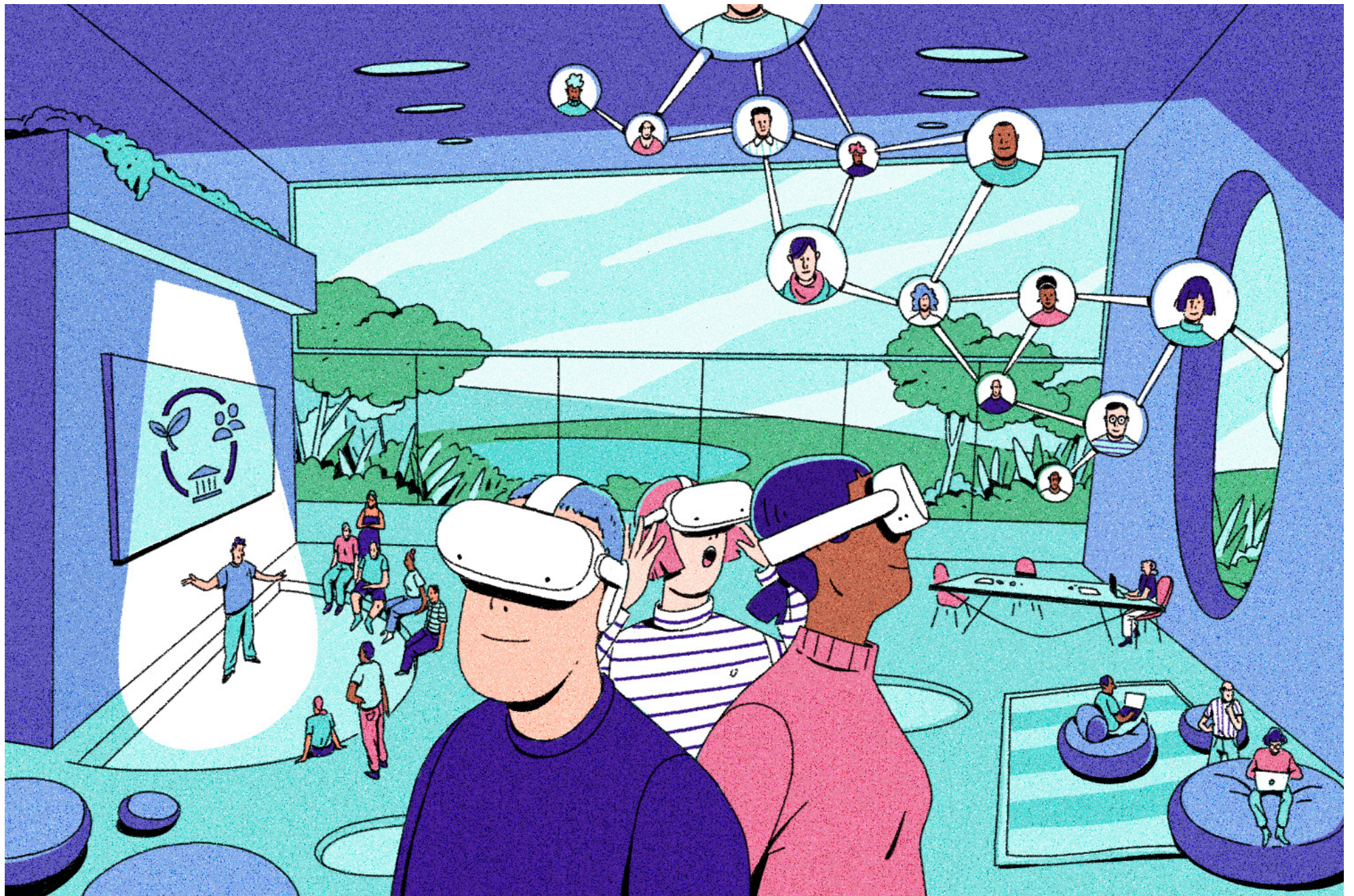


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How Smart Companies are Solving Post-Lockdown Working



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From building 'swarm teams' to creating virtual worlds, innovative ideas are taking on the challenges of the new world of work...

