

Virtual Working Group: Remote Work in COVID and Beyond

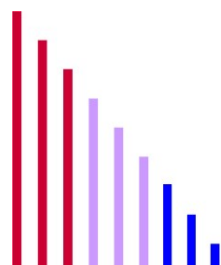
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Key Takeaways

1. Before COVID, the belief that effective collaboration and innovation could only happen in-person was dominant throughout organizations. The pandemic and subsequent remote work have led to the realization that innovation and agile collaboration can happen successfully outside of the office as well. This has long-term implications for how companies envision remote work in the future.
2. As employees settle into the “new ways of working,” companies are noticing increasing burnout, increasing desire to return to the office, and negative feedback about strict safety protocol requirements in the office. Although the workforce does show a big appetite for increased remote work in the future, companies are grappling with how to “keep employees safely at home,” especially as COVID rates are surging in several countries.
3. Companies have greatly increased their benefits and employee offerings to ensure that their employees feel engaged and taken care of, not only immediately, but also for the long term. Common offerings include increased Paid Time Off and leave, flexible hours, childcare benefits, stipends for ergonomic home-office supplies and fitness needs, and temporary relocation opportunities.
4. Managers play a critical role in keeping employees engaged and acting as stewards of the company culture. Companies have responded to this by providing more opportunities for managers to learn how to manage remote teams, both through formal training and through informal roundtables that enable sharing of vulnerable moments and best practices.
5. As companies consider their return-to-work plans and long-term hybrid work strategies, increased flexibility of remote work and the value proposition of the physical office are top of mind.

Participating Companies

AstraZeneca
Bristol-Myers Squibb
Cigna
HP
Medtronic
Microsoft
Workday



In the face of COVID-19, companies and employees have demonstrated high levels of resilience and adaptability, especially as they transitioned to remote work virtually overnight. The early days of the pandemic were filled with immediate uncertainties and urgent challenges. Now that we are several months into remote work, companies find that they have a much stronger understanding of employee needs and effective ways to manage a remote workforce. At the same time, new challenges have emerged: addressing the toll long-term remote work has taken on employees, and navigating the short- and long-term future of remote work amidst continued ambiguity. To help partner companies discuss their remote work learnings thus far and approaches to current and future challenges, Brad Bell, Faculty Director of CAHRS, hosted a virtual working group with eight participants from seven different CAHRS companies. Below is a summary of the key themes and ideas from the working group.

Remote Innovation and Collaboration's Impact on Cultural Transformation

Prior to COVID-19, several companies noted that they had a strong culture of being in the office for work. The most compelling value proposition of the workplace was innovation and collaboration: there was a strong belief that teams needed to work together in-person for innovation to occur in agile and often serendipitous ways (e.g., “catching each other in the office to quickly discuss ideas”). The pandemic surprised companies in many ways, as collaboration and innovation continued even after companies’ entire workforces went remote. In many ways, the pandemic seems to have accelerated companies’ cultural transformation. This has long-term implications for how companies will think about the benefits and limits of remote work and the office in the future. Companies shared that they are now exploring new strategies and tools to facilitate remote collaboration. One example shared was having “Brain days,” where senior level engineers connect with junior level engineers in small groups to discuss new ideas and solutions. Another key idea was continuing to invest in collaboration-enabling technology.

Managing the Impact of Long-Term Remote Work on Employees

As we now settle into the seventh or eighth consecutive month of remote work, the toll on employees has been significant. Although employees may have a general desire for increased flexibility and remote work in the future, all seven CAHRS companies shared that more of their employees are asking to return to the office. Without the separation of office and home, employees are not only working more and suffering from burnout, but having to cope with home conditions that are not conducive to work (e.g., small apartments, children being homeschooled). Many employees also seem to miss the camaraderie of the workplace, or having access to key tools and technologies available in the office. Understanding and addressing these employee needs are more critical than ever, especially as COVID rates re-surge, driving home that “remote work is here to stay.”

CAHRS companies have responded to employee needs by:

- Increasing or introducing stipends to purchase ergonomic home-office equipment
- Increasing or introducing stipends for virtual or at-home fitness options
- Increasing PTO, paid leave, and flexible work benefits, especially for working parents



- Increasing child care benefits, such as discounts for daycare
- Increasing communication frequency and channels to provide a transparent sense of direction and updates to employees
- Offering temporary relocation benefits without affecting compensation (it was noted that the tax implications of employee relocation may make this an unsustainable option for the long-term)
- Encouraging limitations on meetings, such as “No Meeting Wednesdays,” “No meeting” hours blocked off on calendars, or even instituting a long-term goal to reduce meeting hours by 20%
- Sending personal care packages with items such as hand sanitizer and masks to employees

Enabling Managers to Lead Remote Teams Now and for the Future

Even in the earliest days of the pandemic, managers were singled out as one of the most critical factors for the success of remote teams. Managers continue to have tremendous impact on employees, especially in ensuring employees stay engaged and connected to their work and teams from their homes. A few CAHRS companies have sought to quantitatively measure the involvement and impact of managers by analyzing email data on how frequently employees reach out to their managers, or by analyzing the engagement survey results of managers’ teams.

