Acadia BENEFITS

UBA
HR Elements

Ideas and information for human resource professionals

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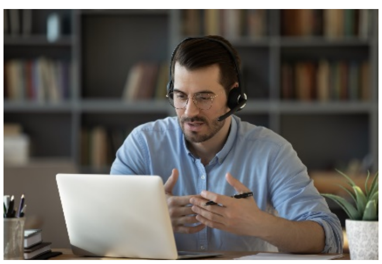
In this edition:

Does Your Company Have the Potential to Go Remote Permanently?



Last March, many employees were sent home to work remotely for a few weeks until this “pesky” coronavirus (COVID-19) resolved itself. Almost a year has passed, and many employees are still working from home. Companies are evaluating the costs of continuing to hold onto office real estate while their staff work effectively (some would say more effectively) at home. Many executive teams, facility professionals, and HR teams are wondering if it is worth keeping a brick-and-mortar space for their business post-COVID. Before deciding to end the lease or consolidate company locations, pressure-test the infrastructure of your organization to see if it would support a permanent change to a fully virtual or hybrid environment.

Knowledge sharing and documentation are the all-stars of the remote work world. Information sharing is key when you have people working at different times of the day (asynchronous) from different locations. Without the ability to turn to your cubemate and ask a quick question, information-sharing methodology needs to be outlined. A clear protocol should be followed to document key data (think: meeting minutes, project plans and how-to documents). Many companies support knowledge sharing in a virtual work environment by investing in technology like Slack, where users can create channels to compile and organize work that is easily accessible to others. A virtual transition would not be a good match for a company that allows employees to keep pertinent company or job knowledge in their head. Information hoarders need not apply! This level of transparency also extends to employee policies. As a best practice, performance standards should be clearly outlined with outcome-based goals. Subjectivity needs to be removed from the equation since work is not being observed live.

Harvard Business School Professor, Prithwiraj Choudhury, points out that a remote or hybrid structure must be supported by the leadership team in order for it to stick. If leadership commitment is not in place to support asynchronous work, then those working remotely from home (or anywhere) may feel out of the loop. For example, if the leadership team is insistent on being in the office, you will see employees respond accordingly. Senior staff may end up returning to the office to ensure they get their voices heard by the executive team. In worst-case scenario, an “A” and “B” cohort are created where different people receive alternative pieces of information based on where they sit during the workday. This could also extend to uneven participation related to problem solving, brainstorming, and training which further affects company engagement and innovation. Leaders must be dedicated to actively including both virtual and remote staff. This may mean that a bit more planning is involved when a senior executive wants to call a last-minute meeting so remote staff can also participate.

The case to shut down physical offices and move staff to a remote or hybrid construct is not cut and dried. There is no foolproof checklist to determine whether your company should make this transition. Yes, there is a bounty of evidence suggesting this would save the company real estate costs and employees may be more productive. But there is more to consider in the equation. A great starting point is to observe the knowledge sharing practices and leadership commitment at your company today. You can use this information to plan the next steps to take to evaluate whether the culture of your company is copacetic to a permanent remote environment.

The Ketchup Question: Building Diverse Teams

“It’s the right thing to do.” This simple conclusion was an early driver for HR professionals and hiring managers to add diversity initiatives to their recruitment strategies. Next came a slightly more nuanced line of reasoning – research study data showed a correlation between diverse employee populations and positive revenue trends. While the target remained the same – building teams with diverse perspective and experiences – the data to support diversity hiring has evolved over time. One simple question exemplifies why building a team of diverse players is so important, and it likely won’t be what you expect. A great case study example to support diversity hiring is found in the answers to one simple question, “where do you keep your ketchup?”

Likely, you immediately thought of a specific location when reading that question. It is key to know that your answer is strongly based on geography and culture. More specifically, it is influenced by the part of the world where you grew up as we pass on traditions like this down family lines. Did you know that Americans are more likely to keep ketchup in the refrigerator? When a substitute condiment is needed, they turn to neighbors in the fridge like mustard or mayonnaise because of its proximity. On the other hand, British natives and African Americans from the south usually keep their ketchup in the pantry, so opt for malt vinegar or tabasco when the tomato-based sauce is unavailable.

