

It's the Vibe.

Talent

Episode 4

Perks: How To Get It Right

with Aoife Fitzmaurice from Sage

Ian Tyler:

Hello and welcome to It's the Vibe, the podcast produced by Talent International and centred around no-bullshit conversations with business leaders and innovators, where we really dig in into all facets of company culture. I'm your host, Ian Tyler. I'm Talent's Group Chief Strategy Officer. Why are we doing this? Well, at Talent, our vision is empowering people to build a better world of work for all and help educate businesses. We are really keen work with companies and educate businesses, big and small on how they can actually do their part. We want to share insights and real life experiences from experts in employee engagement, communication, D&I and a whole lot more. For today's episode, we're going to be talking about perks benefits, and how do you get it right? I'm joined today by Aoife Fitzmaurice from Sage. Sage is a global technology company that provides small and medium size businesses with software to manage people, finance and operations. Aoife Fitzmaurice is the Chief of Staff at Sage. She's been a close to five years and has worked across a number of roles within the business. I'd just like to say a very warm welcome to you, Aoife.

Aoife Fitzmaurice:

Thank you. Delighted to be here.

Ian Tyler:

Indeed.

Aoife Fitzmaurice:

Excited for the conversation.

Ian Tyler:

Likewise, likewise. I would like to start with firstly, understanding your role, the chief of staff, that's becoming a much more popular title that you're seeing within businesses, certainly over the last few years. Tell us about your role and how you got there.

Aoife Fitzmaurice:

I guess I've had a bit of a squiggly career. I joined age about five ago and I was then a business executive, which is like a junior chief of staff to our now CEO. I worked in that role for a few years, then I got interested in an operating model transformation, so I moved to the transformation space. then I got the opportunity to be chief of staff to our CPO, Amanda Custin. I started that in January and I have three hats in that role. I have my chief of staff hat, which means you're the eyes, the ears, you're the confidant, you're the person who goes in if there's a fire drill, but then I also have my future workplace and my work design hat. Future workplace is all about designing that workplace of the future, which hopefully we'll get into. The work design piece is driving effectiveness, basically effectiveness in our organizational shape and just driving intentional work design and working with the business.





Ian Tyler:

Fantastic. Really, really interesting and that finance background certainly as organizations continue to change and look at hybrid solutions and understand cost implications of people having this hybrid work. Then also in understanding how organizations can embrace people and support people in that type of working environment. Accountants say we've got all this money focused on all these expensive assets that are buildings, and leases and things, but how do we provide something to people and our staff and our teams around the world that gives them that flexibility where they're not actually there that much in this new way of working? It's an interesting one. It's an interesting conundrum.

Aoife Fitzmaurie:

It is. It is. I think the world has changed in the last 18 months. I think our context as individuals has also changed, which means employers have to change too, right?

Ian Tyler:

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. Look, we're going to have a conversation about perks and benefits. Couple of years back, I wrote a blog and a little post. It was talking about perk fatigue and perk fatigue being that it's not all about the ping pong table. The year of the ping pong tables kind of dead, or certainly dying. I'm curious to get a little bit of insight from you if you will, or feedback around, what would you say to that? It's not all about the ping pong table, is it?

Aoife Fitzmaurie:

No, it's definitely not. I think you have to reflect a little bit on what, what has happened, particularly in the last 18 months. I think people are individuals. They're the mom, they're the carer, they're the dad, they're family first, and then they're the employee and so therefore, how companies react to that and how they set up that colleague experience and the perks that they provide needs to also shift. I think more and more, people want to connect with something bigger, so that company purpose, they want to feel like they're making a difference. We know that flexibility is becoming one of the most valued benefits. We also know that in terms of propensity to change employer who you're working for, a lot of people will consider changing employer if they don't feel like they have that flexibility. I think with perks, it has to be relevant. It has to recognize an individual's context, so they have to have choice because you cannot have a one size fits all. Then it's also about how do you help people manage that balance between work and home life through more flexible options and also the wellbeing piece that comes in as well?

