

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

Session 2: Supporting Employees Through the Post-Pandemic Transition

March 25, 2021

As we get closer to the resolution of the COVID-19 pandemic, companies are focusing greater attention on preparing for the post-pandemic reality. Indeed, a recent CAHRS survey revealed that post-pandemic work and workplace planning is a top priority item for HR leaders heading into 2021. This CAHRS Series of working groups is aimed at helping our partner companies think through the challenges and opportunities associated with the upcoming transition. In this second working group in the series, we discussed how companies are planning to support employees through the post-pandemic transition.

DISCUSSION

TAKEAWAYS

Supporting Employee Mental Health and Well-Being

- Early in the pandemic, efforts were focused largely on helping employees transition to remote work and were framed as temporary. However, companies are now realizing that many of the changes that have occurred during the pandemic are going to be more permanent and long-term, which requires more sustainable solutions.
- It is challenging, if not impossible, to develop one-size-fits-all solutions or policies because employees' personal situations and their responses to different stressors vary widely. Accordingly, companies are increasingly leaning on leaders to provide more personalized support to their employees. For example, several companies shared that they are encouraging their leaders to regularly check-in with employees, ask them how they are doing, and then pause and listen.
- Several companies noted that they have been developing employee communications to encourage employees to seek out help when they need it, to help employees realize that they are not the only ones potentially suffering from stress and mental well-being challenges, and to build a stronger climate for supporting employees' mental health and wellbeing. For example, one of the participants noted that they have developed a video series called "How are you doing, really?" in which both employees and leaders share their experiences.
- Many of the participants noted that they have launched a variety of training programs and training offerings that are intended to help employees better manage stress and anxiety. For example, many have launched training programs that aim to build resiliency by helping employees prioritize their tasks, set goals, and manage expectations.

17 participants
from 13
CAHRS Companies:

Accenture
American Express
Boeing
Bristol Myers Squibb
Cargill
Daiichi Sankyo
Ecolab
Estée Lauder
General Electric
McDonald's
Medtronic
Prudential
Terex

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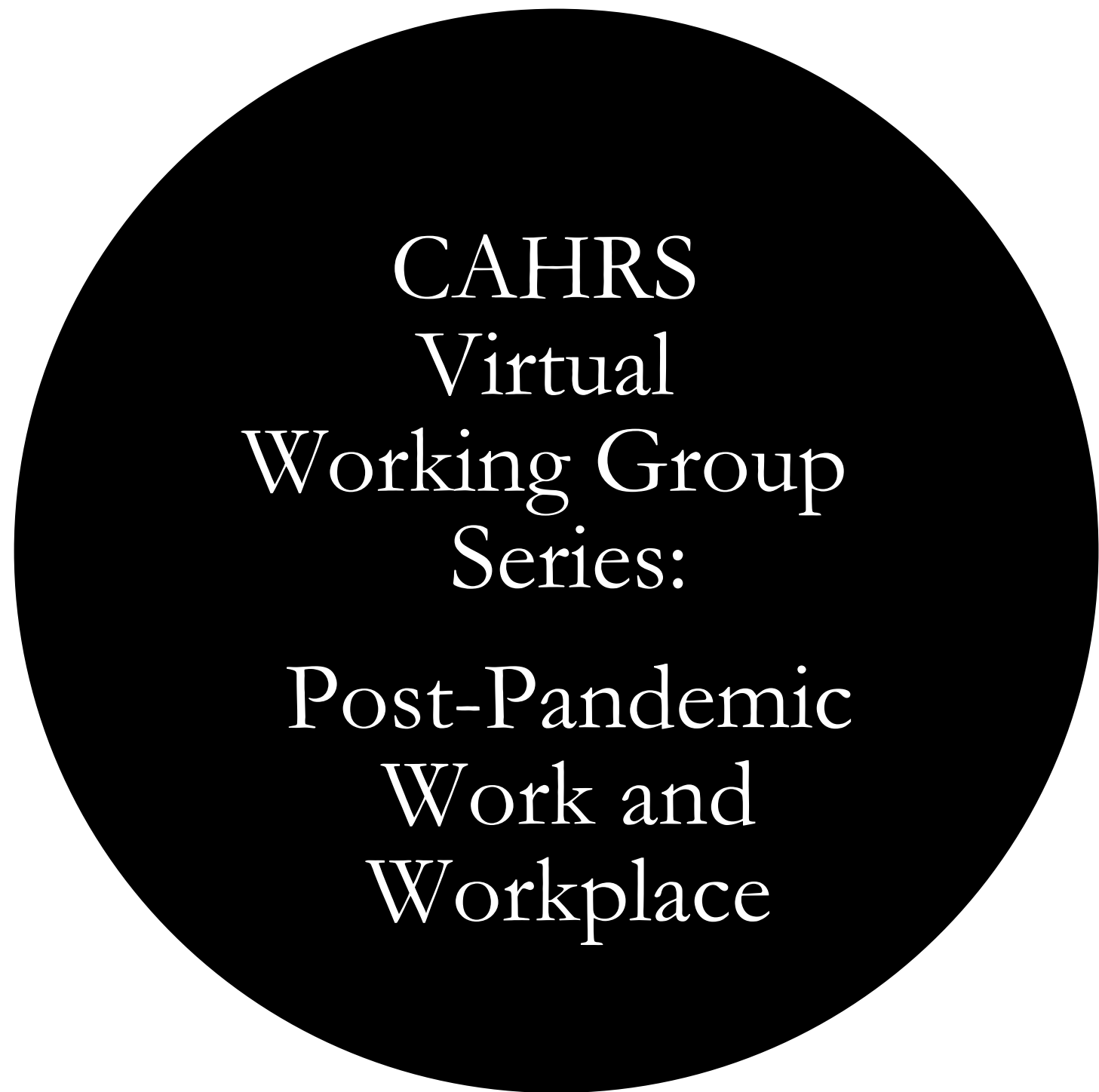
- Companies are also offering employees more flexibility in an effort to promote well-being, although flexibility alone is not a panacea. It is important, for example, to help employees set healthy work-life boundaries, which can be challenging because performance expectations have remained high or even increased during the pandemic. Again, many companies are turning to leaders to help set and communicate clear boundaries, such as no email on weekends.
- As with any health and well-being initiative, those focused on supporting employees through the pandemic have faced the challenge of stickiness - uptake was strong early on, but has diminished over time. It is important for managers to continue to support employees and to regularly remind employees to take advantage of the resources that are available.

