Virtual Working Group:
Building Culture and Community in a COVID-Era Workplace

October 2020

Key Takeaways

1. Building culture in a virtual work environment is not about mimicking in-person culture-building practices.

2. Remote work creates dual challenges of hampering collaboration at the team level and creating feelings of isolation for individuals.

3. Flexibility is essential in this uncertain time.

4. A key opportunity lies in determining how to leverage newly developed competencies from this time period for competitive gain going forward.

Participating Companies

Boston Scientific
Cigna
Medtronic
R1 RCM
Samsung Electronics America
U.S. Venture
Workday

COVID-19 has significantly changed how organizations carry out their operational processes. Reopening efforts are well underway in many organizations, yet the current workplace environment is anything but "business as usual." While reopening has taken different forms, organizations have reported continued reliance on remote work, staggered employee returns, alternate work schedules, and self-contained teams as some measures to protect workers and support their unique situations amid the ongoing pandemic. Further, new safety protocols have entailed drastic changes to the physical work environment and social distancing requirements that are fundamentally at odds with the formal and informal communication that typically supports employees' work for those who are present in the workplace. Moreover, all of these challenges are layered onto the stress, uncertainty, and anxiety facing many employees in this unprecedented time. The CAHRS virtual working group engaged in an open discussion about how they have addressed the interrelated challenges of managing communication, fostering a supportive physical and virtual work environment, and building and preserving company culture in this period.

Challenges Encountered in the Remote Work Environment

Participants in the working group shared challenges faced by their organizations in the current period, which centered around three topics: (1) loss of team community, (2) loss of collaborative productivity, and (3) concerns surrounding return-to-work.
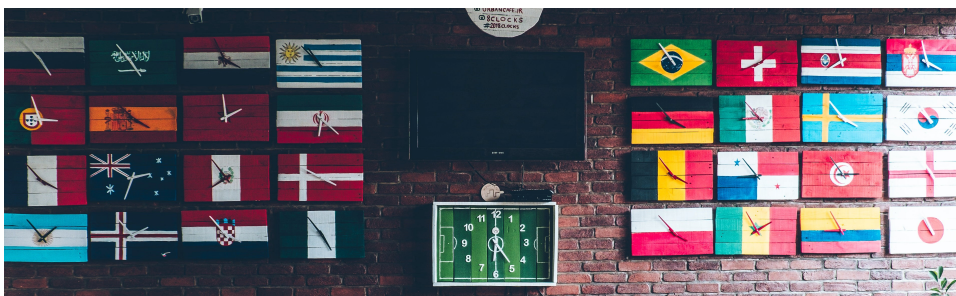
Loss of Team Community

A key challenge associated with the broad shift to remote work since the onset of COVID-19 has been the disruption of community that employees enjoy with colleagues in the office. In addition to preventing day-to-day water cooler conversations, the shift to remote work has made many of organizations' typical community-building efforts (e.g., potlucks, baby showers) infeasible. In early responses to this disruption, several organizations introduced virtual community-building events aimed at replacing the lost in-person opportunities for employee connection. Such events have included virtual trivia, game nights and happy hours. While these efforts have been met with appreciation by employees, participants noted an increasing sense of fatigue around these initiatives as the pandemic has gone on.

Participants also noted that over the last several months since the onset of the pandemic, the mindset around building and preserving community has shifted within their organizations. In particular, whereas early on, organizational efforts were focused on finding virtual substitutes for the missed in-person experiences, over time, efforts have been redirected toward instead determining the best way to foster connection in the virtual context. Several suggestions for addressing the issue were made during the discussion. For example, one organization leveraged the remote work environment to provide broader access among organizational leaders to an external executive coach, while others have used the remote work setting as an opportunity to engage top leadership with otherwise busy travel schedules in meaningful group dialogues that helped to address key challenges while fostering team-building. Participants also emphasized the importance of regularly checking in and connecting with individual employees, both as a way to stay abreast of employees' work and to combat isolation employees may feel while working at home. Importantly, participants agreed about the criticality of reinforcing the organization's core values in this time, offering a common purpose around which the workforce could remain connected.

Loss of Collaborative Productivity

Participants indicated that collaborative productivity has largely decreased since the onset of the pandemic. One company reported that its product development process has become sluggish amidst the transition to remote work. Participants agreed that in some jobs which require high levels of interdependence, the shift to remote work has interfered with employees' opportunities to share ideas and feedback, and has undermined efforts in brainstorming and new knowledge creation. The participants also shared concerns that even with in-person collaboration opportunities, requirements for social distancing may impede teams' typical creative exchanges.

