HAYS JOURNAL

GLOBAL INSIGHT FOR EXPERTS IN THE WORLD OF WORK

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

How can business leaders ensure that they're leading the way on mental health?

ISSUE 19
2020

SPECTRUM OF SKILLS
Exploring the benefits of a neurodiverse workforce

FLEXIBLE TALENT
It's time to create a strong contractor value proposition

DATA EXCHANGE
Employees are becoming more open to monitoring, if it benefits them too

HAYS JOURNAL

HELLO AND WELCOME TO THE LATEST ISSUE of the Hays Journal. We have discussed the challenges volatility can cause organisations in depth over the past few years. But never have we seen it affect so many, so quickly, as we have in 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic forced faster and more dramatic changes to the world of work than many of us could have imagined.

And while it has been a hugely difficult time, there have also been some incredibly inspiring stories of organisations overcoming obstacles and coming together to support those in need.

One such business is Headspace, a global provider of mindfulness and meditation resources. After seeing the challenges the world was facing, the company's leaders came together to see how they could share some of their knowledge to help those most affected. Dr Megan Jones Bell, the company's Chief Strategy & Science Officer, discusses how they went about doing this in this issue's profile interview on page 17.

We also consider how the conversation around mental health has evolved in the workplace. People are more open about the difficulties they are facing and are increasingly seeking support from their employer. On page 4, we explore the responsibility businesses, and particularly leaders within organisations, now have in supporting employees facing mental health challenges.

Of course, there is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to supporting colleagues; each individual will have different needs. But by being more accommodating to these needs, we can unlock new talent pools. On page 22, we look at the benefits of neurodiversity, and the ways in which employers can create a more inclusive workplace for those with different approaches.

Elsewhere, we look at why technology candidates are in more demand than ever (page 26); consider why it is so important for organisations to create a strong value proposition for their contractors as well as their permanent staff (page 13); and explore how employee monitoring can benefit both businesses and their staff, if implemented sensitively (page 9).

Finally, we speak with Karen Bardsley, goalkeeper for England and our partner Manchester City (page 30). Karen recently completed a Masters in Sports Directorship and offers some valuable insights into what the world of professional sport and the world of business can learn from each other.

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Hays Journal is published on behalf of Hays by Wardour.
www.wardour.co.uk
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HEADS FIRST

WHILE MENTAL HEALTH WAS ONCE A TABOO TOPIC IN THE WORKPLACE, MANY HIGH-PROFILE CAMPAIGNS HAVE ENCOURAGED A MORE OPEN ATTITUDE TOWARDS IT. AS EMPLOYEES BECOME MORE WILLING TO TALK ABOUT THEIR MENTAL WELLBEING, DO LEADERS NEED TO BE BETTER PREPARED TO SUPPORT THEM?

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC has created many challenges for employers, but supporting employees who are struggling with mental health issues has been one of the most complex. From anxiety over their physical health, to experiencing loneliness while working remotely, many workers have suffered from additional mental strain in 2020.

In fact, according to US mental health provider **Ginger**, 69 per cent of US workers said the pandemic has been the most stressful time in their professional lives. Furthermore, a study conducted by **Hays** in Australia and New Zealand found that just 42 per cent of the local workforce rate their current mental health and wellbeing as positive, down from 63 per cent pre-Covid-19.

Of course, many workplace mental health challenges were already in place well before the pandemic. According to a report by **Mercer** and **Business in the Community**, 39 per cent of UK employees experienced poor mental health due to work in 2019, up from 36 per cent the previous year; meanwhile 2019 research by **AIA Vitality** found that in Australia, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Thailand, more than half of the respondents had experienced work-related stress.

Aside from the ethical duty employers have to their employees, there are financial implications too. Internationally, the **World Health Organization** estimates that depression and anxiety issues cost the global economy $1 trillion a year in lost productivity.

This year, the challenge is likely to have grown. According to the same research from Ginger, of the 88 per cent of workers who reported experiencing moderate to extreme stress, 62 per cent noted losing at least one hour a day in productivity and 32 per cent lost at least two hours a day due to Covid-19-related stress.

The figures suggest it is important for employers to take these challenges more seriously, and take more responsibility for the mental health and wellbeing of their people. But what does this mean for leaders? Whether they are executives or managers, should they be equipped with the skills and knowledge to identify any potential issues and offer support to anyone who is struggling? Or should this already be part of their skill set?

TOP DOWN

"It's critically important for organisations to ensure their leaders have the right leadership skills to create an engaging and inclusive environment," comments Mark Edgar, Co-Founder of **future foHRward** in Canada. "More specifically, skills that increase awareness and confidence around managing mental health issues are a very important component of leadership development."

Yet Ken Dolan-Del Vecchio, a licensed therapist, author and leadership adviser in the US, believes that training leaders on awareness of mental health issues, while helpful, misses the heart of the matter. "Leaders need to be educated on leadership skills. Effective

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> **"EFFECTIVE LEADERS DEVELOP RESPECTFUL, CARING, TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THOSE WHO REPORT TO THEM"**
> **KEN DOLAN-DEL VECCHIO, LICENSED THERAPIST**

leaders develop respectful, caring, trusting relationships with those who report to them. If you've got highly effective leadership, you've got what you need for a mentally healthy workplace culture."

And while there may be a belief that these skills are a prerequisite for leaders, it seems that many organisations have a long way to go in convincing their workforce they understand mental health challenges. **Mind Share Partners**' *2019 Mental Health at Work Report*, written in partnership with **SAP** and **Qualtrics**, found that only 41 per cent of employees felt mental health was prioritised at their organisation, and just 37 per cent viewed their leaders as advocates for mental health at work.

This indicates there may be problems with culture. If workers do not believe that their organisation provides a positive and inclusive working environment, or trust that it will provide the support they need, businesses may not be able to break down the stigma around mental health. So how can leaders ensure employees are willing to open up?

"It's important to be deliberate in creating and maintaining a culture that allows people to bring their full selves to work," advises Edgar. "This can be done by reviewing processes, policies and people practices to ensure they are amplifying the positive elements of the culture and creating an inclusive and safe environment."

Treacy Webster, Director of Talent Management at **Ceuta Group**, a global brand management business, says that the most effective way to create a supportive culture is to normalise all support mechanisms, such as mental health first aiders, internal communications on mental wellbeing, mental health training, and mental wellbeing services available through employee health schemes. "By doing so, we can proactively reduce the stigma around mental health that often prohibits people from openly seeking support, while increasing awareness for those who may be hesitant to offer support," she says.

IMPLEMENTING MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AIDERS

- Develop a written policy that sets out the expectations and boundaries of the mental health first aider (MHFA) role, which includes support for MHFAs; self-care and opting out; MHFA responsibilities; and the process for signposting colleagues to support.
- Recruit MHFAs – decide how many you need and who should be recruited. Consider a wide range of individuals: as well as asking people who want to learn more about mental health support, approach those who mostly work on site, and people who can maintain confidentiality and commit to the time required.
- Offer training to MHFA volunteers that will enable MHFAs to: understand what factors affect mental ill health; identify signs and symptoms; use a five-step action plan; listen non-judgementally; and signpost people to professional help.
- Following training, ensure continued support and development of MHFAs.
- Main responsibilities of MHFAs are: keeping themselves safe and well; communicating any concerns about the mental wellbeing of anyone in the workplace; following workplace policies and procedures on MHFAs; upholding the MHFA role alongside other responsibilities; establishing appropriate boundaries; and refreshing their skills every three years on an MHFA refresher course.
- Employers must also ensure they promote their MHFAs so that the whole organisation is aware of who they are and how to contact them.

SOURCE: MHFA ENGLAND

OPENING UP AUTHENTICALLY

Another way leaders can offer their support is to act as a role model and be open about their own mental health challenges. Kelly Greenwood, CEO of Mind Share Partners in the US, believes leaders must go first in setting the example. "Being vulnerable – whether about mental health or not – is critical in creating a safe team environment where direct reports can feel comfortable opening up about their own challenges. We find that employees typically only need a small window to do so. Having leaders open up about their mental health challenges is a hugely powerful mechanism to reduce stigma since it flips the stereotype on its head."

Dolan-Del Vecchio believes that leaders are role models for everyone in the organisation. "Leaders should be encouraged to be as open regarding personal mental health challenges, as they are when it comes to their physical, family and other life challenges."

> **“ENCOURAGING EMPLOYEES TO TALK IN AN OPEN, SUPPORTIVE AND HONEST ENVIRONMENT IS POWERFUL AND EFFECTIVE”**
> **PIETRO CARMIGNANI, GYMPASS**

He adds, however, that leaders also need to be thoughtful regarding when it makes sense to share these aspects of their selves. “They should not do it gratuitously,” he notes.