How does a story about your ketchup’s home base contribute to the case for building diverse teams? The obvious takeaway is that differing perspectives lead to different results – a great outcome when you consider how important creative problem-solving is in creating a competitive advantage. Solutions can turn stale or outdated if the people making them are mirror images of each other…attended the same schools, grew up in the same part of the country, came from a similar ethnic background. Scott Page, professor of complex systems at the University of Michigan, points out that a number of not-so-obvious factors influence how we solve problems. People who are similar tend to use the same tools and paths to come to a conclusion. More importantly, the ketchup scenario shows that diverse teammates look for answers in a different pool of information. Think of what this could mean in the brainstorming stage of a new idea!

In addition to bringing new ideas to the table, a cast of diverse employees sharpens the analytical abilities of every member in the group. Your brain is kept on its toes when alternative perspectives are added to a conversation. Connections in your brain are strengthened as your point of view is challenged and you process new information. Additionally, the exposure to people with different approaches and outlooks may help you identify bias in your train of thought as you compare and contrast how you interpret and respond to data.

The need for building diverse teams is not a new one. Teams elevate their game when they are staffed with individuals who come from different backgrounds and offer unique points of view. Look no further than your kitchen cabinet (or fridge) to be reminded why diversity is a necessity for novel solutions.

Mentoring Program Mishaps – Avoid These Common Pitfalls

Influential business leaders often thank mentors for support in reaching their goals. Sheryl Sandburg credits Ariana Huffington. Mark Zuckerberg was mentored by Apple's Steve Jobs. In a 2019 study conducted by Olivet Nazarene University, 76% of participants agreed that professional mentorship relationships were important. Mentoring has the added perks of bolstering employee engagement and increasing employee retention rates. All of this adds up to a rather good reason to build a mentorship program this year to support your employee population. Don't be hasty! A poorly constructed program could cause more harm than good. Review these common mentoring program pitfalls to start your program research.

Applying a "plug and play" approach. While studying best practices in the market is a wise first step, program developers should refrain from using a "plug and play" approach. This tactic includes purchasing or copying a boxed program without consideration of your unique culture. Mentoring is nuanced and should be custom-tailored to your company and employees. Consider the industry, company size, mentee interests, mentor availability, etc. What are the goals of your program? How will you evaluate if the program is successful? Mentoring programs do not fall in the one-size-fits-all bucket.

Forgetting to train mentors. Some people start with the assumption that all experienced staff members will be capable mentors. Yikes! That would be like saying all good salespeople would be great managers. The skill sets are different, so this equation is not always true. Yes, some individuals will be natural mentors, but the majority could use some training (or at least a refresher) on how to be an active listener, clarify objectives, and provide constructive feedback. Mentors should also be briefed on the expectations of their roles before launching.

Overlooking mentee reflective pre-work. Mentor relationships are most successful when mentees identify the skills they need help with from a mentor ahead of time. Mentees can do this by creating a solid development plan in consultation with their manager or an HR team member that includes clear direction on what skills the mentee needs to develop. This level of clarity will offer direction to potential mentors who display expertise in the requisite area, resulting in stronger mentor relationships.

Requiring participation in a mentor program. The benefits of a mentoring program are largely unmet if either party does not want to be there. Instead of requiring participation, Human Resources can advertise the benefits of a mentor partnership and encourage active participation. To take this a step further, consider whether you want to match mentors or get participants involved in the selection process. The *Harvard Business Review* article, “Why Your Mentorship Program Isn’t Working,” posits that *assigned* mentors report little benefit. In fact, the best mentor relationships develop organically while on assignments, projects, or at networking events. How can you provide opportunities for mentorship to develop naturally?

Employees could use some additional support considering the work climate changes resulting from the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. A strong mentor relationship at work can lead to increased job satisfaction, psychological safety, and self-esteem. A program with such positive benefits deserves to be crafted with care. Create a bespoke mentoring program that benefits your mentee and mentor population by avoiding the program pitfalls noted above.

