Building a Positive Workplace Culture

Attracting and retaining good people with great skills.

Content

Introduction

Attracting and retaining good people with great skills is essential to business success. With unprecedented demand for technical skills, however, this requires a strategic commitment to people management that is a world away from the hierarchical approach of the past.

With tech talent incredibly thin on the ground – in the UK as elsewhere globally – retaining top talent must be more than a line in the corporate strategy. As many companies are discovering, adding a chill out zone to a great salary is not enough if the day-to-day working experience is neither happy nor fulfilling. A lack of commitment to creating the right working environment and nurturing talent leads to employee haemorrhage which is actively hindering performance and growth.

Since its inception, Softwire has recognised the importance of creating a great workplace culture. For over a decade the company has been among ranked highly on the Sunday Times Best Companies to work list now known as Best Companies.

This e-book will outline the five steps to creating a great workplace culture.

The executive structure is highly transparent and so is our feedback process; from the founding members, to newbies, everybody has a say in how the company is run, and how we can improve it.

**Sarah Binney,
Developer at Softwire**

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Understanding Employee Value

The importance of creating a positive workplace culture continues to grow, not least in response to the high demand for top technology skills. Almost two thirds (64%) of CIOs now report a talent shortfall, which means talented employees now enjoy almost limitless employment choice. What motivates these individuals to work for one specific organisation?

Employee workplace expectations have also evolved over the past decade. The combination of unprecedented levels of employment and the arrival of millennials and Generation Z, with different outlooks and objectives, are increasingly influencing workplace perception. Employees not only have more choice; they are also far more aware of the importance of a positive working environment.

Employee wellbeing has become important. The majority of today's employees spend approximately 90,000 hours at work in their lifetime – and that affects their health and well-being, both at home and at work. Happy employees are productive employees – which improves the quality of output and the overall client experience, resulting in more repeat business. On the flip side, unhappy employees are contagious – one miserable individual can affect the entire team and consume vast amounts of management time and energy. The speed with which a workplace can become disgruntled and unhappy – and hence begin to leak talent – can take companies by surprise.

Developers, coders, project managers are in a strong position in a market where demand massively outstrips supply. Retention is key to any organisation, not just to minimise staff turnover but also to create a happy, productive workforce that is co-operative and collaborative.

How can a business retain these intelligent, highly sought after experts with the world at their feet?

They could work anywhere; join any business; find a company that not only rewards their skills but respects their opinions and beliefs. Valuable individuals with hard to source skills are no longer just employees; they are part of the business.

...so what does this mean in practice?

Part 2.

Five stages of workplace culture

1 Perks

2 Trust

3 Work

4 Career

5 Purpose

Stage 1:
Perks

A great salary is a given for any talented individual – perks have, therefore, become an important part of the overall package. But what perks do employees truly value? Traditional perks such as gym memberships and company cars are just additional financial incentives – today's employees are looking for something different.

Certainly there is an expectation today amongst employees of a certain type of workplace environment. Whether that is free daily coffee from the nearby espresso bar or Donut Fridays, a pool table, chill out area or company away days, most companies recognise the need to create a more relaxed and rewarding environment.

