



RECENT DIALOGUE WITH MEMBERS OF THE HUMAN RESOURCE PROFESSION ON UNDER-EMPLOYMENT

Report on our recent dialogue with members of the Human Resources Profession on Under-employment

In the first week of November Donington hosted a discussion with senior members of the HR profession on the subject of under-employment. The discussion was held under Chatham House Rules and facilitated by Narelle Hooper, the Editor of Boss Magazine.

The purpose of this discussion was to examine under-employment in order to better understand the impact of this unforeseen phenomenon's impacts. It also allowed participants to share their insights and observations into the measures that had been taken in their organisations and sectors and to explore issues of concern and areas for future focus.

Participants acknowledged a wide range of challenges flowing from under-employment.

There was a broad realisation that both the focus of attention and delivery of benefits and services from government are currently geared to the unemployed. In fact the problems stemming from under-employment are often overlooked or posed as the lesser evil of the unemployment versus under-employment dichotomy.

As a backdrop to individual observations and

experiences, there was a tacit understanding that if under-employment remains or grows going forward it would be desirable at a policy level to re-examine the provision of services in the areas of education and training, recruitment and redundancy and to consider better advocacy mechanisms (particularly for the

vast swathe of the workforce who are now contingent).

Issues around employee engagement, productivity, workforce expectations and meaningful career paths arose in many of the individual stories and anecdotes. There was a deep appreciation of the critical importance of better people management skills and well thought out communications strategies by organisations and leaders.

One of the key themes to emerge was the danger of stereotyping

or oversimplifying the impacts of unilateral but often well meaning management measures, like cutting hours, that aimed at avoiding redundancies. In some cases this could lead to financial difficulties and resentment by sections of the workforce. Others might embrace a shift to part-time work or fewer hours and enjoy the resulting better work/life balance. It was acknowledged that workers in different

AREAS OF CONCERN

- **Retaining staff once the economy and labour market improves**
 - **Engaging employees who may be de-motivated and disengaged**
 - **Managing potential ongoing uncertainty**
 - **Responding to the different expectations of various groups, regions, generation and sectors of the workforce**
 - **Leading with honesty and by example**
 - **Understanding that some employees may not want to shift back to working longer hours**
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industries, geographic regions and from different generations might have different expectations, needs and responses to these measures. Gender might also be an issue for some individuals in how they adapted, embraced or resented changes to working conditions and hours.

Despite some concerns around whether the communication and implementation of measures leading to under-employment could have been handled better, there was agreement that no one was clear about what the future might hold, so over-communication by management was a key action in rebuilding trust.

Measures as simple as holding extra social functions to rebuild workplace cohesion was one suggested strategy, as was increasing the profile of the management team by ensuring that senior leaders were out walking the floor and not cloistered in their offices behind closed doors.

Creating a dialogue with employees and

ensuring that there is one source of information that is accurate and trustworthy is also important so that people don't have to learn about what is going on through external sources such as the media.

After and during a continuing period of instability and uncertainty, the need for leaders to be positive, inspire confidence and show humility was seen as paramount. Switching away from unilateralist approaches was seen as a positive step in achieving such ends, as was re-engaging employees

with the company through training, career discussions and developmental opportunities.

There was also a need to be open to multiple or different solutions for rectifying the problems that organisations and sectors were now facing.

Just as different sections of the workforce had been impacted differently, no one participant could claim to have the "silver bullet" to solve the myriad impacts of the under-employment phenomenon.

AREAS FOR FUTURE FOCUS

- **Ascertain how different regions, functional units and employee groups feel**
 - **Contemplate when unilateral actions to reduce hours can be unwound**
 - **Examine ways to communicate more effectively with your workforce**
 - **Explore strategies to better manage prolonged uncertainty**
 - **Consider learning and training as ways to re-skill and energise**
 - **Manage developmental pathways and dialogue with staff on careers where appropriate**
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