of Tesco, the seeds of an idea that had the potential to be a successful with more structure in place. We'll look deeper into why Tesco and John Lewis' approach to staff satisfaction has an impact on productivity.

So what are the problems that can be improved or rectified with the help of HR? With the help of industry experts and academics we can attempt to piece the productivity puzzle back together, working from the outside in.



Chapter Three:

Workforce wellbeing

Your workforce – healthy = productive

As discussed in Chapter Four of the 2018 AdviserPlus [Absenteeism Report](#), there's a strong chance that companies are falling down by being reactive, rather than proactive when it comes to tackling absence from work. Workplace wellbeing is undoubtedly important, yet a surprising majority of businesses don't implement a workplace health strategy – 57.6%, in fact.

57.6%

A surprising majority of businesses don't implement a workplace health strategy

AdviserPlus Director of Learning Solutions Pat Ashworth, explained in the report that businesses without a workplace health strategy are missing out, arguing: "They are not thinking about the bigger picture."

Pat explained that businesses are increasingly understanding the benefits of being proactive to prevent absenteeism, which has clear positive effects on productivity: "It's certainly the way in which organisations are going. On a fairly frequent basis now I find I am talking to heads of wellbeing. The fact that organisations are appointing someone and giving them that title is a fair sign that they

are taking the health and wellbeing of their people seriously."

The not-for-profit organisation, [C3 Collaborating for Health](#), holds a variety of workplace health events and work on a range of projects. It describes its health movement as: "A networking and knowledge-sharing group for people involved in workplace health. The goal is collaboration across all areas of health at work, identifying ways to make it easier for organisations to develop and maintain healthy, resilient and productive workforces."

C3 considers workplace health important for a range of reasons, including the following:



The healthiest quarter of the workforce is naturally 18% more productive at work than the least healthy quarter. Improved productivity leads to improved financial performance.




C3 Collaborating for Health

"Health promotion programmes are cost-effective, with returns on investment demonstrated of 2.3 to 10.1 times the amount invested."

Empowerment through training

Pat Ashworth explained that having a workplace health strategy is only one part of

the puzzle, however. She also highlighted the importance of robust training for managers to acknowledge that they have a responsibility to the individuals they manage:

 Manager training for workforce wellbeing and mental health is huge. Managers need to get better at spotting the signs of wellbeing and mental health problems and there needs to be an understanding that it's better for everyone if workers are in work.

Pat Ashworth, Director of AdviserPlus Learning Solutions

Pat describes that the four key outcomes in this process are:

- 1. Managers need to have a better understanding of these situations**
- 2. They need to feel confident and capable to have the right conversations**
- 3. They need to be confident the language they're using is correct**
- 4. They need to provide ongoing support, for example, on employees' return to work and adjustments in the workplace**

She added: "This all comes from robust training to make them aware of what's required from them in their job."

There is a cycle and pattern that emerges in the workplace, with self-worth and mental health impacted if someone is not enjoying your work. In order to enjoy your job, you need to be empowered to perform and fulfil your role effectively, but how can you if you're feeling low or unwell?


This is where management training is vital. The previous Post Office example is instructive here. Through effective training and its resulting process, mental health absence fell by 25% with £500,000 of productivity savings.

The [What Works Centre for Wellbeing](#) has put together a number of factsheets, reports and journals on the subject of wellbeing in the workplace. Its factsheet '[Why invest in employee wellbeing?](#)' points towards the benefits for employers including better performance, reduced costs and higher levels of creativity. The research also shows the three key things employers can do to create 'good jobs' for their employees:

- 1. Train and support staff to improve the quality of their job and wellbeing skills**
- 2. Train managers to heighten employee motivation**
- 3. Assess policies of the organisation**

Strike the ideal balance

There's much to be said for the value of training. Beverley Shears explained that it also greatly affects a leader's ability to strike the ideal balance when managing their workers:

 If people are happy and flourishing then productivity is high. We can overdo those cultures though, the balance needs to be right.

