

BRIGHT GUIDES WORKPLACE FAILS

5. TAKING OWNERSHIP





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The factors at play when employees take ownership for their work

Frustrated your employees aren't taking ownership for their work? Do they leave on the dot, whether work's completed or not? Or turn in less-than-perfect work or miss a key action that undermines what you're trying to achieve?

It's a common problem and one that's not easy to solve. That's because the solution does not lie in one place, such as how people are managed. In fact to get it right, a whole range of factors need to be aligned - from leadership and management right down to individual skill and mindset:

1. **Skill**
2. **Management**
3. **Leadership**
4. **Personality**
5. **Motivation.**

This Guide

In this guide we look at avoiding tasks and unfinished projects and improved employee engagement. at the reasons why employees might not be taking ownership for their work and how to address this, at an individual, management and organisational level.

Based on the ongoing work of **Rebecca Stevens, Chartered Psychologist**, these Work Brighter Guides are designed to help business owners and managers address common issues and challenges in the workplace.

Although they contain useful tips and information, it's always advisable to talk to an expert to help you understand the deeper causes and plan the right strategy for your individual business situation.

1. Does your employee have the skills to take ownership?

First things first, does your employee know what they're doing? Could the reason they don't take ownership simply be because they don't fully understand the task or understand what they need to do to complete it?

In order to take ownership people have to either have the right skills to do the job or have the ability and self-awareness to develop those skills.

Take the example of a trainee solicitor, asked to pull together evidence around a case by researching case law, legal archives, etc. Disappointingly they only look at a fraction of the information that's out there. Their manager assumed they'd know where to look and how to search but it turns out they didn't know about all the available resources, like the intranet and company library.

It's important not to assume that just because you know how to do something and find it easy, everyone will. After all, you didn't start out knowing how to do it, did you? It's only through practice, feedback and support that you gained the skills you needed.

Don't assume either that if they need help, they'll ask for it. Asking for help can be hard - you don't want to look like an idiot. And it might be they don't know why they're finding something hard.

Your employee might need someone to show them the way, to coach them in the skill and build their confidence that they can do it too.

Three ways to upskill your employee using the 70/20/10 model:

1. Classroom learning (10% of learning activity) - undertake a structured course, delivered online, face-to-face or in a book.
2. Learning from peers (20%) - find a mentor or coach who's already got the skills.
3. Do it yourself (70%) - the most effective way to upskill is to learn and develop on the job.

On the job learning

On the job learning is not the same as just 'getting on with the job'. To be effective, on the job learning needs to be structured and deliberate. A task or project for your employee to complete that will help them learn the skills they need. Make it a real project but one that enables them to apply their learning and stretch their capabilities with guidance.

For example, our trainee solicitor might be given the task of finding information to support a case of unfair dismissal related to social media misuse. As there might not be much recent case law on this topic, they'll have to be imaginative to find the information they need, perhaps by looking out how other companies have handled this issue. It's a stretch project for them, but their manager's there to guide them with suggestions and feedback and they can build their confidence while feeling supported.

If your employee isn't taking ownership, their skill level is what you should look at first. Do they actually know how to do what you're asking them to do?

2. Do you have the people management practices in place to compel your employees to take ownership?

When it comes to a lack of ownership, most organisations tend to focus on this area - how people are managed and led. And it's important to get it right - how you use the power of leadership and the instruments of management, from job descriptions to your policies and competency framework can have a big impact on employee behaviour. But it's not the be-all and end-all. It needs to work hand-in-hand with the other factors outlined in this guide.

- **Job description:** do your employees have clarity about their role and their key duties and responsibilities? Well-structured job descriptions are key here.
- **Objective setting:** do employees understand what they need to do and by when? Try the 3x3 model - setting 3 objectives to be achieved in 3 months. Even if these contribute to a bigger objective, focusing on just 3 keeps it contained and achievable.
- **Appraisals:** do employees know how they're performing against their objectives? While many organisations are moving away from formal annual appraisals, regular and frequent (e.g. quarterly) check-ins are helpful in keeping employees on track.
- **Feedback:** are employees clear about what's gone well and less well? The more specific you can be when giving feedback, the better.
- **Policies and procedures:** Often organisations rely over-heavily on their policies and procedures to direct behaviour ('we have a policy that says you have to do x') but it can lead to people doing the minimum required. For instance, enforcing a strict time-keeping rule can lead to employees sticking rigidly to 9-5, whether the task at hand is complete or not. Clarity is useful, but just focusing on policy may not be effective in improving performance.
- **Behavioural/competency frameworks:** setting out a framework of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours can be a way to hold employees to account.

Feedback is a Gift to aid Self-Development:

For positive feedback, use the BID model:

- B - behaviour (e.g. I saw how you focused on that piece of research)
- I - impact of behaviour (e.g. it helped us strengthen our case)
- D - do more of ... (e.g. I'd like to see you do more of that.)

