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Productivity hacks

Many successful business owners know the value of a productive workplace. Happier employees, satisfied customers, high morale, a positive environment - the benefits are endless.

Although there is no 'one size fits all solution' to guarantee productivity, there are a few simple changes you can make to improve productivity in your workplace. Consider these four tips:

Incorporate nature

When you think about your office design, how often do you pay attention to how the physical space can affect the psychological wellbeing of your staff? If you are like most small business owners, you probably don't pay enough attention. But if you are serious about improving the productivity of your staff, you must understand the connection between design, natural elements and employee engagement.

Research has shown that indoor plants can boost an employees' overall wellbeing, creativity and concentration. Adding nature or outdoor-like elements such as plants, a water feature, a fish tank or a living wall can help to reduce your employees' stress levels. If these options are not feasible, adding nature photography, nature sounds or natural light can be just as useful for improving productivity.

Opt for automation

Using automation helps to remove inefficiencies and free up time so employees can concentrate on tasks of higher importance. Whether it is automating an email, invoice, HR function or improving database management, you should consider the ways it could benefit your business. Look at what tasks are taking up a significant portion of your employees' time, i.e., manual social media posting or replying to website enquiries, and brainstorm solutions, i.e., install a social media automation tool or use a chatbot for your website.

Encourage breaks

Taking a break to get outdoors at least once a day can improve alertness, mood and overall health; yet many workplaces are known for working through their lunch breaks. Creating a culture in your office which encourages employees to take breaks is not counterproductive, in fact, it can make a difference to your employee's quality of work. Foster a healthy workplace culture by first leading by example and encouraging others to follow suit. Start up a lunchtime sports competition, ask your colleague to have a walking meeting or make it compulsory for employees to take at least half an hour for lunch.

Cut down on meetings

It is well known that meetings can drain productivity, especially when they are lengthy and involve employees that are not necessarily needed. But meetings still hold their purpose in the office, so they should never be eradicated but instead revised. Evaluate how many meetings you have and how effective they are in problem-solving, decision making and informing staff. Is there a better alternative to holding a meeting? For example, sending an email or a message via your intranet. When scheduling a meeting is essential, be sure to use an agenda to stay on topic and address unrelated questions in a follow-up email after the meeting.

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Personality over experience

Hiring a new employee with the longest experience or the best qualifications may seem like the ideal choice for a business, but what is often left unconsidered is their personality.

An employee's personality matters. How they will interact with your clients and how well they will work with your current team is going to affect their performance in your business.

Always remember that you can build your employees' knowledge and skill base on the job, but you can not alter their personality. Picking a candidate who has the longest experience but no enthusiasm for the role may not be the wisest choice. Be open to motivated and passionate candidates who are willing to learn as these employees can usually be moulded into the best team players.

Consider these qualities whenever you are hiring a new employee.

Positivity and confidence is key

Adding enthusiastic employees to your team can change the overall energy in the workplace, creating a more enjoyable environment for all. Energetic employees will always put more focus and effort into each task they complete.

Confidence goes hand in hand with a positive outlook. A confident employee will be comfortable in their role and more willing to take on challenges. They have the self-assurance to convince your clients that they are the best candidate to take on their work.

Action focused

Do not be wary of employees who are inexperienced but looking to take action or form innovative ideas in their role. Though not every decision they make is likely to be successful, they have more potential to grow your business than an employee who stays inside the box.

Dots the 'i's, crosses the 't's

Employees who pay attention to the finer details are more likely to avoid making silly errors that might seriously jeopardise your business.

Authentic

A long history of experience is useful, but to maintain and protect your business' reputation, always look to employ candidates who are honest and genuine.

Career motivated

Those employees dedicated to growing their careers are always looking for ways they can perform their role more efficiently to move up the ladder.

Understanding your management style

Self-awareness is an important tool to master in both your personal and professional life. It is especially important for business owners and managers, as they are responsible for the success of their business and managing key business relationships, i.e., staff.

Business owners and managers often develop a management style over time. Depending on the type of style, this can either help or hinder their business.

If you are looking to improve your management skills, understanding your style is important. You do not have to adopt one single management style; you can use different styles for different situations to achieve the best results.

