Mervyn Dinnen 0:00

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Mervyn Dinnen 1:03

Welcome to today's edition of the HR Means Business podcast, which is part of the HR Happy Hour Network. I'm your host, Mervyn Dinnen. My guest today is somebody I spoke to a couple of years ago, actually, on this podcast, Gary Cookson, who is probably one of the certainly, I would say, UK and Europe's leading expert on hybrid working. Now, in recent years, I think we're all probably familiar with the constant narrative around remote, flexible and hybrid working where most of the conversation is really around the remote and the flexible; but hybrid working is a real boon for a number of people, and when done well, can be very successful for organizations. Gary has just published his second book, which is called "Making Hybrid Working Work," and I'm pleased to welcome him today. Gary, welcome to HR Means Business. Would you like to introduce yourself?

Gary Cookson 2:05

Yeah, thanks, Mervyn. It's great to be back. Hello everybody. My name is Gary Cookson. I'm the director of Epic HR, and as Mervyn mentioned, the author of multiple books on the subject of hybrid working.

Mervyn Dinnen 2:15

I suppose to begin, why don't we define you know what actually is hybrid working?

Gary Cookson 2:23

That's a really, really tricky question to start with. I hope the questions are going to get easier after that. The problem with that question, though, is that you're trying to it's like knitting fog. You can't really do it. The only way you can define hybrid working is by agreeing what it isn't. And that's your start point. Once you get past that, go in any direction. And what it isn't is this point in space and time, which is a misquote from an episode of Doctor Who I think, but that's the opposite of hybrid working. When you say to people, you must work there, you must work there. Now that means hybrid working is anything but that, but that's as far as we get. You can't find an official definition anywhere, or an agreement anywhere on what hybrid working is, because it is very conceptual, very situation specific. It's not meaning the same thing to me, or you, Mervyn, or anybody listening to this now. It's not meaning the same thing to any one organization, sometimes not even in one team, or even if two people do the same job, it can mean different thing. So it's a really difficult thing to grasp, but at a very high level, it means spending part of your working time on site with other people at the same time, and part of your working week elsewhere at a time when other people may or may not be working.

Mervyn Dinnen 3:46

Okay? Well, I think, I think that's kind of explained it, hopefully, to listeners. So I suppose my first question is, what's, what's happened to the nine to five? You know, when I started work, it's kind of like, in the office at two minutes to nine, leave at kind of two minutes past five, an hour in the middle for lunch. What's happened?

Gary Cookson 4:11

Life has happened. I think Mervyn, and life comes at you fast sometimes, and you me both know that we're of a similar generation, and I remember those days as well. But there will be people listening to watching this for whom your description of the the working week is an alien concept, and it's based on the premise that whoever does that, Monday to Friday, nine to five in one office, whoever does that, needed to have somebody at home doing the cooking, the cleaning, the washing, the childcare, all those chores probably unpaid. Now, you and I don't have that, I but I remember my dad having that, and I remember my granddad having that, and people of that generation, but you and I don't have that, and I don't know anybody currently who does it's an outdated concept that Monday to Friday, night to five. And it's one that isn't really compatible with modern family life or societal expectations of what family life should be. And if we mandate, and I'm sure we're going to talk about mandating outside today, if we mandate that that's what the working week would be, well, it resides over not just the nature of the work being done, but the individual preferences and circumstances, and it means that there's only a limited number of people who are going to be able to comply with that. So it's a very restrictive way of working, and one that I wouldn't encourage. It may well work for some people once they use the faster but making everybody do it is a relic from the Victorian era, and it came about in the industrial revolution when workers were moving from villages and towns into cities. And just from a logistical overhead perspective, it was easier for the factory owners to have the factories open at certain times, and then when they weren't open, they could do the cleaning and set it up for the next shift. That's a Victorian relic. No one ever said it had to be that way forever. When technology and society and life moves on, and it has.

Mervyn Dinnen 6:13

There's a line, I think, in your book about, "it's not about mandating days in an office. It's about reimagining work."

Gary Cookson 6:20

Yeah, that's right, because when when we say we want people to come on site, and by the way, I'm not, I'm not pro office or pro remote. I'm pro choice here, and I'm about making something work that works for all people concerned, rather than mandated. But when we make people come on site, there's usually reasons behind that. We see that in the media, it's to do with collaboration, communication, all the right words being said as if that doesn't happen when people were remote, and by bringing them back on site, the moment they walk over the threshold of the building, that bang, it will suddenly happen. Or by saying to people, well, you've been coming on site on two days a week, and we're getting nothing in terms of culture and collaboration. But if we bring you on three days, it will suddenly work. That's the premise behind that, and there is no magic number to that. We all need some on site collaboration. It must happen, but I work with organizations that achieve more from one very well planned, well executed day on site per quarter than some others do from four mandated days a week. And the difference is not the number of days, but what happens on those days? So it's not about quantity, it's about quality. It's not about how often you come on site, but about what you do when you're there. And I'll misquote Muhammad Ali here, who says he wasn't talking about hybrid working, but it's a good quote, nonetheless, "Don't count the days. Make the days count," and that means we have to reimagine what people do when they're on site, not just working offsite.