Edgar agrees, warning that being authentic in these scenarios is vital: “A key component of successful leadership is building trust. This requires a level of authenticity to allow leaders to be a positive role model. However, they should only share what they are comfortable sharing and shouldn’t be expected to unless the environment supports them appropriately.”

Many of the senior leaders at wellness platform **Gympass** have opened up about their mental health journeys, to show that anyone affected by mental health issues will find understanding at the highest level. Pietro Carmignani, CEO, Gympass Europe, is one of them.

“A number of leaders in our business have already shared their own stories and struggles of mental health, including me,” he comments. “People really appreciate the honesty and feel that if their managers can talk about it, so can they. Encouraging employees to talk in an open, supportive and honest environment is powerful and effective. That said, you can only ask leaders to do what they feel able to; their privacy must be respected.”

THE FIRST LINE OF DEFENCE

Another effective initiative to reduce the stigma and raise awareness around workplace mental health is

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Josh Krichefski is Global COO and EMEA CEO of media agency **MediaCom**, which employs 8,000 people in 125 offices across 100 countries. As a business leader, he knew he had a responsibility to de-stigmatise what it meant to seek mental health support.

“Stemming from my own experiences with insomnia, anxiety and stress, I wanted to show employees and other business leaders that an environment where employees feel comfortable talking about their wellbeing is key to driving genuine change,” he remarks.

“We have ensured that all our senior leaders are trained in understanding and managing mental health issues through a leadership course. This has helped to show the senior leadership team that to address mental health across the workplace, there must be an acknowledgement from the most senior people that change starts with them.”

This training forms part of a wider wellbeing strategy at the firm, which includes several initiatives to support employees’ mental health, such as a Mental Health Allies scheme and an Empathy Ambassadors programme, which Krichefski says helps to create a positive culture that prioritises employees.

Moving forward, there are also plans to launch a mandatory two-hour mental health training session for all new starters. “Ultimately, we are working with the belief that in order to de-stigmatise mental health, businesses should have a consistent strategy and training programme that ensures everyone is involved.”

He says that the business has reaped the benefits of having a positive culture around mental health. “An independent **MIND** audit of the company found that 68 per cent of our people are disclosing mental health issues and other concerns to managers, which indicates we have normalised mental health so that it has become a part of our everyday work conversations.”

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to train people – including leaders – to be mental health first aiders. Webster remarks that the most effective mental health first aiders are those who volunteer willingly.

"It takes understanding, calm and quiet confidence to be able to talk, listen and support. When leaders have these attributes and are readily available to assist, they are great candidates to be mental health first aiders, but those who would make effective mental health first aiders can be from any level within an organisation."

Global engineering and design firm **Atkins** – a member of the SNC-Lavalin Group – introduced a mental health first aiders (MHFA) programme in 2017. Jilly Calder, the company's Vice President HR, UK & Europe, says that while they do have a number of senior leaders who are MHFAs, they have tried to ensure they have a mix of people from all levels.

"In our organisation, it is more about getting the right individuals involved and we intend to get representation across the whole hierarchy within the business. One of the challenges in ensuring the programme is successful is making sure we are selecting the right people."

Following a campaign raising awareness around mental health and the role of MHFAs, Atkins advertised for people to sign up to the programme. All MHFA volunteers undertake a two-day training course, on behalf of **MHFA England**, while existing MHFAs receive refresher training every two years.

"The MHFA network is an internal service staffed by volunteers that have successfully completed an approved MHFA training course," explains Calder. "Previous knowledge and experience are not prerequisites to becoming an effective MHFA, as the training course and reference materials provide an excellent foundation."

As a result of the MHFA service, the firm has started to see a decline in occupational health referrals and an increase in the number of MHFA interventions year on year. There are also now more than 100 people on the waiting list to join the programme. "More and more people want to become MHFAs, which is a great sign that the business is embracing it and seeing the benefits it can bring to an organisation," remarks Calder.

Furthermore, Calder says Atkins is now actively encouraging colleagues from the BAME community to become MHFAs as well. "It would be beneficial for our BAME colleagues to have better representation in this space. That's definitely a priority going forward for us. We recognise we need to do more to attract BAME employees to take on the mantle of MHFA."

Carmignani points out that mental health first aid is only one part of the puzzle. "You don't need the full training to have sufficient awareness to be supportive and understanding. All leaders should have some form of awareness training, so they can identify mental ill-health, know how to support it and be able to signpost people to further help where needed."

ENSURE SUPPLY MEETS DEMAND

While identifying and supporting employees with mental health problems can be a good first step, many companies choose to outsource mental health care to third parties, offering access to expert help and guidance. However, organisations still need to ensure mental health support is entrenched within the business.

"I believe leadership teams should drive support within the company," comments Carmignani. "Third parties can provide excellent training, practical and professional support and an outsider perspective, but when it comes to day-to-day engagement, attentiveness to who needs help, and ongoing efforts

to de-stigmatise mental ill-health, it must be embedded in a business through initiatives and an open-door policy."

Calder adds that, while Atkins does rely on a broad spectrum of external suppliers to support their MHFAs, the company still holds responsibility for employee welfare.

"We are very aware that we have overall accountability for the wellbeing of our employees. As a company, we are ultimately responsible and our line managers are accountable. They play a key role in assisting employees to access support. It has to be a collaboration across that supply chain."

Companies could also consider implementing employee resilience programmes to combat workplace mental health issues; however, it's important to first find out if these programmes suit the needs of the employees.

Also, while they may be beneficial, these programmes can imply that mental health challenges appear due to a deficit in an individual employee, rather than the company's culture, policies or processes, warns Greenwood.

"Companies need to consider their role and minimise workplace factors that are proven to negatively impact mental health, such as job strain or lack of trust.

Teaching employees an effective, evidence-based strategy to manage stress is helpful, but doing so within an ecosystem of unhealthy work practices and a toxic culture will inevitably result in turnover."

Dolan-Del Vecchio says that while such programmes are nice to have, they will not be effective without ensuring leaders support employees struggling with mental health. "The solution is effective leadership within organisations that have reasonable productivity expectations. In other words, the solution is a healthy, including mentally healthy, organisational culture."

Webster agrees, concluding that while there are further steps businesses can take, mental health care must start with company culture. "People, including those in leadership positions, will only be open about their challenges when they are ready. If the company culture is right, people will feel comfortable to share, regardless of their position." ■

OFFERING MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT REMOTELY

The Covid-19 pandemic has created new challenges for Mental Health First Aiders (MHFAs). Not only has stress and anxiety increased for many of the individuals they support, they have also had to spot warning signs remotely – a new experience for many.

And with plenty of organisations planning to keep some form of remote working in place, even after the pandemic subsides, learning how to recognise potential red flags in this landscape will be vital for leaders.

"Key indicators that someone is experiencing mental ill health which can be spotted remotely include presenteeism, absenteeism, emotional changes such as irritability and sensitivity to criticism, making more mistakes than usual, a drastic change in physical appearance which can be noticed on video calls, and a general change of character," says Sarah McIntosh, Director of People at MHFA England.

"This is where managers or employees supporting fellow colleagues can play a pivotal role in supporting employee health and wellbeing. It is important to remember that your role as a manager or colleague is to listen and signpost to further support should it be needed, such as to HR, to an Employee Assistance Programme, self-care resources or helplines, such as Samaritans or Shout. MHFAs are not trained as therapists and cannot diagnose mental health conditions or provide professional advice."

Jilly Calder, Vice President HR, UK & Europe, Atkins, says that despite the difficulties, the company's MHFAs really shone during this crisis: "The challenge for many MHFAs was that some of them had been furloughed so it was important to manage their own wellbeing as well. They really came into their own and the volume of their activity picked up. They were very proactive, running lunchtime sessions that allowed people to dial in, share concerns and worries, and find support materials."

She says that creating easy access to tools has been a key learning for Atkins, and that the company is ensuring that this will continue to be part of their strategy in the future.

"Like many organisations, we have extensive materials and an employee assistance programme which has been very helpful. The lesson we learnt was to get on the front foot. Before, we have had materials to help people when they do fall down, but now our emphasis is on supporting people before they get to that point."

