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GUIDE

The modern manufacturing workplace

Defying the stereotypes and bringing in the future



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Introduction

Manufacturing has typically suffered from a bad reputation, battling with stereotypical images of dark, dangerous, noisy and dirty factories. The public tends to harbour an image of a working environment lacking in diversity and modernity.

In reality, the picture is less bleak. In a recent workplace wellness index, the UK manufacturing industry ranked sixth out of ten sectors when scored across categories including on-site gyms, discounts offered, company wellness packages and Glassdoor review scores. Leaders should take this middle-of-the-table position as a sign that some of their peers are investing in the manufacturing working environment, yet there is still room for improvement. As three in five manufacturers experience challenges accessing a skilled workforce, the new frontier of workplace wellbeing is an opportunity to get ahead of your competitors in attracting sought-after talent.

As older skilled workers retire out of the industry, a key priority is ensuring your business is modern enough to attract the next generation. Although manufacturing pays on average nine per cent higher than across the rest of the economy, for the first time, younger people care as much about the working environment as their pay. For Gen Z – the demographic born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, and the cohort from which manufacturers need to build their talent pipeline – 83 per cent claim wellbeing is on a par with salary in terms of importance. Businesses looking to secure their future workforce must consider the lives of their team in a holistic sense, investing in the health and happiness of employees.

Where to start can often be a stalling point for leaders more accustomed to questions of practicality and productivity. There are several key areas which can be maximised to create a modern, enticing working environment. In this guide we cover them all, with real-world examples to get you inspired.

The place to be: On-site benefits and work wellness

The average person will spend a third of their life at work. In manufacturing, where most tasks must be completed onsite, this means employees are committing to spending a huge proportion of their time in the factory or warehouse. For manufacturing leaders wishing to retain their staff and appeal to new workers, careful thought must go into physical premises. Conditions in this environment should be conducive to good mental health and even enjoyment, with a focus on creating a place that people want to spend time.

For HR, operations and leadership teams, base workplace requirements – changing rooms, machinery, parking – should simply be the jumping off point for factory design. Layout should be people-focused, built with an understanding that a productive, practical environment means nothing if you struggle to keep the staff needed to populate it. It can help to think about the range



of activities people might want to partake in at work, the importance of breaks and the diversity of needs on show. For example, a new site for Bakkavor Desserts, the largest chilled desserts business in Europe, included an outdoor picnic and smoking area and four additional meeting rooms, including a prayer room, maximising choice over where workers spend their time. Offer employees a variety of options, plentiful places to enjoy fresh air, and be sure to meet the requirements of different religions and demographics. Accessibility must also be a priority, with it perhaps worth hiring an Access Consultant to ensure the needs of differently abled people have been considered in all aspects of design.

Once your workspace has been planned with human needs at its heart, it is time to start thinking about adding extras. A strong, happy workforce is able to fit exercise and mindful movement into their working day. 34 per cent of people say their jobs mean they don't get time to exercise, with two in five saying they are too tired to exercise after work. In the manufacturing sector, this translates to 42 per cent of employees not working out at all. Employers can make fitness easier to incorporate into working life by offering a gym onsite, also unlocking the added benefit of exercise's known boost for productivity. Nestle, for example, created an onsite health and fitness facility including changing rooms, a fitness studio and wellbeing rooms, upgraded heating, cooling and lighting and pet friendly meeting areas. It was also equipped with fully qualified personal trainers. If a gym onsite is not feasible, paid-for nearby gym memberships are also an option. Investing in exercise is a clear signal that caring for your employees is more than just lip service.

Employers must also consider the social function of work, with 67 per cent of UK employees believing that workplace friendships improve their happiness. Clean, warm and accommodating shared spaces bring a sense of community to the workplace. Games are also

a way to drive connection. Bakkavor Desserts further boosted their new premises with foosball tables, running a Doubles foosball tournament to drive interest. Other popular choices are ping pong and pool tables, offering a perfect opportunity for quick distraction and reprieve from the grind that can easily be fitted into the working day. Robotics specialist Labman, which makes products for industrial, medical and laboratory applications, went a step further and provided a go-karting track, a climbing wall and squash courts. Where budget allows, consider providing these opportunities for colleagues to organically bond, presenting the message that breaks are encouraged.

