

Sustaining Productivity and Gearing for Growth

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As new records are being set with rising unemployment rates, falling stock prices, and the first contraction of the global economy since World War II, it comes as no surprise that most employees are worried about the state of the economy. But what is encouraging is the fact that most employees don't feel that their concerns are impacting their job performance.

Employees are stepping up to the challenge and getting the job done. They recognize that in difficult times it is important to pull together to deliver on what needs to be achieved to keep their organizations moving forward. Great news for employers and managers! But is it sustainable? The challenge for leaders and human resource professionals is to keep up this productivity beyond the current crisis and position their organizations for accelerated performance and competitive advantage when the economy turns around.

Economic Concerns and Employee Productivity

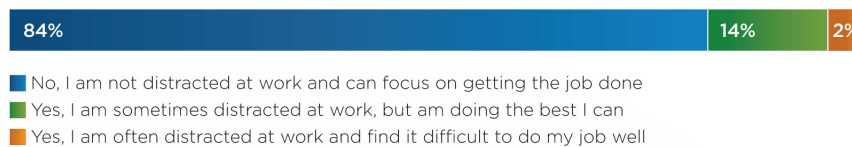
Right Management recently conducted a national Omnibus telephone survey of employed Americans. Eighty percent of respondents said they were concerned about the economy. While 16% of respondents are distracted at work as a result of their worry, the majority (84%) say they don't feel it is impacting their job performance.

The research findings highlight the challenge of employed Americans to remain optimistic during the economic recession. While worried about the economy, most people say that the daily 'doom and gloom' reports are not distracting their performance at work. With job losses continuing to mount daily, unemployment reaching new heights, and organizations struggling to meet profitability goals, employees are working hard and staying focused on getting the job done. Factor into the mix the dismal news from Manpower's latest Employment Outlook Survey – US hiring plans are the weakest since the 1982 recession. Leaders and human resource professionals need to look for new opportunities to improve performance and productivity with fewer resources.

Are you worried about the state of the economy?



Have your concerns impacted your job performance?



Among the survey's other findings:

- Women are slightly more worried than men, with 82% of women reporting that they are Very/Somewhat Worried compared to 79% of men.
- The older a person's age the more worried they are. 42% of people aged 45 to 65+ are Very Worried, compared to only 26% of people aged 35 to 44 years.
- The higher educated an individual, the more worried, with 88% of people holding post graduate studies being Very/Somewhat Worried compared to 77% of people with high school education levels or less.

Source: Right Management Omnibus survey of 501 employed Americans, conducted by International Communications Research in March, 2009.

Sustaining Productivity Beyond the Recession

Businesses are being forced to make tough decisions impacting their workforce. Leaders and human resource professionals should not lose sight of the effort put forth by employees as many are working harder to boost productivity and meet business objectives. With fewer resources and increased responsibilities due to layoffs, cutbacks, and restructurings, employees are being asked to contribute at higher levels. But it is in times like this that leaders need to invest more in engaging their employees to reap the utmost commitment, productivity, and focus. It is important to recognize and reward high-performing employees for their resilience, hard work, and loyalty during this period. Look for innovative solutions to invest in people and demonstrate commitment to them. Failure to do so may result in higher turnover once the economy rebounds and opportunities open up.

It is a leader's responsibility to ensure their workforce is skilled and motivated in order to stay competitive and perform at the expected levels of productivity – both today and while also positioning for future success as market conditions improve. Leaders can't afford for their workforce to become complacent, stagnant or sustain 'quit and stay' employees—those who are disengaged but won't leave.

Many people feel vulnerable now and it is an opportune time for employers to deepen loyalty. Find ways to demonstrate to employees that they are valued—ways that don't have to come with a hefty price tag. Don't let cyclical market conditions be a distraction from creating a workforce strategy that focuses on the skilled talent needed to meet business goals – now and in the future. Here are five practical approaches to reinforce the value of employees and their efforts, helping to keep the talent critical to organizational success:

1. Share with employees that they are part of the future.

Many organizations focus their employee communications on what is happening right now, or worse, limit them to the historical context of what has happened and how they performed last quarter. Let employees know that they are part of the future. Take a long-term view and help employees to understand it. Position the current economic crisis in the context of a cyclical event. Identify opportunities beyond the immediate situation.

2. Invest in building a career management culture.

Create a culture that places importance on career management and development and balances the business objectives with the individual career goals of employees. Such investments will capture the very best of employees' contributions in the 'here and now' while also establishing an environment that can focus their contributions across a much longer and more strategic timeline.

3. Understand how employee motivators differ.

What motivates one employee may not necessarily motivate another. Take time to understand the different engagement drivers of the workforce. Listen and learn how employees feel about their work and their environment and what motivates them in this context.

4. Prove to people they are valued.

Training and development are often the first initiatives to go when cutbacks are put into place. This isn't always the best course of action. It's often the acquisition of new skills and the development of untapped talents that will help the company survive the downturn and be positioned for future success. Provide employees with a process to better assess their strengths and put them in roles where their skills can be put to best use to meet individual and organizational needs. Be overt in recognizing their talents and contributions to the organization's success.

5. Act with credibility.

Gain the respect and trust of employees by being an exceptional communicator demonstrating the utmost integrity. Be accessible, open, honest, and appreciative. If a commitment is made, no matter how big or small, keep it and deliver. Be thoughtful and engaged in each communication. Model a sense of urgency, not a sense of panic. Choose the forums and the messages carefully to create alignment and focus. Improved employee ownership and accountability will be the result of fair and ethical treatment of employees and the creation of a culture that breeds empowerment, loyalty and high-performance.

History provides countless examples of people that found opportunities during adversity, reframed it or rose above it. Now is the time to invest in positioning for competitive advantage for when the economy turns around. The best organizations will find ways to harness the motivation, commitment, and contributions that their employees are providing today and sustain them in improved times. These are the organizations whose performance will accelerate as they reap the benefits of the internal investments they make now. Remember, workforce productivity and engagement is what will make the difference in an organization's success during crisis times and beyond.

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