When Professor Lynda Gratton of London Business School asked 150 executives from companies around the world for their take on the biggest challenge currently facing businesses, the answer came back loud and clear: "retaining people", closely followed by "recruiting people".

That conversation took place over a webinar in late 2021 – and it picked up on a problem that was only destined to grow. The so-called Great Resignation, the result of lockdown-fuelled dissatisfaction with our jobs, was followed by the Great Reshuffle, as workers flitted from job to job in search of fulfillment. In May this year, the UK's Office for National Statistics revealed that there were more job vacancies than unemployed people in the country for the first time since records began. The marketplace has since begun to settle, but a July survey of 1,100 US professionals showed that 31 percent were planning to quit within the next 12 months. In other words, employers still need to focus hard on hiring and keeping the best talent.

According to Josh Brenner, CEO of Hired, the largest AI-driven recruitment marketplace for tech workers, what is most likely to attract and retain employees is the offer of flexible working. In a recent Hired survey, less than two percent of respondents said they were interested in a full, five-day return to the office. "We've seen really high rates of attrition when companies have forced people back to the office for a full five-day schedule," he says. With that comes the need to make the best of hybrid work, potentially across disparate geographies.

In order to retain employees, companies also need to work harder to engage them and to help them feel aligned with the organization's values, Brenner believes. "When we hear about companies losing high numbers of staff, a lot of it is because employees feel disconnected, lack a solid understanding of where the company's going, and how their work bubbles up and contributes to goals. "Throw in the need to prepare for a fast-changing world – technologically, geo-politically – and you have a cluster of problems for companies to solve. Those that do so most effectively stand to gain a competitive advantage – so what are the most innovative trending ideas?

Using ‘the metaverse’ to engage a remote workforce

There aren’t many jobs that involve traveling to a space station to meet your colleagues. But that’s a possibility for employees at global professional services company Accenture, thanks to its ‘enterprise metaverse’, known as the Nth Floor. Created using Microsoft’s AltspaceVR platform, it’s a virtual space that mixes ultra-realism with wild fantasy, and is used for a mix of purposes, including onboarding, training, meetings, events and just hanging out.

“The thing that really keeps people coming back is the happy hours and informal get-togethers,” says Jason Warnke, Accenture’s Global Digital Experience Lead. “They say it’s just such a different way to meet.”

Warnke and his team spent several years experimenting with extended reality as a way of communicating with the company’s global workforce. “At that point, it was a technology that was searching for a business problem,” he says. “There wasn’t a pull from our people saying, ‘We’re not able to get stuff done, because we don’t have that next new disruptive technology.’” Then came the pandemic, and suddenly there was a fit: how could the company introduce 100,000 new hires every year without them needing to enter the company’s physical locations?

Onboarding happens at a section of the Nth Floor called One Accenture Park. New recruits come together from around the world as avatars in groups of six to ten and learn about Accenture’s

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Global Digital Experience Lead at Accenture



processes by taking on a fictional client called Global Coffee, which they’re tasked with helping to remain relevant. It’s generally a fun experience, with games and puzzles, as the newbies move through different interactive spaces (including that space station). In one, they’re confronted by a huge sculpture that lights up as avatars walk around it, illustrating different disruptive new technologies that the recruits should be thinking about.