One participant shared his team's effort to mitigate these challenges, noting the effectiveness of having small group in-person meetings aided by digital whiteboards. In this example, employees met at a local park and held socially distanced in-person small group meetings. Usage of digital whiteboards helped the employees actively interact with each other and be engaged in their collaborative work even while physically distanced.

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Concerns Surrounding Return-to-Work

Many organizations are now making plans to eventually bring some portion of employees back to the office, with some blueprints and timelines more concrete than others. Two key questions organizations are facing in this regard relate to which employees to bring back to the office and how to ensure appropriate messaging in this process. With respect to the former question, several participants noted that Research & Development and product development teams have been those whose work has been most negatively impacted by the lack of an in-person presence. These participants shared that such roles benefit both from collaborative exchanges among team members as well as from the ability to touch and interact with materials and prototypes. Participants also noted idiosyncratic challenges associated with managing the return to work of employees in different locations, where local restrictions and distancing guidelines may vary.

Participants also shared concerns about crafting the right message to employees about returning to the office. One participant shared the desire by the organization to be considerate of employees' preferences to stay at home despite the return of their colleagues to the workplace. Specifically, the organization has a concern that optional returns may be interpreted by employees as a signal of an expectation that they come back to work. Another participant expressed that remote work runs counter to the goals of the organization and thus hopes to have all employees return to the office at the appropriate time – while acknowledging the likelihood of increased turnover by employees who wish not to return in person. Across these scenarios, participants shared the sense that change management would be particularly challenging during these transitions.

New Routines and Practices for Having Employees Engaged and Connected Toward Shared Goals

Participants shared several new routines and practices developed to support employee engagement and connection in the current working environment. First, organizations have sought to be sensitive to employees' increasing needs for flexibility to reduce the conflict employees experience between their work and family roles. This has taken the form of flexibility in working hours and deadlines, as well as thoughtfulness in the scheduling of meetings and other planned communications. Second, participants noted both organizational initiatives and individual efforts to support employees' mental health and wellbeing in this time, ranging from increased availability of formal support services to personalized calls to check in on employees feeling particularly isolated at home. Third, participants emphasized a shift in their organizations' efforts from offering social events and fun to offering a presence of authenticity and support. HR departments have sought to offer increased transparency, ensuring that communications clearly explain companies' plans, address employees' questions and concerns, and demonstrate the sincerity of the organization's efforts.

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Learned Lessons About Building and Sustaining Organizational Culture and Performance Under COVID-19

Participants shared four lessons from their experiences in building and sustaining organizational culture and performance during the pandemic.

Manager Competency

Members agreed that leadership competency is a crucial factor in determining success or failure during the pandemic. Managers who were great leaders previously have tended to continue serving their employees and organization effectively during the pandemic. In contrast, managers lacking competence have shown to yield even worse results under the current situation. Many participants suggested that managers' and leaders' capabilities were at the core of their firms' performance in this time.

Developing Younger Workers

Participants expressed a concern that younger workers may be at risk of falling through the cracks in this environment and need continued support in their development. The remote work environment has threatened the resilience and in some cases stalled critical skill acquisition for many young workers. Participants noted a critical need to identify strategies to address this challenge.

Companies Need to be Flexible

Participants agreed that in the pandemic context, the only constant is change. It was suggested that companies should be flexible in their operations and accepting of uncertainty in this time. Often there is no clear answer to the challenges that are presented. While the popular press has emphasized the significant differences in the way the pandemic has impacted different industries, participants shared that even within a single company, the change to work demands may vastly differ across departments and functions. Overall, there was a consensus that companies will continue to benefit from increased agility in managing both their employees and their competitive positioning.

Taking Advantage of Newly Learned Skills During COVID-19

A potential silver lining to the current environment is that it has allowed employees and teams to develop new skill-sets. Participants noted their organizations' efforts to identify opportunities to maintain and leverage this new knowledge in post-pandemic periods. For instance, one participant noted an improvement in the organization's HR planning capability – a competence with clear applicability in any environment.

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This Summary Report was prepared by Rebecca Kehoe and David Chung for participants of the Building Culture and Community in a COVID-Era Workplace Virtual Working Group.

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