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Module Title: Managing People LCBB5004

Assignment Title: Assessment 1

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Word count: 2500

- **Introduction**

During Covid19 numerous companies increased and implemented remote working in order to continue to operate. Based on the survey conducted by UCAS, employers believe that Covid19 has served as a catalyst to introduce a new approach to flexible work that employees would like to maintain in the post-pandemic world. The following report after presenting the importance that diversity and inclusion, and flexibility have in the workplace for the success of the business, will analyse the advantages and disadvantages raised by working from home, particularly focused on the impact of flexible work regarding diversity and inclusion in the workplace. The report will also analyse the role of HR in addressing and resolving the issues that might be raised from remote working.

- **How and why Diversity and Inclusion are important in the workplace**

The diversity, equity & inclusion strategist and behavioural scientist Arthur Chan (2021) in his social media stated 'Diversity is a fact. Equity is a choice. Inclusion is an action. Belonging is an outcome.' Diversity is about the differences between people in a group. Differences can be in the form of characteristics, our backgrounds or how we think. Being inclusive is all about valuing an individual's differences and taking action to acknowledge and accommodate these. Equity is about treating everyone fairly by taking into consideration their differences and providing them with what they need for equal opportunities.

In order for somewhere to be a place where everyone feels accepted and valued, it needs to include a diverse range of people, be inclusive of those people's different needs and provide equity of treatment in response to those needs. All three of those things are required to make workplaces and society fair places for all.

The term diversity in the workplace refers to individuals who differ in various characteristics. There are characteristics as skills and experiences and there are other 9 categories as age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation that are often victims of bias and discrimination and therefore protected by law by the Equality Act 2010 (Equality and Human Right, 2021).

The term diversity is usually linked with the term inclusion and expressed with the acronym D&I, the connection derives from the fact that the latter is the process and practice that enable organisations to benefit from their diversity (Ferdman and Deane, 2014). For instance, diversity is not beneficial without inclusiveness. Bringing people

from different backgrounds together does not unlock their creative potential. Inclusion accomplishes this. Inclusion unleashes potential and activates a collaborative framework to extract it.

Despite this, many firms declare victory after diversifying their workforce. That is an uncritical and premature celebration. Diversification is only the first step in a two-phase transition (Clark, 2021).

For the company, the benefits of diversity and inclusion are numerous, e.g. variety of different perspectives, increase in creativity and innovation, higher employee engagement, meliorate the brand's image, etc (Ferdman and Deane, 2014).

Diversity and inclusion are therefore beneficial for both parties, the increase in the company's growth is in part driven by the result of the employee's well-being. A study conducted by Psychology Today (Fletcher and Oxon, 2016) demonstrated a positive relationship between the D&I working environment and employees' well-being. Fletcher and Oxon (2016) explained that when a human being does not feel integrated and engaged with the community its well-being and confidence are negatively impacted. In addition, the lack of sense of belonging will result in employees seeking a different job and work environment.

This would negatively impact the companies in numerous aspects, such as losing potential or attracting future talent, raising the employment turnover, damaging the brand reputations, and the financial cost of hiring and training.

According to Hays (Smyth, 2022), the survey shows that 61% of the candidates would only apply to a company that will only consider applying to an organisation with a public commitment to D&I. As a result, it is evident that ED&I must remain a top focus for organisations, particularly concerning the recruitment of attracting talent.

- **Flexibility in the workplace**

Flexibility in the workplace is the capability to adapt to changing conditions and expectations. Flexibility essentially empowers individuals to work most productively for themselves and a business. Implementing effective flexible working practices enables organisations to tap into the new diverse talent and break the stereotype of having to work 9-5 or more, 5 days a week in the office. A system that has never fitted individuals with varied circumstances, a system that ultimately limited the type of talent most organisations attracted.

Flexibility in the workplace is not limited to working as a remote or hybrid, can be expressed in a wide variety of forms as changing or compressing the working hours, sharing the job, part-time job, etc. Flexibility, in fact, can be anything that is the product of the ability to respond to specific work requirements that emphasizes the importance

of delivering and accomplishing the job and its tasks rather than focusing on the way and place (Amstrong and Taylor, 2017). E.g. The UK has just launched a new pilot programme that will start in June 2022, where some businesses will try to implement 4-day working week for a trial of 6 months. During the trial, the performance and the productivity will be monitored to check if can be maintained at 100%, although the 20% of working hours are reduced. The purpose is not about saving costs, in fact, the salary will not be reduced. The purpose is to approach new working flexibility that is advantageous for both parties, the business and the employee (Finch, 2022). Flexibility in the workplace, as the D&I, improves employee wellbeing, increases productivity and consequently contributes to the business's growth.

- **How flexible working can promote diversity and Inclusion in the workplace**

According to Meagher (2019), flexible working is an important tool for enhancing workplace equity and fostering inclusive workplaces. It can assist parents in returning to work, reducing the wage gap between men and women, assisting persons with changeable health conditions in remaining employed, and assisting carers in balancing their work and caring duties. Remote or hybrid working then promotes diversity and inclusiveness allowing working to a broader range of people with specific requirements. The CBR's report (2022) forecasted that the rise of remote working could bring 3.8m people previously unable to work, back into the workforce. The report states that 45% of the UK's unemployed would be willing to work with the opportunity of working from home, while 46% of the UK's 8.6 million part-time workers would increase their hours. The 45% of the UK's unemployed force includes 1.5 million disabled people, 1.2 million parents and 500,000 carers.

Removing the commute going to the office can be extremely beneficial for people with disabilities where the travel journey can be challenged. In addition, they will be better able to contribute effectively to their team if they have the option of working remotely and their home office has been customised to their needs.

