

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

## Session 4: Resetting the Culture

May 18, 2021

As companies focus increased attention on preparations for the post-pandemic reality, one significant element of their planning involves organizational culture – and the question of how to reset it to adapt to the post-pandemic environment. This has challenged HR leaders to reflect on the major cultural changes that their organizations have experienced during the pandemic to assess the positives and negatives that have come from this time – with the ultimate goal of offering recommendations to allow companies to not only bounce back from this global crisis but to pull through this unprecedented period stronger than before. 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 resetting the culture post-pandemic. Below is a summary of the key themes and best practices from the working group.

### DISCUSSION TAKEAWAYS

#### Major Change from Pre- to Post-Pandemic

The attendees of CAHRS companies who participated in this working group are preparing for at least some portion of their workforce to return to the office. With some exceptions, during the pandemic, most of the workforce worked remotely or experienced a hybrid of remote and in-person work. As companies are preparing for their return-to-office plans, they are assessing both the positive and negative aspects of the cultural changes that their workforce has experienced during the pandemic. Because successfully resetting the culture post-pandemic depends on sustaining the positives and improving the negatives that organizations have encountered in this time, the discussion of this working group included a focus on 1) positive cultural gains during the pandemic and 2) anticipated challenges and steps being taken to ensure a successful post-pandemic transition.

#### Positive Cultural Gains during the Pandemic

Although the pandemic has presented companies with unprecedented difficulties, several participants noted some positive aspects from a cultural and technological standpoint. Culturally, employees were able to enjoy increased flexibility in terms of their work hours and locations. This was especially salient for working parents either balancing having children at home when schools were closed or dealing with more typical challenges of negotiating children’s school and activity schedules. Also, this increased flexibility has given businesses the opportunity to tap into new talent pools including employees who are either outside the geographic reach of an organization’s typical market as well as those without the option of working in person.

Another benefit that companies enjoyed during the pandemic is the embrace of digital technology. Technology has accelerated flexible work arrangements and virtual collaboration. Working group participants shared that even leaders and employees who refused to use technology

17 participants  
from 14  
CAHRS Organizations:

American Express  
Boeing  
Cornell  
CUBIC  
Daiichi Sankyo  
Ecolab  
General Electric  
Hormel Foods  
IBM  
McDonald's  
Medtronic  
Procter & Gamble  
Trane Technologies  
Walmart

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before the pandemic are now regularly using tools such as Teams and OneNote for synchronous/asynchronous communication. As employees started working together remotely, “leveling the playing field” was mentioned by many CAHRS companies as one of the positives that was gained during the pandemic. Because everyone was working virtually and communicated with one another in front of a camera, some of the biases stemming from physical interactions became less prevalent. This has brought positive changes from an inclusion standpoint because there is a less apparent division of insiders and outsiders when everyone is on the same screen.

One of the biggest benefits that has come out of the pandemic is the renewed and genuine focus on employees’ voice, health, and well-being. Before the pandemic, these were considered “nice-to-haves” rather than central values that leaders consistently prioritized. Now, more leaders are making efforts to attend to employees’ needs, guided by insights gleaned from regular Town Hall meetings and employee surveys. Both leaders and employees have demonstrated a greater comfort in talking about mental health issues than before, and organizations have recognized the need to develop empathetic leadership skills among leaders. The pandemic has helped organizations to realize the importance of both physical and psychological safety.

Many attendees of the working group mentioned that the pandemic had helped HR to accelerate several of these desired cultural shifts in their organizations. Initiatives previously met with great resistance saw success during the pandemic as leaders were met with little choice but to respond in the face of crisis. As a result, several of these initiatives that would have taken years pre-pandemic were accelerated in the last year.

#### **Anticipated Challenges Post-Pandemic and Steps being Taken**

One of the biggest challenges that companies are anticipating in the post-pandemic transition is in achieving effectiveness and efficiency of collaboration and socialization. Before the pandemic, collaboration was easier because everyone was able to collaborate in person. Since the pandemic and possibly after the pandemic, a hybrid work environment will put people on different schedules, and employees may have to invest additional effort to find the time and location to collaborate with one another. Also, some companies are concerned about new types of social and economic disparities that will arise from the hybrid of the in-person and remote workforce. For instance, some of the populations in the workforce (e.g., factory workers) cannot choose to work from home, which is different from corporate staff who may have greater discretion to choose to work remotely. These differences should be taken into account to prepare for post-pandemic workforce planning and talent management. The variety of different work arrangements will also require companies to establish new regulations and policies.

