



ROBERT HALF PODCAST SERIES

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Interviewee: Andrew Brushfield

Interviewer: Stuart Cameron

Stuart: Andrew Brushfield, how do you think all the uncertainty in the economy these days has affected workplace productivity?

Andrew: What we are finding at the moment, Stuart, is that the uncertainty in the economy has an impact on employees' morale, on employees' anxiety levels, which are both very closely inter-related. We see that these tend to feed off each other and when you throw that in the mix with potential retrenchments, potential movements from staff into other areas of business, we find that the productivity and output of employees is being affected mainly by the economy and the tightening of the economy at the moment. One thing that we are finding through results of our global workplace survey is that the drop in morale and an increase in anxiety is a difficult cost for a lot of employees to measure and when that is the case, particularly being very bottom-line focused as most organisations are, sometimes that tends to get swept under the carpet, which has a further negative effect on people's morale and I suppose the enjoyment they perceive or gain from coming into work each day.

Stuart: Let's talk about productivity for a second. How do you feel that most employers are measuring productivity?

Andrew: Well, it really does depend on the different type of organisation. What we are finding is that the measurement is natural for companies to put a cost associated to that. Now quite often that is actually very hard to quantify, as I did mention earlier. What I can say, to minimise the cost or whatever that cost may be, is that there are certain remedies and certain ways that employers can handle that sort of anxiety, that uncertainty that is created by tougher economic times. One of the things is basic communication. We find that clear and honest communication by employers has a massive positive increase or effect on reducing stress levels of employees. That being, if, as an employer or as a boss you are openly sharing where the company is at, some of the troubles that the company is facing, some of the challenges the company is facing, some of the opportunities the company has ahead of them, then the employees, I suppose, relax a little bit and tend to feel more comfortable. When they are feeling more comfortable, that productivity does tend to increase.

The other thing that should be focused upon is making sure that the expectations of employees are met through providing clear direction and guidelines. For example, project work or day to day responsibilities, particularly if they have increased because there has been movement of staff. Employees look to engage employers or managers as to what are the priorities that they need to achieve on a day-to-day basis, what are the focus areas for that employee when there is more work, when there is greater stress level because of that more work or greater anxiety because people have left. When you

sit down with your employees make sure that it is very clear, very concise and make sure they get the feeling that they can come and speak to you as a manager to discuss what may be on their mind at the time.

Stuart: The Robert Half workplace survey also found that employees and employers may be over-compensating in response to perceptions about increased pressure to perform and to keep jobs. People are coming to work sick, they are checking work email more and more from home. What advice would you give people to handle these particular issues and improve work/life balance whilst holding on to their jobs?

Andrew: It's a good question. One of the considerations of I suppose working in the 2000s is that technology is rapidly advancing and what we are finding is it is very common for sort of in excess of 40% of people to do work from home. It's very, very common, particularly as we sort of come into the winter months, for sick employees to be working when they should actually be at home. So in order to, I suppose, manage that and make sure that the company and the employee aren't adversely affected, it gets back to the relationship that employees have with their managers, the communication that employees have with their managers and the company. So that that over-compensation that you mentioned before is managed properly and effectively. So once again, setting lists and prioritising the must dos versus the lower priority items. If there is lower priority, it shouldn't be done at 9 o'clock at night, after work hours. It should be discussed prior to deadlines or whatever that may be with your boss to make sure that he or she knows exactly where you are placed and your ability to get the job done is delivered upon according to that list of priorities.

In addition to that you need to make sure that if you do get to a stage where you have a whole list of high priorities items, none of them are non-negotiable, looking at a contract option. So getting extra resources in for a short period of time to help you get over that hump is something that can be considered. The reason I say this to you, Stuart, is because when people are working from home, when people are working when they are sick or a little bit under the weather, inevitably that will have flow-on effects to levels of stress. Inevitably their productivity level will be lower than what it should be. So when you manage that according to priorities, with a very open and honest relationship with your superiors, then the impact of that sort of stress level or decreased productivity can be minimised.

Stuart: Over the last six months many organisations have been through either large or even small scale retrenchments and in the aftermath many employees are finding that their workplace suddenly becomes much more stressful. What is the best way for a team or an organisation to recover from retrenchments and to ensure that teams get back to high performance as quickly as possible?

Andrew: I think the simplest way to really answer that question, Stuart, is just to make sure you know your people. So where in an environment at the moment where there does seem to be redundancies or job cuts. One of the flow-on effects of that is that people who remain sometimes feel guilty. To make sure that you maintain and create as normal an environment as possible when people have left, is to make sure you know your staff. So little things like open and honest communication. It does help in motivating and inspiring your team. Making sure you are a very transparent manager, making sure that transparency is across the board. We all hear the word "transparency" at the moment. It is a buzz word in organisations and is a buzz word for a good reason. The reason is, when there is a lack of transparency people are de-motivated. People are anxious, that uncertainty because, you know, they may have closed door meetings,

creates rumours, creates all the types of environments or issues or political chats that organisations strive to avoid.

So by being very honest and very open with your communication does enable you to return to back as normal a work environment as possible. Over and above that it is knowing your people. So little things like Monday morning chatting about weekends, acknowledging birthdays, importantly acknowledging great performance. What we tend to see in environments like that is ... or that we are operating in at the moment is when there is great performance it is probably not advertised as much as it should be because it might create greater pressure on the under-performer.

That is actually not the right strategy to take. We should always be really heralding our top performers and making sure that they know they are doing a very good job despite the tougher environment.