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DATA EXCHANGE

ORGANISATIONS ARE INCREASINGLY MONITORING THEIR EMPLOYEES. WHILE MANY WORKERS MAY HAVE CONSIDERED THIS AN INVASION OF THEIR PRIVACY IN THE PAST, NEW RESEARCH INDICATES THIS PERCEPTION IS CHANGING TO A MORE POSITIVE ONE

FROM THEIR KEYSTROKES and browsing history to their brainwaves and emotions, organisations are gathering more data on employees than ever. According to research consultancy **Gartner**'s 2019 report *The Future of Employee Monitoring*, in 2015 only 30 per cent of companies were monitoring workers. This had risen to 50 per cent by 2018 and the firm predicted this figure would reach 80 per cent by 2020.

Implementation of staff monitoring has been in mind for many people too, since the outbreak of Covid-19. **Google Trends** data indicates that the search term 'employee monitoring' reached a peak score of 51 in terms of worldwide interest between January and March. However, this rose to a score of 79 by the end of March, reaching its peak of 100 in June.

And as more organisations implement monitoring, employees seem to be more comfortable with it – but only if it is used in the right way. Gartner's report also found that just 10 per cent of workers were happy with monitoring in 2015, but that this had risen to 30 per cent by 2018. When employers explained the reasoning behind their data collection, this went up again to 50 per cent.

Furthermore, there is a strong business case for staff surveillance. "Monitoring can be beneficial in terms of productivity and performance, also the health, wellbeing and safety of employees," says Edward Houghton, Head of Research and Service Design at city transformation business **DG Cities**. But, he adds, monitoring is only justified if it is transparent and fair. If not, it raises serious questions about privacy.

Increasingly, however, people are willing to give that up for a benefit, says Brian Kropp, Chief of HR Research at Gartner in Washington DC. We make this trade-off daily with credit card purchases, social media and app use, he adds, so we are more comfortable with it in the workplace. "Employees no longer think workplace monitoring is completely off limits, just a bit uncomfortable."

HEALTHY DEVELOPMENTS

Developing technology is enabling employers to track workers in far more invasive ways, opening up an ethical minefield. For many organisations, wearable gadgets that glean biometric data are an exciting new area of people analytics, but they also have the potential to erode the already shrinking boundary between work and home life.

"Unless this is done to the exacting high standards of ethical best practice, there is a risk it can drive a wedge

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of distrust between employees and employers," says Rob McCargow, UK Director of Artificial Intelligence at **PwC**.

Recently, 1,000 staff at the professional services firm volunteered to strap smart watches to their wrists, gathering biometric data on sleep patterns and heart rate variance, and taking daily cognitive tests in a trial, with the aim of raising individual wellbeing and performance.

While it is early days, PwC hopes that by analysing the anonymised, aggregate data, it can identify the correlations between how remote working patterns and sleep impact on the ability to multi-task and concentrate, says McCargow.

But the biggest benefit has been empowering staff to take control over their wellbeing. Armed with detailed insights, PwC workers could start to learn more about their working preferences and be able to access support more quickly.

Meanwhile, McCargow sees a future in which PwC managers crunch the data in aggregated form to improve resource management, bolstering project teams if the workforce seems stretched. "We may be able to run a better business off the back of this."

Other companies monitor individual employee performance. Some **Domino's Pizza** shops, for example, used an AI-powered camera system to monitor how well employees make a pizza – everything from the border of the crust to the temperature. If a pizza misses the mark, the 'Dom Pizza Checker' tells the employee to make a fresh pizza.

The company says that the tool is there to train staff and raise product quality, rather than punish people for mistakes.

TRUST ISSUES

Thomas Kochan is Co-Director of the **MIT Sloan Institute for Work and Employment Research** in Massachusetts. He thinks it is reasonable for companies to act on the analysis of employee data, with more sophisticated technology, such as artificial intelligence, helping to turn insight into action. "The value of big data is the fast turnaround of problems."

Monitoring can shed light on underperformance: some manufacturing employees use wearables that track their productivity in realtime. If it drops, management steps in to diagnose the problem and find a solution, whether offering training, or adjusting workflow or breaks, says Kochan.

But they should be liable for these decisions. "To maintain the trust of the workforce, managers need to explain how they came to that decision and what factors went into it. Monitoring cannot be a black box."

Employers should be transparent and give staff a say on what data is collected, the method and how it is used, says Kochan. "Define with employees what

problem you are trying to solve through monitoring and share the data with the workforce so they can validate it and put it to work."

Otherwise, organisations run the risk of losing the trust of staff and damaging their mental health. "The dark side of monitoring is it can be unhealthy for individuals to be exposed to excessive levels of surveillance," says Houghton.

Some employers have taken this too far entirely, monitoring or limiting toilet use. Employers will have to continue reviewing and navigating the ethical line, Houghton adds.

In one infamous example, **Barclays** installed a monitoring system that tracked how long investment bank staff in London spent at their desks and warned people who took breaks for too long. Barclays axed the system in 2020 after a backlash from employees and criticism from privacy campaigners and HR experts.

Houghton also offers a warning for any businesses that think implementing monitoring will be helpful in keeping tabs on employees who have switched to home working during the pandemic of 2020.

"Covid-19 is a challenging time for many, and workers may feel anxious about their jobs and their ability to work at home," he says. "If employers do have valid concerns regarding productivity, these should be picked up via line management with employees, and by looking at outputs and quality. Monitoring should only really be used to complement other practices, as opposed to being a quick fix."

Jonny Gifford, Senior Researcher at the **CIPD**, agrees: "Employers should think twice before introducing any kind of monitoring. Our research shows that intrusive workplace surveillance damages trust, has a negative impact on morale and can cause stress and anxiety. There are, potentially, even greater privacy considerations to think about when monitoring home working as well."

BY THE BOOK

The legal line is blurred too. In the EU, lawyers say organisations can process employee data if they prove their justification is superior to the interests of workers.

But as employers conduct their own impact assessment, a potential conflict of interest arises. "You could argue the safeguards do not fully protect employees," says Daniel Cooper, a Partner at the law firm **Covington** who advises clients on data protection.

"But if organisations get it wrong, they get hammered by regulators. The fear [of prosecution] is the deterrent of abuse of privacy."

In the EU, companies have to adhere to the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). If organisations fail to explain why they collect data, or to make sure it is relevant, not excessive, and is up to date and secure, they could be hit with fines of €20 million, or up to 4 per cent of global turnover, whichever is more.

There are also security risks to monitoring, with biometric data a "treasure trove" for hackers, says Nick McAleenan, a Partner at **JMW Solicitors** who focuses on data protection and privacy. He represented staff at Morrisons supermarket group in the UK's first data leak class action.

McAleenan adds that organisations need solid cyber security and data protection policies, as well as audits and insurance.

Global compliance will mean obeying local privacy laws. In the US, individual states have their own regulations. The California Consumer Privacy Act requires many companies to disclose data collection and its purpose, and entitles workers to damages for data breaches.

In a 2018 report, the law firm **Freshfields** noted that new data privacy regimes were established in China and the Philippines. In China's case, the new rules mean employers cannot process an employee's personal information abroad without explaining the purpose, scope, contents and recipient. Furthermore, companies that are found to have publicised private data, or disclosed an individual's private information, in writing or orally, without the individual's prior consent, are considered to have caused a civil injury to the employee, which may constitute a criminal offence.

> **"IT CAN BE UNHEALTHY FOR INDIVIDUALS TO BE EXPOSED TO EXCESSIVE LEVELS OF SURVEILLANCE"**
> EDWARD HOUGHTON, DG CITIES

GETTING BUY-IN

But above all, companies need to get employees on board. A global 2019 survey by **Accenture** found that 89 per cent of workers were open to monitoring, but only if it benefited them.

Companies that collect data responsibly could see revenue growth of up to 12.5 per cent higher than companies that do not, Accenture said, because of employee trust that impacts on productivity.

But only 30 per cent of executives who the consultancy also surveyed were very confident they were being responsible. And 55 per cent do not ask for employee consent, though in many jurisdictions

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consent is needed to monitor biometric data, lawyers say.

For MIT's Kochan, this is "unethical management. It is an invasion of privacy. It breeds distrust in the workforce," with data scandals like Cambridge Analytica making people more sensitive to privacy.

There is also a risk that employees feel pressured into going along with surveillance, adds McAleenan at JMW Solicitors. "How can employees give proper consent when it could affect who gets the next promotion or pay rise? There is an inequality of bargaining power."

Employees often fret their employer could use their data against them, he adds. And indeed, PwC's pledge to anonymise and aggregate staff data helped to win support for wearables: applications to the pilot were oversubscribed within minutes of opening.

Current evidence suggests other organisations will follow suit, gathering data through ever more invasive means with the aim of raising performance, productivity, health and happiness.

But manifold legal and ethical challenges need to be overcome first. Those that succeed will involve employees every step of the way. Monitoring cannot substitute for good management.