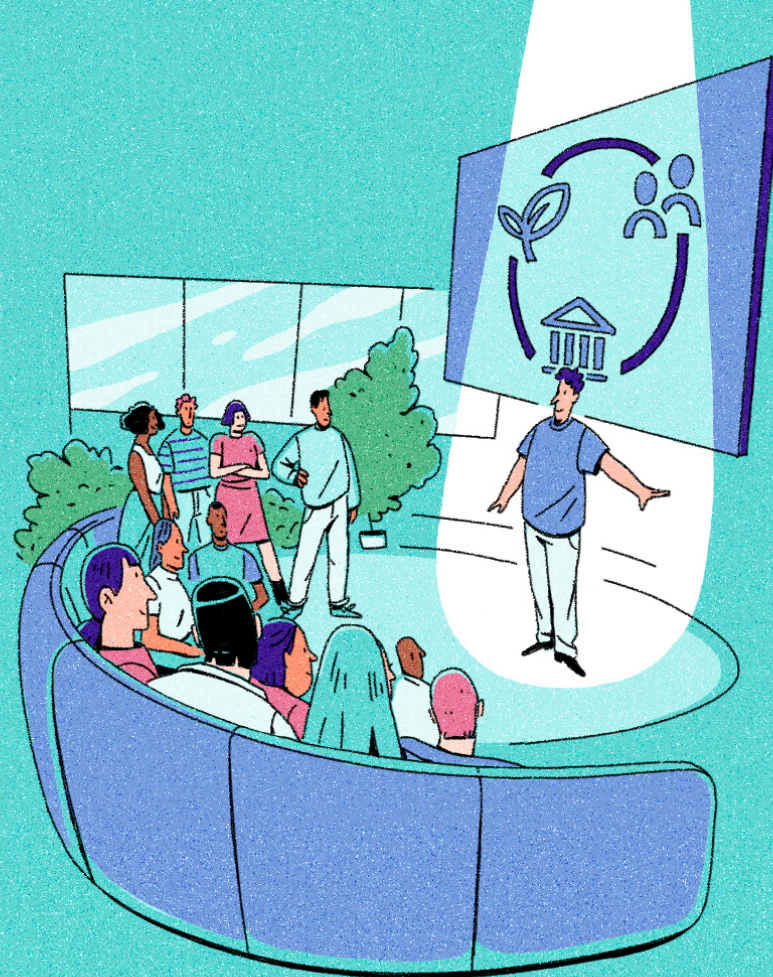
“The [memory] retention rate is really high,” says Warnke. “They can remember exactly where they were, and who they were with, when they were learning those things. That’s something you can’t achieve if you just have someone walk into a room and try to describe them.” A study by researchers at the University of Maryland in 2018 found that participants had at least 10 percent better recall when learning in a virtual environment compared to reading on a desktop

computer or tablet. That makes sense: virtual spaces can enable learning by doing in a way that's visual and immersive; gamification and AI helpers can also be integrated to enhance the process.

Like many 'metaverses', the Nth Floor can be accessed on a laptop but is best experienced on a headset. Accenture invested in 60,000 Oculus Quest 2 headsets and received an unexpected boost on social channels. "It became this big viral thing where people were unboxing their headsets," says Warnke. "They were saying, 'Wow, Accenture is doing part of their onboarding process in virtual reality, that's amazing!' I think employees that are coming into a new organization, especially the younger generation, are looking for differentiating experiences like this." In other words, embracing these emerging tools sends a signal about the kind of company you are.

Although a fully-fledged, connected metaverse in the true sense of the word is many years away from being created, many companies are experimenting with similar virtual spaces for remote or hybrid teams. These can serve a variety of purposes, from providing a kind of 'clubhouse' where staff get together and socialize, to well-being spaces that offer meditation or exercise classes. A virtual workspace can also give remote workers more of a sense of 'going to work', helping them demarcate home and work life, while also combatting video-call fatigue. There's a budding sector providing businesses with those virtual spaces, from startups such as NextMeet to tech giants such as Meta, with its Horizon Workrooms platform.

There may be increasing demand for such platforms. According to LinkedIn data, 35 percent of Gen Z's US job applications this year were to remote roles, up from 21 percent the year before. Warnke's advice for companies who may be considering dipping their toes into virtual spaces is to choose a use case and take the plunge: "This is not something to observe from the sidelines. This is something to step into, understand what the implication is for your organization and then start to understand who needs to be involved to actually move it down the path."



Recruiting a Chief Purpose Officer to Meet New Expectations

In a survey of Gen Z and Millennials by Deloitte earlier this year, nearly two in five respondents said they'd rejected a job or assignment because it didn't align with their values. Those

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Francine Katsoudas

Chief People, Policy and Purpose Officer at Cisco

who said they were satisfied with their employers’ societal and environmental impact, and their efforts to create a diverse and inclusive culture, were more likely to want to stay with their employer for more than five years.