Ian Tyler:

Yeah. The wellbeing factor, it's of significant importance and companies big and small, people are really recognizing that doing the right thing, being there to support people in the context of work and also in the context of their home life, certainly with the way that we've all had to work. Time at work bleeds into home life even more so today than ever before, so getting that balance of what is a benefit and what is a perk when you're supporting people in that environment is really tricky. What's table stakes? What's a baseline expectation? It's an interesting one, certainly, as we move forward into what is the future of work being now because I'm a little bit overhearing about the future of work. It's kind of like whatever. We're living it, so let's just crack on. It's quite interesting.

I'd like to talk to you about this notion of future workplaces. When you think about your role, as you you've kindly shared with us, you've got this lens of the world. Just talk to us a little bit about that. What is it specifically that you're looking at and how do you bring that to life for the business?

Aoife Fitzmaurie:



When we think about future workplace, I think it's all about redesigning work to focus on really, outcomes, to focus on sustainable productivity, so that underpin of wellbeing. Like any athlete or the colleagues at Sage and every organization, they need downtime. I think we probably forgot that years ago and now with more flexibility, those boundaries are becoming blurred. For us at Sage, we've been really intentional over the last 18 months to listen to our colleagues and what matters to them as we go into this next phase. Number one, what mattered to them was flexibility and so we co-designed with our colleagues and our approach to hybrid. That is essentially giving you flexibility of where you work, but also when you work and we're doubling down on that when at the moment, so that flex of time. I'm actually running some pilots to really, really scale flex of time, so designing in job shares. When we go to set up job design for different roles, how can we scale part-time working? Because there's so much demand and there's so much benefit, both for the colleague and the organization of doing this, that we just can't ignore it, if you know what I mean. What was a differentiator pre pandemic is now table stakes, as you say.

Ian Tyler:

When you think about all of those elements and you think about couple of the other things we touched on earlier about that wellness component, and connection and purpose, and you think about the type of flexibility that are afforded, how do businesses maintain connection and culture when there is this significant amount of flexibility, both to your point of where and when people are working?

Aoife Fitzmaurie:

This is not an easy balance to get right. I guess I need to go back to tell you how we are approaching it, I guess. We co-design with colleagues, a flexible human work framework, which is essentially how we operate hybrid. We have four key principles that we set in that framework that guide our decisions around how we want to work in the future. They go from performance for customers, fairness and trust, experimentation, but one principle is human connection. Finding that balance for us is about understanding how work gets done, forming team agreements about where and when will work that really put that human connection, that sense of inclusion, recognizing that, yes, we want flexibility, but how we come together as humans matters and recognizing also that our distributed networks have suffered and that we all have to be a lot more intentional.

We're almost on that journey as an organization where we're trying to find that norm of hybrid. We're very much doing in an experimental way. We won't get this all right, but it's about teams aiming for that one great day together in the office and then maybe progressing from there. What works for one team won't work for another. It's really hard, I think, to look at this at the organizational level. I think you need to go down to the team level. We really empowered our leaders and our colleagues to do that together. It's exciting to watch, definitely as we go back and COVID restrictions are removed and we're testing that in the UK, I know. I'm excited to see. We only currently at the moment, have about 10% of colleagues going into the office. We do know that we're missing that sense of fun and spontaneity. It's something that I'll continue to focus on, and work with leaders and colleagues and educate them about as we go through the next year really.

Ian Tyler:

I'm curious. I mean, what's your view on this as a statement that I think the whole world of work at the moment is in a very big opportunistic, experimental phase?

Aoife Fitzmaurie:

Absolutely. That is how we're approaching it. It is one big experiment and I spent hours with the top 40 execs, getting them comfortable with this notion of look, this is how we used to work and they recognized up front people are not going to come in and sit anywhere nine to five, but having



comfort in that ambiguous place of where will we be in 10 months? How will I get the team together if it's not mandated? You know what I mean? It's just an experiment and it is all about that trust, that focus on outcomes, that focus on human connection and underpinned by very intentional and thoughtful leadership because to get this right, it takes a lot of planning, and a lot of investment and a lot of honest conversation.

Ian Tyler:

I think the leadership factor on that, I think, is really interesting because there's demographics and where I'm going with this is when you think about, again, the world of work that we're in right now and this experimental phase and this hybrid way of working, overlay that with an unprecedented level of four generations in the workplace that have got different levels of wants, needs and expectations. When you think about the leadership layer of that, which are typically certainly from an executive level of a footy listed organization such as Sage, there are demographics at play there that say, this is not how we do things. This isn't how stuff gets done. That trust that you talk about, it's that experimental... That would be really challenging, really challenging. People have got to really lean into that and go, okay, I'm going to trust it. Have you seen any pushback on any of that?