Mervyn Dinnen 8:06

And is this some something that I suppose we could call almost the personalization of work in that it's not a one size fits all, as you've said, bringing everybody into a space five days A week at specific times. It's, it's, it's almost like a people centric approach to the individual.

Gary Cookson 8:25

It's very much personalization of work, and it's what has to happen, and less we try and pretend otherwise has already happened with hybrid working because you and me, we might do the same job, and therefore part of our working week we're sat side by side doing the same task, and that's fine, and we might well have a standard way of doing that, but for the other part of our working week, we're both doing that in an environment that is personalized already to us, probably our home or some other third space, but it's an environment that is personal to us, and we've got our own different stakeholders in our life, and all these different plates to spin and ball juggle, which is different than anybody else, and the way we do our work will be personalized because of that. It shapes your values. It shapes your perception of work. So when we bring people back on site, we have to reflect that in the way we do, that they've got so used to working where, when and how they want to that they are understandably reluctant to go back to a much more collective experience and way of working. We must personalize it, and we're used to that as much in life and not so much in work, but we are used to everything in life being personalized for us. Look at when you go on, say, Facebook, Amazon, the things you see are based on what you've done in the past. On those app you've got a curated news feed or a curated set of things to buy, and that's based on things you've looked at, clicked on, your pst behaviors, your actions, even things you just said out loud sometimes, and your phone listens to you. Everything's personalized, and the tech is clearly there to do that in the workplace. But we just don't use it, or we don't know how to use it, but we could, and we could personalize even more, and we should.

Mervyn Dinnen 10:17

There's a mixture of technology and space about this, I think, in that it's kind of we, you know, one of the things that has enabled kind of remote, should we say, or working from home, is the advent of technology, but also space. And some people you know are feel more productive or feel more comfortable in, I suppose, different surroundings, different spaces. I mean, pre COVID days, I would go down, you know, because I've worked from home, as I probably said before on this podcast, I've worked from home ever since. Working from home meant nobody would offer you a proper job. But I I used to go to a coffee shop, which, of course, I have. I mean, the coffee shop still exists, and every time I go past, it seems quite full, but I have no need to go to a coffee shop to do my work now. But the I suppose, within the hybrid thing, what is the mix, in terms of kind of technology space and kind of how people use it?

Gary Cookson 11:18

It's an interesting point. And my answer to this, the short answer would be, be led by the tasks of this. You're right, but some people are more productive in some environments, but mostly down to the the synergy between the environment and the task itself. Now you mentioned working at multiple places, like a coffee shop, there's an office, there's a home office, and you will probably, maybe consciously, maybe subconsciously, you will have chosen what things to do when you are there so that you can get the most from the environment, the coffee shop, much noisier environment than at home, so you wouldn't try and have an important business call there. You'd save that till you go home. And it's that kind of choice that we need to think about, in terms of the task lining up with being aligned with space. Now I'm at home today, and I'm recording this podcast, stood in my oldest daughter's bedroom, and there's a reason for that. I've got a webcam screwed into the wall in front of me. I've got a window right in front of me that at this time of day that's the most natural light, and it's the best acoustically and connectivity wise. So when I'm doing a task like this, but up until the last we started recording about 20 minutes ago, up until then, I was sat on the sofa downstairs because it was replying to emails, and it didn't need to have a hard surface to be able to do that. And it can do that much better. Be more productive when I'm sat on a soft cushion and I've got a different thing to look at, because I don't need to be focused in one place and my gaze in one place. It's that type of thinking that we need to bring into the workplace. What are you doing? Where's that best done? When's that best done? How do we create that space for you to get the most from you who in particular tasks? And it's that line of thinking that I push.

Mervyn Dinnen 13:10

You and I, both over the years, have spent a lot of time online, kind of in get togethers, conferences and stuff, talking about kind of employee experience, employee engagement, and I suppose, what, what is the hybrid employee experience like? And what, I suppose, in some respects, what input does the organization have to that?