Some working group participants also raised concerns that social and economic disparities in the post-pandemic hybrid workplace may be more problematic for specific demographics, such as working parents and people of color. For instance, in those organizations that are planning to offer employees a choice about whether or how frequently to return to the office, to the extent that employees putting in more “face time” at the office enjoy increased visibility and opportunities, this may disadvantage

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those groups of employees who would disproportionately benefit from the option to work remotely. Notably, these groups may include working parents who have discovered increased flexibility in coordinating between work and home life when working at home during the pandemic, as well as people of color, who in some cases are more likely to live further from the office and thus incur greater costs associated with regular long commutes.

Although it was difficult to switch to a remote work environment when the pandemic hit, people became accustomed to this way of working as more than a year has passed. Participants agreed that, where possible, it is critical to create an environment where employees feel welcomed – rather than forced – to return to the office. As one solution targeting these concerns, many CAHRS companies are focusing on training managers as a critical part of their return-to-office initiatives. Specifically, workshops and training programs are being offered to managers so that they can be ready to have appropriate conversations with their employees and effectively manage the depleted workforce. These organizations recognize that there has been heightened emotion throughout the pandemic, and employees at the bottom of the pyramid may be particularly concerned about their safety and personal issues when they return to the office. Thus, through these training efforts, organizations are seeking to position leaders to put themselves in the shoes of their employees to ensure that a sense of inclusiveness exists regardless of the different work arrangements that may emerge in the post-pandemic period. Importantly, the HR departments of some companies are also working with their Diversity & Inclusion and performance management functions to ensure that employees' decisions to work at the office or from home does not become a factor that differentiates performance evaluations.

Although the aforementioned increased flexibility and leeway given to individuals during the pandemic have been seen largely as positives that many organizations would like to continue to accommodate where possible, many companies are concerned about the possible misuse of managerial discretion in navigating these issues with employees in the post-pandemic period. In particular, some companies are moving forward with a healthy skepticism – and plans to exercise caution – as they delegate the management of in-person, remote, and hybrid work arrangements to managers. To this end, many companies have planned to empower managers to exercise “freedom within a framework” to set parameters for necessary managerial discretion while protecting the flexibility and associated positive experience for employees.

Another concern under the hybrid work environment is the difficulty in the onboarding of new hires. Companies have been providing virtual learning and onboarding programs for new hires, which have been effective for training new hires on basic knowledge and skills. However, participants agreed that virtual experiences cannot substitute for necessary in-person connections and relationships and are thus engaging in conversations to determine how to best meet the need for intentional in-person experiences. These companies realize the importance of creating a model to guide local organizations in determining the circumstances where in-person, virtual, or hybrid work are likely to be most effective. As an attempt to manage the workforce effectively under

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a virtual or hybrid work environment, some companies are trying to learn from their field organizations where employees did not regularly come to the office even before the pandemic. Since those field organizations were successful in instilling the culture of their companies without meeting one another in person every day, their best practices may offer useful insights about how to effectively manage the work environment where in-person connections are not as prevalent as before.

#### **Moving Forward and Tips for CAHRS Companies**

As a way to move forward post-pandemic, the attendees of CAHRS companies who participated in this working group jointly mentioned the importance of carrying on the positive experiences that they gained during the pandemic while successfully resolving the anticipated challenges ahead. To do so, it is essential to take a broad approach to gather evidence and make decisions accordingly.

For instance, as many attendees mentioned during the working group, administering employee pulse surveys before and after the implementation of return-to-office initiatives may be a first step in identifying and addressing employees' concerns and in determining what worked well and what didn't. Some companies have been conducting regular employee pulse surveys during the pandemic, and they are planning to continue to do so before and after implementing their return-to-office plans. Some participants also shared plans to follow such employee pulse surveys with focus groups and mechanisms to track patterns of performance appraisals across different employee groups to delve deeper into patterns underlying the issues that arise.

Also, taking into account the nuances of local organizations-- rather than forcing enterprise-wide solutions – is important. As such, some CAHRS companies are working on team-based tools and templates to prepare for the post-pandemic work environment. Those tools and templates are designed to ask leaders and employees to reflect on what worked well and what did not work well during the pandemic. Companies have found that simple and team-level initiatives have worked better than complex and enterprise-level approaches. Similarly, companies engaged in global business emphasized that it is important to consider local nuances rather than forcing global solutions in an organization's planning. For instance, the US may look different from other countries that have distinct regulations about remote work and returning to the office.

