Making the Shift to a Hybrid Workplace
Four Strategies for Engaging Remote Employees

class
Technologies Inc.

In March 2020, the global pandemic sparked a permanent shift in the way we work, with the number of people working from home five days a week jumping from 17% to 44% in the U.S. alone.[1]

Given the surge of remote workers and the fact that many companies are planning to adopt a hybrid work model in the future, managers need to learn how to keep their employees engaged – whether they are at home or in the office.

In a work environment where leaders may never meet some of their employees face-to-face, it can be challenging to build connections and foster a strong company culture. To help HR managers and corporate trainers guide companies during this important transition, we sat down with employee engagement experts Michelle Smith (Miller Management Corporation), Clint Kofford (Johnson and Johnson) and Eric Polite (Kanarys) to learn how they are working to address these challenges at their own organizations. We combined their responses with research from the field to offer four strategies business leaders can implement to overcome the common obstacles faced by companies engaging a remote and hybrid workforce.

[1] Department, Published by Statista Research, and Mar 8. "Remote Work Frequency before/after COVID-19 2020." Statista, 8 Mar. 2021, www.statista.com/statistics/1122987/change-in-remote-work-trends-after-covid-in-usa/.

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1

Organizational and individual agility

The pandemic has meant that our work lives keep changing – including office locations, hours, and even roles – which can be difficult to handle at both an organizational and an individual level. Leaders have to be ready to implement new strategies based on shifts in the work environment – for example, finding best strategies to run hybrid meetings, with some employees on-site and some remote. And managers need to allow for, and promote, flexibility. For instance, an employee may need to turn off their camera because they have a child working next to them.

Staying agile is essential from an organizational perspective, but it's also important to build into your work culture. People are naturally suspicious of change, so knowing how to support your employees through periods of transition is vital to maintain a happy and engaged workforce.

SOLUTION

Build trust

Particularly during periods of change, cultivating trust at work is essential. You want your employees to feel secure and comfortable. But it's harder to trust people you've never actually met.

To help build trust in a remote work environment, ensure that managers have clear and consistent expectations, and that they communicate plans for growth and change well in advance. The more transparent your leaders are with employees, the more faith your employees will have in the organization as a whole. Creating a culture of transparency where employees feel they can be honest about their experience goes a long way to foster trust.

Making time for live chats is also important – and turning on your video can help. In a survey from Zoom,[2] 82% of users said that there was greater trust with video turned on, and 91% said they had a higher level of engagement. Obviously, turning on video isn't a fix-all – Zoom fatigue, insecurity about home surroundings, internet stability, and other problems are very real, and should play a role in company policies around video calls. But having an hour or two a week where coworkers can see one another's faces can really help remote workers feel like part of the team.

[2] "Does Video Communications Increase Trust & Engagement?" Zoom Blog, 25 June 2020, blog.zoom.us/does-video-communications-increase-trust-engagement/.

2

Inclusivity

Inclusivity is a challenge whether you are on-site, remote, or hybrid. Research at the Center for Talent and Innovation shows that employees are 3.5 times more likely to "contribute to their fullest potential" when they feel like they belong at work.[3] In a healthy work environment, your employees need to feel safe and valued, regardless of their background or where they are located.

New challenges can pop up around inclusivity, however, when your organization moves to incorporating remote and hybrid work environments. Remote employees may feel more excluded from company culture, particularly if they are part of an already marginalized group.[4] Ensuring all your employees feel welcome is more challenging when many of your communications are digital, but there are many tools that can help.

SOLUTION

Seek opportunities to give recognition

Everyone wants to feel acknowledged at work, especially when we are all combatting the stress of life under the pandemic. Feeling acknowledged can be particularly important for marginalized employees, who are more apt to feel excluded. Across the board, when people feel appreciated, they perform better – and luckily, it's just as easy to appreciate your team virtually as it is in the office.

