

How to Motivate Employees When Their Priorities Have Changed

Four strategies. **by Kristi Hedges**

Published on HBR.org / May 11, 2023 / Reprint [H07M7C](#)



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Get into a conversation with a company leader these days, and you'll likely hear some version of "no one wants to work hard anymore." Those companies who are hiring still seek hungry, ambitious hard-chargers who will do what it takes to succeed. But new hires come in negotiating like seasoned executives, leaving managers flummoxed. Even with recent rounds of layoffs, employee expectations are staying high, as job ads emphasizing flexibility and other benefits attest. There's also

a truism that transcends economic situations: Companies want to hire and retain the best people, which gives the best people leverage. I see my C-suite clients grasping for more control to get back to “normal” by pushing for longer hours in the office, tightening metrics, and hoping that economic headwinds will return their power.

I tell them not to count on it.

Human nature hasn’t fundamentally changed. People want to be engaged at work and apply themselves to big things. But just like a camera lens zooming out, we now see there’s more to the story. Feeling passionate about our working life — liking what we do and how we do it — is as important as ever, but what creates that passion has broadened and deepened. We no longer see a singular pursuit of a corporate goal in a bustling office as the only way to a purposeful career. Leaders need to catch up or they’ll be operating frustratingly empty hybrid offices with quiet-quitters and short-timers.

Three years after the start of the pandemic, we’re seeing how our collective trauma has impacted the psychology of work. Our humanity has been revealed, as have working paradigms that were previously believed to be implausible — and no one can unsee either. As Gartner research shows, workers want a more “human value proposition,” with 65% of survey respondents agreeing that the pandemic made them rethink the role that work should have in their lives. For all of our talk for decades about work-life balance, people finally feel in their bones what that means. The big question has shifted from “How does life fit into work?” to “How does work fit into life?” (One could reasonably argue that those in power were already working from the latter question, whether it’s a partner in a law firm taking long holidays to recharge or a start-up founder giving up five years to retire at 40. The question is now democratized.)

I see this trend in action every day. Recently, I spoke to a 22-year-old new hire at a prominent consulting firm, an environment known for grueling associate schedules. She and her peers were already establishing boundaries for what would make the job sustainable, and plotting when to exit if the company wouldn't comply. And during a recent leadership development session, I asked a group of top executives what they're passionate about this year. I heard a few expected comments about projects coming to fruition, but there were just as many who cited personal endeavors or focusing on well-being. These were established professionals talking *in front of* the people who control their promotions and paychecks.

The employment contract has fundamentally changed for a generation of workers. McKinsey & Company's 2022 American Opportunity [survey](#) found that 87% of workers want autonomy over where and when they work. In other words, they want agency over how they work and define success. If leaders want to attract and retain the best talent — those who are passionate and infuse that passion into the workplace — they should expand their own view of how to motivate them. Here are four strategies.

Accept a holistic definition of passion.

Employees don't want to be hungry; they want to be fed. Inspired people make inspired workers make inspired companies. Encourage workers to define passion in any way they want, and align your workplace to support a wide variety of situations.

This means stretching your own ideas of what ambition looks like. Is it better to have a productive worker who leaves early to train for a marathon or a burned-out worker who's strapped to their desk? How do you judge the person who declines a promotion because they love their job exactly as it is?

Let's not punish people who have an updated model of success that works for them. (Leaders even have a role to play in engaging people to discover their purpose.)

Lose the “but I had to do it” mentality.

For most of us coming up, there was a predictable cadence to professional work. You grind it out early, give up large parts of your life, and eventually gain some control over your time.

It can be easy to fall prey to the sunk-cost fallacy: I did it, and now everyone should pay their dues the same way. Consider, though, that that was before new technologies and norms that allow other options came to be. Yes, you had to do it, but was it really the best way to get the best work? I know when I was working seven days a week until 11 P.M., I was not a fount of creativity.

Every new shift in work necessitates an end to an existing norm. Instead of bringing people down to your experience, consider how you can bring everyone up to a new one.

Disconnect performance from time.

Many of my clients express ongoing frustration about not knowing how much their hybrid or remote teams are working. My answer is: You never did. People wasted a lot of time in the office right under your nose, and if they want to waste time, they'll do it anywhere.

You're far better off measuring performance and losing the fixation with time. As the McKinsey survey showed, people want control over how they work. In return, they need to bring results. That's the employment contract. Imagine if that were simply agreed upon openly.

Some of us have such an “at your desk” mentality ingrained in us that we restrict ourselves when we do have flexibility, even if it would garner a better result. We act as if there’s an eye-in-the-sky boss who is watching what we’re doing every second. The more latitude managers can give in creating the right working environment for the individual, the less guilty everyone will feel and, thus, the more they can focus on doing good work.

Don’t tighten the screws, loosen them.

When we sense control slipping, we tend to want to micromanage people and processes. Recessional pressures exacerbate this effect. But putting tracking software onto employee computers will not make people do better work, nor will threats to work harder or leave, as Elon Musk and [Mark Zuckerberg](#) have recently tried. Fear has never been an effective motivator over the long term, with negative emotions compounding. Worrying about job preservation causes people to hunker down, not take risks toward excellence.

Productivity is in fact down, for reasons people are struggling to explain. However, it can’t be because of employee autonomy, because productivity was way up in 2020 and 2021 when many offices were shut completely.

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Fifteen years of coaching have taught me this: People are most productive when they feel motivated about what they do and how they live. We need both to thrive. Even if the market continues cooling, stay the course and give people more autonomy, not less. Employees are expecting regressive behavior from companies, but you can model a sustainable path forward. You’ll get more work out of people, encourage retention, and boost motivation. If leaders show they value what matters to each individual, the entire company will benefit from teams

with more passion and purpose. And passion creates longer-lasting results than hunger any day.

This article was originally published online on May 11, 2023.



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