

# PRODUCTIVITY AND MANAGEMENT: MANAGERS MUST BE PRODUCTIVITY SPECIALISTS

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*Paul Connolly, MCA Think Tank Director, argues that productivity should be an explicit part of managers' remits and their training.*

Among the remedies proposed for the UK's productivity crisis is good management. This may appear to be something to be filed under the heading 'Glaringly Obvious'. But it isn't. Rather, the UK's management challenges are complex. They are a feature of our ongoing inability to balance the need for specialists and generalists in business life.

In UK education, we specialise early. Often the specialisms in question have little relevance to the contemporary work environment. This is a subtle issue, not just to do with classicists who end up working on public policy or people with maths degrees who find themselves in jobs where teamwork matters more than differential calculus. In reality, the problem-solving and creative challenges of both educational backgrounds may be very useful in certain work contexts. But the chances of aligning a person's skills base with a vocational predilection that manifests itself in their early twenties are greatly reduced by setting them on a rigidly defined educational path aged 14 or younger. And preparing them for the emerging economic realities they will face and the associated opportunities is also greatly hampered by premature specialisation. Retraining is thus almost inevitable. We specialise early, thereby paradoxically creating generalists, who must retrain to acquire new specialisms.

The problem is then further compounded. Even if someone finds a profession that works for their existing skills base or for which they can retrain successfully, a subsequent promotion may mean relinquishing the professional frontline and

moving into management. BearingPoint characterise the resulting cadres as 'accidental managers'. In the new managerial roles, frontline training may become less relevant. This problem is especially manifest in, but by no means exclusive to, the public sector. Promotion for a trained environmental health officer may take them into more detached management roles within that function – or even beyond it, if their ultimate goal is to be a departmental director or Chief Executive.

Creativity, listening and sensitivity; people management, the ability to motivate and get more out of the staff for whom one is accountable; an alertness to the productive potential of the processes and resources one oversees; analytical skills, the capacity for sceptical enquiry and a willingness to experiment, to try innovations and new ways of working: these are just some of the skills managers need. They rarely feature in toto in frontline training. But they are plainly critical to productivity.



Indeed, if one of the key features of productivity is the innovative combination of inputs, then a vocational experience of the frontline may be a mixed blessing for the promoted and productivity-tasked manager. For every frontline innovator there may be several dyed in the wool professional conservatives, content with how things are usually done.

To address this, what Mike Turner in his *In the Hot Seat* interview identifies as good management, focused on process effectiveness and innovation, is needed.



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Able and How  
argue that  
there is a case  
for more active

filtration by managers of change programmes, both in their presentation and in how staff are tasked to deliver them. This could avoid initiative overload and help secure more targeted and meaningful productivity gains. And for BearingPoint, accidental managers need to be turned into 'active' ones.

In effect, managers must become productivity specialists. But this will require a range of skills: interpersonal, analytic, creative and risk-taking.

The Digital Age will significantly complicate and enrich this picture. Many frontline vocations may prove automatable. They will either vanish entirely or become the preserve of expert 'curators' who manage a largely automated capacity. Human beings will need to emphasise their 'human' dimension to thrive in this context. That dimension will include many of the core management skills mentioned above. The good news for the future of human employability and potential is paradoxically that the skills in question are currently in short supply. Plenty of scope for expansion...



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