Beverley Shears

If there are no boundaries, goals or targets team members will wonder why they bother and become demotivated.

"A very careful balance needs to be struck and as a leader of a team or organisation you'll need to refine your skills to keep that balance."

Companies also need to ensure their employees are engaged and they understand the work they do and they need to be rewarded and recognised accordingly.

Beverley said: "Money, for me, is a demotivator. If you don't feel valued, it's not a motivator in the long term. You won't feel nourished and you'll start to wither and look elsewhere if you don't feel motivated."



When we're talking about empowerment, happiness and productivity it always needs to be the right model for the right company.



Beverley Shears, Former Group HR Director of the Ministry of Justice and Consultant

"Successful organisations are explicit in what they expect from their employees. When I was junior in HR at London Underground I had a budget to work with. I knew what was expected of me and then I had the freedom to use it in the best way."

"Great companies are specific about the 'what' but allow more flexibility with the 'how'."

"A happy employee is sufficiently knowledgeable, empowered and managed and then rewarded for their work."

'Communication is key'

As Beverley explained, human beings like certainty, context and to know how they fit in – to achieve this, good communication is key.

Without high levels of effective communication, no matter the size or type of business, problems can be easily created.

Beverley said: "Do you have the wrong level of competitiveness between teams? Is it a toxic environment?"

"Taking an example from a school environment – if you have a star shooter in the netball team and they're the only player that gets praised, the other members of the team won't thrive."

"The first thing employers need to do is make sure they're not causing harm to employees – some organisations have a long way to go."

Beverley added: "Some people say 'you're at work – why should you expect to be happy at work?' – but it's a very reasonable thing to want – people are so much more productive when they're happy."

The so-called 'death by work' crisis in Japan coupled with the country's unfavourable productivity statistics certainly indicates a correlation between health and productivity. The move towards an increasing commitment to wellbeing policies is a positive step in the right direction for the UK economy.

Workforce wellbeing is many-layered, but as Beverley Shears commented, with the right model for the right company and the correct balance struck, there's no reason the aspiration of wellbeing in the workplace can't be achieved.

The healthier your employees, physically and mentally, the more likely they are to be fit for effective work. Health, empowerment, happiness and satisfaction all come from well-communicated and proactive policies creating a skilled and productive workforce.

Chapter Four:

Revolutionising the working week

When we think about changes in the way we work in a modern setting we often look at the possibility of flexitime, working from home and the four-day week. Whatever the reason for an employee – whether it's for work/life balance or to eliminate long commutes – it's easier and more desirable than ever for employers to offer flexible working.

While flexi-time is not a new concept, there has been a rethink due to technology being an enabler. This form of working can also be managed appropriately and effectively due to the advancement of technology.

Addicted to work?

Deputy Editor of The New Statesman, Helen Lewis, discussed the UK's addiction to work, the possibility of a four-day week and email bans in her February 2019 article 'Out of the Ordinary': "Are we working too hard? The answer is an unequivocal yes. By European standards, Britons spend a lot of time working – 42 hours a week – but we're not particularly productive when we're there.



The answer to getting more done, counter-intuitively, could be working less.

Helen Lewis, deputy editor The New Statesman

Many employees in the UK now have 24/7 access to their work thanks to technology, and yet productivity remains low. This suggests the more we work, the less we produce. So could reducing the number of days we have to complete the work actually increase productivity? It appears, as previously discussed, to have become a positive solution for Perpetual Guardian.

However, this still poses a major headache for many companies in the UK when trying to grapple with how flexible working policies look for their businesses.

A productivity conversation

AdviserPlus CEO Nick Bradley discussed the issue of productivity, flexible working and the four-day week with Lancaster University academic Dr Anthony Hesketh as part of the HR leadership series.


Nick believes businesses should be measuring productivity and performance – the challenge is how to do it. Due to the risk of presenteeism, and the question of whether the employee is actually working or not, it shouldn't just be about just 'turning up' at their place of work.

