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The New Employee Experience: Positive and Negative Influences of a Remote Workforce

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Every company is in the throes of simultaneously building and executing their employee, customer and community response to Coronavirus. A company's size, industry and current physical footprint are factors in how you will chart a course for your employees on how to navigate this situation. Employees rely on their employer to be a resource. Communicate with them often, share credible national and local resources and remind them of what services you provide to help them through this trying time.

In times of stress, it is important to break through the noise and increase the cadence of communications, while reinforcing messages in a variety of formats and channels. It is necessary and okay to say you don't have all the answers today, but it is also important to convey a sense of calm. Dynamic Signal's Becky Graebe focused on this in her recent blog, Employee Communications in a Time of Coronavirus.

A key tenet of getting through this tumultuous time is to lead with empathy.

REPUTABLE

RESOURCES

Educate Yourself… with the CDC dedicated website
Localize It… Sign-up for alerts from local news outlets
Overwhelmed? Don't read every article and check the source before you share with others

You can alleviate your colleagues' professional concerns, but they also have their personal concerns: their families' health and mental well-being, financial situation, household environment and caregiving needs. Utilize this opportunity to ensure they know that you care about them as a holistic person. Be authentic in your outreach, and as this situation continues to escalate, touch base frequently. Help them identify a locus of control and make them comfortable in an uncomfortable situation. In these times, remember self-care is important for leaders as well.

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Address Employees' Needs

Natural disasters and big sporting events are known to cause measurable loss of productivity, but these isolated incidents are accounted for and addressed. An unprecedented health pandemic, that is causing shifts to personal and professional environments, needs a proactive and prescriptive approach.

Define Remote Work Expectations
- How are you allowing for modified hours due to caregiving or different time zones?
- Will there be a common, core set of working hours?
- What are the expectations and needs to work from personal internet, mobile hotspot or secured network and to maintain general proprietary information?

Support Resources
- Will you help to mitigate colleagues' expenses or provide a home office budget?
- How can you ensure they have cameras, external accessories, monitors, ergonomic set-ups and privacy screens?

ADA Guidelines
If your company is not yet remote, you need to offer the opportunity without detailed disclosure under the ADA Guidelines for colleagues who are caregivers to elderly, disabled or underage family members, or those who may have medical conditions. Reinforce to all colleagues to respect the privacy and needs of others and continue to engage them regardless of location. You need to consider what isolation and medical leave policies you can update or reinforce for utilization in this circumstance.

Deskless
A majority of the workforce is comprised of deskless, retail and front-line workers. Companies need to shift their communications tactics to a more personalized approach to ensure that employees feel supported in their personal situations and that they have professional security.

The best way to communicate is through straightforward, easy-to-understand language, reinforced with FAQs from your employees' point-of-view. Ask employee advocates to share what worries them the most and try your best to address it as a partner and as their employer, that includes thinking beyond work and into their health, safety, mental well-being and personal situations.

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Don't Lose the Foundation of Your Cultural DNA

Don't Lose Established Trust: Out of sight does not mean out of mind, especially for managers or teams that are used to walk-bys, hallway chats and check-ins.

Employee Resource Groups:
- Bring together ERG leaders to hear their fulsome perspective – positives and concerns.
- Empower and encourage them as employee advocates during this trying time.
- Ask them to proactively engage on internal channels, by reinforcing corporate messages, finding virtual ways to bring their groups together, and finding ways to lean into these trying times.
- Enable opportunities for organic collaboration, content and camaraderie to get through this together
- Reinforce the need to manage up trending concerns; ask that they help to stem internal channel discussions that may spin-out of control with misinformation.

Ask what your colleagues need and do everything in your power to champion a solution

Organic Engagement around a Crisis:
- Allow for the congeniality and collaboration that organically stems from going through a significant event together. Your employees may want to start a Remote ERG, ask to hear from leadership more, or start an Internal Social Channel to compete for best handwashing song or provide other uplifting messages.
- If you already have some colleagues that work remotely, ask them to share their best practices and become champions of being productive from a new environment and work/life balance perspective.
- At Cheer Partners, we are a remote workforce, so we have an internal channel called The Virtual Water Cooler, where we pose a fun question weekly, share our weekends, add to stress relief with memes and are now sharing our pantry stockpile pictures.
- Invite your team for a virtual social event and continue to cascade this throughout your organization. You may need a few ice breakers, but the conversation will flow soon enough.

> " It's hard to keep a culture if you haven't defined it,
> and although being in the middle of a crisis may not feel like that right time
> to identify who you are, a short-term consultancy can help you assess and
> capture the unique attributes that make you, you! "
>
> – Cat Graham, Founder, Cheer Partners

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Mental Health is Equally Important to Physical Environment

EAP: Reminders about resources available through your company and insurance carriers.

Stress Relief: Offer suggestions or supplies for how to maximize new opportunities for mental bursts and breaks, that may be more acceptable in a remote work environment, such as adult coloring books, stress balls or journaling.

Educate Yourself: Remind colleagues to only rely on credible sources, like the Centers for Disease Control, but caution them to exercise self-control.

