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When all that we Count becomes all that Counts

By Peter Bloom and Caroline Clarke

Productivity is considered a crucial ‘value’ for contemporary organizations. While the business world rapidly changes, the prioritization of productivity remains the same. Indeed, if there is one way that the 21st century is the same of the 20th, it is in the widely accepted assumption that the more productive survive while the less productive die.

Modern organizations, therefore, must constantly find new ways to manage this relentless quest for productivity. On the one hand, companies rely on traditional methods of quantification and auditing to “squeeze” the most out of their workforce. Yet unlike the past, it is often now workers themselves who are responsible for improving their performance through personally accounting for their time and actions..

HR is at the heart of this cultural shift. The new productivity culture replaces top-down coercion with bottom up “empowerment” strategies. The task of managers is to create conditions that will give workers the opportunities to maximize their own performance. Rather than being Tayloristic, it is tailor-made to the needs of each individual as they strive to increase their efficiency and output. Working on our ‘productive selves’ really can become a full-time job.

The results of this “human” centred approach appear to be quite progressive. They justify increasing an employer’s commitment to the physical and mental wellbeing of their workforce. If a healthy worker is a good worker, as the old saying goes, then in today’s business thinking a happy person is a productive person/employee. For this reason, even in an ultra competitive globalized marketplace, many employees are encouraged merely “to be yourself” and to cultivate a strong work-life balance.

However, there is a potential dark side of to these HR inspired productivity strategies. They ironically serve to increase individual anxiety by instrumentalizing and colonizing all aspects of our existence. Going for a run is no longer a way to relieve stress, it is now a moral duty, and working away from the office and having a flexible schedule far from freeing people from the drudgery of the 9-5 rat race, now makes them feel as if they ‘check out but they can never leave’. Indeed, ‘not working too hard’ and balancing life becomes yet another responsibility the employee has to manage, ironically in a culture of intensified working practices, where, to paraphrase, we count the cost of everything but know the value of nothing.

There is a profound but often invisible danger in this accounting-for-ourselves productivity culture, because rather than the organization confronting unfeasible objectives or serious structural problems, the workforce take the full brunt of responsibility for how they ‘manage’ or ‘mismanage’ their own productivity. The employee is nearly always complicit; striving to be more, do more, papering over the cracks of fundamental institutional flaws that rely largely on unpaid labour and good-will. These conditions are

exacerbated by the insatiable demands of “time greedy” companies in a 21st capitalist world that never sleeps.

In the long term this threat goes to the very core of modern HR efforts to manage productivity. The ethics of accounting can lead to a reality of growing unaccountability and possible subversion within organizations. Present is a top down blame game, where executives pass the proverbial “hot potato” onto middle managers who do the same to the employees they supervise. It is a vicious cycle where everyone is on the defensive, creating a culture of pointing the finger, instead of constructive problem solving and engagement with work.

This culture of distrust easily translates into a pervading cynicism and disaffection. Employees will perform to what is measured, as the *appearance* of productivity becomes privileged over all else, since that is what we are rewarded for. So, when we ask our employees to work ‘smarter’ when they are already at full tilt, produce more when the tank is empty, and halve the time to produce twice the output without any more resources, we cannot be surprised when this results in the manipulation of accounting structures to reflect a picture of a performance that is at dramatic odds with reality. That is to say, the performance indicators/productivity measures become the ends in themselves, rather than the means to the ends, so they become confused with the original purpose because they *become* the purpose. One only has to recall the suspect credit ratings that helped cause the financial crisis to see the danger of these practices.

On a more personal level, employees can suffer from a severe paralysis linked to these productivity discourses and the accounting that it entails. No matter what they do or how they do it, it is never enough or good enough. Even in successes they can never relax, as everything they do can potentially be scrutinized as unproductive, requiring improvement, or be subject to moving goalposts. Mental health can suffer as employees become anxious, and in the face of such seemingly unrelenting pressures to do everything, sometimes the only response is to become detached, to give up and do nothing, or to exit the organisation.

HR managers, not surprisingly, are being pro-active in responding to these concerns – trying to help employees cope with this difficult working reality. Already there is underway a “new age” manager movement where individuals are encouraged to meditate, and be mindful, in order to reduce their job stress (which is their responsibility). The reasoning for these efforts goes beyond simple spirituality – again it speaks to willingness of employers to try anything to ensure their maximization of their workforce’s productivity both in the short and long term.

Yet this cures the symptom not the disease, another doomed experiment in accounting for people’s behavior to ensure their productivity. It continues to disguise the problems of the organization, while masquerading as an individual’s ability to ‘cope’. An extreme form of denial perhaps? We must be careful that counting and measuring does not become the *problem* rather than *the solution* – as sometimes less is more, as evidenced by the problems experienced by Toyota when quantity trumped safety.

And it is precisely here that the painful paradox of modern productivity discourses become a collective threat, not only to social wellbeing but ultimately to the organization's survival and success. Real possibilities for innovation are put aside for the sake of finding new ways to make individuals accountable, employee energies are used to be complicit in creating the illusion of new clothes for the emperor. The potential for new ideas and practices are immediately dismissed as the familiar but uncomfortable slippers of established strategies are put on; increasing 'productivity' without fundamentally upsetting the status quo, and usually without increasing productivity either. But then there is always the question 'productive for who?' to consider, but that is another story...

What gets lost in this accounting are the people who are being counted, and the broader and less trusting environment that this counting creates. When what we count is all that counts, there is a real danger that very soon, nothing will count for anything.