He said: "Personally, what I've seen is that the paradigm has to shift to a more results-based focus."

Nick argued that people should be rewarded and recognised based on results, rather than the time worked.

On this, Dr Hesketh pointed out that people now choose work to fit around their lives. With a transition from the 'fixed meal deal' of a nine-to-five job-for-life to a more 'a la carte' model.

Dr Hesketh also noted that some of the structural changes to the economy lend themselves to the different ways of working favoured by modern employees, adding:

 We have moved significantly over the last 25/30 years to a service-based economy, which lends itself to flexibility. Nine times out of ten I probably am (doing a 10 or 12 hour day when working from home) because one of the problems that you have when you work at home is that you don't know when to switch off.


Dr Anthony Hesketh

The average number of hours of work a week is edging up per full time employee in the UK but it's believed we're not measuring or looking at the right things around productivity. It's about balance and working with the person to understand their needs and implement rules around that to impact productivity.


87.2%

of HR professionals questioned by AdviserPlus believed flexible working could reduce unauthorised absenteeism

After all, 87.2% of HR professionals questioned by AdviserPlus believed flexible working could reduce unauthorised absenteeism.

Working together

Kate Bell, Head of Economics for the TUC (Trades Union Congress), [said in our 2018 Absenteeism Report](#) that she feels flexible working can aid both business and employee if carried out in the right way:

 We think that flexible working is a win-win for both employers and workers.


Kate Bell, Head of Economics, TUC

It helps with productivity and retention. And it means staff can do shorter days in quiet periods to balance early starts and late finishes when it's busier."

The TUC's long term aim is to campaign for a four-day week, and use trends such as automation and artificial intelligence to cut the amount of time workers are having to spend in the workplace.

Kate added: "The future of work should allow people greater flexibility, with technology used to help organise workflows and working time around workers lives. Workers should also get higher pay and shorter working hours as their share from the wealth that will be created by the next generation of automation technologies like AI. We believe that a 4-day week by the end of the current century is an achievable goal."



A YouGov report published in January 2019 discussed whether working from home was more or less productive. Almost half of both of HR decision makers (49%) and employees (45%) polled actually think that their location of working actually has no effect on their output suggesting that the productivity problem involves much more than just a change of scene for employees. Interestingly, a majority of businesses encourage working from home – 7 in 10 – with 27% of companies actively discouraging it.

7 in 10

Interestingly, a majority of businesses encourage working from home

'Listen to your workforce'

While many modern workers will be basing their employment decisions on the offering of flexible working, it still must be kept in mind that no two individuals operate in the same way.

Beverley Shears highlighted the importance of understanding your employees:



Listen to your workforce and individuals to work in collaboration for what you both need and want.



Beverley Shears

We must keep in mind that flexible working doesn't always sit well with the rest of the workforce having to 'pick up the slack.'"

Beverley added: "If we're talking about revolutionising the working week, some people don't mind doing Saturdays and Sundays for childcare purposes, for example."

Of course, as we saw earlier when looking at retail companies, the four-day week isn't accessible for everyone, neither is flexi-time or working from home. But companies like John Lewis have worked around this offering other benefits, including accruing time for sabbaticals. This relates back to the point of implementing the right model to fit the company. Productivity might be a problem for all businesses – but the solution might well be different depending on the circumstances.

There also needs to be a recognition that there are certain roles within a company that can't be carried out from home over a substantial period of time.

Beverley said: "Leaders are judged on their visibility and it's just not possible with customer

facing roles. However, if I had a big paper to write there needs to be flexibility for me to work from home on one day so I can focus. With access to work now being a 24/7 thing, the amount of time a workforce can

F If you get all elements right and balanced for your organisation you'll be pretty awesome and successful!

Beverley Shears

potentially put in throughout the day, in the evenings and at weekends requires addressing through transforming culture. Helen Lewis, commenting on the four-day week adopted by Perpetual Guardian and considered by The Wellcome Trust, pointed out: "The challenge then, I guess, will be to stop all those staff emailing each other on Fridays. Work is a difficult habit to kick."