SUPPLY CHECKLIST
- Non-perishable food
- Baby food
- Pet supplies
- Medications
- Household goods
- Office supplies
- Entertainment ideas

Plan Ahead for the Each Colleague's Personal Obstacles
Encourage colleagues to think ahead for the potential of needing to shelter-in-place, if needed and isolation, quarantine and caregiving needs. Ask each manager to spend some time speaking with each colleague to ensure there is work coverage and that potential accommodations are discussed in advance.

Build a New Employee Experience

Celebrate Day One
Embrace personalized remote working as the new normal by encouraging video meetings – even for a one-on-one meeting. Host a Virtual Town Hall, which enforces technology downloads and embraces casual ways to maintain social connections, while still conducting business.

- **Use Technology to Your Advantage:** Communication should be as easy and instant as it would be in a shared office space. If your company does not currently use an internal IM system or Cloud File Sharing, you should consider investing and training on these now.
- **Test, Test and Test Again:** If your company isn't remote yet, ask each team to do a test run. The goal is to set-up a workspace, identify tech needs and test internal and external platforms. This will alleviate the burden on Day One.
- **Plan B:** Everyone should download the desktop, web and mobile apps for each platform, so that if one is not functioning, there is minimal impact. The worst way to work remote is constantly hearing that the technology is hindering versus supporting your team.
- **Don't Talk Business:** Be cognizant of starting most meetings with casual banter and not the latest COVID-19 update or immediately jumping into the first agenda item.
- **Reinforce and Enforce Guidance:** As you would for all communications, remind colleagues to comply with local regulations, travel, remote and corporate guidance.
- **Difficult Conversations:** As a manager and a leader, be sensitive when having a performance or goals-based discussions. Tone, voice, facial expression can come across as harsher or less personal when via video.

Work/Life Balance in a Remote Setting

Most people think remote work is appealing because it lends itself to a better work/life balance. However, studies show it can have the inverse impact because work is always looming in the background of personal space.

There is a temptation when working from home to go from bed to laptop in the morning and the reverse in the evening.

It is recommended that you define a work-only space, whether a desk under your stairwell, a true home office or the dining area that will help you create boundaries with your family and for yourself. A best practice is to create a delineated visual – a sign for when you cannot be disturbed and putting work items away in a closet at the end of the day.

VIDEO CALL ETIQUETTE

- [ ] MINIMIZE NOISE AROUND YOU
- [ ] USE THE MUTE BUTTON
- [ ] POSITION CAMERA AT EYE LEVEL
- [ ] MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS
- [ ] FOCUS ON THE CALL
- [ ] DON'T ANSWER THE PHONE OR DOOR

> "Since you have less reason to leave your desk, you need to take time for short microbursts. This will help you be more productive with thoughtful pauses."
>
> — Cat Graham, Cheer Partners Founder

We recommend a ritual to start and end your day that is personal to you. At Cheer Partners, a remote-based company, we recommend colleagues find a personal ritual to start and end their day. Some take a walk and others light a candle to signify workday boundaries.

Similarly, your attire will shift your ability to focus. The old college sweatshirt and joggers may feel appealing, but they will not help you be as productive; however, sneakers instead of business shoes might help!

Home Office Set-Up

- ✓ Mimic office desk set-up with:
  - good chair
  - monitor
  - printer
  - writing and storage systems
  - external mouse and keyboard
- ✓ Noise-cancelling headphones and/or noise-cancelling microphone
- ✓ Privacy screen, if not at home
- ✓ Extra batteries and chargers
- ✓ Upgrade or extend your Wi-Fi

Initial Thoughts on Long-Term Planning for Companies

When the immediacy subsides, each company will need to look ahead to determine the structure, physical and organizational design of their future workplace. Some may go back to business-as-usual, others may be asked by colleagues or pushed by their industry to rethink the environment in which they work and how employees experience work.

- Colleagues may make assumptions that they will be allowed to continue to work remotely or have modified schedules. Leadership should start to consider what they need to assess to make decisions – the impact on the employee experience and company culture should be weighed equally to economic and productivity factors.
- Remote working sounds like the ideal situation to many, but when expectations versus reality are assessed, it is often determined that not everyone has the right mindset, agility, or motivation to be successful. There will also be different corporate guidance that would need to be set forth for a company that is having colleagues work from home now, than later on when colleagues may consider that remote work means working from any location, including shared spaces, public spaces, etc.
- If a company is considering a more mobile workforce, the opportunity for choosing the right talent and personality, instead of the geographical location, is enormous. There are many considerations to make, like updating your recruitment materials or choosing how to interview people to assess their agility and needs.
- Companies will need to set expectations among team leaders on how to manage and train people in a remote environment while finding time and resources to continue building high-touch, productive, congenial relationships.

Companies are taking the safety, health, well-being and experience of their employees very seriously in this unprecedented environment. There are immediate needs to be focused on, with an eye on the what the future of the employee experience could look like once we are on the other side. The opportunities to change what can be offered to employees, and the innumerable benefits to employers are endless.