

CAHRS
Virtual
Working Group
Series:
Post-Pandemic
Work and
Workplace

**Preparing for the Return to the Office
Virtual Working Group -
February 25, 2021**

The Motivation of the Session:

In the year since the outbreak of COVID-19, the way employees work has changed dramatically, with most employees, with the exception of essential workers, working from home. As we get closer to the resolution of the COVID-19 pandemic, companies are taking greater attention to post-pandemic work and workplace planning. Bringing employees back to the workplace might entail different types of challenges and thus require thorough, well-designed plans for a successful transition. To help partner companies share and learn some of the current challenges and opportunities surrounding post-pandemic reality, Professor Chris Collins and CAHRS Academic Director and William J. Conaty Professor Brad Bell hosted a virtual working group with participants from 15 different CAHRS companies. Below is a summary of the key themes and best practices from the working group.

**DISCUSSION
TAKEAWAYS**

1. Encouraging employees to return to the workplace

In an effort to restore normal operations after the pandemic, firms will need to convince their workers to return to the office. CAHRS participants conveyed that firms need to provide employees with both actual/physical safety and perceived/psychological safety if they are to return. They also highlighted that concerted efforts from every segment of the company are essential in this process.

a. Actual safety

- i. Participants shared best practices to ensure actual safety. For example, for essential workers who never left the workplace, a company has developed safety countermeasures like social distance markers, temperature screens, and glass barriers.
- ii. Some companies have partnered with local clinics or have their own on-site nurses to administer the vaccines.

b. Perceived safety

- i. In addition to making the workplace actually safe, it is important to make employees feel safe in the workplace. Implementing company-wide behavioral protocols and sharing relevant information can help employees be psychologically better prepared to come back to the office.

20 participants
from 15
CAHRS Companies:

American Express
Boeing
Bristol Myers Squibb
CIT Group
Colgate Palmolive
Daiichi Sankyo
E&J Gallo Winery
Ecolab
Estée Lauder Companies
General Electric
Hormel Foods
Johnson Controls
McDonald's
Polaris
Samsung

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- ii. For example, a company created an app that would facilitate self-health screening so that employees are required to work from home if they report any health issues/concerns. The presence of this app can soothe employees' concerns about the possibility of contracting the virus in the workplace.
- iii. Another company has created communication platforms to help people understand what coming back to work will be like -- e.g., what the conference rooms, cafeteria, hallways, elevators, and stairwells look like --and what new policies they will have to adhere to. As such, employees can get a better sense of how the workplace will look, and how well the company has prepared for post-pandemic situations.

2. Defining and managing flexibility (after the pandemic)

CAHRS participants predict that, even after the pandemic, companies will face considerably different business environments and employee attitudes from before the pandemic. One of the most conspicuous changes is higher employee demands for flexibility. Although the definition and degree of flexibility can vary, most CAHRS companies are leaning towards a hybrid (blended) approach where employees have more choice about where/when to work than in the past. The participants discussed what flexibility actually means in the workplace and what factors firms should consider in administering flexibility.

a. Aspects of flexibility

- i. **Schedule flexibility:** Under schedule flexibility, employees may work at different times of the day and on different days of the week.
- ii. **Location flexibility:** Under location flexibility, employees may work from home or at the office. At a higher level of location flexibility, employees may work from different geographical locations that are distant from the company.
- iii. Most companies mentioned the latter aspect of flexibility -- that is, how many days per week employees can work from anywhere.

b. Considerations in implementing flexibility at workplaces

- i. **Increase in coordination costs:** The more flexibility workers have, the less likely they will be able to find a time and method that will work for all parties when scheduling meetings for collaboration. This increased difficulty in coordination among employees can create additional challenges for managers in implementing effective ways to coordinate their team while not undermining the employees' flexibility.

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ii. Reduced opportunities to share knowledge and ideas:

When people work at different locations and times, social interactions between employees can decrease (to the minimum for essential tasks) in terms of both frequency and quality. This reduced social interaction may hinder them from sharing conversations and knowledge, which sometimes serendipitously leads to innovative ideas.

iii. Perceived fairness and equity: The extent to which employees can work flexibly may vary even within a single firm, depending on jobs and tasks. In this situation, how to make employees feel they are treated in a fair and equitable way can become an issue. CAHRS participants shared their experiences.

1. Support for home office

a. Some companies raised the issue of who should be eligible for a stipend to set up their own home office space (e.g., screens, keyboard). Should it be for employees who work 100% virtually, 60% virtually, or every employee regardless of the work mode?

2. Compensation for those who moved to another location

a. A question might arise as to whether the same amount of salary should be paid to workers who moved to a state with lower living costs and different income tax rates (e.g., an employee working from Idaho for a company located in NYC).

3. Leader bias

a. Even if a company implements a hybrid approach, leaders' bias against those who work from home might still exist. The underlying bias might impact how these leaders evaluate employee performance, and who they think deserves a promotion. According to a study conducted at one organization a few years ago, some leaders actually behaved, despite their agreement on the flexibility policy, in a way that made it impossible for people to truly leverage flexibility in a meaningful and productive way (e.g., scheduling team meetings on the days when their subordinates work from home).

iv. Employee well-being: Employees' experience of working by themselves can vary widely across individuals; some manage working alone well, while others struggle due to lack of social interaction. Hence, companies need to support leaders to develop skills and abilities to identify those who are struggling and how to help them.

v. Global guidelines vs. local guideline: If a firm operates globally, it may need to develop not only global guidelines that apply to workers all over the world, but also local guidelines that reflect regional differences in regulations, cultures, and/or vaccine availability.

This Summary Report was prepared by Brad Bell and Chris Collins for participants of the Preparing for the Return to the Office Virtual Working Group.

The Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies (CAHRS) is an international center serving corporate human resources leaders and their companies by providing critical tools for building and leading high performing HR organizations. CAHRS' mission is to bring together Partners and the ILR School's world-renowned HR Studies faculty to investigate, translate and apply the latest HR research into practice excellence.