

Virtual Working
Group:

Return to the
Office - Early
Lessons
Learned

Return to the Office - Early Lessons Learned July 27, 2022

Many companies have begun to implement their return-to-workplace plans in recent months. However, the transition to hybrid or fully in-person arrangements is far from an easy one, since employees might have an unending list of concerns about office policies, safety issues, and personal life disruptions. **In this working group, CAHRS members shared their experiences in navigating the early days of the return and discussed ongoing challenges as well as their strategies to address them.**

DISCUSSION TAKEAWAYS

1. Overview of Current Work Arrangements

- Most companies are currently following the hybrid work model that represents an ecosystem of employees working from home, in coworking spaces, and in the office. Hybrid work can take different forms, such as flexible hybrid work (i.e., employees or teams choose their locations and work hours based on their task assignments and priorities of the day) and fixed hybrid (i.e., the organization determines the days and times employees are allowed to work remotely or come in the office).
- Companies are in different phases of the initiative. Some have brought all of their employees back to the office for more than a year while others just had their ‘soft openings.’ For multinational companies, the transition timeline can differ across countries and regions.
- Overall, the transition has been recognized as a mixed success. Most of the challenges revolve around 1) senior leaders’ opposition to hybrid work, 2) employees’ resistance to return, and 3) equity issues arising from different workplace arrangement policies within the same organization.

2. Getting Leaders on Board

a. Challenges

- It can be challenging to get all senior leaders on board with the hybrid work model as there is often a segment that would prefer employees to be in person full time.
- Some leaders, on the other hand, are complicating the return. They do not show up in the office, arguing that remote employees can still be productive and engaged with work.

b. Solutions

- *Collect, analyze, and share internal data on performance and engagement:* To convince leaders, Human Resource executives

16
participants
from
12
CAHRS Companies:

Bloomberg
Cigna
E&L Gallo
Hershey
IBM
Manulife McDonald's
Polaris
PPG Industries
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Shell
Workday

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can provide data that show how a change in work arrangements is positively related to performance metrics [e.g., employee engagement, Net Promoter Score (NPS), and profit]. The data can be collected from a few functions at the beginning of the process, but consistent and more widespread tracking is essential in the long term.

- *Provide external data for benchmarking:* External benchmarking reportedly plays a key role in gaining senior leaders' buy-in. For example, HR executives can demonstrate how their proposed work arrangements can be a differentiator in a competitive talent market, and therefore will help them retain and attract new employees. The external data can be obtained from the headlines that are trending or by intelligence gathering.
- *Invite senior leaders to architect the agenda for the future of work:* Discussions with senior leaders across an organization should be facilitated by a member of the top management team [e.g., the Chief Executive Officer (CEO)]. That way, senior leaders can hear from the top line leadership and ultimately, feel more motivated to drive the agenda forward. It is also essential to ensure senior leaders are aware of their responsibilities to create a vibrant and productive workplace.
- *Allow team managers to determine what works best for their team:* Many companies are adopting a decentralized approach where managers take the responsibility of deciding where, when, and how their teams get their jobs done on a daily basis. Reasons for this include the fact that different roles and functions are likely to have different obligations and needs. It is also because companies tend not to have data for every team at the beginning of the transition process.
- *Tap into Fear of Missing Out (FOMO):* Companies that are committed to bringing their employees back to the office have attempted to organize various networking opportunities (e.g., ice cream socials) and events (e.g., in-person only town halls) to create FOMO and encourage leaders to show up.

3. Getting Employees on Board

a. Challenges

- A significant portion of employees have requested to remain fully remote. They do not want to change their work routines and do not see the need of returning to the office.
- There are employees who understand why there is a push to return yet are reluctant to do so because of personal reasons—such as childcare issues, anxiety about leaving their pandemic pets at home, and commutes.
- Most companies report office occupancy rates that fall below desired targets. For example, companies that expect employees to be in the office three days a week commonly find that employees, on average, are only coming in two days a week.