Chapter Five:

Meetings

Business travel hotel brand Crowne Plaza Hotel & Resorts released a report in September 2018 revealing that the average UK worker wastes almost 13 days a year in meetings that are considered to be unproductive.

13 days*

The average UK worker wastes ***almost 13 days a year** in unproductive meetings

An analysis of the report in [The Independent](#) highlighted: "More than one in three admit to switching off during meetings lasting too long, deeming more than half of those they attend as "unproductive"."



So could unproductive meetings be contributing to the UK's 'productivity puzzle'? Meetings have been a hot topic of discussion in recent years, with many companies trialling different protocols to make their processes more streamlined. Some only hold meetings on certain days, many have banned phones and laptops, other companies have stand-only meetings and some have banned meetings altogether.

'Mad Meeting Monday's and going Mobile-Free'

Interestingly, many of the examples in this field actually come from American businesses but there are a few from the UK. Sales and leadership coaching company Southwestern Consultancy only hold meetings one day of the week – something they have dubbed 'Mad Meeting Mondays'.

In an [interview with Forbes Rory Vaden](#), co-founder of Southwestern explained: "Mondays are the one day we ask everyone to come in. We meet. We talk. We discuss. We make decisions. Then the rest of the week we scatter all across the world, we deploy those decisions, and we execute the strategies."

The chief executive of Welsh firm [Creditsafe](#) [revealed](#) that after banning smartphones in meetings creativity increased and Virgin Mobile Australia has also introduced 'Mobile Free Meetings'.

Social media and content marketing manager [Joe Kerr](#) said the results have been positive:

F Mobile Free Meetings are definitely more productive – you use the time so much better!

Joe Kerr, social media and content marketing manager, Virgin Australia

It's also had another really good benefit in that meeting organisers respect people's time more and their commitment to the meeting and run better meetings."

The UK meetings culture

Pat Ashworth explained that the UK has a 'meetings culture'. HR professionals especially find that this means they need to be in and out of meetings all the time so a 'ban' isn't practical, but there definitely are improvements to be made.

F Meetings do have a tendency to meander and run over without good planning and leadership. The half day/ three hour type meetings need to be reduced – do we need 'stand up' meetings to keep us energised?

Pat Ashworth

"We need to challenge our perception of meetings, what they are and how they are structured. Are they sit down or stand up? How long are they? Are they planned?"

For Pat, it all relies on how effective and relevant the agenda is and the strength of the person leading the meeting.

Beverley Shears believes that if there's a complex issue needing a resolution, a short meeting in a room with all involved, rather than streams of emails, is far more productive. The problem, she agrees, is a lack of control:

F Often the problem with meetings is a lack of discipline to come to a conclusion in the allocated time.

Beverley Shears

I do think there is a place for meetings, but what I do have a problem with is three-hour meetings where people use it as a talking shop and to eat biscuits!

"If you have your culture right – people can use intelligence to work all this out."

Dr Anthony Hesketh, an academic from Lancaster University with an expertise in HR, sees no way around the culture of meetings. He said: "How would we manage to conduct operations without meetings? What's the



alternative? There needs to be a reengineering of the idea of meetings."

Dr Hesketh agrees with Pat and Beverley in that



The craft of a meeting is allocating the right amount of time to the task



Dr Anthony Hesketh

While just one day a week for meetings may not be workable for certain businesses and also

for certain situations, it goes to show that with an organised plan and the right model for your company, productivity can be boosted.

As we've investigated, culture is incredibly important. No two businesses are the same, so getting your culture right and creating a workable protocol for meetings within that could be the key. The one thing that's certain is that most companies would probably benefit from tightening up the way their meetings are conducted and will feel the productivity benefits from this.



Chapter Six:

The importance of onboarding

We've seen the value that Post Office gained in employee wellbeing and productivity savings as a result of implementing training for managers. As Pat Ashworth told us in Chapter Three, manager training is vital, but so too is training for employees to ensure they increase their skills and feel knowledgeable and empowered. A study from the International Journal of Science and Research cited the benefits of training for both the employee and the employer.