But employees are also far more aware of the importance of other aspects of wellbeing. A new study by AVIVA revealed that a wellness allowance is by far the most requested benefit, with people expecting their
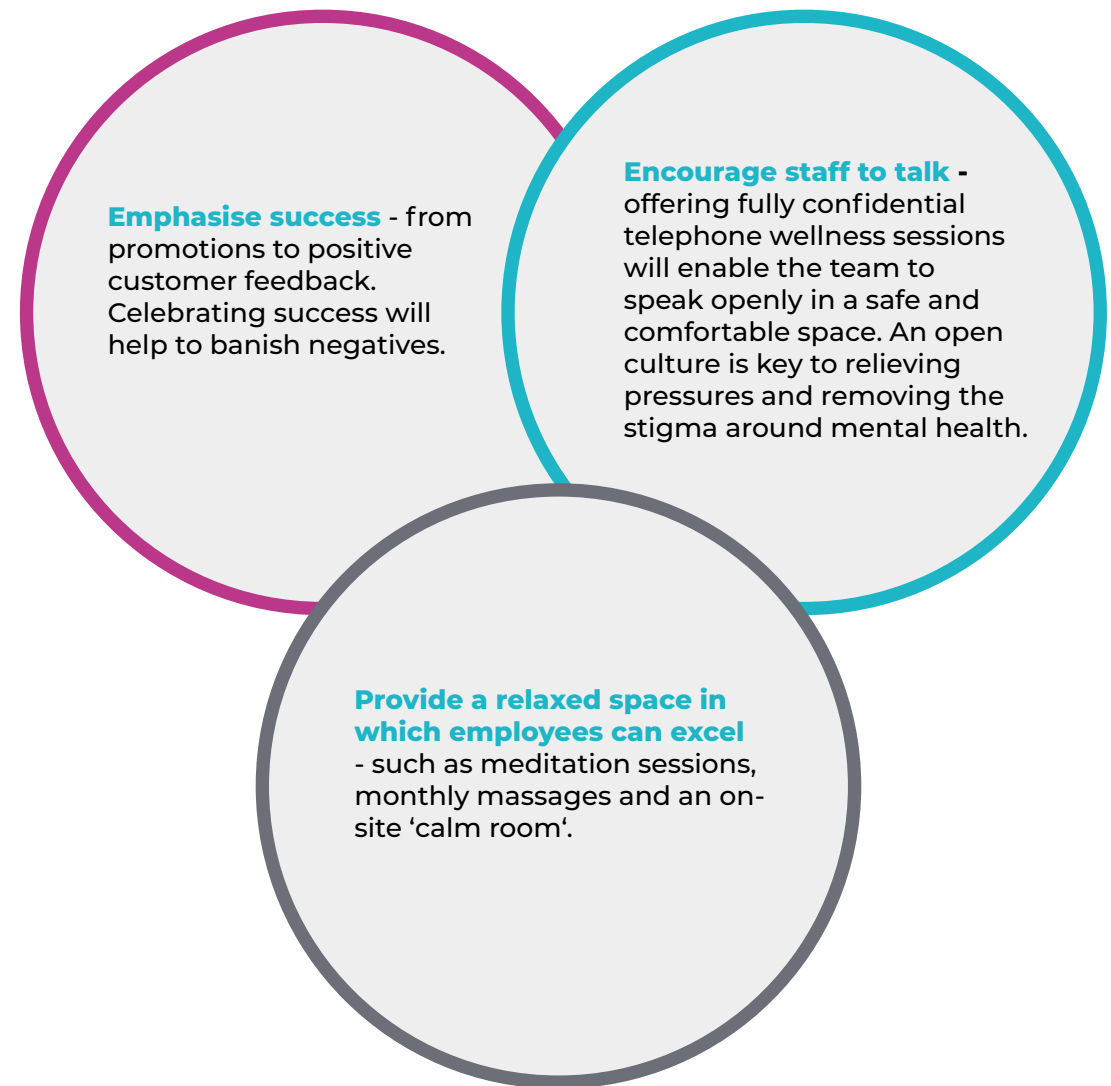
Morale Commitment

Several working practices are becoming standard within business that are a significant change from previous eras.

Faith holidays, for example, are essential in any multicultural society; while a self-authorising expense policy (to certain limits) will demonstrate trust in individuals and empower them to create the right environment to be productive and effective.

Perks must, of course, work for the business as well as the employee. They could include:

Introduction of 'morale holiday' entitlement which enables employees to take part in company activities, providing both time off and a chance to bond with colleagues.

Building a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme to enable employees to directly support causes, both through individual and company-wide initiatives.

Emphasise success - from promotions to positive customer feedback. Celebrating success will help to banish negatives.

Encourage staff to talk - offering fully confidential telephone wellness sessions will enable the team to speak openly in a safe and comfortable space. An open culture is key to relieving pressures and removing the stigma around mental health.