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b. Solutions

- *Conduct regular employee listening sessions:* It is important to communicate with employees, both supporters and resisters of the return-to-workplace policy, to identify the nature of their mindsets and the core of their interests. HR executives and team managers can then incorporate the results into sound inclusion practices.
- *Give supporters a platform to extoll the benefits of returning to the office:* Active supporters can help organizations buttress the benefits and legitimize the change. The more people hear support expressed, the more likely they are to shift their mindsets.
- *Underline purposeful presence and linkages to the organization's culture:* Some companies use words like 'purposeful,' 'meaningful,' 'intentional,' and 'collaboration' to emphasize the importance of the organization's culture and the ways in which it can be further cultivated by employees' presence in the office.
- *Encourage leaders to serve as role models:* Employees look to their managers for cues about how to behave or act in certain situations. When the managers attend or organize in-person events (e.g., town halls) the employees are likely to also show up. Some companies allow employees to come back on a rolling basis but require all leaders to come back first to serve as role models.
- *Tap into FOMO:* Employees who work remotely full time are likely to experience FOMO. They may feel they are missing out on chance meetings in the hallways, talks in breakrooms, and chats around the water cooler—which can be sources of important information and collaboration opportunities. Given that, companies are working to provide more on-site networking and social events (e.g., food truck Wednesdays, ice cream socials, and free pizzas) to encourage those who are still reluctant to come back.
- *Provide financial assistance:* The cost of returning is nontrivial as employees might need to pay for childcare, pet sitting, and the daily commute to and from work, which has become particularly costly with inflation and high gas prices. While it is challenging to cover all these expenses for employees, some companies attempt to provide a 'Be Well' package whereby each employee receives some financial support per year to offset part of the expenses.

4. Equity Issues

a. Challenges

- The hybrid or fully remote work models might not fit all functions and roles across an organization. Essential workers, for example, need to be on-site to do their jobs. Even within the same function, some managers let their employees work remotely while others do not. Such situations are particularly relevant to companies that adopt a decentralized approach and allow the managers to make decisions regarding their teams' work arrangements. Given that, several important questions about equity arise, such as how to