"The democratisation of data can have huge benefits to both workers and employers. Data should not be secretly collected and analysed and decisions made at the top without employee involvement," says Stacia Sherman Garr, Co-Founder of the human capital research firm **RedThread Research** in California. "They need insight into how they work, to develop themselves into better, more productive workers." ■

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR

Rob McCargow, UK Director of Artificial Intelligence at PwC, offers his tips for implementing employee monitoring:

- Be clear that the project will deliver meaningful benefits or insights to the employees first, in addition to the organisation.
- Create a diverse project team with a range of professional disciplines to ensure high ethical standards, including human performance, legal and compliance professionals, communications experts and ethicists.
- Consult extensively with your workforce to co-produce the project.
- Trust and transparency are key: communicate clearly how data is collected and processed, where they are stored, who will have access and under what jurisdiction. Also, ensure compliance with regulations such as GDPR.
- Provide clear guidance on what rights employees have to access their data and the inferences drawn by the employer.
- Provide ongoing feedback from interesting data insight to staff.

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FLEXIBLE TALENT

THE MAKE-UP OF THE WORKPLACE IS CHANGING AS MANY ORGANISATIONS TAKE ON MORE CONTRACTORS AND TEMPORARY STAFF. BUT AS DEMAND FOR NON-PERMANENT EMPLOYEES INCREASES, HOW CAN BUSINESSES ATTRACT THESE WORKERS WHEN THEY NEED THEM?

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THE INCREASE in demand for contract workers has been one of the most prominent developments in the workplace in recent years. A 2019 **Oxford Economics** and **SAP** survey of 1,050 senior executives found that non-permanent staff now account for roughly 42 per cent of workforce spending. The attractions of such a model are evident, allowing businesses to call on labour as and when they need it, without the commitments that come from employing someone permanently. Employers can even outsource end-to-end management of this talent pool, with the help of managed service providers.

"Contractor workforce models are a cost-effective solution for many companies," explains Dr Magdalena Cholakova, Associate Professor of Entrepreneurship in the Department of Strategic Management and Entrepreneurship at **Rotterdam School of Management**. "They work not only for companies that were originally set up with a flexible model in mind, but are also a model that other, more traditional companies are switching towards as well."

But in an increasingly competitive labour market, many organisations will find themselves competing for talented contractors, in much the same way as they do for permanent employees. There is good reason for this: a 2020 study by **Ceridian**, a global HR software company, suggests that, while 76 per cent of 'alternative workers' are satisfied with their employment arrangement, more than half (54 per cent) felt they did not earn enough and 41 per cent were dissatisfied with the benefits they got. A lack of training is also an issue: global research released by **City & Guilds Group** in 2019 suggests that 22 per cent of employers do not carry out any training whatsoever with contingent workers.

It's likely that in future, employers will need to think about developing a 'contractor value proposition', in much the same way they do for permanent employees. "Traditionally, companies have treated their relationship with contractors and contingent workers as transactional rather than strategic," says Kristofer Karsten, Head of People and Culture at Ceridian Europe. "To truly unlock the full potential of this cohort, employers need to view them as more than a quick fix to an existing problem."

A WIDER AGILE STRATEGY

It's essential that the business has committed to engaging contractors as a starting point, says Keith Robson, an HR leader who has worked at companies including **M&G Investments**, **NATS**, **Rolls-Royce** and **Aviva**. "Unless the business has set out the high-level strategy explaining why agile working is important to the whole organisation and how they are to achieve it, contractors may never be embraced on arrival as an asset to support agile working," he warns.

There are also specific measures that organisations can take to help develop a contractor value proposition. Ensuring they feel welcome is a good starting point, says Rebekah Tapping, HR Director at employee engagement provider **Personal Group**. "It's important that the onboarding process is the same for both full-time and contingent workers," she says. "These people still wear the uniform and are representing the company so you don't want them to feel any less engaged because they aren't full-time."

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> **"TO TRULY UNLOCK THE FULL POTENTIAL OF CONTRACTORS, EMPLOYERS NEED TO VIEW THEM AS MORE THAN A QUICK FIX TO AN EXISTING PROBLEM"**
> **KRISTOFER KARSTEN, CERIDIAN**

It's also vital that the quality of work they are given is at the level they would expect, warns Dr Zofia Bajorek, a research fellow at the **Institute for Employment Studies**, who looked at the use of contingent labour in the UK's National Health Service for her PhD. "Organisations need to recognise that these people are providing them with a service that they actually need," she points out. "Give them that good quality work, remunerate them properly, reward them fairly and give them the same voice as permanent staff."

Karsten says that there are also valuable lessons to be learnt from the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic: "Ceridian's *Pulse of Talent* report, released in February 2020, found that contractors value the flexibility the working arrangement brought, but cited not making good pay and a lack of support with their mental health as problems.

"Companies have a duty of care over everyone that they work with. The challenges of 2020 imposed an even greater responsibility on employers to prioritise workforce morale and mental health, and for the most part, they have risen to the challenge.

"As we transition into a hybrid workforce – with some working from the office and others not – businesses would be well-served to remember the lessons learned during this period and apply them to their contractor workforce as a valuable extension of their brand and culture."

GET PERSONAL AND PRECISE

Giving contractors a main contact at the firm can also help them feel wanted and part of the team, as well as making life easier for permanent staff, says Ross Meadows, partner and head of the HR and employment team at **Oury Clark Solicitors**. "The primary contact can resolve any issues the contingent worker may have and provide easy access to other staff within the organisation who can assist where needed," he says. "Ensure that contingent workers are given feedback from the organisation on the work they are carrying out, and arrange catch-up meetings to iron out any issues."

Some firms are now going further, starting to offer contractors specific benefits. For example, calls for on-demand pay are becoming more prevalent for contractors in the US, and Ceridian has responded accordingly in this geography. "Both inside Ceridian, and as a feature for our US clients, we are now able to pay employees their wages as they're earning them," explains Karsten. "With this payroll system, it helps our contractors avoid working in arrears and be financially stable throughout the month. Such a feature can be a compelling element for the contractor value proposition."

It's worth remembering that many contractors follow portfolio career paths, and will look for employers that can offer them interesting opportunities – as well as good pay and benefits. Businesses must ensure that they communicate why their projects are compelling, in order to attract the best contingent workers.

Yet there are also legal issues that organisations must consider when it comes to using contractors. "Self-employed contractors are in business on their own account and do not have the right to many of the benefits and protections to which workers or employees would be entitled," points out Claire Brook, employment law partner at **Aaron & Partners**.

There are also challenges around legislation. In the UK, for example, the introduction of reforms to IR35 legislation in the private sector in April 2021 for medium to large employers, following their implementation in the public sector in April 2017, aims to close a tax loophole that allows contractors, operating through an intermediary such as their own limited company, to avoid some of the taxes paid by permanent employees. Under the reformed legislation, employers are responsible for determining the tax status of their contractors so must now carefully consider their processes so they can continue to engage with limited companies.

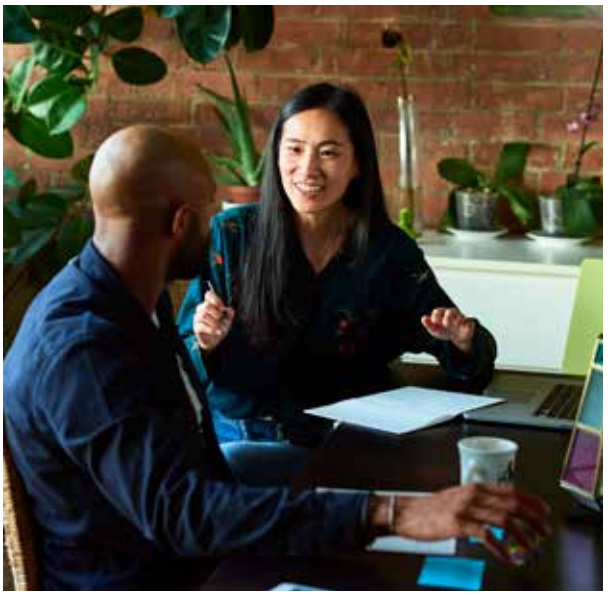
"THESE PEOPLE ARE REPRESENTING THE COMPANY SO YOU DON'T WANT THEM TO FEEL ANY LESS ENGAGED"

REBEKAH TAPPING, PERSONAL GROUP

"Where a contractor is deemed to be caught by IR35, tax and national insurance should be deducted in accordance with the requirements," adds Brook.

Inevitably, legal nuances will differ from country to country, says Meadows, with different rules around employment and tax law, and the protection they can expect. "Local advice should always be sought," he says.