As Beverley Shears emphasised,



Successful organisations are explicit in what they expect from their employees.

Beverley Shears



Training should begin with the onboarding process to ensure the bar is set for those expectations.

Beverley also believes that onboarding makes an individual feel welcome in their job – vital for setting the tone – but explained that some companies are treading dangerous ground when it comes to carrying out this process.

She explained: "Some organisations are in danger of being arrogant because they think they can skip this process. This arrogance comes from the misguided thought that the individual got the job over hundreds of other applicants and therefore they should just want to work there.

"Good organisations get the onboarding process right – you want people to feel they've made the right decision."

There is value in these processes and value in time spent with top leadership in the





organisation too. This process needs to be an organised one as it ultimately helps the employee forge relationships within the organisation that can be grown and sustained.



You want it to feel like a partnership process. Mutual trust, for me, is the most important part of a relationship with an employee and a business. Onboarding and ongoing training is a really important aspect of this.

Beverley Shears

"The individual has a responsibility here too – they need to be motivated to learn."

Pat Ashworth agrees that a thorough onboarding process is important for productivity: "The onboarding process really sets a standard. It needs to be organised, well prepared and then it sets a tone. Within that

onboarding process there needs to be plenty of clarification of what's expected of them.

"New technology introduced in ongoing training then underpins that expectation for productivity."

It's clear that onboarding should be a part of HR processes, no matter the business. Immersing new starters in your brand makes them proficient in their role and understand the wider business function faster. It also helps your employees understand what is expected, makes them feel welcome and wanted and therefore reduces staff turnover – which can greatly impact on productivity.

Investing in a comprehensive onboarding process gets the relationship your business has with its employees off on the right foot. Of course, the individual will need to have the motivation to immerse themselves in the process and carry it forwards, but the enthusiasm your company shows from the beginning offers the best chance of it being reflected back.

Chapter Seven:

Technology – the pros and cons

In neuroscientist Daniel J Levitin's book 'The Organised Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload' he discusses technology addiction and multitasking. He explains that our brains aren't built for the kind of multitasking the internet age encourages from us and also that technology addictions are making us all less efficient.

He explained in a Q&A [with the Guardian](#):



Although we think we're doing several things at once, multitasking, this is a powerful and diabolical illusion.



Daniel J Levitin, Neuroscientist

So, while technology is a fabulous enabler and should, in theory, be making us all more productive through streamlining processes, is it, in reality, actually meaning we produce less? Is technology use a problem that needs solving?

Blurred lines

As Pat Ashworth rightly points out, the lines are becoming increasingly blurred between technology use for work purposes and for recreation: "The difficulty is that social media is a vehicle for our roles, not just for social

purposes so there is an overlap. But we know they're addictive – the blue light from our phones even has negative effects on us.

"How can you divide the social and professional? When you're posting on Twitter for work you can easily get distracted by a thread – that's the addictive nature of social media and of tech."

However, technology is – and can be – a positive vehicle for productive processes. Both Pat Ashworth and Beverley Shears believe accessible and usable technology is an important enabler.

Using technology in a positive way through monitor and measure processes can create incredibly productive workforces when implemented successfully. There are tools available within technology to be able to track how productive your workforce is.



If your workforce has deadlines to meet and ways to track, they're more likely to be productive to hit those deadlines.



Pat Ashworth

With the help of technology, blended learning and e-learning is no longer required to be in a classroom and self-service HR can also be improved dramatically.

Beverley added: "Time with my manager should be face to face but why can't we work on the appraisal ongoing? Tech can be a great tool for self-management."

She also highlights that it can be a distraction, so discipline is key – technology has an invasive nature as you can never really escape it.

Beverley explained: "If I'm sitting having a cup of tea at home in the evening and see an email pop up, the temptation to read and reply then becomes a problem."



