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Lisa Brown at Green America: Diversity versus rigidity

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the world's population, with the exception of certain essential workers, was unable to go to their workplaces and had to work from home. Initially, many professionals had to invest in office furniture and incur other expenses to adapt their homes for use as workspaces. Over time, many became accustomed to this new way of working and developed new habits.

Along with many drawbacks—such as limited space or the inability to ensure sound insulation in households shared with others—working from home also had certain advantages for many employees. These included saving money by eliminating the cost of commuting, a lower risk of accidents on the way to work, the ability to make more effective use of their time, and having greater flexibility to balance personal, family, and work life.

When the lockdowns ended, many companies realized that they had made significant cost savings by freeing up office space and found that, in most cases, employee productivity had not declined significantly.

In addition, many employees preferred to continue working remotely. The "new normal" mentality took hold, and many companies asked employees to come into the office several days a week to ensure the continued effectiveness of teamwork. However, they were no longer expected to come in every day, as presenteeism came to be seen as a thing of the past.

Case was prepared by Professor José Luis Ruiz-Alba, visiting professor, Professor Nuria Chinchilla, and Berta Marqués, external collaborator. April 2025.
IESE cases are designed to promote class discussion rather than to illustrate effective or ineffective management of a given situation.

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Green America

Green America (GA) is a multinational company that provides professional services in B2B environments and is a leader in the renewable energy sector. Headquartered in New York, the company has offices in more than 20 countries. GA takes pride in its progressive workforce policies, particularly regarding flexible work arrangements for employees. The company leverages this advantage as a key selling point in talent recruitment. Specific measures are tailored to the legal frameworks and customs of each country where the company operates.

The UK is one of GA's main markets, and they have a central office in London. Employees in the UK receive a range of benefits, including private health insurance, a daily £6 allowance for use in the office cafeteria (loaded automatically onto a card and non-cumulative), and fully paid maternity or paternity leave with a negotiable duration. Additional perks include on-site childcare, a gym membership subsidy, a bicycle purchase subsidy, and access to interest-free personal loans.

GA spends approximately two million pounds per year on office rent in London's financial district. The lease is binding for a renewable five-year period, but is subject to price renegotiation. In addition to rent, maintaining an office evidently entails numerous other expenses, including furniture, reception and maintenance staff, IT equipment, cleaning services, a cafeteria, electricity, and air conditioning.

Competitors

Most of GA's competitors offer significant workplace flexibility to their employees but pay lower salaries than GA. In addition, competitors recognize that many employees, especially younger ones, prefer to come into the office every day—partly for the social interaction with coworkers and partly because they often live in small spaces or shared housing, which makes working from home more challenging.

Most of GA's competitors provide employees with free baskets of fruit, cookies, coffee, a variety of teas, sandwiches, and other snacks, most of which are gone before the end of the workday. These are low-cost incentives for companies but highly popular among employees, particularly younger, lower-paid workers, who take advantage of these offerings to have most of their meals at the office. Many companies also load a nominal daily amount of £2 to £3 onto employees' company cards for small purchases in the cafeteria.

The competition for talent is fierce, and knowing that they can't compete with GA, the market leader, on salaries, they offer other types of incentives, with a particular focus on workplace flexibility.

Lisa

Lisa Brown has been with GA for five years. She works in the finance department as a reporting financial controller and oversees three finance analysts: Nina, Ahmed, and Olivia. Lisa reports to Charles, the CFO for the UK. At the same level as Lisa, but with a greater focus on the commercial side, is Julie, who serves as the commercial financial controller and has three client finance analysts reporting to her. Julie is on maternity leave for the second time in three years and is being temporarily replaced by Francesco, who has been transferred from another division of the group to cover her leave.

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Lisa joined GA on a reduced-hours contract, working four days a week for 80% of a full-time salary. She remained on this schedule for her first three years with the company. Two years ago, after realizing she was putting in unpaid overtime almost every day, she asked to go full-time, and Charles agreed to her request.

Lisa has a good professional relationship with Charles, but she isn't very happy with his work style. She sees him as controlling and prone to micromanaging, and he calls her frequently at all working hours. Most of the time, he calls about minor issues, interrupting Lisa's work, which requires a great deal of focus. These senseless interruptions really get on her nerves, especially when Charles calls just to clarify something trivial or to inform her that he's about to send an email—without considering the workload and tight deadlines Lisa and her team are managing.

Lisa is particularly frustrated by the company's inconsistent approach to workplace flexibility over the years and the injustices this entails. For example, she's bothered by the fact that during the COVID-19 lockdown, the company required employees to work remotely from home; however, after the lockdown ended and the company realized the cost savings of reducing office space, it began allowing employees to come into the office only a few days a week, effectively forcing them to maintain a dedicated workspace at home. For instance, at GA, if an employee wants to come into the office every day for any reason, they're not allowed to do so simply because there isn't enough space to accommodate the entire workforce.

An email from New York

On January 8, 2024, Charles convened his entire team for an online meeting at 10 a.m. Everyone expected him to ask how their Christmas had gone or share some good wishes for the New Year, but that wasn't how things went. As usual, Charles, with his typically expressionless face, began the meeting without preamble:

> Good morning—well, good morning for what it's worth, because we're not exactly off to a great start this year. We've just received an email from New York, signed by Robert, Global VP of HR, stating that the days of coming into the office infrequently are over. From now on, we all have to work in the office three days a week. This is non-negotiable, and they've even said that failing to follow this directive could be grounds for dismissal. You know I'm not a big fan of presenteeism, but I don't make the rules—that's just how it is. Since there are multiple teams and limited space, we've been divided by department and assigned specific days to come into the office—Monday, Tuesday, and Friday for the finance department. We've also been assigned specific desks that must be reserved in advance through the app to avoid wasting time searching for a free one each morning. If anyone has an issue, they should speak with their direct manager, but I'm afraid there's not much they can do. That's where things stand: Take it or leave it.

Charles

Charles is an unexpressive person—you could say he lacks empathy. He rarely smiles, and when he does, it's usually at a sarcastic joke he's made about a coworker. In the office, he almost always sits in an area far away from his team, wearing earphones. He tends to isolate himself and hardly interacts with others. He arrives early and leaves a little before the other employees to avoid small talk in the elevator. He usually eats at his desk to avoid the company cafeteria. Most weeks, Charles goes into the office only two days, even though he's supposed to be there three days a week like everyone else. He also frequently chooses days when his team isn't

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