The reality for many employers is that contractors will continue to be an important part of the mix. For those that don't get their value proposition right, however, there are very real risks. "The bottom line is they will quickly gain a reputation in the market as a business where contractors aren't welcome," says Robson. "They could potentially find key work projects not being delivered, as they won't have the talent or resources in place to execute them. With social media, and contractors being well networked, any business that doesn't get it right will become known very quickly." ■



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GETTING THE BASICS RIGHT

Global foreign exchange business **XE.com**, currently based in Canada, has made use of contractors for a range of activities in recent years. These include helping with specific projects around anti-money laundering, and filling roles where people had moved on and there was some doubt over where those positions would be based in future.

The firm has since taken the decision to relocate its operations to the US, which has traditionally proved a harder market in which to attract contractors than Canada.

Lydia Sas, the firm's Head of Compliance, North America, believes it's vital the company makes itself as attractive as possible to ensure it can access the required talent.

This is especially important when the business needs to react quickly to changes in the market. Getting this wrong could result in freelance talent choosing to work with competitors, putting the organisation at a disadvantage.

"It's about how you present yourself and treat people that will help get you that contractor ahead of others," she says. "We bring them in to fill a void but we also want them to feel like they're wanted here." This could be as simple as making sure they are not left on their own at work, she adds, or expected to work unsociable hours which full-time employees are not asked to.

Making sure contractors are paid on time is also important, as is making them feel part of the wider team. "That's how you get the best work out of them," says Sas.

Sas herself is leaving the business but will shortly re-join as a contractor. Initially this is a short-term move born out of practicality on both sides, but she admits the move has given her food for thought. "It has got me thinking that maybe I would rather do a contract position, make some money and then take some time off, and then do another contract," she says. "But that's not an option for everyone."

HEADING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

DR MEGAN JONES BELL, HEADSPACE'S CHIEF STRATEGY & SCIENCE OFFICER, DISCUSSES HOW THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC COULD GIVE ORGANISATIONS THE CHANCE TO MAKE A STEP CHANGE IN CARING FOR THEIR EMPLOYEES' WELLBEING

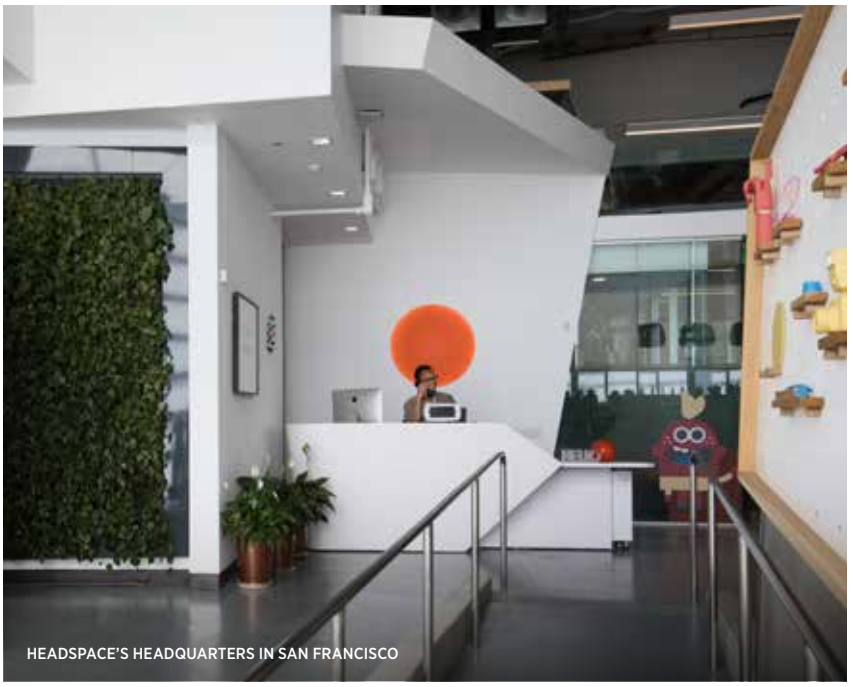
SOMETIMES IT TAKES experiencing a personal challenge to find our path, and this was certainly the case for Dr Megan Jones Bell, Chief Strategy & Science Officer at **Headspace**.

While in her freshman year of college, studying an interdisciplinary computing and arts degree, she faced a mental health crisis. "I had struggled with an eating disorder and depression for a number of years in high school and I really hit the bottom with it in that beginning year of college," she explains. "I received really incredible care and I got better very quickly once I gained the support I needed. I remember being in the hospital and deciding I want to turn this experience into something that's positive.

"I didn't want it to be something that I'd be afraid to talk about or that was an awful period of my life. I thought 'I can turn this into something that's a source of strength and empathy, and commit myself to prevent other people from ending up where I have'."

When she was ready to return to her education, Jones Bell switched her major to psychology and began volunteering at an eating disorder treatment centre. She also started a non-profit focusing on eating disorder prevention and self-esteem improvement, initially working with a local school.

"That launched me first towards advocating for the reduction of mental health stigma, then to designing prevention programmes. And that just led me into



HEADSPACE'S HEADQUARTERS IN SAN FRANCISCO

wanting to design programmes that could be made available to anybody that needed them, programmes that could effectively help prevent the onset and progression of mental health problems, as well as facilitate access to care for people that needed that level of intervention."

THE BUSINESS OF CARE

This varied mix of experiences across her personal, educational and professional life positioned Jones Bell perfectly to consider how technology could be used to improve mental health; something she started to truly focus on professionally in 2013 when she co-founded a company called **Lantern**.

The business, which launched at a similar time to Headspace's app, offered tools to help subscribers deal with stress, anxiety and body image challenges, but Jones Bell says that when they started opening conversations with employers about offering such support as a benefit, they did not always get the responses they hoped for.

"Frankly, the majority of employers that my company interacted with at that point expected there to be a really easily measurable big return on investment (ROI) associated with the implementation of mental health programmes. There is, but that is not the only reason to do it."

She says at the time, many employers questioned if they held any responsibility for the mental health of their people, but things have come a long way since then.

"What I've seen change is that employers are really owning mental health in such an inspiring way, recognising it as something that is on them to address. This is in terms of creating a workplace culture that supports mental health and, for people who do need more assistance, offering them the tools that support them across the whole continuum of mental health [crisis] prevention and early intervention, all the way through to specialised treatment.

"There is a lot more work to do in this regard, but I think many businesses now take ownership of the problem. We have customers that tell us: 'of course ROI is interesting for us, but that's not the reason we're buying it. We are buying it because we believe that this is a problem and we care about the health and wellbeing of our employees.' So the conversation has really flipped."

MEASURES IN PLACE

Jones Bell left Lantern in 2017 to become Chief Strategy & Science Officer at Headspace. The company, which was founded in 2010 by Andy Puddicombe and Richard Pierson, has a simple mission: to improve the health and happiness of the world.

Starting off as an events company, they ran courses to help people start meditating. But the founders soon realised that attendees wished to access the teaching at home. They evolved their offer accordingly and created an app. They now have over 65 million users in more than 190 countries, and have headquarters in San Francisco and London.

Much of Jones Bell's work focuses on finding how businesses can implement the technology successfully. And while the conversation may have shifted to one of concern for wellbeing, rather than concern for measurable improvement, Jones Bell says

that the data still very much shows the benefits of Headspace as well.

"What we've proved over and over again in our studies on Headspace is that there is a consistent reduction in stress. Many of our Headspace for Work partners are buying our product for their employees, as a mental health benefit.

"What they see then is a reduction in stress and a reduction in job-related burnout. We've demonstrated reductions in anxiety and depression in some of our published work with real company customers."

One study of users working at **Google** and pharmaceutical organisation **Roche**, released in 2018, found the use of the app reduced symptoms of depression by 46 per cent and anxiety by 31 per cent.

Jones Bell adds that the company also sees consistent improvement in people's ability to focus – a welcome benefit for organisations struggling with productivity.

"This is measured by the reduction in mind wandering," she explains. "So, when people are sitting down with the intention of being focused, 10 minutes of meditation practice can help improve your ability to let go of distractions and maintain your intention."

CALL AND RESPONSE

Jones Bell adds that it is vital for Headspace to offer the same support to its own people. In the past, this has meant daily all-company meditation practices and helping staff create mindfulness routines. But like any organisation, Headspace had new challenges to overcome when responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. It chose to close its offices in California a few days before this became mandatory and quickly considered what it could provide to its people to help in an increasingly difficult situation.