Finally, the way to employee love is through the stomach, with two of the top three most desired at-work incentives food related; 40 per cent of employees want an onsite cafe, 45 per cent would like a subsidised or free lunch. With nearly half of all employees in 2023 saying they are skipping or rushing through lunch to get work done, making good nutrition easy to access, enticing and cheap is a great way to both boost employee health and mood. Connecting over meals also promotes stronger workplace relationships, a practice far more likely with a well-used work cafe. Follow the example of holiday home manufacturers Swift's, which invested £2 million into a brand-new cafe to serve fresh food at breakfast and lunch, providing subsidised meals as well as vending machines, booths and an expansive outdoor seating area. Ensure that the dining experience at your manufacturing plant is a far cry from soulless cafeterias of old and instead a signal that you care about your employees' day-to-day happiness.



Making the workplace your own: Flexible working

Following the pandemic, flexible working became the norm and is now viewed by many employees as an essential requirement of any job. This mindset is only set to continue, as from April 2024 the law changes to further empower workers, allowing them to ask for flexible working from day one and with greater frequency, and legislating that employers must take these requests seriously. An estimated four million UK employees have changed careers due to a lack of flexibility at work. In manufacturing, this poses a problem, as many tasks must be undertaken onsite for the sake of safety and practicality, with set working hours in place for security reasons. Does the industry risk losing out on workers to other sectors more able to accommodate a variety of working patterns?

By quickly dismissing flexible working as impossible within the manufacturing industry, leaders risk appearing out of touch. They also potentially forgo a more productive workforce, with 56 per cent of manufacturing professionals believing that a greater degree of flexible or hybrid working could enhance their ability to innovate. There are ways that leaders can introduce flexibility, even if full time remote work remains out of the question. By thinking innovatively, the mental health, work-life balance and productivity benefits of flexible working can be accessible to employees in the manufacturing industry, too.

For example, open up the possibility of a wider range of working hours by allowing staff to clock in autonomously and securely.
Automated time tracking via fobs, swipe cards or even fingerprint or facial recognition gives an accurate picture at all times of who is onsite and avoids unauthorised personnel entering.
When workers are passing through barriers in this way, set working times become less essential from a security perspective. Administrative personnel do not need to be on-hand to check staff in and onsite presence is digitally tracked. For certain tasks, trusted team members with the requisite training could be allowed to check themselves into work and complete tasks earlier or later than the rest of the team. A strong infrastructure for site entry means employers can grant greater freedom of movement, whilst also ensuring staff whereabouts is accounted for.

A simple change to boost employee experience is providing more shift scheduling options.
Many employers are now offering multiple shift permutations to choose from: three and four hour shifts instead of just the standard five or eight.

You can also offer variety in when shifts begin and end, which is especially important when catering to the needs of parents and carers.
A good approach is to survey staff over what timings would be most useful – would 8.00am–6.00pm be most valuable, or 13.00pm –11.00pm? – and continue to develop timetabling options as the organisation grows and changes.

Flexibility can also be built into the factory line itself. Whilst some processes must be undertaken in a certain order, in areas like packaging there is potential to offer varied options for the sequence of jobs. This will empower employees to schedule their own working day, choosing when to complete certain tasks. Rather than sticking to a mindset of 'this is how we've always done things', progressive leaders will distinguish between where they need to stand firm and unnecessary rigidity.

Shift swapping is another way to offer employees more control over their work patterns. Previously, this is a practice many manufacturers have shied away from, believing it might leave certain job functions understaffed and see differently skilled employees taking each other's roles, causing chaos. However, modern technology is set to make shift swapping more practical. With the right software, team members can swap shifts between themselves, on a universally accessible cloud-based schedule. Employers can put constraints on certain work functions, ensuring that only colleagues with comparative capabilities can swap. It also means that swaps are visible to all, avoiding confusion, and allows team members to broadcast their availability for those that want to change last minute. Taking days for mental health, family illness or last-minute breaks becomes not only possible, but stress-free for managers, with time and attendance software that puts the power back into the worker's hands whilst also ensuring full transparency.

A compressed work week, where employees work longer hours in order to work less days, is another potential option for increased flexibility, and could be seen as a perk. Bex Design and Print saw success in moving its industrial print factory to a four-day week. By completely shutting down operations on Friday, the firm also unlocked sustainability benefits, saving electricity and reducing car journeys as well as improving productivity. A three-day weekend is widely acknowledged to offer a better work-life balance and allow workers to come back into the workplace refreshed. The independent research and technology organisation, the Manufacturing Technology Centre, also now offers four-day weeks to the manufacturing professionals it employs, with 83 per cent of its team reporting they were happier because of these measures.