Provide a relaxed space in which employees can excel - such as meditation sessions, monthly massages and an on-site 'calm room'.

Trust

Without trust between employees and management it is impossible to create a positive workplace culture. It is essential to recognise just how easy it is to undermine that trust.

Just take the company that took the positive step of creating a chill out room - but then made the mistake of limiting its use to set times, somewhat missing the point! The result was not only that employees boycotted the room, but what should have been a positive step in building workplace culture seriously back-fired and undermined that essential trust.

So how do you foster trust?

Communication

Clear channels of communication are essential in any business. Communication must be two-way.

An open door policy or dedicated times when employees are encouraged to speak to senior management, in informal group environments and one-to-one, are valuable.

This is not just about providing a safe space for raising concerns and complaints. It is about celebrating success, requesting new office facilities, promoting debate and discussion about dealing with clients, managing remote teams or embracing new business opportunities. Essentially, it is about fostering an open business environment that is a world away from the 'them and us' hierarchy of the past.

Transparency around decision making

Shared thinking behind key decisions

Ensure that initiatives are employee-led

Democratic Business
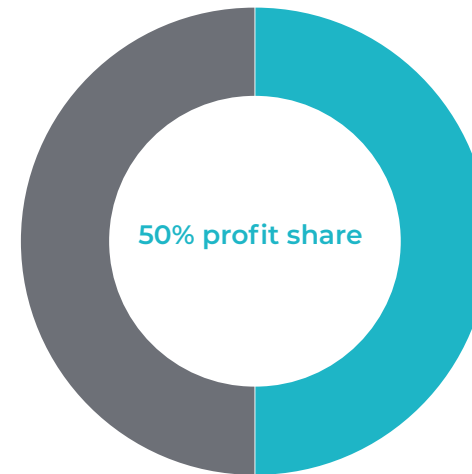
Incentives and bonuses are a core component of many employees contracts, but companies can also consider profit redistribution.

This makes empoyees feel:

Motivated

Engaged

Committed

50% profit share

We have shared 50% of profits with employees since our launch which helps individuals feel motivated, engaged and committed. When employees have a share of the profits, they need to have real input on important decisions. Management need to share business challenges as well as celebrating success.

Asking employee opinions on tough decisions - doesn't undermine morale, it improves trust, benefiting staff engagement with the business. Softwire encountered this situation a few years ago when staff voted to take a 10% pay cut instead of redundancies.

Trust is harder to gain and retain than you might think - and you have to keep working at it.

Work

Wherever possible it is important to take the time to match the right employee to the right project.

Of course, some employee/project fits will be better than others, but accommodating employee feelings is an important aspect of improving
productivity and, ultimately, retention. For example, if a coder specifies a preference for working on Java projects, why allocate that individual to one developing in .Net? If one individual enjoys working with a specific client, making that happen will both improve the employee's day to day working life and deliver a great client experience – boosting employee and client retention.

With increasing environmental awareness, it's important to consider employee feelings regarding business partners and clients – some may have concerns about certain business areas or organisations.

Most individuals are approaching these difficult issues in a very constructive way – with a goal to improve their own business' environmental impact first, for example, rather than pointing the finger at others.

Matching people to projects is tricky but it is worth investing time and energy to get the right fit.