Over and above that, it is just knowing your people. A lot of companies and bosses assume that the only priority people have is money. What we are finding through our global workplace surveys is that there are more considerations for employees than just money, albeit money is very important. So looking at the way you reward people in terms of bonuses, looking at work/life balance, looking at providing flexibility in the hours that your employees work, looking at training opportunities, looking at internal growth, internal promotion. It may not be in the next month or the next two months but at least acknowledging that there may be that opportunity down the track. All these types of things enable companies to get back to that normal environment that you are striving for prior to making redundancies or retrenchments.

Stuart: When asked what has the most positive effect on morale, the largest number of respondents to the Robert Half workplace survey answered open, honest communication and you have talked so far today at length about communication but what are some of the practical steps that employers can take to make sure that they communicate better with their teams?

Andrew: What we are hearing from the market at the moment is the most important and most practical step is to make sure each employee is aware of the company goals and the team and individual goals. Making sure that they feel involved, making sure they know and understand the direction of the company. So if that is, on an individual basis, they need to hit certain targets or they need to execute certain deals or whatever discipline they work in, they know exactly about what they need to do on a day to day basis. Then from that, build that up into a team, what your team needs to do on a day to day basis, on a week to week basis and then the company. So that they completely feel in alignment and, if you like, married into the direction of the company. Other little things ... and they do make a big difference is open door policy. We have talked about communication earlier. Open-door policy is obviously related to that. Encourage teams and individuals to come to you as a manager or an owner of a company with any concerns, observations, thoughts, feelings about the company, about the market, to communication needs to be two-way. You need to provide that direction, that awareness of the company goals in the short to medium term but you also need to be able to listen to what your employees are saying about how they are feeling about their market that they are operating in as well as the opportunities that exist internally and the like.

On the flip side of that, Stuart, is the closed door meetings, the behind the water dispenser meetings. Those types of meetings, be it formal or informal, create politics,

the whispering creates rumours. So in a management position certainly avoid it. When you can, when you are dealing with your people, and your people are communicating with each other, make sure that there is open and honest communication across all levels of the organisation because you then avoid that rumour mill, you avoid the whispering, the what-if type scenarios and it means you are in more control of the organisation at hand.

Stuart: What are some of the lessons that an organisation can take from people who have either voluntarily or involuntarily left their jobs and what can they teach us about improving productivity?

Andrew: So lot of companies actually don't conduct exit interviews from employees who have left. I would strongly encourage employees out there to conduct exit interviews. The reason I say that is you can learn a lot about the company from the perceptions of people who are leaving the business for whatever reason that may be.

A lot of people don't like doing it because they don't like hearing what they think may be negative comments but if you are open and willing to listen to comments and suggestions from people exiting the business, you are bound to learn more things. You are bound to tap into more knowledge, be it informal or formal, by conducting those exit interviews. So what I would suggest is sitting down, make it a quite formal interview if you like or meeting, and ask about their experience in the business, ask what they thought where the company did well, ask what they thought were opportunities for us to take advantage of, ask what you, as a manager, did well or did poorly. The comments that are then made need to be handled appropriately. That may mean that you hold on to them yourself. That may mean that you make certain observations to other people. But when you actually go through that process with an open mind and provide the opportunity for the person leaving the company to express their feelings, what you will find is that you will learn a little bit more about your organisation. You will get a different insight to the organisation than your perception because it is coming from a different level. Obviously the most important thing is you need to use your discretion as a manager to do with that information what you will. Some of it will be inappropriate for broader consumption, some of it will be very appropriate. Some of it will provide you the opportunity to put action points in place as a result of it and then some of it is best to just stay with yourself.

Stuart: And finally, as a senior manager yourself, what are your top tips for improving team productivity?

Andrew: I think the most important thing is to be close to your people, to understand your people, to empathise with your people. People who work for all organisations across Australia are feeling increased stress levels, increased anxiety levels because of the market we operate in. They don't have expectations of managers to completely eradicate those stress levels but they do, and rightly, have an expectation of their managers to be aware of what they are going through. So empathy is a massively important thing in this instance. So when you empathise you understand. When you understand, you can provide action points or considerations of what your people are going through.

From my personal perspective, I think the most important thing as a manager to do is to stay very close to your people, to communicate very clearly with them, ensure that they understand the deliverables on a day to day business, that they execute the deliverables on a day to day basis and that they know what the result of those deliverables are.

Making sure that you provide recognition to your employees. Making sure they feel comfortable in coming to you. Quite often you find certain areas of companies, for whatever reason, may miss that recognition. So little things like saying thank you on the way out each day or saying, thanks for a great week, on a Friday afternoon make a big impact on the way that people feel about the company that they work for. You need to involve people in decision-making, where appropriate. Now that is not a wide-ranging statement but you need to use your discretion as a manager when there is a decision to be made that will have a positive impact on the people, if they can be involved it, use your discretion and get them involved. Talk to them about the opportunities that exist in the market and in the company.

Even though they may not be as evident now as they were 12 months ago, it is important for your people to know that you are still thinking about their career and managing their career and lastly, I would just like to re-emphasise that making sure they understand ... your employees understand what projects, what work is absolutely critical versus what work is not so critical. So sitting down with them and prioritising their work, be it for a day, be it for a week, be it for a month, is vitally important. If they feel that every job they are doing is mission critical, if you like, then inevitably what is going to result is increased anxiety, increased stress. If they understand that what is in front of them is 75% mission critical, they will then focus on completing that 75% and then the remaining 25% they will sit down with their manager and say, "I will have this done by that date". That will make them feel a lot more comfortable in their role and as a result will enjoy coming to work each day more so.

Stuart: Andrew Brushfield, thanks very much for your time today.

Andrew: Thanks Stuart.

End of Interview.