Aoife Fitzmaurie:

I think it's because we invested so much upfront in doing this. It wasn't pushback because people know they have to do it, but we did a lot of testing as we designed our framework. It wasn't pushback. It's more nervousness around, okay, suddenly the accountability now for pushing this rests with me and not with the top. Can you not just tell everyone that they need to be in because it makes my life easier? Actually, I think hybrid working is so linked to the way your company operates, your culture, your values, and we're all about doing the right thing, having accountability, transparency. That's really how I think we've been able to do this effectively so far at Sage because there is that trust, there's empowerment and there's that safe space where colleagues feel they can call out when they don't feel it's fair. Fairness is a big part of our framework as well that we put a lot of thought in because the equity in this workplace is so important and something that we need to continue to focus on, particularly around presenteeism and things like that.

Ian Tyler:

It's a fantastic point. I just want to quickly circle back slightly on this notion of wellbeing in the environment and understand from your perspective, from the Sage lens, how do you incorporate development and wellbeing in this type of environment, this type of working environment, into your way of working at Sage? I'm curious, what could listeners take from this that Sage do to actually say, you know what? We incorporate professional and personal development, as well as wellbeing to our people.

Aoife Fitzmaurie:

How would I articulate this in the best way? I think the gold standard, ultimately for approaching hybrid working puts sustainable high performance that's focused on outcomes, front and center and that's underpinned by development for colleagues. That means that colleagues can show up to be their best, most productive selves, ultimately in the long term. We've designed that way of thinking into the principles that are set out in our framework of how we make choices around hybrid ways of working. I think also, the latest kind of thinking and organizational wellbeing, you need to approach the job holistically. How we are doing it at Sage is we're looking at how we can redesign job to support wellbeing and energy. It's not just about the elastoplast of solutions ultimately that are the free gym or the free lunch. You need to go deeper than that. It's systemic and you need to really address the root of the issue.



I think the company, or the organization has a massive accountability at the individual level for wellbeing and development that's highly personable and that people should feel like they have ownership over it. I also feel at the same time that individuals themselves need to be accountable for owning their own wellbeing whilst they have been given the optionality, and also their development whilst being given the optionality of what they want to pull from a development perspective. I see it as very two-way. You have to create the conditions and the foundations, and that's your responsibility as an organization, but then colleagues also have a role to play in this. I think that's really, really going to be increasingly important as we go forward.

Ian Tyler:

It's interesting because there's still the elements of the table stake conversation of the things that will be there, the free lunch that you just touched on before. There are those superfluous types of benefits that the organizations expect, but I think there's certainly a dial, a change that's being moved right now toward this kind of purpose, vision, flexible wellbeing. When you think about all of that, it's all about putting... Almost sounds very cliché, but the human back into human resources. It's very much centered on people, heads, hearts, and minds. It's interesting because I think it's been coming for a while and I think the world in which we've just all gone through for the last 18 months around the world, it's expedited it significantly. I think it's a wonderful thing. I'm conscious I'm bouncing around a little bit, but just when I'm listening to you talk, I find it quite intriguing. There's a four day work week. Do you see that as a perk, a benefit, an experiment or something that we should just all lean into?

Aoife Fitzmaurie:

This is really interesting, actually. At Sage today, 5% of our current colleague base work part-time. That's everything from job share, compressed, so the four day working week through to part-time hours. The next part of our flexible human work rollout and what we are piloting at the moment is all about designing in flex of time options at the point of role design. We are testing and we have in the business, what we call a compressed role. The job design itself would warrant a five day working week, but colleagues have asked, could they do this in a four day working week? I think more flexibility, the better for people and people need to deliver on the outcome set and the objective set in their role. I sit on the fence a little bit because when you have teams that are working five days a week doing this similar role and you have someone doing it in four days, there is that sense of inequity that we need to be mindful of.

At the same time, people and studies have proven that in four days, people can do the work of five. We haven't, as an organization, stood up and say we're stopping compressed hours because we're actually just experimenting with it a little bit to see where we go. We have loads of colleagues that deal direct with our customer customers and for them, compressed hours is actually great because they work hourly shifts. I think for the knowledge worker, it becomes a little bit more difficult and that sense of equity across a team becomes a little bit more difficult to keep the balance. If everybody's on a four day week, it's fine, right?

