

Virtual Working Group: The Impact of COVID-19 on Employee Health & Well-Being

September 2020

Key Takeaways

1. Different employee populations face different health and wellness issues; companies can use tools rooted in consumer-driven HR to create targeted initiatives that meet the needs of different groups.
2. Companies are providing leaders with toolkits and training so they can better support their employees, and are also emphasizing that leaders need to take care of themselves.
3. As companies contemplate a potential return to the office in the future, it is important to articulate a clear value proposition for in-person work.
4. Although the pandemic has created many challenges, it may also spur positive developments, such as driving an evolution in leadership styles.

Participating Companies

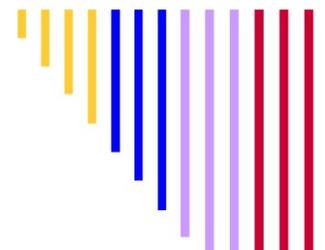
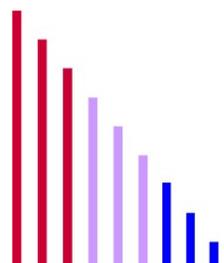
Amgen
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Workday

As the result of the unprecedented COVID-19, organizations are working hard to provide health and well-being programs to support their employees through this challenging time. To better understand the current challenges and the steps companies are taking to address them, Brad Bell, William J. Conaty Professor of Strategic Human Resources and Academic Director, CAHRS and Chris Collins, Associate Professor of Human Resource Studies and Director of Graduate Studies facilitated a discussion among participants from six CAHRS companies. The key takeaways from the discussion are summarized below.

Supporting Different Employee Populations

The participants noted that one of the most challenging aspects of supporting employees during COVID-19 is that different populations have different needs. Thus, it is important to meet individual employees where they are rather than to adopt one-size-fits-all policies and practices. Likewise, there are unique considerations across different geographies, so it is important to adopt a local rather than global approach.

While all employees are feeling higher levels of stress and these are related to higher levels of mental health issues across employee populations, the underlying causes and potential solutions differ across employee populations creating challenges for large companies to



develop programs that can efficiently address these issues across locations, employee groups, and demographics. Even initiatives aimed at general stress and mental health and well-being issues (e.g., flexibility, resiliency) have uneven impact across different groups of employees based on roles they are in, stressors they are experiencing, support of their family and colleagues, etc. Companies can draw on tools rooted in consumer-driven HR focused on the employee experience and design thinking to create an array of initiatives that may be more powerful in addressing the different health and wellness issues experienced by different employee groups.

At a time when many schools have moved to remote learning and childcare centers have closed, working parents in particular are facing significant stress. For companies providing on-site childcare, many employees remain concerned about safety and are hesitant to utilize these services. Some companies have assisted employees with finding in-home childcare or have tried to enhance flexibility by providing more time off. A few companies have provided childcare stipends, usually targeted at essential workers during the early phases of the crisis. Although these various efforts provide some measure of relief, there are still concerns about the burden being placed on working parents.

As companies provide employees with more benefits to help support them through the pandemic, a challenge will be deciding whether to sustain these benefits in the future or try to unwind some of them. Of course, once employees come to expect a certain benefit, it will be difficult to take it away. This suggests that companies need to be judicious in deciding which benefits to roll out in the near term.

The Role of Leaders

It is widely acknowledged that leaders represent a key source of support for employees, although historically the challenge has been that many act more as managers than leaders. Companies have taken several steps to strengthen the role of leaders in supporting employee health and well-being, including providing toolkits and retraining in areas such as listening and empathy. Companies are also providing leaders with previews of new policies and programs before they are rolled out to employees so they can be better prepared to answer questions that may arise. During this stressful time, it is also important to support leaders. Companies are reminding them that it is important that they take care of themselves and are providing them with resources, such as resilience training, that can help them navigate through the current challenges.

Employees' Attitudes Towards Going Back to the Office

With the exception of essential workers, most employees continue to work remotely. While some have expressed a desire to return to the office, when the option has been made available the uptake has been tepid. In part this is because the current office landscape looks and feels very different from what employees remember from before COVID.

Some companies have communicated a timeline for returning employees to the office, given the need for people to plan their lives. A challenge on the horizon, however, is articulating a clear value proposition for in-person work. Throughout the crisis, employees have been praised for sustaining, and in some cases increasing, their productivity, which may lead many to ask why it is necessary to return to the office at all. Some companies have adopted an activity-based perspective to rethink how the office can be used to meet fundamental needs, such as those related to human connection. Other challenges also loom, including the fact that some employees have moved out of urban centers to save costs. Will these employees be willing and able to return to the office when the time comes?



Competitive Transparency

An intriguing trend during the pandemic is that more companies have been publicly announcing their policies and programs. The upside is that the HR community at large has benefited from seeing how different companies are responding to the crisis. The downside is that this has created an “arms race” in which companies may try to match or one-up the actions of their competitors.

Silver Linings

The group ended the discussion on a positive note by highlighting some of the potential long-term opportunities that may emerge from the crisis. The large-scale remote work experiment has led to a realization that people can successfully work from home. In addition, companies have recognized the speed and agility with which they can get things done. It has also led to some positive developments in the area of leadership, including forcing more traditional leaders to evolve and breaking down some of the power distance that has historically created a chasm between leaders and their followers.

Key Questions to Address in the Future

The discussion highlighted several important questions that will need to be addressed going forward. These are summarized below.

- How to measure the impact of initiatives/interventions – how to best assess whether these actions are having positive impact on employees and the business;
- How to balance initiatives when there are so many competing demands and there is such a wide array of needs/concerns across different groups of employees; and
- How to implement programs/initiatives that address current needs/challenges balanced with long-term needs post-pandemic – some concern that employees could see short-term actions as new benefits and be upset if these are “taken away” in order to fund long-term Health and Wellness/employee experience initiatives.



This Summary Report was prepared by Brad Bell, Chris Collins and Chang Cheng for participants of the Impact of COVID-19 on Employee Health & Well-Being Virtual Working Group.

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