

Heather McGregor: 'Working from home is the future'

Trust is essential to any business, and it's a lot easier to earn it face to face, in the office. Nevertheless, lots of people want to work from home, and flexibility is important



Heather McGregor

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A certain amount of time together is essential to form good business relationships, writes Heather McGregor

Technology has made the world a smaller place. We are all better connected – schoolgirls in Pakistan can study courses in artificial intelligence taught by Ivy League professors thousands of miles away. And it has become ever easier to combine work and home. So why is a CEO such as Marissa Mayer summoning Yahoo staff back into the office?

Employment is a matter of trust. If you trust someone, it is easier – and cheaper – to work with them. I run a business in central London; we work for large companies, all of whom we trust to pay us. I do not, therefore, run credit checks on them, which saves me both time and money. Trust, as transaction cost economics tells us, lowers transaction costs.

So how do you build trust? Through transparency and knowledge. If you know more about someone, you will trust them more. If you have a positive experience of working with them, you will be more likely to trust that future working experiences will be worthwhile. But trust is earned, and it is much easier to earn it face to face – not at the end of a phone, or in an email exchange. The culture in our small company is built on a mutual trust and respect.

We are light years from Yahoo; we employ fewer than 25 people and instead of a Silicon Valley office, we inhabit a six-storey Georgian townhouse without air conditioning or a lift. But I have sympathy with Mayer, who needs to rebuild her company and will be able to do so faster if her team build trust between each other. Communication between people is the pathway to trust, and 85% of communication is non-verbal.

The digital age has made it harder, not easier, to build trust. To build an organisation that functions as a team, you need to face and overcome challenges together, learn from failure and celebrate success. All very hard to do if people are geographically spread far and wide.

That may be true, but I still believe the future of work will be more about working from home – or on the move – and less about offices with expensive commercial rents and sky-high business rates.

I employ talented people who are not easy to replace, so when they ask for flexibility in the form of remote working, I would much rather find a way to accommodate that than lose them. More than half the staff in our company work flexibly. People of both sexes want and need to work from home for many reasons, including ageing/infirm relatives, medical appointments, or because their partner is posted a long way from our office. It makes good business sense to accommodate these requests.

I don't deny that it's hard – you have to schedule routine meetings into specific days of the week, and the people who remain in the office five days a week end up shouldering the burden of keeping the office running, answering phones, doing admin and opening doors. Plus, clients are not always as accommodating as employers – those who work from home often have to come in to fulfil client need.

The common thread in all cases, though, is trust. It would be hard to allow working from home if I thought that they were all watching box sets of *Mad Men*. So a certain amount of time together is essential to form the bedrock of the relationships that are the glue holding the whole thing together. In times of crisis, I may need more face-time with my team, not less; when the recession hit us in 2008/9, one of the first things I asked was for people who had been home-working to return to the office.

We hire people as graduates and before you know it, we are celebrating their engagements, then agreeing their maternity leave. At different times in their lives,

people have ambitions to build their human capital – I have agreed to flexible working for employees studying everything from a professional qualification in psychoanalysis to a masters in international relations and even a flower-arranging course. I have learned it is the grease that oils the wheels of our business.

But the future will include working from home by almost everyone, even if they have to build the foundation of their ability to do so in the office.

Heather McGregor runs her own executive search business

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