But it isn’t just employees who are concerned about corporate values these days. According to a global survey by PR firm Edelman, 58 percent of consumers say they will buy or advocate for brands based on what a company believes in. Meanwhile, the world’s investors are following a similar path: ESG assets under management have seen 30 percent growth over the last five years and are forecast by Bloomberg to make up a third of total global assets under management by 2025.

One response to this growing focus on corporate values has been the increasing appearance of a Chief Purpose Officer in the world’s C-suites. Companies as diverse as Deloitte, S&P Global and toy maker Hasbro now boast a CPO. Brian Kropp, who heads up HR research at Gartner, has cited the phenomenon as one of the key trends shaping work this year and beyond.

“I think of purpose as the intersection of our business and what we’re trying to do more broadly for the world,” says Francine Katsoudas, Chief People, Policy and Purpose Officer at Cisco, who maintains that the role of CPO is important for two main reasons: firstly, because it demonstrates to current and potential employees that a company takes seriously its impact on the planet and its inhabitants. And secondly, because this sense of purpose needs to be fully integrated into every area of a business, and someone needs to lead that push.

Social initiatives are not new for Cisco. For several years, the company has had a policy of giving employees paid time off to allow them to give back to their communities. “It’s been a big part of our culture and we didn’t need a Chief Purpose Officer for that,” she says. “Where things started to change was with the realization that our business strategy and our purpose strategy should go hand in hand, as opposed to social value being something our employees are doing on the side.”

On a daily basis, Katsoudas’s role is a varied one, ranging from helping to ensure that sustainability is at the core of the company’s products, to looking at how Cisco can make best environmental use of its real estate in a world of hybrid working. She says that although most of the company understands that a focus on purpose will result in a stronger long-term business, there are still some who think of it as just “a nice give-back effort”.

“That means I have to do a better job of connecting those dots,” she says. “But I believe I can only architect a part of this. You have to leave room for your teams to innovate and find their own solutions, because they’re probably going to do better in some cases than what you can do from the center.”

The concept of ‘doing well by doing good’ is taken to its extreme conclusion by French academic Isaac Getz in his recent book *L’Entreprise Altruiste* (The Altruistic Corporation), co-written with business consultant Laurent Marbacher. It tells the stories of several dozen companies around the world that have put

aside all concerns about the bottom line and focus entirely on benefiting their customers, suppliers and local community – and as a result have been highly successful. They include a Japanese pharmaceutical company with a reputation for ground-breaking solutions in the areas of oncology and neurology, which defines its purpose not as manufacturing and selling drugs for profit but as relieving the suffering of patients and their families; and a Swedish bank with the largest network of branches in its home country that “thinks of its financial advisors as family doctors taking care of their customers’ financial health”.

“It was an amazing discovery,” says Getz. “Although the aim of these companies is to unconditionally serve their stakeholders, they’re also, as a collateral benefit, creating a stronger economic value than their competitors. Even if only 30 percent of companies acted like this, it would totally change our world, more than any government could ever do.”



Building ‘Liquid Organizations’ to take on a Rapidly Changing World

“We think that having fixed management structures is a very silly thing to do,” says Daniel Hulme, CEO of Satalia, a company that builds AI innovations for leading companies such as PwC and Tesco. “What managers mainly do is move information around and they’re usually the bottlenecks for decisions.”

There’s nothing new about getting rid of management hierarchies. For example, the holacracy system, first developed at a Pennsylvania software company in the early 2000s, decentralizes companies into fluid, autonomous teams; while the ‘liberated companies’ that are particularly popular in France give employees complete freedom and responsibility to take the actions they feel are best. But Satalia’s approach is different. As Hulme admits, sometimes the skill of moving information around can be a useful one. So for him, it’s not about getting rid of managers for the sake of it. His real aim is to remove frictions and improve agility – something that the pandemic experience, teamed with ongoing political and economic turmoil, has put at a premium.

“What I want to do is to build systems that can adapt more quickly to a changing world,” says Hulme. “And if you have rigid structures and processes, it’s likely that your organization can’t do that. It’s about creating a new operating system for an organization that allows for adaptability from the ground up.”