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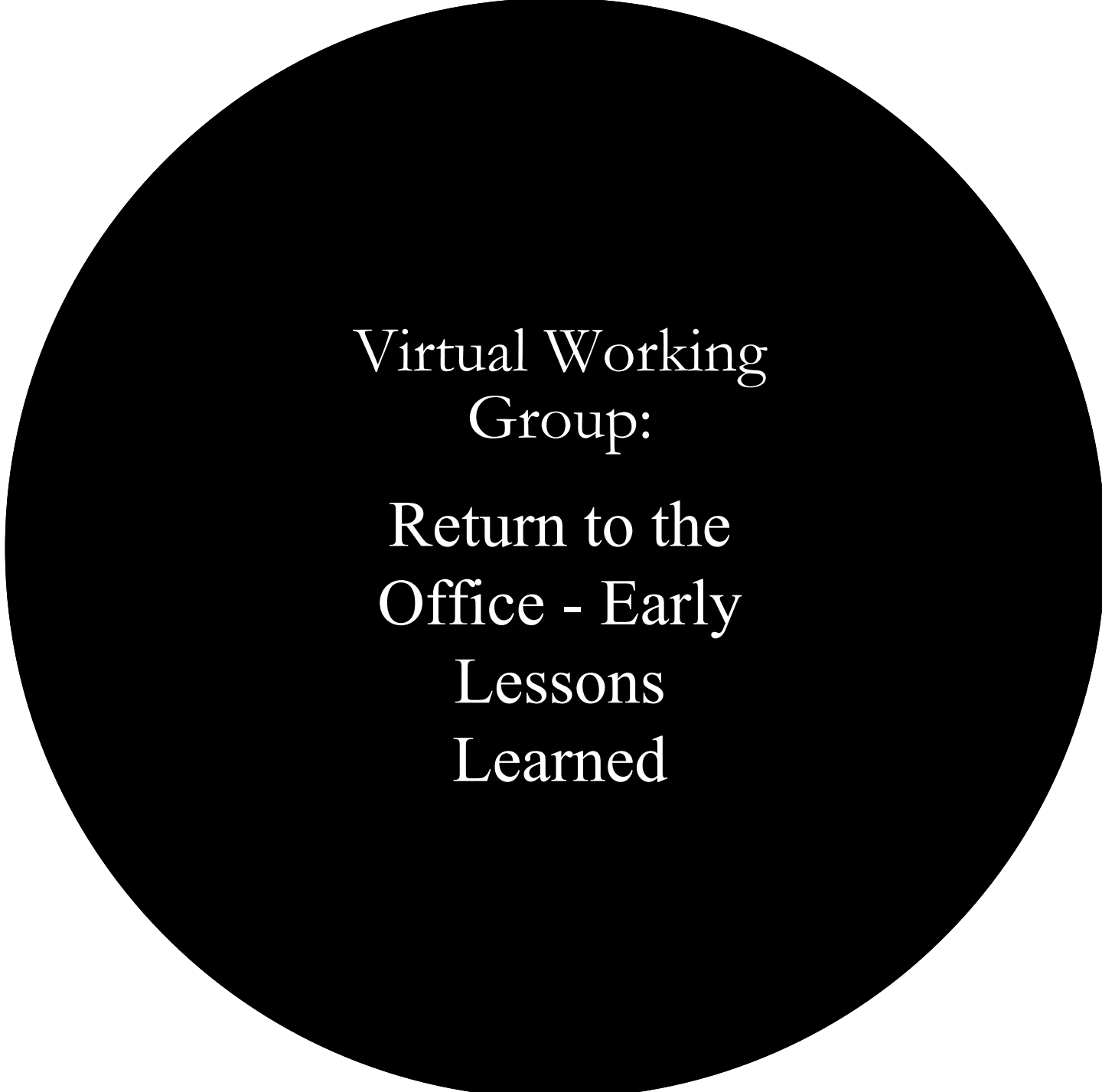
drive equity across the different approaches and what does flexibility look like for employees whose work has to be done in the office?

b. Solutions

- *Recognize essential employees' contributions:* For example, companies can make investments in workplace sites and create social events for this specific group of employees (e.g., sending free food trucks to the manufacturing sites every week). Another suggestion is to introduce a recognition program where peers can honor the pivotal roles of the essential employees. Companies can also create opportunities for senior leaders (e.g., top line leaders) to do road shows to the essential sites and roundtables with the teams.
- *Enable two-way communication:* Companies might want to consider conducting listening sessions for essential employees on a regular basis. This is to not only fully understand their interests and needs, but also allow companies to react promptly and appropriately. Further, it is important for companies to be transparent about their return-to-office policies, including the reasons behind their decisions.
- *Acknowledge that some jobs cannot be done remotely:* While the strategies above can address some of the concerns raised by front-line employees and perhaps uncover ways to offer greater flexibility (e.g., schedule flexibility), the reality is that many jobs are not currently conducive to remote work. Thus, there may come a point where the discussion shifts to whether a particular job (and often by default organization) is the right fit for an employee's needs and personal circumstances. Given current talent shortages, there is understandably some hesitancy about having these frank conversations with employees.

