Adjusting to a New Normal

Every day we read or hear of predictions for what our world of business will look like in the short-term and long-term future. When we assess all of these predictions, the range of differences among them can be dizzying. Some say we'll go back to our offices and plants and the internal environment will be different, with social distancing and other devices. But once we're there, our work will be similar to what it was before the pandemic. Others say that companies will invest in the development of working remotely, with new technology and equipment. At the same time, many smaller companies are simply worried about surviving altogether. The view can range from exciting and innovative to dismal and worrisome.

At Learning Dynamics, we're trying to figure it all out just like everyone else. But we have a huge advantage because we have our clients and customers to tell us what they'll need. One common message from just about all of our customer base is that the world of working remotely and virtually will not go away. In fact, it may be the core of the rebuilding of the economy.

Back in the 1990s, we saw a move toward some work from home, especially from our larger clients. But achieving the status of remote worker wasn't a simple process then and it still isn't now. Today, the population of remote workers is the result of workplace shutdowns. Previously, it was a way to reduce office costs and reduce commuting. The discipline needed to work remotely was assessed and the nature of the work itself was reviewed to assure no drop in overall performance.

Let's see what that disciplined approach included.

Ergonomics:
If we compare the efforts employers made toward safe and effective ergonomics inside the workplace against the ergonomics of working from home, the results may give us pause. Is the employee sitting on the sofa in their pajamas? Is their computer in their lap as they slouch on the sofa? How many hours are they likely to work that way? Aside from the possible drop in the quality of the work, will we be seeing a boost in "workplace injuries" when the workplace is the living room? As the pandemic recedes (hopefully) and the decisions are made to allow home- or remote-based workers to maintain that status, it may be a very good idea to establish safe and effective guidelines for ergonomics.

Customer Service:
The networks established to assure strong customer service were often supported by complex and sophisticated plans and protocols. Companies need to review what happens to those plans when the CSRs are working from their homes. Is the dog barking, the baby crying, the kids active and noisy? Is the service person distracted by the energy and excitement around him or her? When we add to these issues the likelihood that the CSR may have to deliver bad news to the customer, related to the shutdown, the potential for a deterioration in customer service performance and reputation can suffer.

Virtual Meetings:
With our worker population spread far and wide, the only realistic way to meet and discuss issues is

to do it virtually. So far, the perception of meeting remotely is not especially strong, perhaps because it is a new frontier for many people. For those of us who can remember work before computers, the patterns appear similar. For anyone to have to work, to communicate, or to document within the virtual realm can be worrisome to say the least. If we add to that worry the challenges with technology used for virtual connection, the reality for many people related to virtual meetings can be daunting. Many meetings begin with valuable moments spent getting everyone on line and functional and the resulting frustration often pervades the overall feeling throughout the meeting.

It seems evident that the reliability of meeting and connection technology lags behind demand. Too often, managers are not fully trained on the use of their technology systems and they haven't set up a "producer" to help with connectivity and functionality issues. The role of producer has become vital for the success of virtual meetings. The pandemic shutdown has illustrated the need to spend more time and money on technology and technology training, especially as it relates to meetings and webinars.

Length of Calls:

Before the shutdown, a common complaint at work was the number and length of meetings. Employees, managers, even CEOs, often clamored for fewer, shorter meetings. Now that we've shifted the work place to remote and virtual, this complaint is even louder. To connect into a meeting run by the boss with a previously emailed 10-item agenda can become a marathon of boredom and mind wandering. If we add in the distractions mentioned above, the problem is exacerbated. No matter how effective the manager is at leading the meeting, it will run too long and its efficiency will suffer. When leaders create shorter meeting plans with a timed agenda and a timed meeting duration, things begin to improve. Are the items on the agenda presented by different members attending with estimated time per item? The more the meeting is an exchange of communication, the healthier.

No matter what prognosis we listen to, the world of work is changing. It will require whole new sets of plans and protocols. Fortunately, we have already identified many of these solutions, and now our challenge is how to implement them.

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