Expert warns employers need to connect with coronavirus reality for working parents

Friday 20 March, 2020

With all UK employers now asking people who can to work from home and all schools and nurseries closing for the majority as of the end of today - life is about to get very challenging for working parents.

In a recent survey of working parents, less than half (45 per cent) said they would be able to work from home if the schools closed, yet seven in 10 employers said they would encourage staff to work from home in the event of school closures.*

Business culture and remote working expert, Jane Sparrow, says the data suggests a worrying disconnect between employers and working parents on what is going to be feasible over the coming weeks and months.

“It’s absolutely essential that organisations connect with the reality for working parents and get off on the right foot with how they are going to work with and support them, and the wider teams working with them, during this time” says Jane. “Everyone’s circumstances are different and emotions are going to be running high (as well as fuses running short) so an open, empathetic and collaborative approach organisation wide, and critically, in teams is going to be essential.”

With just 55 per cent of working parents feeling confident to discuss family-related issues with their employer**, there’s a big question mark over how effectively UK businesses can navigate the necessary conversations and negotiations to create a workable situation for both the organisation and its working parents. However, with 3 in 4 mothers and 92.6% of fathers with dependent children in work in the UK***, they’re a vital part of keeping Britain open for business whilst it battles COVID-19.

“As we go into next week many of us will be making plans around how to best organise our days to allow us to look after our children, potentially supervise home schooling, whilst also working ourselves”, says Jane. “Others may not have families but are going to be working with people who do, so having the right level of empathy and working out a pattern that’s going to work for everyone is going to be critical.”

So what’s the advice from Jane for working parents and businesses alike to try and make this work?

Talk early and talk openly

If you’ve got children begin open, honest conversations with colleagues now on what this is going to mean for you. If you don’t have children but work with people who do, talk with those individuals soon. We’ve all got to work together on making the new reality work.

Virtual connection points

Involve everyone in the team to talk about the possible times of day when everyone could be available e.g. to have a team call. This might only be for half an hour or you might have to run an A and B shift to stay connected.

Work in shifts

If you have a partner and they are working from home also, taking shifts is a no-brainer. Becoming an early riser is also an option if your kids sleep well, as is bringing in an evening shift if they wake with the lark.

Chunk it down

Don’t try and do everything - if you’re able to, have parts of your day where you’re absolutely focused on work, parts where perhaps you’re semi focused whilst supervising home schooling and parts where you totally disconnect and just be with the children.

Create boundaries

If you’re able to because there’s two of you on the job at home, create boundaries to help you focus when working. If there’s just one of you and your kids are older, talk openly and agree on those

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boundaries. Try noise-blocking headphones and a ‘do not disturb sign’.

Don’t plan too far ahead

Make individual and team plans by the day or week (at most). COVID-19 and children are both highly unpredictable so plan too far ahead and you’ll set yourself up for failure.

Be fully present in your current activity

That means that if you’re having a stint with the family, do that 100 per cent. When you’re working, give that your total focus (using boundaries above). You’ll feel much better for it (and get more done).

Power work for productivity

According to a study of 185 million workers, the average person is productive for two hours and 48 minutes each day****. Schedule your day well and you can actually increase your output while you're home with the kids by carving out two sets of time for deep work.

A flexible to do list

Sit down and look at what needs to get done each week, rather than each day. Break them down into quick tasks that don't involve a lot of brainpower and longer ones that demand deeper thinking. It shortcuts deciding what’s possible to achieve depending on the window you have.

Work with your body

If you work best in the morning, try and work then, accepting that in the afternoon you may not get to work as much but you’ve made hay at your most productive time.

Be kind to yourself (and your children!)

Working with children in the house is not going to be perfect (or even close). They’ll be interruptions, spillages (and worse) and hours will get away from you. Be kind to yourself and celebrate the small wins (and stuff you got done) each day.

Embrace a different lens

The current COVID-19 situation will mean that we’re looking through a new window into each other's homes, families and wider lives. Embrace that and use it as an opportunity to connect on a more human level - if your kids burst into a video call, let them say hi!

Be realistic and honest

We’re all in this crisis together so there’s no need to hide your practical limitations and challenges - leaders being open and honest about their own working patterns (and limitations) can really set the tone for this.

Be human

‘Words create worlds’ and at times like this how we make people feel is everything. Remember the human beings behind the laptops, the challenges they might be facing and help each other out as much as you can.

Jane is founder and director at The Culture Builders who have been supporting Asian businesses through the eye of the Coronavirus storm since the end of last year and is now supporting a range of UK businesses too.

www.theculturebuilders.com

Notes to editors

* CIPD and YouGov survey of 282 working parents, CIPD survey (March 2020) https://bit.ly/2U4pKOS

** Modern families index 2020 https://bit.ly/2WspZoy

***April - June 2019, Office of National Statistics https://bit.ly/2J0t3At

**** RescueTime - the state of work life balance 2019 https://bit.ly/33ya7m0

Photo caption - “It’s absolutely essential that organisations connect with the reality for working parents and get off on the right foot with how they are going to work with and support them" says Jane Sparrow, business culture and remote working expert.

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For further information, media commentary, tips or to arrange interviews please contact Anna Jester on anna@theculturebuilders.com 07802 294 857

About Jane Sparrow

Jane is an organisational culture expert, published author, expert facilitator, performance coach, impactful speaker and global commentator. She has worked with businesses across the world, including Centrica, UKTV, Sony, Lane Crawford, Dyson, HSBC, Rugby Premiership and Sky, to create and sustain high performance cultures.

About The Culture Builders

The Culture Builders is a UK-based consultancy that works globally and specialises in building high performance teams and workplaces. Their client list includes global corporates, UK NGO & Government organisations, NHS trusts, charities and SMEs including Sony, NTT Security, Dyson, The Government Office, BBC and Arqiva. The Culture Builders is a carbon-neutral company.
For further information visit theculturebuilders.com

Company Contact:

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The Culture Builders

T. 07802294857
E. anna@theculturebuilders.com
W. https://www.theculturebuilders.com/

Additional Contact(s):
Katie Stokes
katie@theculturebuilders.com
01256 674 477

View Online

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