Consider the most popular management styles:

Bureaucratic

Bureaucratic managers direct their team by making sure everyone follows the rules and procedures. This style is common in workplaces with hierarchies where the manager has the final say in every decision. These workplaces usually feature roles with strict responsibilities and decision making capabilities. It is helpful for environments where safety is of utmost importance, i.e., engineering or health-related jobs. A bureaucratic style is not suitable in workplaces that require creativity and agility to succeed, i.e., creative industries.

Democratic

The democratic style speaks for itself. Management collaborates with the team before making decisions. Employee consensus and cooperation is important in making this style work. Due to the amount of consultation involved, the democratic style can impact efficiency. It can take a while for decisions and solutions to arise as the input of all employees is necessary. However, it is beneficial in promoting a culture of effective communication through discussion and debate. It can also facilitate trust between management and staff, as employees can feel appreciated by sharing their opinions and contributing to solutions.

Autocratic

This style instils a fear of consequence as a driving force. There is no leeway for employee feedback and employees are instructed on what to do without any control over decision making. The manager takes on a dictatorial role and motivates staff through threats and discipline. It can be beneficial to use this style during periods of crisis or stress, however, in most circumstances, it stifles creativity and innovation. It can also result in low employee morale and limits any room for employee development.

Laissez-faire

Laissez-faire management, sometimes known as delegative management, is all about giving employees the freedom to do the job themselves. Generally, the manager delegates decisions and allow staff to choose their direction over the work. Unnecessary formalities and hierarchy often diminish creativity in the workplace, so this style is excellent for creative industries. It can also be useful in industries that have teams of experts, as the manager can trust that their staff have the appropriate knowledge and experience to perform tasks without too much oversight.

The downside is that employees need to be committed and responsible for their work at all times as there is very little guidance from their managers. It may not be ideal for workplaces with employees who are not willing to be held accountable for their work. This style can also cause role ambiguity where employees are unsure of their manager's expectations for the role or project.

Fostering fairness in the workplace

Promoting a fair and equal workplace is not only a common concern for leaders of corporate giants but a challenge for small business owners as well.

Your team is essential to the long-term success of your business, so it vital that each staff member has an equal opportunity for recognition and reward, no matter where they fall on the leadership ladder.

Creating a workplace culture that rejects favouritism or unfair recognition programs will ensure every employee feels like they are a valued member of your business.

Here are three ways to design a fairer workplace for your staff.

Equal opportunities

Re-evaluate your recognition system and bonus program (if you have one) to ensure every employee will be recognised for any achievements they reach on behalf of the business. While it is it easy to notice a sales employee who makes a deal or brings in a new client, do not forget about the assistant who puts in that extra effort to keep the office running smoothly. Otherwise, various employees may feel resentment towards management and become unmotivated in their role.

Dispute resolution process

Even in a small business, it can be easy to overlook an employee complaint. However, this does not foster a fair or even peaceful working environment. It is important to have a formal procedure in place so that your staff can voice any complaint they may have. This way, you can maintain a positive working relationship with your employees and resolve any issues that arise in the workplace before they escalate.

Fair promotions system

To ensure other staff members do not believe a particular employee is unfairly promoted, provide regular feedback to your team, i.e., monthly or quarterly performance reviews. Establish clear goals that employees must meet to receive a promotion. This will not only help to avoid any resentment but fuel your employees to take on extra challenges that work towards the success of the business.

Equal pay

It is essential that your staff is compensated fairly for the time and effort they spend each day in the office. This way you can retain your hardest and most talented workers.

Batching your tasks

Task batching may sound like multitasking, but while multitaskers flick back and forth between two or more unrelated tasks, a business owner who uses task batching can work systemically from one task to the next at a faster and more efficient pace.

Many employers waste time by merely reacting to tasks. They must continuously re-focus their attention when switching between different tasks, ensuring less focus and time is dedicated to each job. Batching is the opposite of this. It requires the worker to group similar tasks together and start and complete each one before moving onto the next. So it is best used for small jobs, i.e., letters, emails and phone calls.

