

Talent Mangement
During the Post-
Pandemic
Transition CAHRS
Virtual Working
Group Series:

Building and
Maintaining
Employee
Engagement

Session 4: Building and Maintaining Employee Engagement

October 21, 2021

As companies focus increased attention on preparing for the transition to a post-pandemic normal, one significant element of their transition involves the question of how to build and maintain employee engagement. The emergence of new hybrid work models and increases in employee attrition across industries have challenged HR leaders to reflect on the major changes in their expectations and goals related to employee engagement to offer recommendations that will enable their companies to achieve a successful post-pandemic transition with an engaged workforce. To help partner companies think through these challenges and to learn from one another, Professor Rebecca Kehoe hosted a virtual working group to explore how CAHRS companies are addressing the challenges of building and maintaining employee engagement in the post-pandemic transition. Below is a summary of the key themes and best practices from the working group.

DISCUSSION TAKEAWAYS

1. Since the onset of the pandemic, organizations have taken on a heightened sensitivity around employee engagement, recognizing that the success of the post-pandemic transition depends on building and maintaining an engaged workforce.
2. In organizations' efforts to attend to employee engagement, many have uncovered specific challenges that have taken root in the last 18 months, including a reduced sense of community and belonging among employees, increased burnout and fatigue, and resistance to returning to the office. In response, some organizations are attempting to rebuild community by encouraging employees to engage in in-person activities. Another focus has been on the implementation of policies to mitigate the workload and emotional stress that employees have experienced since the onset of the pandemic.
3. Organizations have also reported committing greater resources to the assessment and analysis of employee engagement, approaching measurement with more rigor and depth and following surveys and focus groups with more concrete plans of action.
4. As a way to move forward, organizations have realized the importance of putting both symbolic and practical actions in place to overcome challenges in engaging employees.

Changes in Expectations and Goals Related to Employee Engagement

Many CAHRS company participants in this working group recognized their organizational leadership's heightened level of sensitivity around employee engagement. Going through the pandemic, the power dynamic between the employer and employees has shifted, due largely to increased employee attrition across industries. Further, the increased stress and anxiety faced by employees over the last year and a half have presented new threats to the maintenance of an engaged workforce.

17
participants
from
16
CAHRS Companies:

Bloomberg
Boston Scientific
Cigna
CNH Industrial
CUBIC
Estée Lauder
General Electric
Harvard Business Publishing
IBM
Johnson & Johnson
Manulife
Microsoft
Otis Elevator
PPG Industries
Samsung Electronics America
Verizon

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In this time, many companies have taken on a renewed, genuine focus on employees' wellness and wellbeing. Reflective of this trend, several participants noted that their employee engagement surveys now include specific wellness questions (e.g., "how do you feel today?", "do you have a work best friend?"). Others noted their organizations' coordination of seminars focused on dealing with emotional stress. Rather than considering these as "nice-to-haves," which was the case in some companies before the pandemic, leaders have realized these socio-emotional concerns must be more central to the employment relationship.

Although people managers (e.g., front-line leaders) are still considered the key to employee engagement, many participants mentioned that those people managers are also dealing with their own emotional challenges and need the support of the organization as well.

Challenges in Building and Maintaining Employee Engagement and Steps Being Taken

A key challenge associated with the shift to remote work since the pandemic began and in the preparation for the post-pandemic transition has been the disruption of the sense of community and belonging in organizations. Many employees have reported feeling lost and isolated. Participants emphasized that bridging this emotional gap is made more challenging in the remote work context, as bringing people together and encouraging them to be supportive of one another are difficult to achieve virtually.

Relatedly, participants also noted that employees' sense of purpose in their work has largely decreased since the pandemic's onset. Employees have been losing the connection between their work and how it serves the community and customers – a line of sight more difficult to foster without shared time in the office. Participants noted the prioritization of instilling this sense of purpose as part of their broader engagement efforts, with some including the rebuilding of community within the organization as a part of the purpose they're seeking to emphasize to employees.