#### **Key Takeaways**

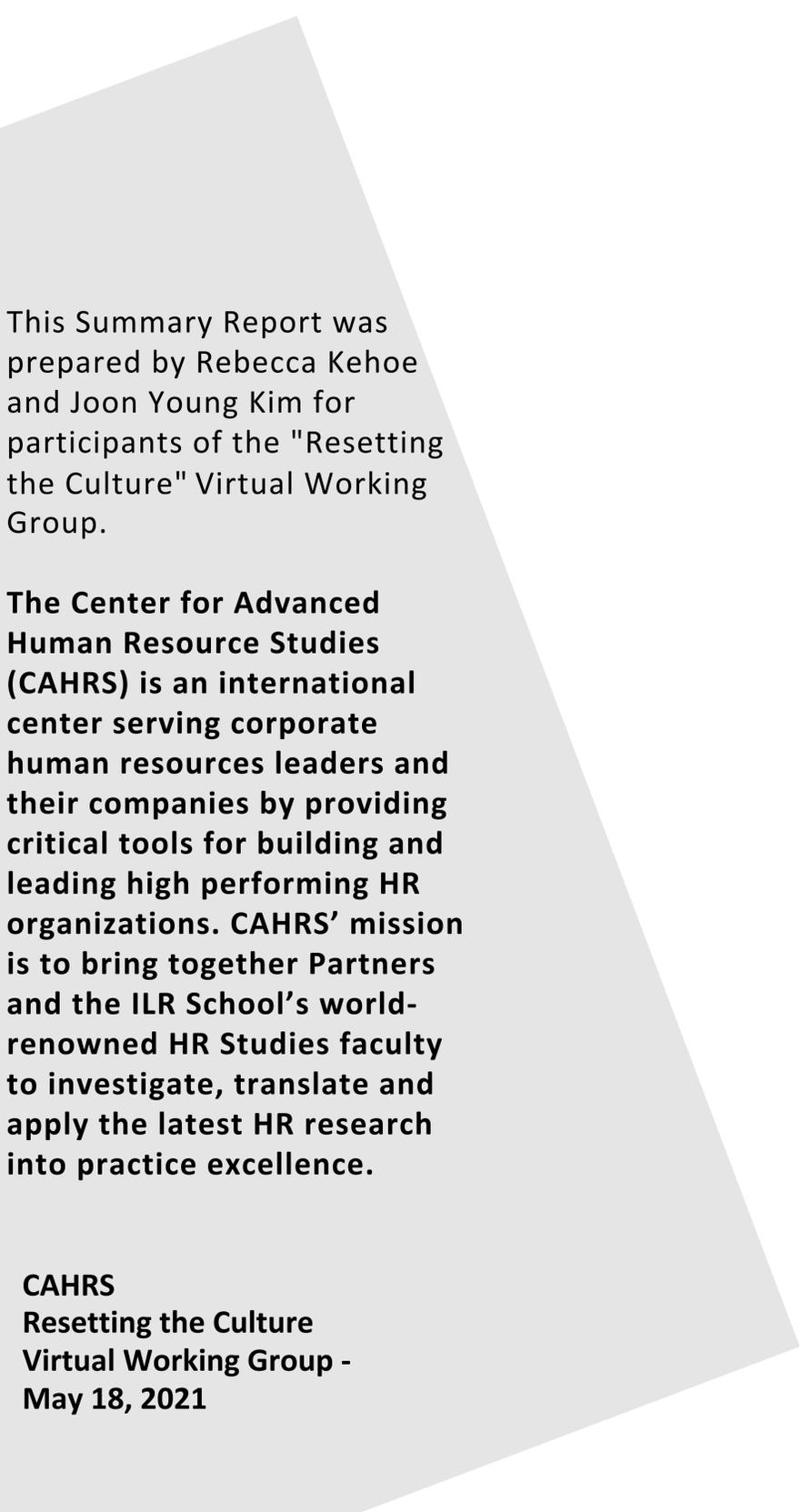
1. Most companies' return-to-office planning has centered on a balanced assessment of the positive and negative cultural transitions and changes that they experienced during the pandemic. The success of the post-pandemic culture shift depends on sustaining the positives and resolving the negatives.
2. Although the pandemic has brought unprecedented difficulties to organizations, there were positive gains such as increased flexibility, advances in the acceptance and utilization of technology, improved focus on employees' well-being, and greater transparency offered by organizational leadership.
3. However, post-pandemic work arrangements may bring new types of disparities within the workplace, which may work adversely for specific demographics such as working parents and people of color. As a flipside of

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increased flexibility, power and discretion can be misused, and the loss of in-person connections may be problematic for the onboarding of new hires and collaboration among employees.

4. As a way to move forward, listening to employees and making data-based decisions have become more critical than ever. Some organizations are already relying on employee pulse surveys and focus groups as an approach to identifying employees' concerns and making decisions to address them effectively.

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This Summary Report was prepared by Rebecca Kehoe and Joon Young Kim for participants of the "Resetting the Culture" Virtual Working Group.

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