Therefore, manufacturing leaders dismiss flexible working at their own risk. Even though in most cases fully remote working remains out of reach, there are many ways leaders can introduce malleability into timetables and demonstrate they trust and value their team. Cater to a wide range of personality types and preferences with a variety of work arrangements to choose from.

Calm and connected workforce: Digitalisation

Benefits like good facilities and flexible working can only go so far if the actual work is inefficient, frustrating or stuck in the past. 96 per cent of manufacturing employees identify operational efficiency as the top enhancer of happiness on the job.
This means you are more likely to attract and retain staff if you suffer from disruptions infrequently, have a well-organised working environment, strong processes, cost-effective management and high Overall Equipment Effectiveness (OEE). Increasingly, this is made possible by the adoption of digital systems and techniques. 89 per cent of leaders report that a lack of digitalisation has a medium to high impact on OEE.
Leaders must prioritise introducing new technology not only to streamline processes and boost efficiency, but also to create a happy workplace for their staff.



One way digitalisation can improve the work experience is by automating manual tasks. Unilever, for example, has been praised for introducing manufacturing with minimal operator intervention, which they have used to redirect their team's effort towards value-adding activities. By spending time at work at tasks that require their specific expertise, team members feel more cherished and have the opportunity to grow and develop. Digitising menial tasks does not just apply to the actual manufacture of products; it can also be associated with HR and financial tasks. Software solutions can take care of previously time-intensive jobs like time sheeting, rostering, absence management and document processing. This frees up your staff to work on strategy, highly-skilled tasks and training. Take your people away from tasks they deem to be pointless or think are obvious candidates for automation, to show you appreciate their time and think carefully about how they spend it.

Digitalisation also improves connection and breaks down silos in the workplace, as software can act as a single source of truth. A time and attendance solution, for example, can integrate with HR and Payroll systems to hold all employee information in a single space. Supplier contracts also can be collated in a software solution, adding information like renewal date, cost efficiency, supplier KPIs and risk scores. Using a digital system makes information more readily available and accessible to all who need it. This makes it easier to communicate with and understand the challenges of other parts of the company, and to make quick, informed decisions based on data. In a world where the supply chain is often rocked by geopolitical events, weather changes, and more, being able to see information and respond in real-time is vital to maintain that all-important agility.

While digitalisation offers many advantages, it also triggers fear and anxiety among employees, as the fear of losing their jobs to automation looms large. This is why manufacturers must recognise the importance of nurturing a human-technology relationship in the workplace, building an open channel of communication with staff, and reassuring them that digitalisation is only meant to boost them and not to replace them. For steel and aluminium manufacturers Contracts Engineering LTD, this involves developing a culture of "learning, openness and dialogue", with each technology investment also accompanied by upskilling the team. By promoting education, companies can ensure their digital transformation moves at a pace that is compatible with the staff's knowledge and abilities.



Safety at work

The modern manufacturing workplace must prioritise worker safety, as the sector still suffers from a reputation for danger and accidents. The facts do not dispel worries, as around 2 per cent of workers in the manufacturing sector have sustained a workplace injury, a rate higher than the 1.7 per cent for workers across all sectors. Forward-thinking manufacturers invest extra time and effort to avoid incidents, whether that manifests as workplace training or innovative safety solutions.

Faulty machinery is a leading cause of manufacturing-related accidents. Ensuring that equipment is well-maintained is essential, and checks should not be confined to just after an issue has arisen. Investing in predictive maintenance – where data analysis is used to identify anomalies – can highlight potential malfunctions before they become a problem. Computerised systems can accurately predict when maintenance is necessary, and more advanced technology can detect when machinery is soon to fail and take immediate action, ultimately prolonging

the lifespan of the equipment as well as protecting employees from errors. Connected devices can also be used to monitor the workplace environment, including temperature, lighting, and air quality, and provide warnings and notifications for any potential dangers or uncomfortable working conditions.

It goes without saying that the more employees know about the equipment they are working with, the less likely they are to get injured. However, simply giving out manuals or providing lectures can only go so far. Investing in augmented reality (AR) technology and simulators can improve training. AR can allow trainees to see the potential hazards of operating equipment in different scenarios, while simulators allow for hands-on experience without putting anyone in harm's way. The gamification of training, and digitalised courses direct to workers' phones, are also ways leaders can use technology to boost the reach and impact of safety best practice teachings.