Leading through Burnout

The World Health Organization (WHO) expanded its definition of burnout as an “occupational phenomenon,” giving credence to a set of conditions that many have experienced but not been able to name. According to WHO, burnout is characterized by "feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional efficacy." Leading executive search firm, Korn Ferry, reports 7 in 10 employees are feeling burnout – a statistic that increased dramatically since the start of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Without proper support, employees dealing with burnout may choose to look for a new job in the hopes that symptoms will decline as a result of a change. Managers can retain employees struggling with burnout by leading by example and empowering teams to approach the solution as a group.

Mental health is a topic that may feel off-limits at work; many employees don’t feel comfortable sharing personal information like this with even the best of managers. Instead of waiting for employees to come knocking on your door or inbox, managers can proactively take action to show their team what healthy boundaries look like at work. This may include allowing employees to take time away from work when needed, whether for a doctor appointment or a needed mental health day. It can be the little things that help an overwhelmed employee, so consider how you can help employees disconnect at the end of the workday. Instead of sending late night emails to your team, try using the “delay delivery” feature. An inbox filling up after hours may put an expectation on employees to respond during their downtime. Give staff the OK to focus on other parts of their lives. Rest and recovery are important when dealing with burnout.

Good relationships are built on trust and respect. Practicing transparency with your team when you are feeling down or distracted from your work can lead to a more positive working atmosphere. While sharing something this personal may sound scary at first, your vulnerability will help others feel more comfortable being open with the team as a result. Workers need to give a voice to their concerns and pressures without fear of retribution. Managers can further support employees by showing compassion when employees raise their hands and offer additional support through the company's employee assistance program.

Finally, managers can encourage their team to tackle self-care as a group. Ask the team to look for opportunities to add healthy activities to the agenda. Add time during your department meetings to practice meditation. Ask members of your team to collect healthy tips to distribute in a weekly email roundup. Create a healthy team mantra that offers a shared mission for the group to circle around. Managers can help employees struggling with burnout by modeling healthy behavior to the team. An added benefit is that these same actions also support managers who feel burnout themselves.

Employer Webinar

Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 Group Health Plan Considerations and COVID-19 Vaccine Wellness Programs

Tuesday, March 9, 2021 • 2:00 p.m. Eastern

On December 27, 2020, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 (Appropriations Act) was enacted. The Appropriations Act contains various provisions affecting group health plans including health flexible spending arrangement (health FSA) and dependent care flexible spending arrangement (DCAP) relief, mental health and substance use disorder parity, and the No Surprises Act. This webinar will help employers understand these provisions and the steps an employer should take to be compliant.

Additionally, this webinar will address the compliance considerations for employers seeking to implement a vaccine wellness program to encourage employees to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

This webinar will:

- Describe the optional carry over, grace period, post-termination reimbursement, DCAP carry forward, and midyear election change relief available for health FSAs and DCAPs and plan amendment considerations
- Describe the comparative analysis of nonquantitative treatment limitations (NQTLs) on mental health and substance use disorder benefits requirement and what plans should do to begin complying with this requirement

- Provide an overview of the group health plan requirements under the No Surprises Act that seeks to prevent surprise medical bills for emergency services and air ambulance bills
- Describe the compliance considerations under ERISA, HIPAA, ADA, and GINA for employers seeking to implement a COVID-19 vaccine incentive wellness program

This 60-minute intermediate level webinar will provide employers with an overview of group health plan relief under the Appropriations Act, the new comparative analysis requirement, and the No Surprises Act.

Registration

Register here for the webinar. The presentation will be posted on the UBA Website the afternoon before the webinar.

Presenter

Lorie Maring is a partner in the Atlanta office and a member of the Employee Benefits Practice Group. She has extensive experience in all areas of employee benefits, including health and welfare programs, qualified and non-qualified retirement plans and executive compensation. She routinely advises employers, including non-profit and government employers, trade associations and employee benefit insurance and risk management consultants on the complex compliance and day-to-day issues arising under ERISA and other state and federal laws governing employee benefit plans and programs.

Certification

This webinar has been submitted to the Human Resource Certification Institute and the Society for Human Resource Management to qualify for 1 recertification credit hour.