Gary Cookson 13:34

Well, the opening question there was, what's the hybrid experience like? I'll refer back to something we talked about already, which is, it's a personal one. It's a very different one. People have tinkered with their environment, tinkered with the space, tinkered with the technology, got something that worked for them. They've also got a unique set of circumstances surrounding their personal life that nobody else has, and therefore, their family experience was already personal one, and that it brought with them back into the on site portion of that working experience. And that means we have to focus on the individual. We need to ask questions of how to get the best from them, and we have to individualize the management relationship as well. The manager cannot, could not greet everybody who works for them if they're hybrid in the same way. Probably shouldn't do that anyway with any working arrangement. But if you're going to get the best from somebody, respect the experiences they have and for them into your thinking, and the second part of your question was, what role should the organization play in that well, the organization should try to build on those individual experiences by working from the ground up and hybrid tends to work better, not top down, but bottom up, when we respect what work needs to be done. Task by task, where we respect the space that's best for that task by task, where we respect the individual circumstances in which work is done, and we factor in all those things, and we build it from the bottom up. And therefore what you are doing is rafting an employee experience based on lived experience, rather than imposing the ideal and the experience, which may not be anything like ideal, but it's building something that works for each person. So the organization needs to create structures for that. It needs to create guidance for that. But what it doesn't need to do is mandate anything. It doesn't need to create rules that apply to everybody, policies that suit the majority, because then we alienate people. We run risks of losing stuff and losing people because we're not giving them the right experience. So bottom up and not top down, is my advice.

Mervyn Dinnen 15:58

And in terms of kind of the role of managers in this which we've touched on there. How would you advise an organization, kind of, yeah, to help support their managers in in understanding, particularly those we often talk with, the kind of remote working thing about, you know, managers and leaders who can only manage and lead when people are sitting in front of them. And obviously, with hybrid there is a mix, because they're going to be sitting in front of them at some times, and obviously not the rest of the time. So is there something very specific, or advice, should we say, for managers to, particularly those who maybe are new to a hybrid environment?

Gary Cookson 16:42

Yeah, I always advise rebooting leadership and management development, and I'll explain why: you are right that sometimes people just naturally good managers and leaders. And we need to realize that the the skills, the mindset, the attributes that made somebody a naturally good leader in a face to face environment where the staff are right in front of them are not quite the same as the ones you need in a hybrid or a remote environment. Some are, some aren't. And therefore, even if you're a naturally talented leader in a face to face environment. We can't assume that you will be in a hybrid remote environment. There will be some, but there'll be a lot. Aren't lots. Will struggle with the sensory loss that comes with vibrant remote working, how to make decisions, how to communicate, how to do various tasks, how to work asynchronously, and they might struggle with not being the hub around which on site work revolves and the bottleneck for decision making and the arbiter of Team relationships. All that changes in a hybrid environment. So my advice is, don't leave your competence and confidence of your managerial population to chance. That's a recipe for disaster. I always say, reboot leadership development. Let's start again. Let's work out what a great leader in a hybrid environment needs to be. And let's build a program to give them that some might have it well, for a lot this will be brand new stuff. And therefore, start again with leadership development.

Mervyn Dinnen 18:18

You're kind of nicely leading me on to my next question, I guess, which, given that this is an HR focus podcast, what's HR role here?

Gary Cookson 18:28

HR role is to provide structure and guidance for the leaders, for the teams, for the individuals, not to rigidly and for an organizational policy or approach, we need to respect the individuality that teams will need, the autonomy that managers will need from a manager's perspective, we could give them templates. We could give them workshop structures. We could give them guidance on how to get the best from their individuals and teams, and we could coach them through those things. We could create a community of practice where they can connect with other leaders and managers on how to do certain things and the issues they face from a team perspective, teams left on their own will eventually become high performing, but it takes a long time. So what HR and L and D can do is facilitate team development with the manager, ideally or on behalf of the manager, you get themes through that forming storming model that many people will be familiar with by getting the team to work out how they should work in a hybrid environment, when you face to face, you don't need that, because you just pick it up by osmosis. It's never written down or spoken out loud, but with a hybrid team, it really should be. So that's what we can do for them. And for individuals, they've got a lot of technology to use, and we can't assume that they've got the digital literacy, the reading and particularly writing skills to be able to communicate predominantly through digital media. We don't know whether people are capable of working asynchronously. We don't. Know if they understand how to work in a hybrid environment, not how to do their jobs, how to work, how to be, how to act, how to behave. And those are things that we can reinforce through the cultural initiatives, through the various bits of things that we do in all our people practices. So there's a key role for HR to play there.