The efficiency of batching comes from the level of focus this method enables. Following a task batching schedule allows your mind to become methodical as you complete each task, one after the other. A sense of flow or rhythm is created in the process, and an employer can focus on the task at hand rather than on the million other things going on. When batching your tasks, it is important to delegate a reasonable amount of time to complete them and ensure you will not be interrupted while you are in the zone.

Wise Words

Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to pause and reflect

- Mark Twain

Nailing your content marketing strategy

A well-thought-out strategy is the tool you need to create organic and engaging marketing content for your viewers. Content marketing is an effective way to let as many viewers as possible learn about your business and the product or service you offer.

Consider the following tips to improve your content strategy:

Excel at one thing

Focus on one or two strengths of your business' products or services and hone in on those strengths in your content marketing. Research shows if a business is good at one thing, people will assume the business is also good at other things. This is also known as the "halo effect." Use this simple strategy to your advantage.

Stir curiosity

Spark curiosity by starting a discussion on an unfamiliar topic, providing information on something customers want to know or creating mystery with upcoming products or services and so on. This is a great way to incite interest and keep your followers hooked on your posts.

Interact with followers

Interacting with your followers is important in strengthening connections and keeping them engaged. Respond to comments and inquiries promptly; whether they are on your social media pages or blog, responding in a timely manner shows you care about your followers. When customers are satisfied with your business' online behaviour they are more likely to become repeat customers and advocates for your business.

Communicating effectively with difficult people

Working with unreasonable people is inevitable for most individuals at some point in their careers. Whether it is an unhappy customer, difficult colleague or uncompromising community member - chances are you will encounter at least one of these situations.

Unfortunately, there is no crash course in dealing with difficult people, but by applying some basic principles of communication, you can maneuver through these situations with ease.

Here are three ways to improve your communication with difficult people:

Harness the power of listening

When dealing with a difficult person, it can be easy to fall into the trap of not listening to them and instead concentrating on what is bothering you. Switch your focus to understanding the other person's viewpoint. Try to understand the underlying motivation behind the person's behaviour, i.e., they may feel unheard or underappreciated.

Make your intentions known

Communication is a two-way street - you need to be able to listen effectively and express your interests in a clear manner. Think about your communication style.

Analyse your strengths and focus on improving your weaknesses. Do you use healthy body language to boost your verbal message? Are you quick to interrupt when someone else is talking? Do you get to the point or use vague language? When the other person doesn't understand your message, you need to improve communication through feedback, i.e., verbal and non-verbal cues.

Don't make it personal

When you are emotionally activated, it can be difficult to stay neutral. Be aware of your self-talk and if it is fuelling negative thoughts of the other person. Look at your situation from an outsider's view and remain objective. If you are providing feedback, make sure it is constructive and not a personal attack. If you are struggling to take a neutral position, get some perspective from external parties that have dealt with similar situations. They may assist in helping you to see your own situation in a different light.

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Preventing burnout in your workplace

Burnout can be detrimental to your employees' wellbeing and the overall productivity and performance of your team.

Despite the consequences associated with burnout, many workplaces do not have effective strategies in place to prevent it from occurring. The key for many employers is to keep employees engaged, satisfied and harmonious.

Here are three factors that can influence employee burnout:

Work/life balance

Expecting staff to be available at all hours of the day is unreasonable for most jobs. If staff are expected to check their emails after work hours or on weekends and paid leave, you may want to consider the type of culture you are instilling in your team. Furthermore, when staff work overtime and through their lunch break, there is limited time for relaxation which can impede creativity and problem solving. Overworking your staff can result in exhaustion and mental fatigue, both of which play a large role in burnout.

Compensation and rewards

There is no surefire way to prevent burnout but paying your staff adequately can help reduce some of the stress associated with the role. Competitive salaries and "work perks" can give staff motivation to continually strive for the best results. On top of a decent salary, rewarding great

performance by providing bonuses, promotions and awards can help to ensure staff feel appreciated and recognised for their hard work.

Empowering staff

Staff need to feel valued and responsible for their work. Give staff autonomy and ownership of their work by setting clear tasks, providing them with the right resources, and ultimately, avoiding micromanaging. It is also important to be supportive and realistic when staff members make a mistake. Trusting your staff to recover from a blunder gives them the confidence to overcome it with more ease.