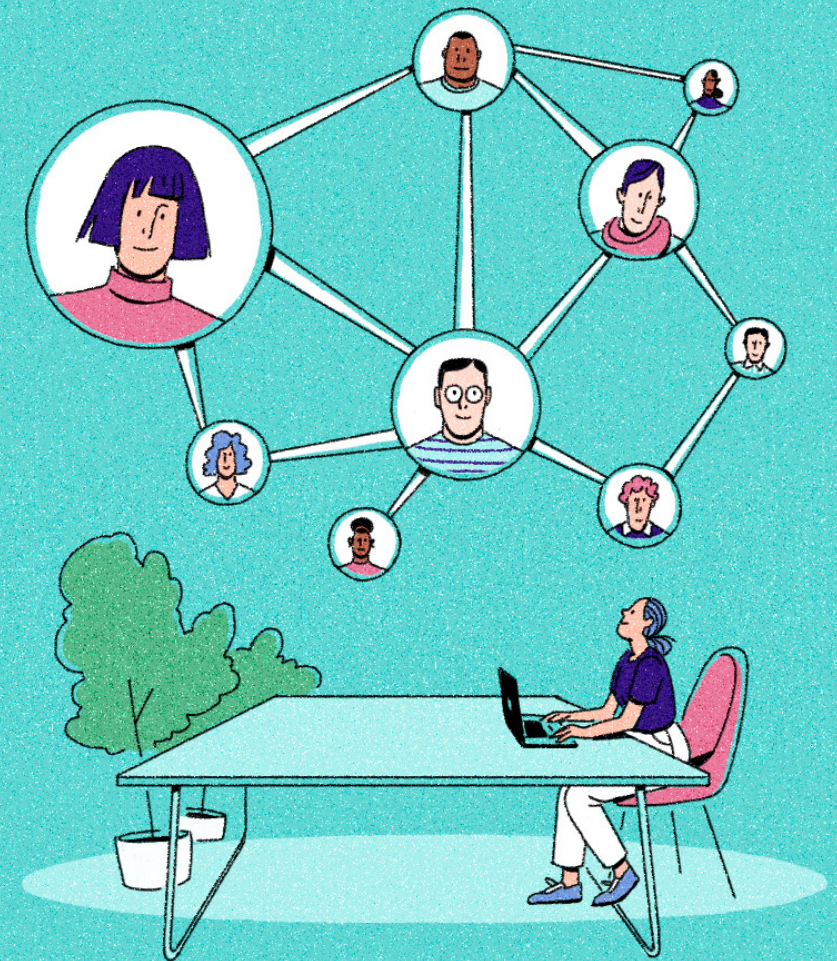
The goal is a so-called ‘liquid organization’ that’s flexible enough to exist in a state of almost permanent change. There are various ways to achieve this, one of the most popular being the ‘scrum’ framework that’s based on self-organizing, multidisciplinary teams. As detailed at [scrum.org](https://www.scrum.org), the idea is to break down projects into sets of tasks that the team completes in set time periods called “sprints”. At its heart is a process of constant review

(usually in daily 'scrum' meetings) to track progress and improve effectiveness, with constant review leading to constant adaptation.

But in Satalia's case, agility is achieved thanks to an AI whose algorithms interpret data on employees' skills, knowledge and experience to isolate the individuals or groups best qualified to make a decision at any given moment. Workers act like a 'swarm', moving around projects and working on those which attract them and to which they can add most value. And they're not limited by job titles. "We don't want people to silo themselves but to be able to move fluidly across the organization," says Hulme. So, in theory, the same member of staff could contribute sales expertise to one project, and marketing expertise to another.

Whirring in the background, algorithms constantly crunch data on how workers are contributing. That might seem slightly sinister, as it could reveal more about people than they would want. "It comes down to intent," says Hulme. "In theory, I could be able to predict who are secret lovers in my company, or I could identify people who are going to leave before they know it themselves. But the intent is to use it to allocate people to projects that align with not just the values of the company, but their career development and the things that matter to them."

