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CAHRS Virtual Working Group Series:

Post-Pandemic Work and Workplace

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Session 3: Managing Hybrid Work Arrangements
April 21, 2021

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many employees experienced a sudden shift in their work model from on-site to remote working, which has dramatically changed how they perceive their work and workspaces. As the pandemic begins to ease, companies are now planning to invite their employees to the offices by creating and implementing a hybrid working model, or a combination of remote and on-site working. Although the potential benefits of the hybrid work arrangement are considerable, there are substantial challenges that should be considered and addressed. To help the CAHRS partner companies think through these challenges and to learn from one another, Bradford S. Bell, the CAHRS Academic Director and William J. Conaty Professor of Strategic HR hosted a virtual working group focused on post-pandemic work and workplace. Below is a summary of the group discussion, especially focusing on the major challenges that companies have experienced and how these challenges can be addressed.

DISCUSSION TAKEAWAYS

Employee Preferences

For many CAHRS companies, accommodating divergent employee preferences is one of the key challenges they face. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, employees had a shared mindset that most of the important aspects of works and business, such as in-depth discussions and meetings, could not be achieved successfully in a remote work setting. As they've learned during the pandemic, however, many employees have changed their perceptions on how and where to work and have established new attitudes and routines toward remote working, which has caused salient differences among employees in their preferences about where, when, and how they work. Overall, however, companies estimate that a majority of their workers want a hybrid work arrangement post-pandemic.

Companies clearly indicate they need to think carefully and be flexible. They point out that the very different circumstances different employees face should be taken into consideration for designing and implementing practices and policies. Given the magnitude of the effects the pandemic has had on employees' lives, it is important to consider the full breadth of their employees' needs and preferences. Some companies also suggest that real-time monitoring is critical as employee needs and preferences evolve over time. Multinational/multi-regional companies, for instance, may need to consider the national/regional differences in the timing of when the pandemic ends, vaccine availability, and reliability of social constructs such as mass transportation and childcare/school, which will largely influence employee preferences and decisions with regard to coming back to the office.

Given that the situation remains fluid, companies are bringing employees back to the office in stages. In the first stage, employees are invited to return to the office as they feel comfortable so they can begin to readjust.

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In the second stage, once the most pressing safety concerns have eased, employees will be encouraged to return to the office. And finally, once things have normalized employees will be expected to return. This "invite, encourage, expect" model has been widely adopted across companies.

Value Maximization

Companies also need to investigate and evaluate whether their hybrid work settings maximize the values of both on-site and remote working. Many companies have realized that key benefits of on-site working, such as serendipitous connections, creative idea generation, and social cohesion, cannot be achieved when workplace density is low and the office does not play a role as a social hub. Therefore, employees may decide to work remotely only because the way their workspaces are structured marginalize the benefits of on-site working, and they do not feel the need to return to the office. Several companies also mentioned the issue of low workplace density as a challenge of inviting their employees to the office: it can be difficult to convince employees to return until there is a critical mass. One noticeable approach to managing this issue is a team-centered work arrangement. One company, whose occupancy rate has reached about 50%, is focusing on maximizing team interactions in designing hybrid work. In this company, for instance, work teams alternatively use the office: Team A occupies the office for a week, and then Team B takes its turn next week. Teams decide which works and tasks should be done together versus individually, which allows team members to schedule interactive and collaborative activities on the week/days they meet in person.

Inequity and Inclusion

Inequity is another key concern that CAHRS companies have in implementing hybrid working. Hybrid work environments can lead to differences in employees' resource availability and career opportunities. Specifically, on-site employees are likely to take advantage of all the resources available at the office, whereas those who remain working remotely, either by choice or circumstance, can be easily marginalized and even stigmatized. The inequalities may also arise in "blind spots" that are easily overlooked by companies and leaders, such as informal networks and long-term career development. Importantly, each employee has a different level of "hybrid competence" and the inequity issues can disproportionately affect certain groups that may be more likely to prefer remote working, such as caregivers.

Many companies underscored the importance of flexible, inclusive, and empathetic leadership as an important way of addressing the inequities. Managers and leaders should be aware of how the hybrid work setting can create an imbalance and revisit their procedures to ensure they result in a level playing field. Instead of adhering to the original performance metrics and measures they used before the pandemic, they need to be more creative to provide equal opportunities to their subordinates and evaluate people with fair criteria and standards (i.e., focusing on impact versus face-time).

Although leaders certainly hold the key to establishing an inclusive and fair workplace, companies should not endow them with all the responsibilities. In this extremely uncertain environment, every single member, regardless of whether they are rank-and-file workers or those who are in the upper echelon, experiences high anxiety, stress, and fear for multiple reasons

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(e.g., business outcomes, health issues, job security etc.). To address the ongoing and potential problems of hybridity, therefore, companies are now designing and implementing new workplace initiatives such as:

- o Diversity and inclusion training;
- o Training and discussion sessions that provide general guidelines of what companies expect leaders/employees to do and how to make the hybrid workplace fair;
- o Creating safe spaces where employees can voice their difficulties and problems;
- o Revisiting and improving corporate cultures; and
- o Leveraging analytics to identify problem areas that need to be addressed through training or other organizational interventions.

Vision Establishment and Communication

A clear, unifying vision is more critical than ever. To succeed in the post-pandemic era, companies should ensure a collective and concerted effort by the entire organization. Without an overarching philosophy about their hybrid work arrangements, however, they will have difficulty in establishing a shared sense of how work should be done, and managers will struggle to coordinate their team activities. To clearly communicate their vision, companies have launched executive-level sessions/events where the CEO and/or executive committee members communicate their visions and expectations about hybrid work arrangements, how the visions can be implemented, and what the major challenges and obstacles will be. Besides this top-down communication, companies have also used various methods, including employee surveys and "listening" sessions, to collect employee input to establish better visions and more realistic goals.

Key Takeaways

1. In the post-pandemic era, companies will need to adopt flexible approaches and solutions to accommodate and balance employees' divergent preferences and expectations.
2. Companies will also need to investigate and evaluate whether their hybrid work settings maximize the values and advantages of both on-site- and remote working.
3. At the same time, companies should keep in mind that hybridity may cause the problem of "flexibility stigma": employees who remain working remotely can be unfairly disadvantaged in the workplace.
4. Besides addressing short-term, immediate challenges, companies will need to think and discuss the big picture: What is your overarching philosophy and vision of post-pandemic work and how should it be communicated to your employees?

This Summary Report was prepared by Brad Bell and Eunhee (Annie) Kim for participants of the "Managing Hybrid Work Arrangements" 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.