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How Covid-19 has changed the way we learn at work

By Jackie Carroll

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When we look at the world of work, it's easy to peg the changes and developments we're currently witnessing on Covid-19. It was the pandemic, we say, that prompted the move to remote working. It was the pandemic that made us invest more heavily in virtual systems and processes, and to prioritise the skills that help people to work independently.

Jackie Carroll - MD of Optimi Workplace and co-founder of Media Works

But while Covid certainly escalated the shift to online working, the reality is that we were inching towards this point long before the pandemic started. The businesses that were able to adapt to the pandemic the best were those that had already identified the benefits of flexible, adaptable working environments.

As we take a longer term view of the changes we've witnessed over the past few years, we need to ask ourselves: what's next? Looking ahead, what are some of the key workplace trends we are likely to see?

Computer literacy comes first

This one is all too obvious but it needs to be emphasised, particularly in South Africa.

The assumption that today's matrics are leaving high school with an adequate level of computer literacy is false and damaging for their future careers. Employers who expect a certain level of literacy are likely to be disappointed, and may dismiss high-potential employees who simply need additional training.

We're still dealing with a deeply entrenched legacy issue in this regard, and employers need to help bridge this digital and computer literacy gap. A computer skills course based on the essentials is designed to do exactly this. It will provide a basic introduction to critical computer skills and will offer a solid base from which employees can expand their knowledge.

The increase in business interest in courses such as this, and the rise in IT learnerships across the country, is an indication that businesses are becoming aware of their responsibility. And they're realising that computer-literate employees who have practical work-based experience are invaluable to their long-term success, especially as remote or hybrid working becomes the status quo.

Of course, the advantages that learnerships offer businesses in terms of their BEE scorecard is another driving motivation.

Independent working drives productivity

We almost always work better when we work collaboratively. We need one another to thrash out new ideas, to find new solutions, and to be truly innovative. But businesses also need to provide employees with the support they need to work independently. If they do, employees are likely not only to be more productive, but happier, too.

The era of micromanagement is over (and it's worth asking whether this approach was ever truly beneficial at all). Workplaces that micromanage are prone to becoming toxic environments, where employees experience heightened levels of stress, and productivity and creativity slump. Employees often become resentful if they are heavily supervised, and are more likely to resign.

Today, employers are realising that it's in their interest to grant their employees more independence and freedom in their work. Employees need to feel empowered to make decisions, solve problems themselves, and fine-tune their own resourcefulness. This is even more important as remote working continues to gain momentum and employees aren't working as closely with their colleagues.

But these skills aren't always innate. And workplace training is critical in ensuring that people have the skills they need to work productively on their own.

Soft skills have become power skills

The ability to manage your time, to communicate with others, to think critically and problem solve, and to have a strong work ethic are typically referred to as "soft skills". The implication is that they're less tangible and perhaps less important than their "harder" counterparts: the technical skills acquired through education and experience.

This perception is changing. What were once "soft" skills are now often being reframed as "power skills". They're no longer nice-to-have. Instead, they're critical to business's ability to adapt and thrive in changing environments – the distinguishing factor between businesses that soar, swim or sink.

Those that truly understand the importance of these skills, and acknowledge their role in training their employees accordingly, are better able to attract and retain talent.

These trends in workplace training have been true for some time, certainly before Covid. The pandemic has merely been a spotlight. And as we move forward into what one day, we can only hope, will be a post-Covid world, they are only likely to escalate in relevance and importance.

ABOUT JACKIE CARROLL

Jackie Carroll is the CEO and co-founder of Media Works, South Africa's leading provider of adult education and training for over 21 years.

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