

Rethinking the workplace: Goodbye, employee; hello, employefree!

By [Liesel Gordon](#)

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Picture this: it is 4pm and you're done for the day - you know there is not a single productive bone left in your body. However, your working hours end at 5pm and leaving anytime before then - while not strictly forbidden - is distinctly frowned upon. And so you find yourself surreptitiously glancing at the clock for the umpteenth time, while doing your best to not appear too obvious about it.



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If you're a Baby Boomer, Gen Xer or even an older millennial, you've likely noticed a gradual shift away from this scenario over the past few years - and a more rapid one over the past few months, courtesy of Covid-19. Simply put: the old way of working no longer works.

Enter the employefree - that is, a young employee who values their freedom and flexibility over conventional employment drawcards, such as job security. And we, as corporates, need to think about how we show up if we want to attract top talent.

The biggest point of departure from the old way of working is that the workplace has traditionally been structured around a 9am - 5pm workday in a fixed location, with a clear separation between work and personal life. This model prioritised input: you had to be physically present in the workplace for a prescribed number of hours each day, in order to be seen as doing your job.

This is now changing, and in its place is a new emphasis on outcomes. While it means more flexibility for the employee as they are measured on performance or output - and not the hours they spend in the office - the individual is expected to be able to work independently, and take accountability for these outcomes.

The 24-hour day

As the focus shifts to measuring output rather than input, the concept of a 24-hour day is replacing that of the traditional 8-hour model. Consider that we have young people entering the workplace who are digital natives; they have never known a life without Google, WhatsApp or Facebook. They're used to being connected 24/7, and thus the line between work and home life is a blurred one. They view each day in its full entirety - and when and how they work is up to them.

They're more comfortable responding to emails late at night or receiving work-related text messages first thing in the morning, but will not be desk-bound in the same location, for the same amount of time each day. They value their flexibility and freedom too much for that, and don't understand why they should have to fit their private life around their 9am - 5pm job when - thanks to technology - their work can happen at any time, in any place.

What else is the employfree looking for?

Aside from freedom and flexibility, work-life balance is important to them, and employers should not make the error of conflating their preference for a 24-hour work day to mean that employfrees are workaholics. Young talent want to feel energised about life, and unreasonable working hours only adds to their stress. Their currency is fulfilment in all aspects of their lives.

Employfrees eschew formal and stiff working environments with confining schedules, and they're far less concerned with climbing the corporate ladder.

Instead, they're drawn to agile and fluid fast-moving environments, where there is opportunity for multi-specialisation and career progression. They want growth, and they want to feel like they're making a difference. They expect their work to offer meaning and purpose to their lives, and if it doesn't - they move on.

Nurturing passions outside the daily grind

In the past, many companies did not allow alternative forms of employment, as it was seen to be in conflict with or detract from the work that individual would perform for the organisation.

However, this mindset is changing. Allowing side hustles provides an opportunity for people to enjoy and live out their passions. It offers the opportunity to engage in multiple interests and contributes to outside-in thinking. Employfrees want to contribute in meaningful ways and have the capability to provide quality work in multiple spaces. By not allowing side hustles, we miss out on this talent.

It also benefits the business, in that it brings new knowledge, experience and insight into the company - while also creating an opportunity to showcase the corporate brand in different environments.

Changing how we view employment

Lastly, I believe that corporates need to completely reimagine the traditional employment model. We don't need to 'own'

someone in order to benefit from their skillset - there are many ways talent can add to a business without requiring their full-time employment.

We are seeing more and more employefrees wanting to forgo the security of a permanent position, for the freedom to offer their expertise and skills on an open market. And as corporates, this means that we do not need to demand employment in exchange for getting our critical business tasks done.

Why is it that we do not allow freelancers or consultants to participate in corporate incentives like staff competitions and bonuses? If we change our mindset to focussing on outcome, then it shouldn't matter whether the individual is a permanent employee or not - as long as they deliver.

When we start thinking this way, the talent pool is suddenly so much bigger – we are now able to engage multi-skilled talent, rather than recruit purely for skillset.

Yes, maintaining a healthy company culture takes more creativity and a continuous concerted effort in this new paradigm, but this is achievable if one keeps the bigger picture firmly in mind.

Employeeefrees are wired differently. As corporates, we need to take advantage of this opportunity we have been presented with to reinvent our business models, ensuring our relevance into the future.

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