

Soft skills in hard times:

why good people management matters more than ever

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Section 1: Why people management is so important (for business and employees)

The Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter has, since its launch in 2019, championed the importance of improving people management. Good people management practice helps firms create good jobs, delivers opportunities for people to progress, and contributes to the region's growth and success.

The pandemic has further highlighted the value of effective people management practices. This is evident in the increased need for health and wellbeing support, and the challenges of transitioning to more home and hybrid ways of working.

In particular, the crisis has emphasised the need for managers to demonstrate empathy, while providing flexibility and support. These are behaviours that are even more important when managing an increasingly dispersed and disparate workforce.

And, as the UK seeks to recuperate from the effects of Covid-19, there is a growing body of evidence to support this. Evidence suggests that improving people management capability will boost workplace productivity and support economic recovery over the long term.

For example, recent data from the ONS shows that people management practices such as performance reviews are directly correlated with positive firm-level productivity.

However, research shows that positive HR and people management policies alone are not sufficient. Rather, it is the quality of line management that will decide its effectiveness, and

its subsequent impact on organisational performance.

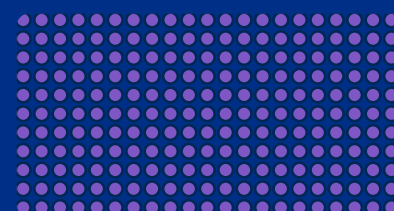
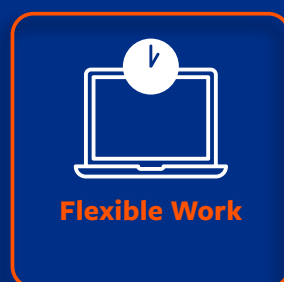
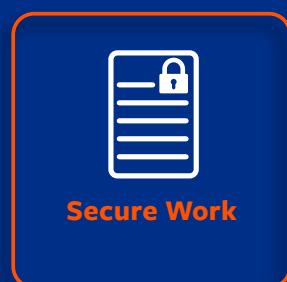
Line managers are critical to the different aspects of job quality, with their behaviour having a major effect on job satisfaction, employees' development, wellbeing, and sense of inclusion at work.

All these outcomes depend on managers having the necessary people management skills to manage and support their staff. This is why the Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter calls out 'People Management' as a key characteristic.

It is the 'golden thread' that binds many of the elements of good employment practice together, and yet too often people managers don't receive any training or support to help them fulfil their role.

In response, we are urging employers in Greater Manchester to boost investment in the development of people management skills. This will be a critical part of GM's recovery as we seek to strengthen good employment practices in our city region and navigate the workforce challenges ahead.

The Characteristics of the Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter:



Section 2: The critical role of line managers in managing, supporting, and developing staff

As discussed, managers are integral to ensuring HR and people management policies are effectively implemented - for the benefit of both the organisation and the individual.

We now turn in more detail to explore five pivotal aspects of managing, supporting, and developing staff.

1) Improving job competence and motivation

CIPD research suggests that it is the quality of line managers' people management skills that will decide, to a large degree, if workers are engaged with an organisation's core purpose. Good quality line management is also associated with employee innovation and support for other staff.

However, only about 40% of line managers receive any training in how to manage people. As a result, it seems their central role in ensuring employee motivation and proficiency is not fully recognised.

Business leaders should be asking questions about their line managers' people management skills and provide training where necessary to ensure the effective delivery of business strategy on the ground.

2) Tackling stress and supporting health and wellbeing

Closely linked to motivation is employee health and wellbeing, an issue which has come under even more focus in the last year as a result of the pandemic. Employers have a fundamental duty of care to their staff, underpinned by health and safety legislation and common law.

Besides the ethical and legal considerations, there is a very strong business case for supporting staff health and wellbeing. This is supported by evidence that shows the link between employee wellbeing and the quality of line management. For example, good quality line management is strongly associated with lower levels of stress among employees, and positive effects on workers' mental and physical health.

3) Managing and preventing conflict at work

Competent people management underpins positive interpersonal relationships and helps prevent and manage conflict at work. Recent research by Acas highlights the negative effect of conflict at work, with nearly seven in ten organisations agreeing that it is time-consuming and more than half reporting that it negatively affects their culture.¹

Conflict between staff and line managers is the most common cause of disputes at work, followed by interpersonal conflict within teams. This information highlights the key role of the line manager in both preventing and managing conflict when it arises.

4) Supporting learning and development

While the role of line managers in managing conflict will be widely recognised in many organisations, their role in skills development and learning is often not well understood.



Line managers are critical in supporting employees' skills development, and in shaping workplace culture to be one that is productive and supportive of learning - according to the CIPD 2020 Learning and Skills at Work survey.

