



THE C-SUITE

with
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Seven years post-Covid, the facts are staring at us. There will never be a normal to return to. This is the new normal, and refusal to accept that, is an attempt to hold onto a world that no longer exists.

When the Covid-19 pandemic promised a new normal, it sounded like a joke, a catchphrase in many business circles. It is no wonder when the lockdowns were eased, some business leaders rushed to return to the old normal. Seven years later, and the facts are staring at us. There will never be a normal to return to. This is the new normal, and refusal to accept that, is an attempt to hold onto a world that no longer exists.

One of the concepts that emerged in the new normal was 'Flexing'. Many organisations went on to draft their Flexi-policies. Because the pandemic had taught us, there was no one-size fits all for employees. And flexing was the grand opportunity to personalise the work environment at scale.

Put simply, flexing starts with the idea of who the employee is, who they are as a person and how to get them to thrive in the work culture.

A story of Steve Jobs

In the Steve Jobs' biography by Walter Isaacson, a story is told of a young Steve Jobs who was notoriously smelly while working at Atari Corp. The CEO at Atari knew the potential of Steve Jobs. At that time, Steve Jobs was experimenting with a weird fruitarian diet. In his classic reality distortion field, he be-

lieved that while on this diet, one need not shower. The CEO decided to flex with Steve Jobs. He sent him onto the night shift to save him from complaints by the guys on day shift. With this compromise, the organisation did not lose out on a creative employee, neither did the employee lose out on giving their best.

If it had been today, most organisations would have told Steve Jobs to either fit in or be shown the door out. Trouble is, some employees are square pegs, trying to fit them into round holes will kill them. In the past I have written that rarely is it the employees, it is always the culture.

Making a case for a flexi-culture

The current traffic grid-locks in Kampala have always got me asking one question – why should we all be on the road at the same time? First in the morning (6am to 9am) and in the evening (5pm to 8pm). As a result, anxiety levels are heightened, but also, long commute times are taxing on employee productivity. You have a scenario of higher stress levels, reduced output, increased work errors, all because organisations cannot make the leap into the flexi-world.

Why should an employee struggle through traffic jam just to catch a work meeting at 8am? In the era of technology, they should log onto an online platform, zoom or Microsoft teams, drive to work at 10am (when the roads are clear) and have any other physical catch-up as needed.

Organisations struggle with office rent as a fixed cost driver. But two organisations could choose to flex together. By implementing a clean desk policy, organisations could share the same office at different times. One organisation could even choose to go on night shift.

In the office, organisations should now invest in flexi-furniture. This could mean standing desks, chairs

Who can flex better?

EMBRACE CHANGE

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that enable employees to have that rejuvenating Japanese afternoon nap.

Flexing is to say, let organisations think out of the box and drive outcomes. Just because an employee clocks in on time and clocks out of time, does not guarantee productivity. Productivity could be higher with the employee that gets in at 11am, and gives you three hours of undivided attention.

With AI taking away most of our mundane tasks, it means more than ever, the most critical skills in employees are now creativity, taste and imagination. Only a Flexi-Culture can scale those critical skills.

Flexi-Culture also means that compliance could be summarised into a few words "do the right thing, if in doubt, seek guidance." I love how Netflix summarises it as freedom and responsibility. You are free to do anything you want at Netflix but responsibly.

Flexi-Culture is also to say, if your employee is bored on a Sunday, then let them come in and work. Then, they could take a day off during the week (when there is less to do) in exchange for the Sunday they worked.

Organisations are grappling with questions of employee productivity, and how to increase it. Many have increased the rules, threats and warnings. The time clocking machines have come in (oh how HR love these!), there has been increased employee surveillance (cameras and computer activity). Yet all this has just distracted management from the important questions of the day. Others have tried with annual salary increments and bonuses. Many motivational studies show that beyond a certain limit,

money fails as a motivator.

Problems cannot be created at the level they were created. Problems require an out-of-box thinking. And Flexi-culture is that out of box thinking. We ought to rethink the workplace as an environment where humans come to be alive. Employees spend a third of their lives at the workplace, and another third on the commute. For most people, work defines their lives. We thus radically need to rethink the workplace, how we design it, the culture at the workplace and thus make it a place that employees wish to stay longer.

Previous generations viewed work as a thing to deal with, something to dread. For the zoomers and Generation Alpha (coming soon), work is more than just a place you go to make money. It is a place you find yourself, where you unlock all potentials.

That's why there has been the rise of the corporate influencer. If one was hired as a logistics coordinator, but they also have great talent when it comes to creative design, why not utilise them when launching a new marketing campaign?

Organisations that fully embrace flexi-culture will lead in the years to come. It also means they will be leaner organisations, since they hire a full human being who can do many things. These organisations will also see their spend go down, you do not need to use money to motivate an employee who is passionate about what they do, where they work.

Flexing is the future of the workplace, we should not deny it.

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