"We believe in practising what we preach so we did focus groups with our own employees to find out what support they needed," Jones Bell explains. "We increased our stipend so employees could purchase a home office set up to meet the same standards we have in our offices.

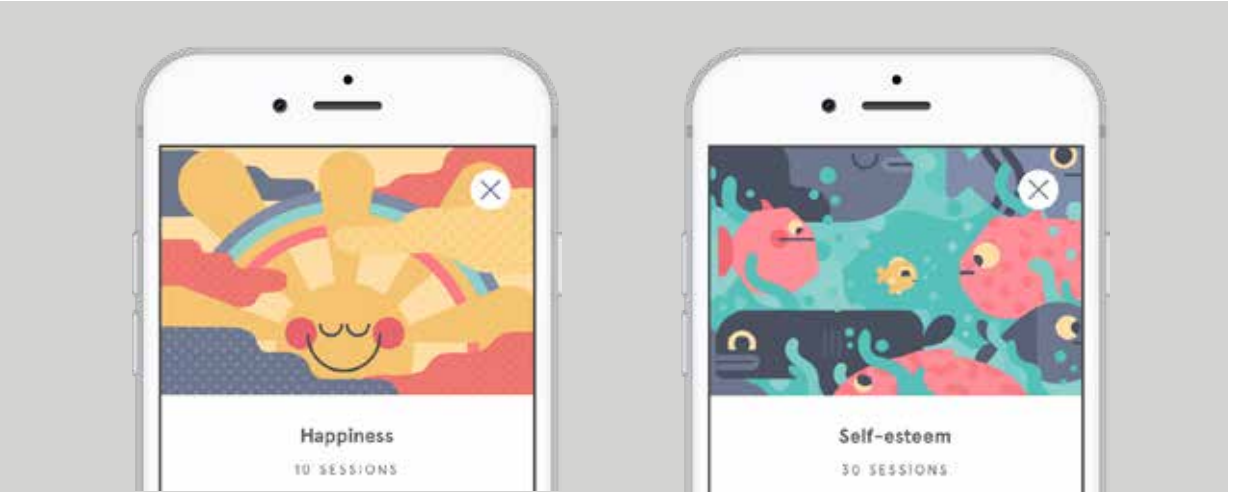
"Fridays now alternate between having no meetings and having a day off that we call a 'mind day'. We also have a Monday Zoom meeting with the leadership team so that our leadership group is more accessible to employees."

The company has also worked with groups of employees with more specific needs, such as caregivers and parents, to see what can be done to help them during the pandemic. And while the support offered to these groups is different, Jones Bell says that measurement is just as important at Headspace as it is for its clients.

"We have an evaluation culture where we try something but evaluate and learn from it to refine our programmes over time.

"Our science team partners with our people team and we launch surveys of our own employees anonymously to try and understand the specific needs of groups within our employee base to make sure that when we're thinking of new policies or practices we're inclusive.

> **"EMPLOYERS ARE REALLY OWNING MENTAL HEALTH IN SUCH AN INSPIRING WAY"**
> **DR MEGAN JONES BELL, HEADSPACE**



CV

DR MEGAN JONES BELL'S CAREER

- **2020–present** Chief Strategy & Science Officer, Headspace
- **2018–present** Adjunct Clinical Assistant Professor, Stanford University
- **2017–2020** Chief Science Officer, Headspace
- **2015–2018** Consulting Assistant Professor, Stanford University
- **2013–2017** Chief Science Officer, Lantern
- **2011–2015** Clinical Assistant Professor, Stanford University
- **2011–2014** Director, Healthy Body Image Program, Stanford University
- **2009–2011** Postdoctoral Fellow; Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University

"Qualitative and quantitative data collection [such as user experience and uptake] is used to launch new things and evaluate how they are working, but we also follow up to do the same interviews and surveys again to see if the thing we have tried has worked and addressed the need that we identified."

A CULTURE OF PURPOSE

While Headspace had to contend with the challenges of remote working and supporting staff, it also reacted quickly to support society more widely, opening up many of the resources it has created over the years.

Jones Bell worked with a cross-functional group of around 40 colleagues globally to consider how the company could support members and partners through the crisis.

"We launched a free, specially curated, collection of meditation and mindfulness content called *Weathering the Storm* to help people find some space for themselves and to cope with the stress and uncertainty of a global pandemic," she explains.

The company then moved to support organisations and individuals that might need the most support. In the UK, this meant rolling out free services to all National Health Service staff and giving free access to unemployed and furloughed workers for a year. It has added the latter of these offerings to its Headspace Promise, ensuring its members will be supported with free access should they become unemployed in the future.

AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

While steps like these certainly match up to the company's mission, organisational authenticity starts with authentic leadership.

At Headspace, on a basic level, this means leaders using the methods and techniques promoted by the company. Luckily for Jones Bell, this did not require a great change in her existing habits: "I was a Headspace user for three years before I joined, using the very first product that Headspace developed. I'm very interested in this space, I usually try everything that comes out, but that was one that I actually used, even though I had my own start-up that was doing a related thing."

Furthermore, her relationship with meditation and mindfulness went even further back: "It was really an important part of my recovery. I went through a lot of different therapies when I was recovering from my mental health issues. And having a meditation practice and really applying mindfulness to my life was a thread that continued."

With Jones Bell being so open about the roots of her relationship to meditation, it is perhaps no surprise that she feels at one with her work life and home. "I'm the same person in both places," she says. "I think that meditation and mindfulness allow me to show up as my best self wherever I am."

FAITH IN THE FUTURE

While this year has certainly presented difficult mental health challenges for many people, Jones Bell is optimistic that it could also be the push that businesses need to take employee support to the next level. She says that the conversations she has had with other organisations have evolved since the start of the year.

"The overall level of awareness of companies around mental health has increased. Mental health has been a problem for a long time – one in four to five people experience a mental health problem during their life – and companies were already on this journey to address that and contemplate their place in it. But the crisis has accelerated the pace of change and the level of awareness. Our research shows that about 89 per cent of workers think that their company should offer mental health care to them and their dependents.

"In terms of what companies are asking for, they are better informed about what they should do. I'm observing that more companies are aware that they need comprehensive mental health resources and that employee assistance programmes or access to therapy alone are not sufficient (though they are necessary).

"They realise they need to provide health-promoting interventions to help people before they develop a mental health problem and have swift access to evidence-based care."

She says that this is particularly important as new generations join the world of work. "In the last decade, the youth mental health crisis is worsening all over the world. Younger employees are coming into companies with a greater prevalence of mental health concerns than prior generations. Our research indicates that around 40 per cent of younger workers suspect they suffer from anxiety and depression but haven't gotten help for it."

> **"MORE COMPANIES ARE AWARE THAT THEY NEED COMPREHENSIVE MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES"**
> **DR MEGAN JONES BELL, HEADSPACE**

Jones Bell concludes that the time to act on these challenges is now, warning that these prospective employees will want to know how the organisation they are considering working for reacted to the Covid-19 pandemic.

"I would suggest that organisations think of the steps they have taken during the pandemic not just as a response to a crisis but as something that is long overdue and is addressing a more permanent need. They need to consider how to earn the trust of potential employees and demonstrate that they have built a culture that is supportive of mental health.

"This younger generation, the future leaders, are more demanding. They expect mental health to be addressed and think of it as something their employers are responsible for. Once you begin to address that need, it's something that is hard to take away again. That is going to be another new normal." ■

DR MEGAN JONES BELL AT A GLANCE

Who is your hero?
My dad. He taught me what it means to live a life of purpose and to leverage my career to help other people.

What is the best part of your day at work?
When I get to watch someone on my team present work that I know has been challenging for them.

What has been the best moment of your career to date?
Ten years ago, when I decided to leave academia and launch into a digital health industry that didn't really exist yet. I felt a sense of possibility that I'd never experienced before.

Where is your favourite place to meditate?
Under normal circumstances, I love sitting in a room in our HQ called The Lookout where we all gather to meditate together.

What is your biggest passion outside work?
My three-year-old son. My life revolves around him. He's the best anchor to remind me of what's important, to laugh, to play and not take life too seriously.

What is the best piece of advice you've ever received?
A very accomplished female CEO, who is a mentor of mine, told me there would be chapters of my career where I had my foot on the accelerator and there would be times when there would be plateaus, where the best I could do was maintain. That was really liberating.

SPECTRUM OF SKILLS

FIGURES SHOW THAT A LARGE PERCENTAGE OF NEURODIVERSE ADULTS ARE BEING LEFT OUT OF THE WORLD OF WORK. HOWEVER, THEY CAN BRING MANY BENEFITS TO BUSINESSES. SO WHAT STEPS CAN ORGANISATIONS TAKE TO HELP THESE PEOPLE THRIVE IN THEIR WORKPLACE?