Companies have responded by increasing support and learning opportunities for their managers. Some of the key responses include:

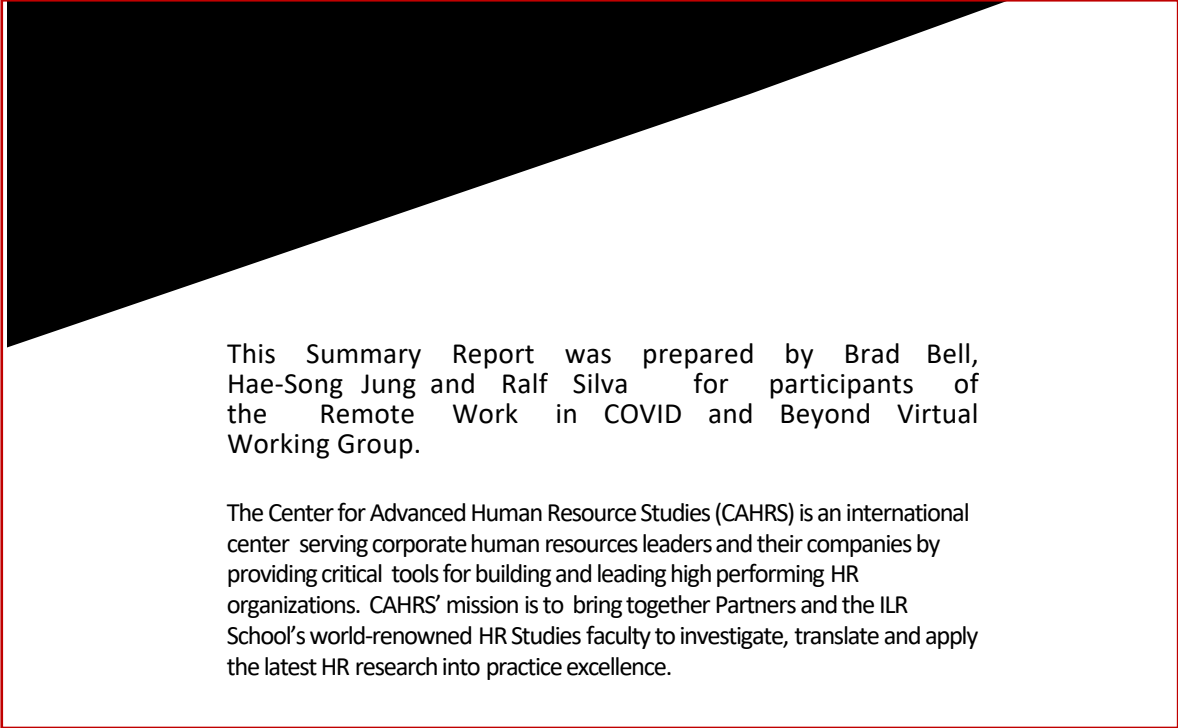
- Training for managers on ways to effectively manage a remote team
- Training for managers on mindfulness, resiliency, and mindful listening
- Creating roundtables for managers from across the organization to meet and share “real-time” best practices from one another, especially from senior leaders whose effective practices show in positive team engagement rates and responses
- Leading focus groups with managers to get their firsthand input on employee burnout and ways to mitigate it

Return to Work and the Future of Hybrid Work

All seven CAHRS companies shared that they plan to increase remote work opportunities long-term. Some companies plan to relax their remote work policies by increasing the percentage or number of remote work “days per week” for all employees. Other companies are classifying their entire workforce by how critical it is to their function, and plan to restructure their remote work policies accordingly. The possible cost-savings of real estate, and differing employee desires for remote work are other factors companies are taking into account as they consider what the future of hybrid work will look like for their organizations.



In terms of short-term return-to-work plans, companies showed a fair amount of variation. All seven CAHRS companies have had essential employees who have been working in the workplace throughout the pandemic, whose safety and well-being remained and remains a top priority for companies. For the employees who have been working remotely through the pandemic, the timeframes for return-to-work vary from now to August of 2021. As long as Covid-19 infection rates remain in flux, however, return-to-work plans, employees, and companies will all need to be flexible and comfortable with ambiguity.



This Summary Report was prepared by Brad Bell, Hae-Song Jung and Ralf Silva for participants of the Remote Work in COVID and Beyond Virtual Working Group.

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