Good line managers help identify learning needs and encourage employee participation in both informal learning activities and training. This is particularly important if people are working remotely, to help assess any learning impacts.

5) Boosting inclusion and diversity in the workplace

Line managers play a central role in creating a more diverse and inclusive work culture. This is by ensuring all staff are treated fairly and consistently and taking action against any form of harassment or discrimination.

Within this is learning and development, as managers are crucial in helping employees' progress and reach their potential regardless of their characteristics or background.

Line managers are also critical to the operation of both formal and informal flexible working arrangements. Effective managers get to know the people they manage as individuals, and provide this flexibility where needed based on a case-by-case basis.

The shift to more home and hybrid working as a result of the pandemic is set to continue once the crisis is past. This will further emphasise the need for line managers to have the people management skills to manage a more flexible and increasingly diverse workforce.

¹ Acas (2020), Dispute and their management in the workplace: a survey of British employers',

Section 3: What does good people management look like?



Research carried out by [CIPD and Affinity Health](#) has identified the five behavioural traits that all managers need to both engage their employees in productive work, and support their health and wellbeing.³ But how relevant are these traits in the current environment?

Being open, fair and consistent. Team leaders need to remain calm under pressure and manage their own emotions as well as those of staff who may be worried for their futures – particularly with the recent surge in redundancies.

Handling conflict and problems. Many workplaces are likely to be experiencing high levels of latent conflict, due to the ongoing stress and anxiety associated with health and safety, job security, contractual changes and new ways of working.

Providing knowledge, clarity, and guidance. For many, remote working has created a welcome flattening of organisational hierarchies. But managers still need to make decisions and play an active part in joint problem-solving initiatives.

Building and sustaining relationships. One positive by-product of the pandemic is that we are becoming increasingly literate in the language of our psychological wellbeing. Now is the time to get to know your staff well.

Supporting development. There may be lessons to learn from the last recession - when there was an over-reliance on agency and zero-hours workers to fill short-term gaps. We need to promote a longer - term investment in skills.

²CIPD (2020), 'Learning and Skills at Work. Mind the gap: Time for Learning in the UK',

www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/strategy/development/learning-skills-work#gref

³CIPD and Affinity Health (2017), 'Developing Managers for Engagement and Well-being',

www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/developing-managers-report#gref

Section 4: How to improve people management

Good people management cannot exist in a vacuum – it requires leadership and senior managers to set the right tone and live up to organisational values.

As well as championing the right values and investing in skills, good people management can be improved by using carefully drafted policies and procedures. For example, in current times this may mean taking another look at your flexible working policies and making sure policies appeal to both men and women. This is a great way to help improve diversity and promote better gender equality at work.

Here are three quick ways to improve people management in your business that you can start to work on today:

- 1. Support the Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter**, and share experiences with other managers facing similar issues. The Charter can help you get connected!
- 2. Access the wonderful resources from CIPD and ACAS**, on everything from flexible working to employee engagement and wellbeing.
- 3. Establish a safe environment within your own business** that encourages managers to speak up, share, and try new ideas.



Section 5: Resources

For help and support to improve management practice employers can find resources here:

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

CIPD offer a wide range of resources including guides, podcasts, webinars and training:

The Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter Resource Microsite

- provides up to date guidance and advice on the best management practice.

Line Manager Support Materials

- resources, guides and quizzes to help managers explore and develop their management capability.

Guidance for Employee Engagement

- leaflet for employers and managers.

Alignment Quiz on Behaviours to Support Health, Wellbeing and Engagement

- quiz to determine how your management approach aligns with the five areas of manager behaviour.

Line Manager Development Exercises

- exercises to help you develop a stronger management approach.

Line Managers Fact Sheet

- information about the role of line management, and its relationship to an organisation's people practices.

Training

- course on building the essential people skills for line management.

Line Managers' Role in Supporting the People Profession

- outlines roles and responsibilities of line managers.

Acas

A number of resources are available through Acas to support employers:

Helpline – free and impartial advice for employers, workers and representatives 0300 123 1100

Website – includes:

- **Advice**
- **Template letters, forms and HR documents**
- **Research and commentary**, including *case studies*

E-learning - sign-up for our free e-learning to update your HR knowledge or learn new skills.

Webinars - free webinars on employment law topics and employment relations.

Acas Model Workplace tool – free and easy to use self-diagnosis tool.

- Helps you to check how good your organisation is at people management. Presented in short modules, complete as few or as many sections as you want to. After completing a module, you'll be given a rating, along with useful advice and links to resources.

Training events and courses – 'open access' training providing practical solutions to employment problems.

Tailored support for your workplace - in-company training and in-depth advisory services. Our specialists can work with you to provide tailored support and practical solutions to address challenges at your workplace.

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