Companies are feeling their way a bit because tech has advanced so far so quickly. So making sure companies have time for reflection is important.

Beverley Shears

Unblurring those lines is an important step to getting the benefits of tech while mitigating any downsides.

What's your 'bandwidth'?

It is worth noting that productivity has been declining in the UK at the same time as there has been a rapid increase in technology.

People manage technology in very different ways, and therefore understand what they can, and cannot manage. Dr Anthony Hesketh refers to this as 'bandwidth' when he explains how much technology people have to juggle:

"We're bombarded with phone calls, skype calls, emails, then I'll stand up in front of 300 people for a lecture and they're on their devices or in a meeting with people on their phones – the question for me is how skilled are people at handling their bandwidth?"

"Many lecturers do, but I don't have a problem with my students having their laptops open in my lectures because they can handle multiple bandwidth. The trouble is, most people can't cope – does that mean we burn out?"

What he also points out is that there's no way back – we now need to manage the technology we have to deal with in the best way possible:

"In the 2000s there was a buzz around the possibility that phones may give us cancer, but how would we possibly be able to put that genie back in the bottle?"

Smartphones are here to stay – but how do we use them more smartly in the workplace?





'Do we treat workers like children and turn the WiFi off? I just don't think that's possible.'

HR has experienced a technological transformation and there are now many digital tools at the disposal of HR professionals to aid productivity, as we saw in the Post Office case study. Our 'HR and the Digital Revolution' eBook explores the transformation of technology in HR. Data-led and evidence-based HR could inform strategies to combat a range of issues including wellbeing and absenteeism, that ultimately feed into productivity. Tech is definitely part of the solution – it's just a question as to whether it's also part of the problem.

As Pat Ashworth said: "Do we treat workers like children and turn the WiFi off? I just don't think that's possible."

Technology use is a difficult point and there are a multitude of problems, but also a multitude of positives to come from its use.

What are your rules around technology? Do you use email too often? Know your culture and behaviours, understand what is expected and communicate protocols clearly with your workforce. It's very tricky for companies to get this balance right, but having these positive conversations in the workplace can aid and enhance productivity.

Our Conclusion

There are clearly many factors for businesses to think about within the broad spectrum of productivity. We've covered some of the important aspects, including the overarching issue of the UK's productivity puzzle, theories as to why it exists, examples of what proactive companies are doing and we've explored how the problems can be fixed by HR processes.

This all means people in HR have many things to consider, but identifying the potential issues means there's a great deal of opportunity for businesses to improve their processes.

From the examples given, it's clear that companies can affect positive change for the wellbeing, skill level and knowledge of their employees through being proactive and progressive action as opposed to being reactive and forever trying to fix problems.

This kind of progressive mindset will ultimately contribute to increasing productivity levels. Each business can find its own solution and take charge of boosting its own productivity.

Key takeaways on productivity:

- 1. No two businesses are the same** – so understanding the culture of the company is vital. Get the culture right and the business will be best placed to create productive processes.
- 2. Investing in training for both employees and managers** can impact productivity through increased skills, attitude, knowledge and heightened wellbeing.
- 3. Technology should be an enabler, rather than a distraction.** Implementing accessible and usable technology via monitor and measure processes could be key. Understand as a business what is expected and communicate protocols clearly with the workforce.
- 4. Implement a comprehensive and well thought out onboarding process.** It will need to explain clearly what makes great productivity and what constitutes bad productivity. Successful organisations are explicit in what they expect from their employees and reap the benefits.
- 5. Be proactive through the implementation of a workplace health strategy.** The benefits of preventing absenteeism will shine through in productive output.
- 6. Create ways to boost the workplace environment** in an attempt to heighten workplace happiness and wellbeing but be careful not to overdo this. Strike a balance and set boundaries and goals.
- 7. Set out a clear meetings protocol for your business** to avoid loss of productive time to meetings that overrun.

Do you need some help with managing the people in your workforce?

Whether you want to invest in expert-led training, or capture, analyse and act on HR data, speak to us and see how we can help.

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