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION have been major areas of focus for many organisations in recent years, and for good reason. A 2020 **McKinsey** study found that companies in the top quartile for gender diversity outperform their competitors by 25 per cent, while those in the top quartile for ethnic diversity outperform their competitors by 36 per cent.

And, while many organisations are taking steps to improve the inclusion of workers from different ethnic groups, genders or social backgrounds, other areas are being overlooked.

Adults with brain differences such as autism, Asperger's syndrome, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and dyslexia are being left out of the workforce in swathes. Looking at autism alone, the problem is clear. In the US, 85 per cent of college graduates with autism are unemployed. In Australia, just 40 per cent of people with autism are employed, compared to 83 per cent of people without a disability. And in the UK, only 32 per cent of autistic adults have 'some form' of paid work, with 16 per cent holding full-time roles.

SO MUCH TO OFFER

With such large numbers of employable neurodiverse adults side-lined, what exactly are businesses missing out on? Could improving neurodiversity bolster much-needed skill sets?

Autism Europe suggests this may be the case. The non-profit association says that while people with the condition often struggle with social interaction, communication and some cognitive functioning (such as planning or prioritising), they are also predisposed to display high levels of concentration, hold detailed

factual knowledge or technical skill and have the ability to excel at repetitive tasks. Similar skills are also often seen in people with Asperger's syndrome. Meanwhile, a 2019 **EY** report indicated that people with dyslexia often display the most in-demand skills for the workforce of the future – leadership, creativity and initiative.

Some of the abilities that many people with these conditions possess are particularly useful for STEM industries. **Microsoft**'s Autism Hiring Program and **IBM**'s Ignite Autism Spectrum Disorder Program are just two of the schemes set up by big-name tech firms to hire more neurodiverse employees.

Meanwhile, an **Israeli Defense Forces** unit, Ro'im Rachok (Hebrew for 'seeing far into the future'), was set up to include young adults on the spectrum. The soldiers perform analytical intelligence work, visually analysing aerial surveillance imagery. Launched in 2012, it now accepts around 80 applicants each year.

Carlene Jackson, CEO of tech company **Cloud9 Insight** – who is herself dyslexic – estimates around 20–30 per cent of her company are neurodiverse. Describing the benefits these employees can bring, she says: "Firms just need to understand the value of having people that don't think in a traditional way. We find the ability to focus and be loyal are strong autistic traits, while being creative and an out-of-the-box thinker is a dyslexic's contribution. Why wouldn't we want this in our business?"

US software and QA testing non-profit **Aspiritech** has gone further still. Its entire workforce is made up of people on the autism spectrum. Founders Brenda and Moshe Weitzberg set up the business in 2008 after their autistic son Oran was turned away from many jobs.

"Our clients benefit from an affordable, US-based, highly skilled solution for their QA testing needs," says Brad Cohen, Chief Marketing Officer. "The staff gain a well-paying job in a suitable environment that supports their long-term employment. Everyone gains when people are given the opportunity to use their skills for meaningful, well-paying work that leads to a fully independent life."

The benefits are long-term as well; Aspiritech has a retention rate of 95 per cent and team leaders and managers are hired from within the organisation.

CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

But while these reports and experiences indicate there are many benefits to improving neurodiversity in the workplace, the reality is that many organisations are simply not set up to help these employees be successful. One of the biggest challenges is around improving understanding and awareness.

> **"EVERYONE GAINS WHEN PEOPLE ARE GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO USE THEIR SKILLS FOR MEANINGFUL, WELL-PAYING WORK"**
> **BRAD COHEN, ASPIRITECH**

"Research we conducted found 32 per cent of UK workers said their employer fails to offer additional help or support for neurodiverse employees – but that's often because they're unaware of it," says Mike Blake, Wellness Lead, **Willis Towers Watson**. "The first thing employers have to do is accept they're likely to have neurodiverse staff in the first place. These are people who might be suffering because they're trying to do a job that their neurodiversity makes very difficult."

Organisations also need to ensure that, culturally, colleagues are aware and accepting and thoughtful of their different peers' needs. "This is the tougher ask," says Dr Nancy Doyle, CEO of **Genius Within**: "The paradigm shift is for everyone to ask 'what is it neurodiverse people can bring?' Currently, thinking around neurodiversity is still closer to disability and discrimination legislation – about making reasonable adjustments – rather than seeing it as a benefit in the whole."

When it comes to making adjustments to recruitment practices, Aspiritech's Cohen says there are a number of barriers to overcome: "Primarily, it is identifying the skills that a candidate has and how to accommodate for their challenges. Specifically, weak social skills, a lack of eye contact, and difficulty with interviewing skills can hide the candidates' true abilities.

"Awareness of these issues can open up opportunities for both the job seeker and the employer. There are many resources to assist employers with best practices and tips on hiring."

He says the secret to Aspiritech's success in hiring neurodivergent employees had been offering them the support they need. "Even now during Covid-19, we employ 116 QA testers who are autistic plus a handful of support staff to help our autistic employees with both hard and soft skills. We also offer daily and weekend social activities, coding clubs, women's groups and many other planned free activities to build an environment where our staff can shine and be effective QA testers for our paying clients."

Helen Needham, Managing Principal at global management consultancy **Capco**, has experienced the differences small adjustments can make first-hand. She was diagnosed as autistic in her 40s and says that she struggled with the decision to 'come out' in 2018. "My condition means I can't read people's emotions the way normal managers can. I was conflicted about opening up," she recalls, "because once you do, you can't take it back, and I didn't want people to think it was me excusing myself for a certain type of behaviour. What I decided, though, is that this is simply me. My brain just operates differently."

Since revealing her autism, Needham, who also runs the **Me.Decoded** forum for other autistic people, says she's had huge support. She now has what she calls her 'social bridges' – trusted people who report back to her the feelings of her team – emotions she might have missed.

SETTING UP FOR SUCCESS

While there are challenges, there are some organisations taking formal steps to set up programmes to improve neurodiversity, and ensure workers with differing needs and abilities are catered for.

"Supporting neurodiversity requires HR directors to think about more than just tapping into skills, or new conversations that come as a result of thinking differently, but being totally supportive of differences," says Nadya Powell, co-founder of **Utopia** and chair of the diversity committee of the **British Interactive Media Association**. Powell helped write **Universal Music**'s recently launched *Neurodiversity Handbook*, and consults on its 'Creative Differences' project aimed at supporting its 10 per cent of staff who claim to be on the ASD (Autistic Spectrum Disorder) scale.

She says that just by starting to talk about neurodiversity, staff are learning to spot (and be more accepting of) signs that their colleagues might be different. But Powell and others accept being neurodiverse isn't easy.

For businesses looking to learn more, Cohen encourages them to get in contact with Aspiritech as the organisation is ready and willing to share its experience. And for those looking to make concerted efforts to make their work environment an easier place for neurodiverse colleagues, he suggests simply taking the plunge: "Just do it! Start by being really nice but think about the social challenges that the candidate is facing. Don't forget that the skill and abilities are there.

"Once a person becomes an employee, find them a mentor or co-worker who they can meet with. Ask the employee what simple accommodations will make them more productive. Many of these accommodations are really easy; a quieter area to sit, noise-cancelling headphones, a place to decompress or eat lunch in private.

"Why not ask them to lunch or coffee? But don't be offended if their response is frank. Be clear about communication protocols and listen to their ideas, you will be surprised. With a successful hire, the loyalty and long-term job retention will benefit everyone." ■

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DIGITAL HORIZONS

JAMES MILLIGAN, GLOBAL HEAD OF TECHNOLOGY AT HAYS, DISCUSSES HOW COVID-19 HAS DRIVEN DEMAND FOR DIGITAL AND TECHNOLOGY TALENT GLOBALLY IN 2020, AND EXPLAINS HOW BUSINESSES CAN STAND OUT IN A COMPETITIVE MARKET

GETTY IMAGES

> **"TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN THEIR HIRING IN THIS HIGHLY COMPETITIVE MARKET, BUSINESSES HAVE HAD TO EVOLVE THEIR PROCESSES QUICKLY"**

DEMAND FOR TECHNOLOGY talent has evolved rapidly since the start of the pandemic. At first, there was a hugely increased demand for candidates who could enable remote working – people with cloud-based skills who could deploy systems like AWS and Azure. Within the first four to eight weeks of lockdown happening, demand for these candidates rose by 400 per cent.