However, efforts to implement return-to-office plans and to encourage employees to rebuild the organizational community in person have not been without challenges. Although some employees have been suffering from a lack of a sense of belonging due to remote work, others have shown resistance to returning to the workplace. For instance, employees who live further from the office have enjoyed increased flexibility in coordinating between work and home life when working at home during the pandemic. Employees have largely adapted to remote work and become accustomed to new ways of working. To these employees, return-to-office messaging centering on the importance of in-person collaboration has fallen flat, as nearly two years of remote work has given them evidence of their own effectiveness in collaborating virtually. To this end, participants agreed that it is critical to place an emphasis on rebuilding the organization's culture and community at the center of such messaging, rather than maintaining the initial focus on collaboration or productivity.

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Some working group participants also raised concerns about increased employee burnout and fatigue (e.g., Zoom fatigue). In response, some companies reported tactical interventions, such as encouraging employees not to schedule meetings on certain days or keeping meetings within particular time limits or time frames.

As a means to boost employee morale in these difficult times, many attendees of the working group highlighted their organizations' rethinking of the value of recognition. Many shared a shift toward the realization that recognition is needed not just at formal milestones or touchpoints (e.g., promotions, annual performance evaluations) but is also critical in employees' informal day-to-day exchanges (e.g., one-on-one water cooler conversations between supervisors and employees). The group shared a belief that informal recognition is likely to build resilience which can help employees get through tough times. Another consideration was that recognition is not limited to coming from supervisors; leaders can encourage employees to recognize their peers, which can be helpful in showing employees that they are not on their own.

Assessment and Measurement of Employee Engagement

Many participants shared recent changes in their organizations' approaches to employee engagement surveys. Virtual work and the pandemic have increased companies' focus on assessing and analyzing employee engagement surveys with more rigor and depth. To this end, many companies are approaching the study of engagement with clear hypotheses and undertaking active collaborations both within and outside the organization to align with their goals.

In addition, organizations have recognized that the assessment and analysis of employee engagement cannot be the end; rather these must be followed with appropriate action plans for real change to take place. Participants shared that the key to getting the most from these efforts is to take spotlighted problems and investigate deeper to figure out why certain issues occur. The group discussed how conducting focus groups and interviews and analyzing the narrative comments in the engagement surveys may be helpful in approaching the root cause and creating meaningful and concrete action plans.

Moving Forward and Tips for CAHRS Companies

As a way to move forward post-pandemic, participants shared a sense of the importance of putting both symbolic and practical actions in place (e.g., giving additional personal days; small one-on-one conversations with employees). By doing so, companies can demonstrate a sense of collaboration and show with tangible investments how much they care about employees. Importantly, basic but meaningful efforts often mark the highlight of an employee's day or week at work – and make the difference in their engagement. Thus, these smaller gestures should not be overlooked as organizations and leaders consider how to demonstrate their support.

In order to successfully bounce back from the pandemic with an engaged workforce, embracing a “back-to-the-basics” mindset may be useful. Participants shared how helping people managers to focus on one or two straightforward interventions tied to their employees' engagement

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survey results offers a way to maintain a clear focus and deliver a consistent message without overburdening managers who may be dealing with their own stress and burnout.

Instilling a sense of community and purpose in work is important. For some organizations, encouraging employees to build an in-person network may be necessary, but the key is to help employees understand the “why” and also to give them choices in this process, rather than forcing enterprise-wide solutions without intentionality and rationality.

Organizations are now dealing with a workforce that has experienced – and proved successful with – remote work during challenging times. A compelling return-to-office plan will need to incorporate all perspectives. For instance, different generations and different types of employees may have distinct views about what they need from the organization. New employees may want to build an in-person network that they can rely on as they progress with their careers, whereas mid-career employees may prioritize the work-life balance they have found by working remotely. Thus, while different influences will guide the decisions of each organization, one useful consideration for all companies would be to step back and look at the composition of the workforce and consider what each population desires and needs.

Lastly, it is important to remember that employee engagement surveys are meaningful not because of the numbers they generate but because of the action plans they can inform. In this regard, participants emphasized that it is critical for leaders to focus more on developing appropriate action plans that will resolve the concerns raised by employees rather than on the numbers themselves or the incentives associated with their teams’ engagement survey results.

This Summary Report was prepared by Rebecca Kehoe and Note Taker Joon Young Kim for participants of the "Building and Maintaining Employee Engagement" 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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