## Work Smarter, Not Remoter – Smart Working Puts New Requirements on Leaders

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After the shift to remote working a few years ago, and the inevitable backlash that saw companies calling employees back to their desks, managers around the globe are now carving out a middle ground: smart working. In this new model for organising work, each task is done at the time and place that are most suitable, with managers and employees collaborating to ensure objectives are met using the optimal mix of physical locations.

Of course, this new way of working is creating all kinds of challenges for companies. Some of the biggest ones are in the area of leadership: What skills does it take to motivate, manage and evaluate a smart workforce? Other areas where companies need to rethink how they do business include IT, legal issues and physical infrastructure.

### Do they work if I can't see them?

For leaders, the equation used to be simple: If you can see your employees, they're at work. Then came remote working, with the proposition that you didn't need to see your employees at all. This may have been hard for some traditional managers to swallow, but at least it was simple. Smart working is even harder, because it's more subtle: With smart working, you need to see your employees some of the time. But how much?

### How to manage a dispersed team?

The solution, as with many other questions for today's leaders, lies in agile leadership. Managers need to be flexible, engaged, collaborative and accountable – all values that are championed by the Agile movement.

That's because the key to managing smart working, for both employees and managers, is to focus on outcomes. Managers need to set clear goals, do what it takes to ensure they're met, and ensure employees are recognised and rewarded based on those goals. At the same time, agile leaders recognise that rapid changes in the market may mean targets also shift rapidly; successful managers are able to communicate changes in their unit's priorities effectively, even when they don't have daily in-person interactions with all members of their team. Similarly, employees need to ensure they stay focused on the agreed outcomes, rather than other factors.

### Trust is the key

In all of this, trust is key – and as with the focus on outcomes, it's a two-way street. Managers need to trust employees to get the job done even when they're not physically present, and employees need to trust managers to evaluate them fairly on the basis of their achievement of the agreed targets.

In practical terms, agile management in the world of smart working means both employees and bosses have to learn new communications skills. Bosses need to learn to be available, even if they're not present, as one observer put it. (And indeed, even in the old system, there were always plenty of bosses who were present but never available.) Employees in turn need to take more responsibility for staying in contact with their bosses, and choosing the appropriate method of communication – with strategies including being intentional about the best times to reach them, and preferring phone calls over e-mails and messaging.

As they strive to change managers' and employees mindsets, of course, companies also need to adjust their training programmes to build an agile culture that ensures smart working works for them, according to research from Politecnico di Milano's Smart Working Observatory.

### Smart working puts new requirements on leaders …

In the era of smart working, leaders also need to ensure they're keeping up with legal developments that affect the employer/employee relationship. Italy is one recent example of a jurisdiction that's passed legislation to ensure protections for people who work from home. In addition to the obvious question of working hours, business leaders need to have strategies for issues such as occupational health and safety, including work-related injuries, when they have less control over employees' physical environment.

### … but also opens new opportunities for improved productivity and cost reduction

Finally, corporate leaders also need to take a good, hard look at their physical infrastructure and decide how much they really need, in what locations, and how it should be organised. An extensive report from the UK government discusses many of these challenges and the solutions that country's Civil Service has found. Some companies are experimenting with opening satellite offices that shorten workers' commute times, giving them greater flexibility, while ensuring they're still on company-controlled property for tasks where data security is a more crucial issue. Within their properties, companies are developing comprehensive policies for how space is assigned and managed. Open-plan office spaces with no assigned desks need to have the right balance of other spaces – rooms of various sizes that allow collaboration or confidentiality, as needed.

The world of smart working is opening up a host of new opportunities for companies to reduce spending on physical infrastructure, reduce their environmental footprint, and increase employee satisfaction and retention by offering better opportunities to maintain work-life balance. Leaders have to make sure they have the agility they need to seize those opportunities.

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