Helping Leaders Recalibrate to the New Reality

- Adjusting to the post-pandemic reality will be a challenge for not only employees but also leaders. Participants noted that leaders did a great job of stepping to challenges at the start of the pandemic, and that managers showed an amazing ability to lead with empathy and were really investing time and effort in supporting employees and having conversations about employee mental health and wellbeing. However, there are concerns about whether managers will continue to keep up these conversations as their companies start to have a renewed focus on business performance and growth. Further, there are some concerns that leaders might be starting to hit a wall of their own stress given the length of time that they have been managing under uncertainty.
- Leaders have had to develop new skills and styles over the past year to navigate not only the pandemic but also other salient issues, such as those related to social and racial justice. In addition, leaders have experienced their own personal challenges, which has helped them relate to the challenges faced by their employees. These new capabilities and perspectives should serve leaders well during the post-pandemic transition. Nonetheless, leaders will require support and development from their organizations to help them manage everything that is being put on their plate. If leaders are not supported, they will not be able to support others.

Managing Remote Work

- In many companies, the policies that are being developed around remote work are quite broad (e.g., the ability to work from home one to four days a week) because there is again a great deal of variability that needs to be accommodated.
 - There are often geographic differences that need to be taken into account. Is it feasible for employees to commute into the office for just a few hours to meet with colleagues? Can employees drive to the office or do they need to take mass transit?
 - There are also cultural differences. In some countries employees have much stronger preferences for being together versus working remotely alone.



o Adjustments also need to be made for different worker segments (e.g., corporate vs. field).

- Multiple participants described the need to gain more insights from employees and amplify employee voice in identifying the range of different needs and desires related to remote work, current challenges and circumstances that employees are facing, and potentially identify alternative solutions and ideas for remote work policies and plans.
- Ultimately, it is important to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach remote work, while also ensuring that there are guiding principles that ensure fairness and equity are upheld. Accordingly, companies are seeking to balance global and local decision-making and are also providing leaders with guidance on how to determine the remote work arrangements that are the best fit for their teams.

Office Design Implications

- As companies prepare for the return to the office, they are seeking to create spaces that drive collaboration, while also recognizing that employees will have different schedules of when they are working on site and at home. It is important, therefore, to empower employees to be more thoughtful about when and why they should come into the office. One way in which this is being done is by providing employees with a “Day in the Life” video to help them figure out how to navigate this new world.
- Companies are also using the “Day in the Life” video to help people get more comfortable with the idea of coming back to the office, as well as having people who are already on-site share photos to remind their colleagues of what they are missing. Given that many people have been doing well at home, the concern is that many may not want to return.

HR Burnout

- As the proverbial cobbler’s children, HR has been working overtime to support both leaders and employees while not taking great care of itself. The result is that burnout and exhaustion levels in the function are quite high.
- HRBPs in particular have found themselves inundated with tactical work, such as helping furloughed employees navigate overloaded state unemployment systems, which has contributed to burnout.

This Summary Report was prepared by Brad Bell and Chris Collins for participants of the "Supporting Employees Through the Post-Pandemic Transition" 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.

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