That quickly changed to interest in cyber security candidates. While technical skills were sought in these candidates, businesses also needed people who could drive behavioural change in users. When employees are working from home, there are different vulnerabilities compared to working in an office environment. Organisations needed candidates who could ensure employees were operating in a secure environment with the quick deployment of new systems.

Next, we saw an uplift in demand for data analysts and data scientists, particularly in the UK. There was demand from central governments and health services for people who could crunch the numbers around Covid–19 and take a predictive view of what would come next.

There was also some private demand for these candidates, with businesses trying to understand how their risk profile might have changed.

Those trends were seen between March and May, but we're now seeing companies think longer term about their digital and technology talent strategy. Here are five of the key areas organisations will need to consider when recruiting technology talent:

1. PLANNING FURTHER INTO THE FUTURE IS KEY

After the first months, where companies were playing catch-up, businesses were starting to look ahead. They understand that Covid-19 is going to be here for some time and, rather than just reacting to the immediate crisis, organisations have started planning for the future. From May to June, there was a drop off in demand as they considered what their next steps were going to be.

Lots of companies, from large enterprises to public sector organisations, had digital transformation programmes in place, but they needed to identify new priorities based on the new needs of employees and customers, whether they were individual consumers or businesses. Many found they had room for improvement when it came to the tools they used to engage people. There was also a need to improve virtual shop windows, websites, and anything else businesses had to facilitate their direct relationship with the customer, which will have replaced or augmented traditional human interaction.

We found these forward-looking businesses were coming to us with a planned approach. They had identified their programme of work and the types of people they would need to enable change and transformation. Most organisations now work in an agile or a semi-agile way, so they are looking for skills that can enable the change, but also software developers who can build and develop the applications that they require.

2. RECRUITMENT PROCESSES NEED TO KEEP EVOLVING

To be successful in their hiring in this highly competitive market, businesses have had to evolve their processes quickly. Most companies had some sort of video platform, but adoption was poor, generally speaking. Covid-19 made it a necessity because everyone's working remotely, so you had that accelerated transformation, which increased adoption very quickly.

The next challenge was around onboarding. Many companies don't have a cohesive remote onboarding process where they can bring somebody into a business in a non-physical way. Luckily, technology companies, or technology departments, move in quite an agile way; they are almost always the early adopters of these changes. They're familiar with the technology and they're advocates of it. On the whole, though, Covid-19 has accelerated cultural change in non-native digital organisations.

3. IT'S WORTH SEARCHING OUTSIDE OF YOUR USUAL TALENT POOLS

Organisations have become much more flexible in the geographies they will hire from. We have helped a company in Belfast recently that was willing to look for candidates within three time zones. They are tapping into a much broader pool of talent. We're starting to see this trend more frequently.

What remains to be seen is what will happen over the next six to 18 months, and whether this has become the norm or if these placements are outliers within the market. My instincts tell me that, in tech, we're going to see an awful lot more talent placed that is not linked to the geography of the office that they're 'based in'.

4. THERE HAS BEEN A CULTURAL SHIFT AROUND TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION

A lot of the time, when technology workers try to launch new systems in organisations, the process of change is difficult and people won't take it on quickly. People have been forced to adopt new technology rapidly and that's changed a lot of people's view of it forever. The pandemic has been the biggest change that's happened in the business world in our lifetimes, and collectively we've demonstrated that in a matter of weeks, most organisations have been able to pivot from working in an office to a fully remote working environment. Behaviourally, users have demonstrated they are able to make this rapid change, so psychologically they will be more open to new systems in the future.

5. ORGANISATIONS WILL NEED TO TAKE TIME TO REFLECT

Organisations have moved quickly and will want to go back and revisit what they did earlier in 2020 to make sure it's robust. They are looking at a new hybrid world where employees work both from home and in the office. Strategically, they must make sure that they are in a position where they can continue to operate and thrive.

This move to hybrid working is likely to mean an acceleration in digital transformation and that means that technology professionals with legacy skill sets will need to retrain to make sure that they have the skills required in this new world.

Finally, all organisations need to consider what this means for new entrants to the workforce. A large part of learning how to be effective in the world of work comes from observation, being mentored and getting real-time feedback. Organisations that have shifted to a remote model will need to consider how to manage this. ■

ISTOCK

› WHAT CAN BUSINESSES DO TO ATTRACT THE BEST TECHNOLOGY TALENT?

"Organisations need to understand what their value proposition is. It is key that they are transparent and can clearly articulate what they want. They also need to make the process easy and as quick as possible, and ensure they haven't created barriers in there, because that quite often leads to candidates, particularly those with technical skills, dropping out."

› **James Milligan,** Global Head of Technology, Hays

"Many companies are lacking a mission and a vision. I would urge them to tell their story, and explain what they want to achieve, in a more meaningful way. Technology professionals want to have fun and develop something innovative, but if you don't have that authenticity, potential employees see through it quite quickly."

› **Frédéric Beziers,** Director General, Hays France

"Our annual salary guide survey shows that career progression is the number one factor for technology candidates seeking new opportunities. Having a vision and being able to articulate how a candidate's role contributes to the bigger picture is important to share with them during interviews."

› **Edmond Pang,** Regional Director, Shanghai & Suzhou, Hays China

"Put even more effort and time into building and nurturing genuinely meaningful, long-term relationships with your potential technology hires. The uncertainty caused by the pandemic means that the talent landscape is looking somewhat different from what it was just a few months ago. Hiring processes may take longer. Building long-term relationships with talent pools are becoming even more important when constructing a strong employer brand strategy."

› **David Brown,** CEO, Hays US

"Challenge your requirements and explore a wider range of candidates. Ask yourself if all the tech skills on your wish list are essential. For example, could you hire someone based on potential, attitude and alignment with your values, and then train them? An upside of this approach is that you are more likely to hire candidates with a diversity of backgrounds and experiences."

› **Robert Beckley,** Regional Director, Hays Australia

"We continue to see a stronger preference for hybrid working among technology candidates, and some clients are introducing working from home arrangements into their contracts for the first time. This has been particularly evident for the most in-demand skills such as software engineering, as businesses try to attract the very best talent."

› **James Hallahan,** Director, Hays UK & Ireland

KEEPING FOCUS

KAREN BARDSLEY, ENGLAND AND MANCHESTER CITY WOMEN'S FC GOALKEEPER, HAS RECENTLY COMPLETED A MASTERS IN SPORTS DIRECTORSHIP. WHILE STILL VERY MUCH FOCUSED ON HER PLAYING CAREER, SHE DISCUSSES HOW SHE IS PREPARING FOR A FUTURE CAREER PIVOT TO BECOME A DIRECTOR IN THE WORLD OF SPORT

When it comes to getting ready for a game, some things have changed since the start of my career. This season, I'm coming back from a serious injury, and the lockdown as well. I feel grateful now for every opportunity I get to train and improve every day because that was something that I couldn't do for a very long time. Being away from it made me really appreciate what I have. However, the excitement to go out and play is still there. When you get to focus on playing for an hour and a half, two hours, that's the fun part.

Growing up in the US is part of what gave me the drive to complete my Masters in Sports Directorship in 2019. Sport and education go hand in hand there, and when I was growing up everyone wanted a scholarship to go play football at university. As a professional athlete, there's never a good time to do things like a degree, but with the history of some of the injuries and things that I have, I am always seeking to make sure that I'm appreciative of opportunities. When that came knocking on my door, I thought I might as well just do it. If I get an opportunity to do something cool like that, I take it and make it work.

CHANGING THE FUTURE

I wouldn't rule out coaching or punditry when I finish playing but, to me, sports directorship is about making a difference and having a bigger purpose. I think you can affect change on a greater level from an administrative role, and ultimately that's what we want in women's football. We want to change the perception of it, we want to make sure that everyone has parity of opportunity, both on or off the pitch, and we want to offer more viable career paths for these athletes, not only in sport but in executive positions as well. That goal is pretty close to my heart.

This year, I became the first professional footballer to sit on any County FA's Board of Directors, when I joined the Manchester FA Board. I've been really impressed with the way that they've handled themselves during the pandemic; they have an open culture in which everyone can contribute. In roles like this, I can bring knowledge of day-to-day life in sport.

I have seen times where players are treated as numbers and assets, as opposed to human beings. To achieve high performance you have to approach things more holistically and find ways to support the individual and make sure that they feel involved, included and valued.

AUTHENTICITY AT HEART

In the future, as a sports director, I don't want to get to a place where we just do things because the men have done them. We need to find out what works for us and consider how we can get the parity that we deserve. I don't think that we should be given any change as a token gesture, but I do think we should be allowed to have the opportunity to achieve the same things. ■

GETTY IMAGES

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