Removing the commute going to work provides numerous benefits, e.g. additional time that helps the employees to improve their work-life balance, the financial benefit of saving on transport costs, and can reduce the stress of the travel journey.

In addition, working remote, increase the flexibility of the working hours. Employees are not more restricted to the office working hours, they can manage and adapt their working hours to meet their needs, beneficial that is extremely advantageous for parents and caregivers that struggle to manage their responsibilities. According to CaresWeek (2020), in the UK has been estimated

that 26% of the adult population is providing unpaid caregivers (1 out of 4 adults), a number that increased since the pandemic. Research reports that 16% of unpaid caregivers that have paid work are concerned about having to stop working or studying and reducing their working paid hours because unable to manage their responsibility. Based on the research, for the 55% the biggest challenge is to balance their caring responsibility and their work schedule, arriving late or leaving early to work or taking time off because they must fulfil their caregiving obligations. The same research (CaresWeek, 2020), reports that 58% of the caregivers are women, therefore working remotes can diminish gender inequality and help caregiver women to maintain and fulfil their paid job.

In addition, according to White (2021), remote labour might provide a sense of security to marginalised communities. Going to work in certain circumstances or being a visible minority in the workplace can be difficult. For instance, statistics reported that over 23% of respondents in the UK believe they have been bullied at work. A further 25% believe that they have been subjected to passive bullying due to being purposefully left out.

Working from home, virtual interactions are more concentrated and intentional, providing the potential to boost productivity while also showcasing skillsets that could otherwise be overlooked due to workplace social dynamics.

According to Amstrong and Taylor (2017), one of the responsibilities of HR is to ensure diversity and inclusion in the workplace. As flexible working enables companies to include demographic groups that would be excluded from the job market, is a strategic tool for HR in promoting D&I. The HR department is required, by law to ensure that none is discriminated against or left out because of belonging to the protective categories (Equality and Human Right, 2021). For this reason, HR should promote flexible working as enable to include in the process of recruiting and retention various of the protective categories e.g. disability, pregnancy and maternity.

- **How flexible working can raise inequality at work**

Besides all the positive aspects of flexible work promoting diversity and inclusion, several aspects negatively affect the D&I in the workplace. If on the one hand, as mentioned above, flexible working helps caregivers to return or to maintain their job and therefore diminishes the gap between gender inequality, on the other hand, remote working has been criticised for increasing the gap of gender discrimination.

According to Partridge (2021), the major concern for employees who must work from home is their career progression, as they feel less favourable to getting promoted than the employees going to the office. Still according to Partridge (2021), besides bosses' companies denying any favouritism, it is an employee's common thought that the 'small talks' and the relationships at work are essential advantageous for getting promoted over the other colleagues working from home. As the majority of caregivers are women, it raised the concern of increasing the gap between paid gender inequality.

From this scenario, it can be said that the implementation of flexible work is helpful and essential for the caregivers to maintain their work, however, the issue is a lack of strategy for diversity inclusiveness. The employees working from home are feeling in a disadvantageous position because they are missing the possibility of engaging with their colleagues and bosses. Therefore, according to Larson et al. (2020), one of the major complaints about remote work is that employees feel isolated and lonely, missing the informal social interaction of an office setting.

According to Beaudry (2021), remote working can increase disparity and inequality at work because if on the one hand working from home provides a sense of security to marginalised communities, on the other hand, can disadvantage them by raising their marginalisation from the rest of the teams. According to Beaudry (2021), it is more difficult to deal with problems that arise since, with remote employment, setting up an appointment is a formal procedure rather than being able to approach someone and ask to speak privately which also affects the engagement of the introverted people that are feeling more discouraged to contribute in the conversation.

What emerged is an essential intervention of HR, therefore is HR's responsibility to ensure that employees are feeling trusted and valued and not discriminated against, and to ensure employee engagement with the company and the rest of the team (Amstrong and Taylor, 2017). E.g. HR, as suggested by Larson et al. (2020), could let starts online meetings with non-work topics and organise weekly virtual parties where packages of food and drinks are delivered to the employee's home simultaneously. Reports demonstrated that these small approaches can improve social interaction and inclusiveness with remote workers, increasing their sense of belonging to the company and decreasing their loneliness (Larson et al., 2020).

Therefore, considering that setting up a conversation requires planning, Hr managers can address the lack of engagement of the marginalised employees, advantaging the lack of spontaneous team working and conversation to mix and group members of staff that were unlikely to work together.

Moreover, remote working raises inequality as not all the employees have access to the same facilities and technologies required to perform the job. This issue can be particularly disadvantageous for juniors roles and young adults that they might not have a good wifi connection or adequate space for work. CEBR (2021b) reports that two out of every five people under the age of 35 do not have a proper home office or a peaceful space to work. Besides, although remote working can be extremely advantageous for parents, from another point of view can be disadvantageous because they might struggle to focus on the job, while at home with their family (Actual Experience, 2021). As Actual Experience (2021) suggests, HR managers should do the utmost to ensure employees have the right setup to perform the job.

- **Conclusion**

Flexible work can be expressed in different forms and can be extremely advantageous for either employee and the company as there is a positive relationship between the employee's well-being and his productivity on the job. The flexibility of working from home can promote diversity and inclusion because enable organisations to tap into a wider talent pool, reaching a demographic segment that would not have been able to work otherwise. Besides all its positives, remote working if not supported by strategic HR management could increase the gap between diversity and inclusion rather than improve it. Therefore, emerged that the HR role is crucial to implementing diversity and inclusion strategies whether the work is flexible or not.

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