

# Strategic commentary

## Disrupt yourself: how to avoid complacency, build productivity and keep talent engaged

James Lowery

**K**eeping talent engaged is a key challenge for every business – and especially in the UK, where productivity has declined to the point that, to match the USA's performance, it would need to increase its hourly output by 32 per cent.

When quirky start-ups are offering abundant perks and benefits to their teams, more traditional companies have found it difficult to keep up. Knowing how to keep complacency at bay and ensure that staff remain interested in working for you is all-important: when you find the winning combination, you can boost productivity, stimulate business growth and prevent an exodus of talent to your competitors.

To keep employees engaged, traditional businesses must effectively disrupt themselves – re-evaluating their benefits, culture and communication to create an environment where employees can (and want to) do their best work.

If you are working for such a business, here is where to start.

### Benefits

Do the benefits, perks and rewards you are offering to your employees really speak to their needs?

Glassdoor data reveal that these benefits are a priority for 57 per cent of all workers when considering whether or not to accept a new job. Some 90 per cent of younger employees

between 18 and 34 said that they would accept new or additional benefits over an increase in salary.

It is not hard to see why. The right benefits, perks and rewards can make employees feel wanted, valued and motivated by their employers. That is why Qualtrics is giving every employee \$1,500 per year to spend on experiences they would not otherwise be able to afford, and that is why Airbnb gives employees an annual allowance of \$2,000 to travel and stay in its listings anywhere in the world.

They are expensive perks, to be sure, and not every business will be able to afford them. But their true worth is less about their monetary value, and more about what they say about the employer. They have tailored their benefits to millennials who work more hours, sacrifice more holiday time, retire later and make less money than their parents. Under these circumstances, it is easy to feel disillusioned or burnt out.

Qualtrics and Airbnb solve this problem by subsidising leisure and extracurricular activities. You do not have to do the same to show you care about employee wellbeing: a fitness class, health care, vouchers and other little things can go a long way towards motivating your team.

### Environments

Gensler research indicates that the physical office environment is the

James Lowery is Co-lead at Storey, London, UK.

most significant factor that contributes to an employee's ability to focus. It makes sense: spaces with variety, stimuli and, well, space tend to be more conducive to productivity than dull, grey, traditional business locations.

A comfortable workspace should therefore be a priority: monotony only encourages complacency. Giving your employees the opportunity to define their own working environments should be a priority – hot desking, modular workstations and flexible hours all help in terms of offering the variety that they need.

In terms of your physical environment, there is only so much you can do without changing offices and investing a lot of time and money. But small changes add up: a break area, an extra meeting room, or a couple of sofas can make a lot of difference. In fact, Storey's own research indicates that 20 per cent of employees want better meeting room space, and 15

per cent would like a "chill out zone" to relax in.

### Communication

Finally, communication is all-important for maximising employee engagement. It is hard to make your team feel included if they are kept out of the loop: if essential information such as financial results, strategic plans, and departmental performance become the preserve of a small, managerial elite, they will not feel connected to the business' success.

If your company is heading in a different direction, let your employees know – and be honest about the challenges ahead. Trust them with this information, and they will trust you with their best ideas. Set up a monthly email update from the CEO – perhaps in the form of a newsletter – and if the business is small enough, try to ensure that everyone gets some face to face time with the company's leaders.

Beyond that, ask your employees what they think, how they feel, whether they are satisfied with their personal growth opportunities and whether they believe in the company's mission. You can do this through regular anonymous surveys: it may sometimes hurt to hear it, but it will hurt more if an issue goes unaddressed.

Finally, celebrate your team when they succeed and lift them up when they fall short. It is good leadership, and it ensures that everyone is pulling in the same direction.

It does not matter how brilliant your employees are on paper if they feel fundamentally disengaged from your business. Create a workspace that nurtures, motivates and rewards them and you will be rewarded in kind.

### Corresponding author

James Lowery can be contacted at: [britishland@toplinecomms.com](mailto:britishland@toplinecomms.com)