Ian Tyler: Exactly.

Aoife Fitzmaurie...: [crosstalk 00:20:51] you have some and some others, I think you just need to be very mindful of how you manage that and as a team, openly discuss it.

Ian Tyler:

These are all very interesting topics. If you think about everything that we've touched on and you put the clock back five years, the boardroom conversation about all of this stuff, do you think it would've been a, you guys are all gone mad. What on Earth are you thinking about it? It's interesting. It's really interesting.



Aoife Fitzmaurie:

I know. It is, but you know what? I think you can do anything if you prove your way with data and we proved our way with data in this one at Sage. Nobody could argue we need to do this. When I think about our next journey about really enabling full flex, flex of time, not just place, organizations, I think, are quite shortsighted on this still, I have been quite surprised at how some of the more traditional leaders in the business are so open to this. They're like some kind of job share is an amazing way to progress in a senior role on a part-time basis. We just don't see enough of it. There's so much proof that it's a really great way to retain colleagues and that 71% of job shares go on to promotion and that job areas average two years duration. It supports someone when they need more flexibility, so we're trying to almost go on this cultural shift at Sage to support our new ways of working. I've been amazed and really excited by just the degree of motivation to want to make this work from all our senior leaders.

Ian Tyler:

The openness and willingness to lean into something like this, I think it's bold. You've got to be really brave. You've got to have good discipline because these are the other things that people forget, going to a four day week or going to the success from anywhere notion, requires discipline and requires governance as much as it sounds like it probably doesn't, but actually probably more so.

Aoife Fitzmaurie:

Absolutely. We've done a lot of research into the area of part-time working and the key attributes of people that can be successful, more so from a job share perspective, but I think the saying could applied in a four day working week are the same attributes of high performers. I think regardless of how you're working, you need to have a focus on outcomes. If you have that mindset across a team, that then unlocks the different flexible options for you. I can't imagine us ever going back to that nine to five, five days a week. I haven't done it for many years, if I'm being honest.

Ian Tyler:

Well, I'm kind of the same. I think mine's more like 7:00 AM to 10:00 PM, six days a week, but that's a different story. I'm just teasing. I want to ask you a quick question on that, actually, because I agree with you that the nine to five notion is out the door now by and large in most industries. When given we are talking about perks and benefits, how to get it right and thinking about balance, is everything that we are talking around flexibility, success from anywhere, the great experimentation that's going on, is flexible working and job sharing, all these type of things, are they perks and benefits or are they as we've touched on before, just table stakes and expectations now?

Aoife Fitzmaurie:

They're absolutely table stakes. Absolutely, they are. I think it's like paying someone to do a job. You know what I mean? You ultimately have to pay someone to do the job. I see flexible options in the same bucket as that, to be honest. That's how I view it. That is the way the world has changed.

Ian Tyler:

I agree with you. However, given the myriad of conversations I have with different levels of leader, manager, individual contributor, I think we are going to get this sense of... Certainly if I look at it from a global perspective and then focus on different regions where I interact, globally, I agree. You get into different types of companies or service industry, and they're not quite there yet. I think they're going to get this sense of we can all get back in the office and let's do that. I think it will be a wonderful couple of days or even a couple of weeks, but then that natural vibe of I have been successful whilst working from home and I don't have to do an hour commute and that is saving me money, and that is a real perk and a benefit because that's when it becomes a perk and a benefit to that individual. I don't believe that organizations should be thinking flexible working is a perk or a



benefit, to your point. I think it's an expectation. I find it interesting because I've spoken to businesses that go, "No, no, no, no. When we are through this pandemic, everybody's back in the office. It's going to be great."

Aoife Fitzmaurie:

Do you know what? I just don't buy that. I was reading the newspaper yesterday and they were worrying about a shortage of bankers because we know that banking is one of those traditional industries where you have to go in. I do think there is a cultural piece to this. In Asia, we know that people generally live in smaller accommodation. It's quite hierarchical still. There's probably that piece or around presenteeism, so they're starting to go back to the office more. I think we're on a journey, but I also think there's a lot of research done in this space that points to that propensity to switch employer at the moment and colleagues will walk. You know what I mean? Because I think individuals now have expectations around that balance and what's important to them that they potentially didn't have before. Maybe in 5 to 10 years, that will just be washed away and we're all back on that treadmill of jumping on a tube every day, but I'm not so sure.