And Hulme has big ideas for the future, with an aspiration to open source his corporate "operating system" for others to use and improve. His dream is that it might radically change the nature of work altogether – if many organizations became radically decentralized it could create a widespread, well-functioning gig economy. "My goal is to scale this to the planet," he says. "I'd like to create a platform so that anybody in the world can contribute to an idea and be fairly remunerated for it. We should granularize work and use AI to identify the best people who are best placed to do that work."



Embracing Four-Day Weeks to Enhance Productivity and Job Satisfaction

Now that the Covid pandemic has made company leaders more responsive to ideas of workplace flexibility, the traditional five-day week is increasingly being questioned. Currently 3,000 workers at 60 companies across the UK are trialing a four-day working week in the biggest pilot scheme of its kind to have taken place anywhere in the world, following in the wake of high-profile trials by the likes of Microsoft, Unilever and Kickstarter.

But for Lorraine Gray, COO of Pursuit Marketing, an IT lead generation company with offices in Glasgow and Spain, the four-day week is already a fact of life. Since 2016, the company's employees, who have grown from around 40 to more than 230 in the intervening years, have worked Monday to Thursday, while being paid the same as they would have been previously for a five-day week.

The initial impetus for making the change came as a response to other companies aggressively headhunting Pursuit's staff. "We'd always had flexible working in our DNA, with people working different hours," says Gray. "We're a very data-driven business, and we looked at results across the organization, and actually found that the people who worked less hours per day or less days per week achieved the same, if not more, as people working a traditional five day week. So we dug into that deeper and spoke to the people involved, and they were just a wee bit more motivated to achieve what they had to do within that shorter timeframe. They attacked it with a different mindset – a bit less time on Facebook, a bit less chat and watercooler, and just coming in knowing what they had to do to achieve success."

Since rolling the four-day week out across the whole company, the results have been overwhelmingly positive: "Initially productivity spiked by about 37 percent, compared to pre-four-day-week

stats," Gray says. "Now it's settled down, we're still looking at more than 29 percent productivity gains." And in terms of recruitment, the company now finds it much easier to attract high quality talent: "Previously, people who've been really successful in other organizations for long periods wouldn't think it was worth moving for an extra £3,000, but the four-day week makes it worth the transition." The Great Resignation hasn't affected Pursuit, which counts Google and Microsoft as clients, because workers are unwilling to return to a five-day week at a new company, says Gray. Absenteeism is currently down at around two percent, which she describes as "unheard of" in their sector.

A survey last year by recruitment company Reed found that 83 percent of people in the UK would prefer a four-day working week, and trials around the world have resulted in similar positive results to those experienced by Pursuit. However, surveys at some trials have shown that while some workers enjoy the increased pace of a shorter work week, others miss the chit-chat and office banter of a more leisurely five days. Pursuit has taken steps to avoid this by introducing a Breakfast Club, providing free breakfasts and a chance for some social engagement every morning, together with lunchtime fitness classes.

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Lorraine Gray
COO of Pursuit Marketing

There are also some areas of work where the model can be harder to apply, such as healthcare. During the Covid pandemic, Pursuit undertook a project for NHS Scotland around PPE for social care, and found itself forced to work in a structure of 12-hour days, seven days a week. Determined to maintain the four-day week for its employees, the company hired more staff and created a rotating schedule, allowing staff to pick and choose which four days they worked via an app. "It ended up costing us a bit more to hire extra heads," says Gray. "But we wanted to deliver the best possible service at the same time as making sure our people weren't drained by the experience."

And what about clients? Don't they get frustrated if they can't talk to anyone at Pursuit on a Friday? Not at all, according to Gray, who compares it to Christmas time, when nobody expects companies to be working. She says that clients also value the longer-term working relationships that come with high staff retention. "We haven't had anything but positives from clients," she says. "It's all about expectation management. And in fact, one of our biggest clients chose us because of our four-day week and the way we look after our people – it was very much in sync with how they like to treat their own employees."

As with so much about the new world of work, what at first looks like a challenge is in fact an opportunity.

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