Mervyn Dinnen 20:24

You also mentioned team, teams there as well. And I think that, I think it's interesting when we talk about hybrid teams. And again, You've obviously done a lot of the research behind this, the impact. Because within a team, I'm guessing you, you will have people within the team who are working in all different ways. So in office, you know, totally remote, hybrid. And what, what have you found from the research or advice would you give in terms of, I suppose, managing a team where you know that they are, there is a number of different working arrangements,

Gary Cookson 21:01

and I always recommend doing something that I call a team charter, but there'll be variations on the label, and that's what I mean when I say work out how the team works. And you don't need to do that with the team at all face to face, but the moment you've got any element of remote or hybrid working, you really should. So on a practical level, who's working where and when at any given point. That's an obvious thing to put into it. But also, how do we make decisions when we're not all here? How do we communicate when we're not all here? How do we solve problems and resolve conflicts? How do we keep everybody informed in and outside the team of what's going on, What things does the manager need to get involved in, and what things do we sort out ourselves? How do we keep each other accountable for healthy working practices? What if we're all working at different times? How does that change our processes could go on, but it's that type of stuff that a team needs to work out and give clarity to all team members in and even more so, when new people join the team, we assume that that standard induction into the company is going to be enough. It really is. When a new employee joins an existing hybrid team, their induction needs to focus way more on how they fit into the team and its rituals and its rhythms that might be hidden from that of how they build relationships digitally, as much as it is the corporate stuff. So there's loads of stuff teams need to do.

Mervyn Dinnen 22:30

And presumably the in terms of the work patterns that the individuals are able to adopt this, this, presumably, again, is a way to get people within the business who maybe have different responsibilities, caregivers, parents and things like that. I mean, do you find that that is one of the key drivers for people wanting to work in this way it

Gary Cookson 22:54

is, and that's a societal shift as well. And remember that we're on a progress away from working six and a half days the week, down six down to five and a half now at five, and nobody ever said we had to stop at five. So this is this is cracked in terms of centuries of evolution, and this is the next stage of that evolution, and we now exist in a society that is increasingly 24/7 it wasn't when I was a kid Mervyn, and probably wasn't when you were a kid, either, but now it is, and many organizations operate 24/7, round the clock, sometimes around the globe. And therefore people have got different things going on in their life because of that. There's different things that they want to do in their life, and if the organization itself is able to provide services and products to its customers outside of the Monday to Friday, nine to five, then employees should really encourage them out loud, and maybe even helped to work outside that normal rhythm and traditional rhythm, because it could open up lots more productivity, lots more engagement, and actually bring people back into the workforce who are currently excluded from it because they don't want a daily commute, five days a week, 40 hours a week, we can offer different employment options for them and therefore access different talents. So there's loads of stuff that we could do that.

Mervyn Dinnen 24:22

We're coming to the end of the chat now, which is a shame, because I'm really enjoying it, I suppose, for people listening to this, for whom organizations are struggling with a hybrid arrangement, or have tried it and it hasn't really worked for one reason or another. What's your advice in terms of getting started and in terms of, I suppose, not so much the quick wins, but, but the things to address first?

Gary Cookson 24:48

It's a good question, enough. Of course, I could recommend a good book that covers a lot of this in a bit more depth, but for the purpose of this podcast, let's give you a summary. Hybrid isn't working in most places, my view. And one of the reasons is that you. Lots of people think that as soon as they've decided their days of the week split, that's it, they've gone hybrid. They couldn't be more wrong, and usually it fails and leads to all kinds of frustrations and cultural issues, because that's where it's stopped. That shouldn't be the end point. That should, if anything, be the start point. But who says that that's where you need to start anyway. So organizations need to figure out what kind of an employer they want to be. That would be my start point. What kind of employer you want to be? How do you want your staff to feel when they're at work? And then what can we do to give them that feeling? And maybe then the answer wouldn't be tell them to come into the office on number of days a week. Maybe it's about respecting individual choice. Maybe it's about building it path by task. So organizations need to do that. There's something about fairness as well, which often holds organizations back that they may have different segments of their workforce with different abilities to access flexible and hybrid working and therefore they go with the path of least resistance and say, just because you can't have it, that means you can't have it as well. And that's a dangerous game to play. It is an equality focused thing. I think we should be more focused on equity. So the job you do, situation you're in at work and at home, what can we do to give you the best working environment. And what can we do to reshape jobs and tasks that might unfreeze some tasks in terms of time and space, to open up more flexibility? And where does that then take us? This is proper organization development stuff. This is job crafted and his job redesign. But that's what we must do. Somebody did that decades ago in most organizations, when they first founded the organization. It's a big challenge, but somebody's done it in the past, and we can do it again.

Mervyn Dinnen 26:51

Okay? Gary, it's been absolute pleasure to talk to you. People listening to this. How can they contact you?

Gary Cookson 26:59

You can contact me either on my website, which is epichr.co.uk, you can find me on LinkedIn, and I'm also on both BlueSky and Threads @ Gary\_Cookson.

Mervyn Dinnen 27:08

Okay, Gary, it's been an absolute pleasure. Wishing you lots of luck with the book, and hopefully we'll talk again soon.

Gary Cookson 27:15

Hope so. Thank you, Mervyn.

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