For negative feedback - use the BIRD model:

- B - behaviour (e.g. I saw how you didn't explore our in-house legal library)
- I - impact of behaviour (e.g. meaning we didn't include some key case law)
- R - result (e.g. which was embarrassing when pointed out by a client)
- D - do differently (e.g. in future, I'd like you to make sure you cover all the possible sources of information – what might help you do this?).

3. Is your leadership team setting the right tone?

Your senior leadership team sets the tone for your organisation in three key ways: behaviour, vision and recognition.

Behaviour

Does your leadership team model the behaviour you want to see across your organisation? Are they setting a good example?

As visible role models, how the leadership team in an organisation behaves sets the tone for everyone else - so if they take responsibility for their work, for example, that will be a powerful influencer on the rest of the organisation.

It can be helpful to agree what these look like in terms of underlying values i.e. what are the principles the organisation wants to be known by and to guide the culture? How do the leadership team demonstrate these values every day in how they are seen and act? How do these values show up in the behaviours expected across the organisation?

You may also find it helpful to establish leadership competencies or employee competencies which define the expected behaviours within the organisation. These can be useful underpinning frameworks for other HR processes as well as creating a common language for recognising achievements, providing promotions and advancements or rewards, and for those more uncomfortable conversations.

By having a common language, can help your leaders have a conversation and behave in way that brings out the best in their teams.

Vision

Has your leadership team made it clear to your employees what the vision is for your organisation and what purpose it serves? And if so, do employees understand how their job contributes to that vision?

Having a real sense that the work you do is integral to the success of the business overall can help employees take ownership for and pride in their work. They need to feel a connection to the purpose of the organisation and how their role is part of that; it helps with connection and motivation.

Recognition

How does your organisation recognise and celebrate good work?

Often this key factor in whether employees take ownership is left to managers to sort, but inevitably managers can find themselves spending the majority of their time focused on poor performers, leaving those performing well to fend for themselves.

Leaders can help set the right tone by encouraging managers to thank their team and by giving managers the budget to do something and ideas for the recognition of good work. Celebrating achievements reinforces the behaviour you want to see in the organisation.

4. Does your employee have the right personality to take ownership?

There are certain personality traits that mean someone is more likely to take ownership. And you can test for these when recruiting employees. The key personality traits for taking ownership are:

- **Achievement-orientated** - those hardwired to want to succeed are more likely to take ownership as a way to push themselves and achieve their goals.
- **Activity-orientated** - those who like to be busy are more likely to take ownership because they enjoy having an activity to work on.
- **Conforming** - those who are happy to follow rules and procedures don't want to break rules and cause a fuss by not delivering what they've been asked to do.
- **Conscientious** - those who don't want to let other people down are conscious of the impact on other people if they don't deliver. If you want people who take ownership always test for conscientiousness!
- **Self-assurance/self-confidence** - those with self-confidence are more likely to take ownership. If low on this trait, they're more likely to avoid doing a task for fear of failure.
- **Leadership traits** - those who like being in control are more likely to feel comfortable taking on responsibility.

We recommend you use a blended assessment approach to test for these types of traits; no one measure is a perfect predictor. For example, job simulation exercises and psychometric tests can help you identify these qualities when recruiting.

5. What will motivate your employee to want to take ownership?

Everyone's motivated by different rewards. For some, it's the extrinsic rewards like money, status, material goods, perhaps bonuses, a car or fancy job title, that do it for them. For others, it's more intrinsic like learning something new, having a sense of purpose, making a difference, connecting with others or having autonomy over their work.

To make sure you meet the different motivational needs of your team, you'll need to provide a range of options, such as:

- providing opportunities for the team to socialise outside work/away from their desks
- acknowledging people's value to the team and business
- providing opportunities for growth and development.
- providing opportunities for people to take on new responsibilities
- helping people understand how their work impacts on the lives of their customers or the wider community.

Think about the different intrinsic and extrinsic motivators you can offer to your employees. One approach is to develop this 'menu' of options with your employees through consultation workshops. This enables stronger buy-in and more meaningful rewards are created.

Taking ownership is complicated!

It's a beautiful thing when you give someone something to do and they take responsibility for getting it done - on time and to your high standards. You know your project is safe in their hands, so you can relax, leave them to it and focus on your own job.

But for that to happen, lots of factors need to be in place. You need to have hired someone who can do the job or has the ability to learn - and who is wired to want to do a good job. Their manager needs to set them clear objectives and provide helpful feedback. Their leader must set a good example and give them a clear vision of what the organisation wants to achieve and how their job fits into that. They need to be recognised for doing a good job and they need to get out of the job the rewards that are the most motivating for them.

It's an issue the whole organisation needs to take ownership of if it's to be addressed. But get it right and the rewards speak for themselves - in fact, everybody wins!

Top tips

1. Look at personality and motivation when recruiting.
1. Make sure you have good management practices in place and your managers know how to implement them.
2. As a leader, be a visible role model of the behaviours you want to see.

At Work Brighter we can help you understand what motivates and what demotivates your employees, we can help you put in place approaches to reward, beyond pay, we can help you improve the engagement of your employees.

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