5. Talent Issues

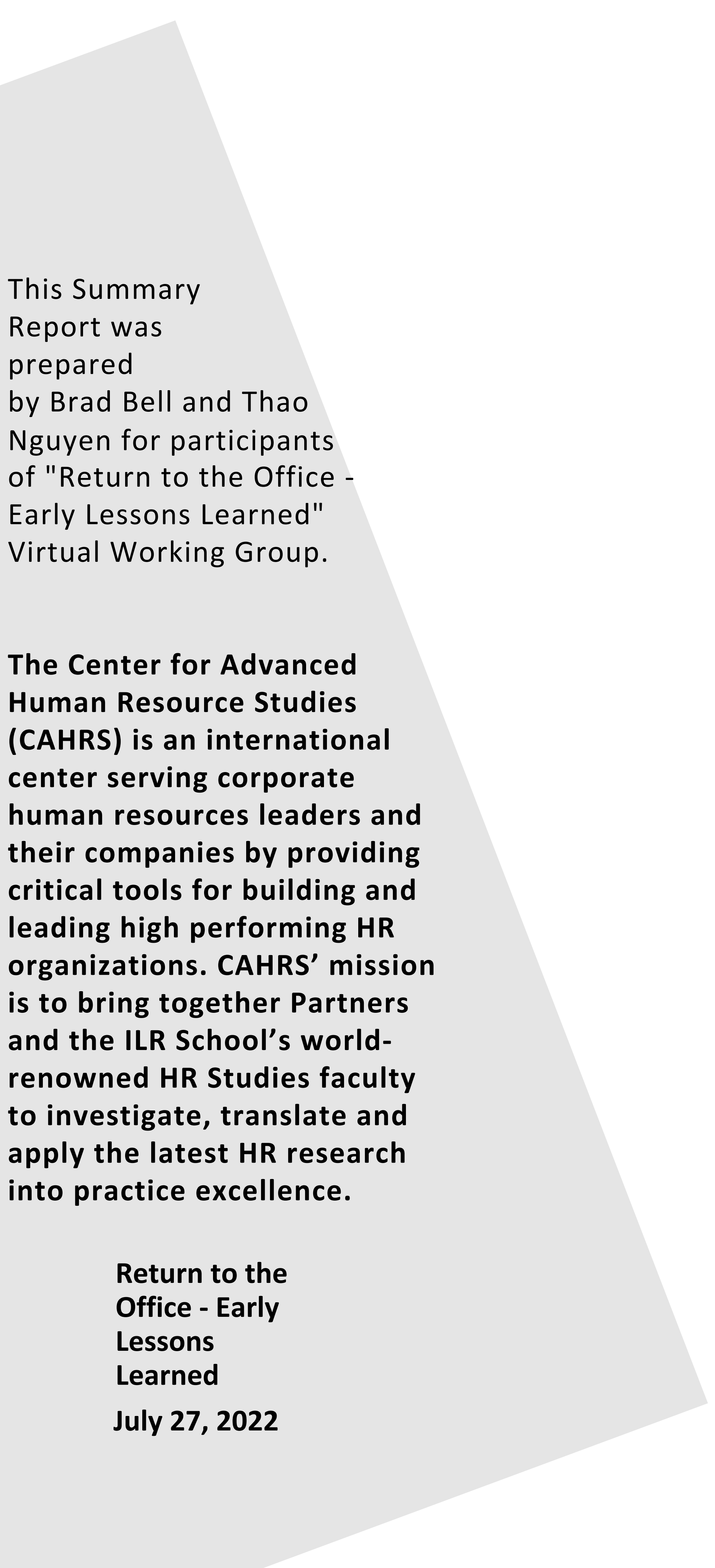
- For many participating companies, the push to return to the office is not a primary but a secondary driver of employee turnover. Employees who do want to return to the office at all or with the same frequency required by their employer may start to explore other job opportunities. They often end up leaving, however, because they receive offers that are more attractive than their current situation (e.g., higher salary, better job title).
- Some companies underline the importance of educating and helping employees make sense of the work arrangement policies adopted by other organizations in the same industry so they are clear on what they may lose if they make a move.

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Other Questions

- Is hybrid work here to stay or should companies prepare for a return to the pre-pandemic way of working?
- What's the best way to leverage current resources to create more connectivity among employees?
- How can HR bring an organization's culture to employees, especially those who stay entirely remote?

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This Summary
Report was
prepared
by Brad Bell and Thao
Nguyen for participants
of "Return to the Office -
Early Lessons Learned"
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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