Vital also is promoting a culture of openness and trust. Manufacturers must encourage staff to report safety issues, without fear of blame and with a structured, most likely digitalised, process. Make workers aware that safety is a common goal and any potential risks will not result in a witch-hunt, but instead be taken on by dedicated team members as a failing of the entire company, not the individual. This avoids cover-ups and encourages knowledge sharing, ultimately spotting potential fault lines before they result in disaster. For example, Greenenergy fuel manufacturers became a leader in workplace safety by building their approach on detailed, open reporting and follow up. Workers are encouraged to report incidents via a centralised system, and as a result, solutions can be found. Rather than shying away from mistakes, invest in a company culture where lessons are learned.

Green touches: Bringing sustainability to the plant floor

Over 70 per cent of workers or those looking for work are drawn to employers for their sustainability, meaning that to create a manufacturing workplace fit for the modern mindset, leaders must consider its green credentials. The environmental standing of a business spans many areas, from the energy efficiency of industrial processes to how employees get to work; recycling and reuse policies of the products produced, to chosen fuel sources. Start by setting targets for your business, such as reducing emissions by 10 per cent, cutting waste or minimising energy consumption. It is important to also share these with your whole business, both ensuring that this goal is not forgotten and that your team are aware operations are keeping up with the times and considering the planet.

Though there are myriad ways to improve the environmental impacts of a factory or plant floor, start with the basics and assess where small changes could result in a more sustainable culture. Improper machine maintenance can lead to preventable consumption, as old kit has to be discarded and replaced with new products. It is cheaper and more environmentally-friendly to maintain rather than replace equipment and machinery. Make sure you assess all your machines on regular schedules, cleaning areas such as filters and replacing malfunctioning parts on time, and calibrating equipment regularly. This means you use your equipment, safely, for longer, and are more likely to reuse and recycle good parts. Avoid the environmental impacts of continually discarding old machines and purchasing new ones, and save the business money in addition.

Another way to both hit environmental targets and save costs is to focus on energy efficiency. With gas and electricity prices set to soar, Net Zero – where emissions of carbon dioxide are completely eliminated – is a priority for 92 per cent of manufacturers.
Ways to achieve this goal can range from small tweaks like using LED lights and optimising temperature and ventilation, to switching to renewable energy sources or entirely upgrading your equipment to more efficient models. Again, continued monitoring can pay back in dividends in the long run, with many businesses choosing to invest in smart meters that make it easier to analyse unnecessary energy usage. The bread manufacturers Warburtons managed to reduce their CO2 emissions by over 20 per cent over the past decade, with a wide-ranging plan including increasing oven insulation, automatically shutting down gas burners, and using waste to heat hot water systems. Efforts to reduce carbon emissions are likely to be the most effective when multiple areas of the business are considered, and both energy saving and energy generation plans are combined.

In manufacturing, the green credentials of a business also extend to its supply chain. With the average manufacturer boasting hundreds of suppliers, environmental innovation on home turf mean nothing if this cohort of businesses providing materials and products are not also actively improving their eco-efficiency. Using a single software system to store contracts makes it easier to audit supplier sustainability, with the ability to assign KPIs based on reducing environmental impact and continuously assess performance against these.
Buyers can also get ahead of the game by introducing green targets in the initial selection process. A sourcing management solution allows you to assess proposals against key criteria with ease, ensuring businesses can introduce environmental objectives and easily compare the responses of different potential suppliers.
By inputting clear goals into your software, all stakeholders will have to automatically complete sourcing activities according to these company guidelines, avoiding negative environmental impacts creeping into your business via the supply chain.



In today's fast-paced society, the manufacturing industry has been a driving force for economic growth and job creation.
With manufacturing responsible for a huge 10 per cent of the UK's GDP, it is only right that modern manufacturing has evolved beyond traditional models and into a cutting-edge powerhouse of the country's economy. Leaders in the industry incorporate technology, a forward-thinking approach and attention to detail to prioritise employee comfort and deliver an efficient, effective and safer workplace. We hope these practical tips to improve the workplace environment and best practice examples have given you inspiration to modernise your operations. Through research, smart investments in software and careful planning, the future of modern manufacturing looks bright.

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Get in touch

+44(0) 330 343 4000 www.oneadvanced.com hello@oneadvanced.com