

Increasing Productivity Means Working Smarter Not Harder

written by vickyp | May 16, 2016



If your employees worked harder, faster and longer would you get better results? That can be a difficult question to answer as usually quantity of work does not always equate to better results, at least not in the long term. Finding ways for employees to be highly productive involves a combination of factors but the formula is not that complicated.

In the recently released 2015 documentary from US filmmaker Michael Moore, titled 'Where To Invade Next', Moore shares a story about the rise of the education system in Finland from near the bottom of developed countries 20+ years ago to the top today. Among the changes he discovered about the Finish education system was that over the past 20 years Finland eradicated homework, cut school hours per day and reduced school days per year. In other words, the children worked less and the education system gained more. It seemed that for children to be productive they had to spend less time working, but when they worked they worked smarter.

Across Canada and around the world when asked employees frequently report that they are working harder than ever before. Working harder often meaning faster and longer hours, more pressure and increased expectations. However, this increase in a perception of working harder has not produced an upward shift in productivity in the countries where these workers are surveyed. The question of how to improve or increase productivity while retaining quality and retaining employees is one facing many organizations today.

Defining and Measuring Worker Productivity

There is no one consistent universal measure of worker productivity. Frequently organization's point to employee output, including volume and speed of work, as measures of productivity. When asked about productivity employees often reference increasing their intensity and pressure to complete work as a measures of their productivity. Output alone does not measure productivity although it is one important element of productivity. Well-measured productivity can also include efficiency, experience, quality and other factors that impact a business bottom line.

In a 2013 study by CIPD (Chartered Institute of Professional Development, a professional body representing professionals working in HR) questions about trends impacting work were explored in a series of reports called MegaTrends. In one report,

titled '[Are We Working Harder Than Ever](#)', the question of working effort and productivity were considered. The authors looked at whether the quantity and quality of effort that employees expend has changed in recent years as a factor in determining whether people were really working harder. The report identified that employees today do report they feel they are working harder, although their actual hours of work in many cases is less than previous generations. However, while they may overall work fewer hours it appears that their work is a more demanding and intense experience, partially due to the pressure of workload and demands in the workplace coupled, perhaps with demands and workload outside the workplace.

Employee productivity is about working smarter, not harder, faster or for longer

Working harder and faster may improve a workers output in the short term but it generally does not maintain the advantage over time. And adding more hours to a workers week or month may actually have a negative impact on productivity in that research has showed that productivity decreases and errors increase, and of course you often have to pay overtime wages impacting your bottom line.

Sustainable improvement in worker productivity requires re-evaluating, learning and adjusting to find ways to make changes that enable workers to produce better results in the same or less time frame as previous while maintaining quality and employee health.

4 Steps to Smart Productivity Improvements

- **Small Improvements** – Identify how your employees are working and look for those places where small changes can lead to increases in productivity. You may have heard the story about Los Angeles Lakers Basketball coach Pat Riley's formula for success. This formula involved focussing on incremental improvements, 1% improvements as a matter of fact. By looking at where his players could make 1% improvements he was able to build better players and better teams.
- **Select the Right Tools** – Investing in technology, hardware and software, can be an investment in productivity. Get rid of technology that is too slow, labour intensive and restrictive and explore technology that is agile and easy to learn and implement. This might also require an investment in your technology infrastructure to increase speed and mobility.
- **Workplace Design** – Building systems around the way people do their jobs, rather than systems where the employee has to fit in. Provide an environment that energizes employees and keeps their productivity high. Another CIPD [survey of agile practices](#) found that in today's workplaces about half of all employees work on the move, both within the primary workplace and outside of it. This could mean investment in workplace design and providing an environment that energises employees by allowing for both collaboration and concentration as needed. Standing and walking meetings, standing desks, comfortable and ergonomic workplaces and stations can help employees stay fresh and healthy.
- **Engage and Well-Managed Employees** – Nothing can be more de-motivating than to feel unsupported and disengaged. Involving employees in their workplace by obtaining their input on the first 3 elements, 1% improvement, tools and design, can result in improved productivity. Workers often bring innovative ideas and if they are invited to the conversation and have an open line of communication with management so they can identify opportunities for improvement that can improve everyone's bottom line. Employees can often be the catalysts for disruptive innovation if they have the opportunity to contribute.

Asking employees to work more and harder and even offering financial incentives to do so are usually not enough to create sustainable improvements in productivity. Making small changes, investing in the right workplace tools, technology and design and

working well with employees are simple steps that can make a significant difference.