Team Topic and Number: Workplace Well-being #24

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There is no asset more valuable to a business than its employees and the creativity, innovation and productivity that is achieved when people come together. These work environments are sustained through safety and happiness so its employees can tap into their most creative and innovative ideas.

The impacts of COVID-19 have been profound on many fronts including needing to evacuate our workplace havens, adapting to work from home (WFH), and planning to return to places of work outside the home. The shifting settings leaves employees feeling physiological, psychological, social/cultural and creative/innovative set-backs.

This uncertain time will pass, but it presents a significant opportunity to rethink how to best support us – the nucleus – to off-set undesirable consequences. Improved environmental outcomes need to accommodate:

- **Physical activity** to mitigate prolonged sitting, screen staring, and **mental well-being**.
- Improved **communication** to reduce isolation and getting "personal" with our colleagues.
- Strong **policies** that accommodate WFH, leave of absence, choice-making and safe return to the office with the employee in mind.
- Maintain **culture** through fun **social** ways anticipating a distributed workforce.

Companies that seize the opportunity to take a deep breath amongst the chaos, and re-think what was working before COVID, what wasn't, what could be better and are inclusive of their employees to come up with the right solution for them will come out ahead.

PHYSIOLOGICAL

A few months ago, many of us would be traveling to a meeting inside or outside the office. Now we click into a virtual one which requires us to sit for hours on end, staring at a screen. What does all this screen time do to our bodies and our ability to sleep at night? The National Sleep Foundation has found that "[t]he blue light that's emitted from screens can delay the release of sleep-inducing melatonin and increase alertness." With most of our work and personal lives being lived on screen into the hours before bedtime, many are having trouble sleeping, waking up feeling tired, which leads to far less productive workdays.

It's easy to see what physical inactivity is doing to our waistline, but perhaps, even more importantly, what is inactivity doing to our wellbeing? According to the WELL Building Standard "Relatively small amounts of activity can lead to significant benefits: just 2.5 hours of moderate-intensity physical activity per week can reduce overall mortality risk by nearly 20%."

How can companies support the physiological wellbeing of their employees?

Short term:

- Ensure all computer screens are adjustable in terms of height and distance.
- Alternate between sitting and standing every 30-45 minutes.
- Host walking meetings where everyone on the call must be walking (in place or

elsewhere).
- Encourage use of "night mode" or orange light from screens in the hours before sleeping.

Mid-Term

- Remove chairs from conference rooms creating distance, host standing meetings, and shorten meeting duration.
- Encourage use of stairs (supporting social distancing).

Long Term:

- Encourage employees to bike, walk, and run to work.
- Encourage use of stairs between floors.
- Install and promote use of height adjustable tables at workstations.

PSYCHOLOGICAL

This event is big, and its many effects are still unknown and unpredictable. In a recent survey by Ginger, an on-demand mental health company, 69% of workers claimed this was the most stressful time of their entire professional career. Many rate this pandemic as more stressful than other major events including the September 11 terror attacks, the 2008 Great Recession and others. How can businesses take care of an employee's mental well-being in addition to their physical safety when returning to work?

Any solution cannot be one size fits all. This event and the isolation that it has caused has affected everyone differently. Some will not want to or will not be able to return to the office for a variety of reasons. Others who crave office interaction might not have acceptable working conditions at home or those for whom the office is the only daily social interaction might be eager to get back to the workplace. WFH policies, flexible working hours, and even a leave of absence will need to be considered and implemented more than ever before.

To know that someone cares about you holistically is important. The same survey from Ginger stated that 93% of employees agreed that companies that survive COVID-19 will be those who support employee mental health. Leaders will have an unique opportunity to redefine the way they engage people and how companies function.

- Engage employees on a personal level, and become more proactive in the message delivered.
- Communicate early and often not only with facts and plans for reentering the workplace, but also with check ins and social calls.
- Inform staff about availability of PPE, wipes, masks, furniture arrangements, signage, etc., to alleviate fears surrounding returning to the workplace.

Preparing the workplace for reentry will be critical for employees' confidence. It is critical that the messaging and interventions remain positive and are not overwhelming. The measures

taken must be visible and understandable, but the goal should be a positive and confident reentry into the workplace.

SOCIAL & CULTURE

While some may see a return to the office as a welcomed respite from distracting or isolating home situations, many will see the social distancing, masks, and other return-to-office protocols as cumbersome and counter-productive. How do companies maintain an engaged workforce while teams are largely still working from home with a few colleagues phasing back into the office? What does this distributed workforce do to maintain the culture of the company?

Begin answering these questions with community and engagement in mind. This approach will help safeguard social well-being of an individual while strengthening the company's overall culture.

- Create opportunities to build community
  - Set aside time for engaging teams in fun or bonding activities, including games, virtual happy hours, and opportunities for group learning.
  - Direct projects to be collaborative between team members to avoid individuals being siloed or only reporting progress into their direct line management.
  - Provide incentives and explicit support for participation in employee social groups and events during the workday.

- Reinforce culture-based expectations
  - Regular communications (emails, all hands, town halls) with leadership must remain consistent and demonstrate the defined culture.
  - Practice empathy and provide practical tips and training for emotional intelligence at all levels of the organization.

- Provide greater choice to staff
  - Be mindful of an individual's time for personal needs by removing the expectation of standard working hours and respect their personal boundaries.
  - Consider limiting back-to-back meetings by deploying strategic solutions such as enforcing shorter meeting times or creating 'off meeting' hours.

If a company's culture was defined by in-person collaboration, corporate leadership teams will need to redefine expectations in order to maintain consistent expectations. Evolving the culture to be inclusive of all work styles and situations as well as respecting what the new normal looks like will be imperative to cultivating long term community-minded and engaged employees. Failure to pivot will result in disconnection, lowered productivity, and possibly employee turnover.

CREATIVITY & INNOVATION

COVID has the potential to inhibit creativity, productivity, and innovation. During this unprecedented event, creativity is paramount to survive and thrive. Individuals and businesses must focus on strengths, differentiators, and reinvention to remain relevant. Rebuilding and recovering post-COVID will require ongoing adaptation.

How can an employer or workplace enable creativity? Office design provides a variety of spaces to support different user types, teams, tasks, and interactions. Currently our homes are not only supporting work, but also moonlighting as a restaurant, school, gym, and petting zoo, causing a myriad of distractions. The ability to be present and engaged in the same way that is supported in an office environment is nearly impossible, and for those accustomed to working from home, they now have "colleagues" and responsibilities that have impacted previous routines.

What is the opportunity for workplace professionals? Reimagine the workplace we have spent most of our careers creating, solving a new set of problems that allow for flexibility and future adaptability, user-friendly hackability with opportunity to scale. Creating space that allows for productive work in an office environment and the tools needed when employees are in the office, while establishing work from home best practices and productivity tools.

Short terms solutions to inspire creativity and innovation:

- Leadership: Reiterate importance of creativity, communicate strategy to empower employees to take ownership in working toward shared goals.
- Provide choice based on employee needs to ensure they are comfortable and can be most productive in their work environment.
- Establish best practices, selection of tools and equipment, a sense of accomplishment, and work/life balance for both in office and home work.
- Eliminate blockages and obstacles to innovation by providing an environment that supports stress management, minimizes chaos, and allows focus.
- Creative outlets – external sources, hobbies, networking, nature, crafts, etc. - provide resources and/or time.

Longer Term:

Take the lessons learned from the fast and forced changes dictated by COVID to create a new and improved normal - better the planet, our businesses, work/life balance