Morale holiday is great - but it offers little value if the employees are not happy for the rest of the time.
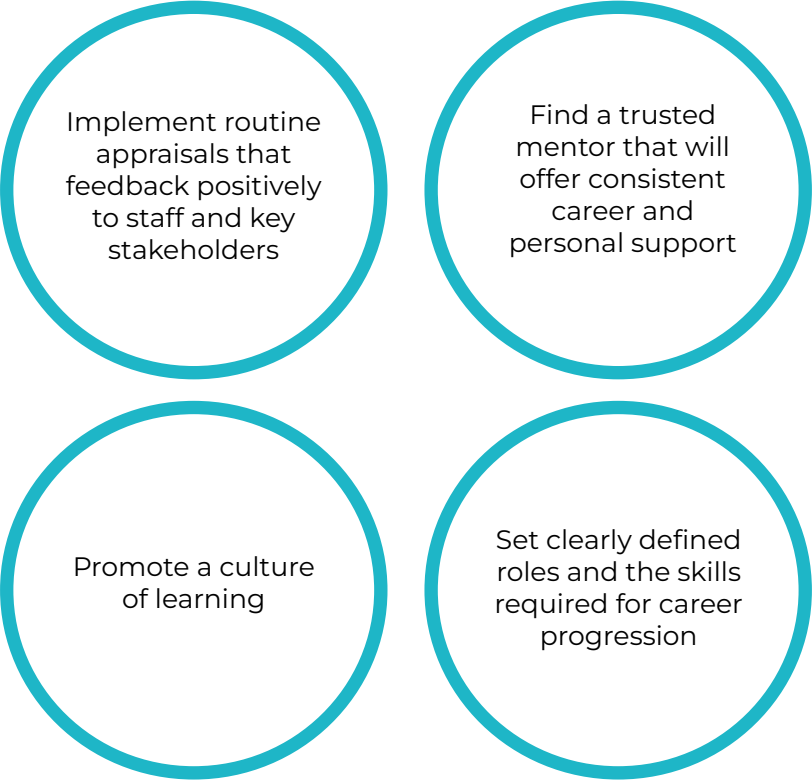
...so what can a company do to ensure the day-today working environment is inspiring and motivating?

Career

Purpose

Traditional hierarchical career paths are no longer being followed in particular in the tech industry which demands more fluid organisational structures. So how do we go about achieving this?

The best companies have a shared mission and purpose. What does the company care about? Is it money, developing great products and services or doing good in the world? For most it will be all three, but how is the balance achieved? How can employees ensure they are involved in projects that also support their own objectives?

There is no simple to answer to this question, but it is one that companies must consider. Purpose is often an emotional, gut reaction rather than logical, so companies and individuals will require different approaches to truly understand the purpose.

Most businesses will struggle to find a purpose that resonates with every employee. Avoid bland vision statements. Keep the discussion going and open.

Implement routine appraisals that feedback positively to staff and key stakeholders

Find a trusted mentor that will offer consistent career and personal support

Promote a culture of learning

Set clearly defined roles and the skills required for career progression

Why is workplace culture a continual process?

Creating a great workplace culture is not a one off activity – it's a work in progress and requires continual thought and activity. Organisations must adapt to employees' changing needs and expectations; try out new ideas, keep what's successful and improve what isn't or risk employee dissatisfaction and retention Adopting a continually evolving approach that involves making small, but incremental steps, will ensure businesses cotinue to improve the overall culture and employee wellbeing.

Communication is key

Remember the importance of communication – and make it explicit. It is not possible to over communicate. Also ensure employees make the most of an open door policy. If they are not booking meetings, create regular chat forums – over tea and cake, for example - and actively encourage people to come and share their views, positive and negative. This experience will often be tough, often uncomfortable – if employees have a grievance – and time consuming! But it is essential.

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Everyone needs to buy into your ethos. Listen to your employees, make sure both they and your customers are happy, and share the commercial success that results.

**Andy Smart, Director of
Sales and Marketing at Softwire**

Create a positive workplace culture

Knowing the importance of creating the right workplace culture should give senior management the energy and commitment to keep evolving the culture and gaining a long term business benefit.

Senior managers can't do it all, especially as the business grows. Ensure managers at all levels are proactive in looking for individuals who are not engaging – either new joiners who are not settling or longer term employees who have suddenly lost interest. Softwire's managerial structure includes both day to day managers responsible for employees' work and longer term managers responsible for their careers – and that includes checking in regularly to discuss their well-being.

Perks are about so much more than layering financial add-ons such as gym memberships; they are about building a positive company culture and enjoyable working environment.

Listen.
Communicate.
Trust.

Create a continual process of evolving workplace culture.

Involve your staff in key decisions

Put employee well-being at the centre of your culture strategy

Keep communication channels open to develop a positive workplace culture

Softwire

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