

Build a Sustainable Culture for Employees to Thrive In



©GOOD STUDIO

In recent conversation around [“The Great Resignation,”](#) the importance of one number — 16% — has been overlooked.

In the workforce as it stands, the number of Americans reporting they’re happy with their current jobs has dropped by 16%.

In 2019, there were roughly 157.54 million Americans employed in the workforce. Now, 16% of the workforce is 25 million Americans who are spending roughly eight hours a day working in a way that’s not working for them. Keeping those workers is imperative. But moving that number in a positive direction needs to be the method by which employers achieve that goal.

To that end, one winning strategy is becoming exceedingly clear. A [study of 13,000 knowledge workers](#) across eight countries found that 71% of respondents had experienced burnout within the last 12 months. If that figure holds, it’s a miracle that only 16% are reporting unhappiness; being overworked and burnt out is not a sustainable way to move through the world.

Sustainability is the key word, and sustainable teams are distinguishing themselves within the recovery economy.

The people side of sustainability refers to the way employers and teams optimize, respect and conserve the mental energies among the team. Workplace sustainability means understanding

that personal and mental health is a nonrenewable resource, and that the same environmental standards, care and responsibility we’ve established as priorities need to be equally reflected within the company culture, workplace expectations and team offerings.

There’s every reason to believe that sustainability is going to be a determining factor for employers hoping to recruit and retain top talent in the new workforce.

Recruit, Recognize, Reward the Intangibles

Creativity, emotional intelligence and communication ability — these are three of the top 10 qualities that the World Economic Forum focused on in their 2019 [skills outlook](#). Like a majority of skills on that list, those aforementioned capacities are classified as soft skills, which are

abilities associated with how people work and relate that are harder to quantify than technical competencies.

A [report by McKinsey & Co](#) emphasized the importance of recognizing and rewarding employees for their soft skills, providing the necessary training opportunities and incentives to progress in those directions. Part of what makes a company culture sustainable is the expectation and the invitation to bring the full range of employees’ potential with them to the workplace — to employ their empathy, exercise their leadership, demonstrate their compassion and have those contributions recognized with their proper weight.

Great team leaders have found repeatable ways to track and reward their team’s soft skills — not only to recruit professionals with those skills onto the team, but to create and maintain a culture that invites that full range of participation. The result is engaged workers who feel a closer connection to their work, and who are able to bring more of themselves into the office, even in a remote setting.

Keeping Boundaries in Close Sight

Conversation around boundaries is rarely the most exciting item on the meeting list, but sustainable teams take a disciplined approach to setting and maintaining clear standards around their time, mental energy, and emotional and physical space.

Notably, setting and sticking to boundaries is more important than the actual parameters chosen. Whether the rule is notifications off by 6 p.m., no meetings before 10 a.m., or an expectation for team members to take real time off, the real benefit comes in repeatedly upholding those named commitments.

When employers set the conversation up for collaboration and demonstrate a full commitment to enforcing and respecting whatever parameters the team presents, the resulting trust, respect and appreciation are tangible. With clear expectations that are upheld with a dependable predictability, the working experience becomes more sustainable and employees know that there are real measures in place to prevent and/or address their burnout.

Short - and Long-Term Rewards

By inviting the professional’s full span of contributions into the workforce, including the soft skills that too often go unnoticed, and by upholding employee-centric boundaries around mental, physical and temporal space, teams are positioned for fast and lasting rewards. A recent study captures the short-term benefits of maintaining that kind of employee engagement, with [93% of enterprise leaders](#) indicating that a sense of employee belonging will be a main driver of organizational performance.

“When employers set the conversation up for collaboration and demonstrate a full commitment to enforcing and respecting whatever parameters the team presents, the resulting trust, respect and appreciation is tangible.”

And the rewards only compound for sustainable teams in the long-term outlook. Industry leaders like BlackRock and Vanguard have never been so attuned to a company’s intangible offerings, including their established culture and team sustainability. For some companies, those intangibles [constitute up to 90%](#) of their market value.

Investors aren’t only noticing a company’s internal handle on sustainability, they’re prioritizing it as a matter of due diligence. Overwhelmingly, companies with more sustainable team cultures can expect a better market exit; company owners and team members who have equity will enjoy the reward.

The pressure to take more sustainable actions toward the environment is urgent. But if some of that urgency is also directed internally, with the goal of creating and sustaining employee-centric policies that make work-life balance more sustainable, the team will be in a much better position to succeed and effectuate real change.

Recognizing soft skills and upholding boundaries with real consistency are two things sustainable teams do differently from their market peers. And those teams are well-rewarded with increased engagement, higher productivity and a bigger exit down the road.

The choice is clear, and there’s never been a better time to begin. ###

[Tara Milburn](#) is the CEO of [Ethical Swag](#).



Tara Milburn