Ian Tyler:

Yes, yes. Same. I'm certainly with you on that one. Let's just talk a little bit now about Sage and some of the things that you do over and above. I did a bit of research and can see that as an organization, you've won some pretty cool and interesting awards as a business. When I look at employee benefits awards winner in October 2020, and 2021 Glass Door Best Place to Work, you guys are getting it right. For those listeners out there that are still maybe running smaller businesses or thinking about going from their 50 to 200 employee growth and those scale ups, what would some of the key takeaways or pieces of advice that you would want to offer some of the listeners that are on that journey of saying, "We need to really look at this. We need to think about these perks and benefits that we can give our people." What would some of those key takeaways or recommendations be?

Aoife Fitzmaurie:

Do you know what? I think I'll bring in a bit of what I learned when I was that business executive to our CEO when he started at Sage. I think number one, you have to be clear about what you're about as a company. What is that core purpose and how do people connect to that? That narrative needs to be front and center because you could be giving them anything. They need to understand that and want that, and go to above and beyond for your customer or your mission. I think, secondly, it's all about the values which you lead and that guides your colleagues' behaviors and your leaders' behaviors, ultimately. We co-designed our values with our colleagues a few years ago and that's so important.

Then I think it's all about listening. We have an Always Listening survey. We run Pulse surveys. We listen and we inform our people strategy and our broader strategy by what colleagues are telling us. We've made some really, really great progress in improving that colleague experience, putting DEI on the very front and center of our agenda, embedding wellbeing and how we redesign work, but also providing those benefits that people might need at different stages of their life and wrapping optionality around that, giving them opportunities for development and making it available, but putting that sense of individual responsibility and accountability on the individual to go and take that up as well. I think, for me, it's just being clear on that purpose, that vision, those values that guide you day after day. Then listening, listening to your colleagues, recognizing it cannot be a one size fits all in the world in which we live today and that optionality for people is so important.

Ian Tyler:

I'd summarize that not so eloquently, but go and give your people a bloody good listening to. If you're going to do that and they're going to tell you things, and then it's on us as leaders of



businesses to shape that conversation in that organization to ensure that we give people what they want and what they need. It's really interesting. I'm very grateful that you've summarized it in such an eloquent way. When you think about all those things, the things that are relevant, if you will, but I don't think there's anything that you've said there that will never, in the future, be irrelevant because when you think about the notion of ping pong, or free bus to work or food in the office, yeah, nice. Is it really going to be that relevant in the future? Probably not. I think that's where the organizations that have done the gimmicks, and the trinkets, they're going to come unstuck if they haven't got those other core fundamental elements.

Aoife Fitzmaurie:

Absolutely, absolutely. We're a tech company, but we probably don't have all the gimmicky perks of the other tech companies, if that makes sense. We're born and bred in New Castle, so I think that sets a different tone.

Ian Tyler:

Absolutely, absolutely. I would like to say a huge thank you. You've been amazingly gracious with your time. I thoroughly enjoyed this. We could talk for hours, I feel. I just want to say a massive thank you.

Aoife Fitzmaurie:

Thank you.

Ian Tyler:

It's been a great discussion. The way that you've been able to articulate what you are doing at Sage, which from my perspective, are things that businesses all over the world should be embracing. Credit to you for doing that and being right at the tip of the spear on leading that. I congratulate you for that and I thank you so much. I'd just like to say to our listeners out there, thank you very much for tuning in. Aoife, thank you very much for your time and investing [crosstalk 00:32:28].

Aoife Fitzmaurie:

It's been a pleasure.

Ian Tyler:

Absolutely. It really has. I'd like to think that some of our listeners got some great takeaways and insights have been gathered that they can just apply back in their businesses. If you'd like to know more or hear any more about these types of conversations, get in touch with us at Talent's website. It's www.talentinternational.com, or you can reach out to us on LinkedIn. Without any further ado, Aoife, thank you very much and I will speak to you soon.

Aoife Fitzmaurie:

Thank you.