Build in scheduled opportunities to shout-out achievements, like before a weekly staff meeting, or via Slack at the end of the week. Many companies give out monthly or quarterly awards to show appreciation and acknowledge a job well done. Clint Kofford, global head of talent development at Johnson and Johnson, adds that celebrating teamwork is just as important. Encourage collaboration remotely

by embracing technology, like the breakout rooms in Class , that make it easy to do project-based work, and don't forget to give teams credit for their efforts.
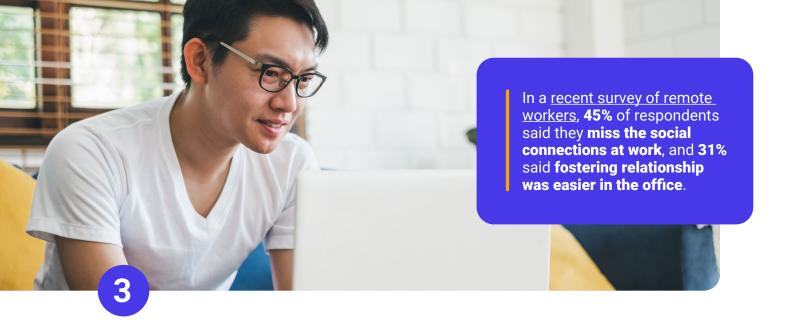
Eric Polite, VP of diversity, equity, and inclusion at Kanarys, notes that part of recognizing achievements is knowing how your employees like to receive feedback. More introverted employees might prefer receiving recognition privately, so they aren't put in the spotlight unexpectedly. Michelle Smith, SVP of integration and operations at Miller Management Corporation, has one creative way to offer private feedback – she sends cards in the mail. During Covid, she's found that her colleagues appreciate the surprise of receiving a card or letter, because it shows that she has taken extra time to reach out.

[3] "The Surprising Power of Simply Asking Coworkers How They're Doing." Harvard Business Review, 21 Mar. 2019, hbr.org/2019/02/the-surprising-power-of-simply-asking-coworkers-how-theyre-doing.

[4] Abril, Danielle. "Remote Work May Exacerbate Diversity and Inclusion Problems for Companies." *Fortune*, Fortune, 24 May 2020, fortune.com/2020/05/24/remote-work-diversity-inclusion-challenges/.

In a <u>recent survey of remote workers</u>, **45%** of respondents said they **miss the social connections at work**, and **31%** said **fostering relationship was easier in the office**.

3

Culture and communication

Miscommunication becomes a bigger pitfall in a remote world, where it's harder to read body language and tone, and one poorly worded email or Slack message can spark conflict and resentment. Studies also show that remote employees are more likely to feel excluded at work, with **41% of remote workers reporting they feel "coworkers say bad things about [them] behind [their] back," compared to only 31% of on-site employees.**[5]

Leaders need to have processes in place to handle these challenging moments, but it's also important to cultivate connection so people are less likely to feel threatened in the first place.

SOLUTION

Create time for casual interactions

"What people miss the most is people" says Michelle Smith. Smith's sentiment is demonstrated in a recent survey of remote workers, where **45% of respondents said they miss the social connections at work, while 31% said fostering relationships was easier in the office.**[6] To create a sense of belonging at work, which also helps build relationships and decrease workplace conflict, leaders need to be intentional about making space for the kind of casual, interpersonal interactions we used to have in the hallways or the break room.

How do you make space for casual conversation and connection? Clint Kofford suggests "positive gossip," in which managers encourage everyone on the team to shout-out each other's achievements, either in meetings or via Slack or email. Eric Polite, meanwhile, schedules virtual hangouts with his team, complete with scavenger hunts, trivia, and other fun games.

Studies show that "employee satisfaction increases nearly 50%[7] **when a worker develops a close relationship on the job,"** so make space for employees to get to know each other. In a virtual workspace, you'll need to leverage technology to do this. For example, Class offers built-in quizzes and polls that you can use to check-in before a meeting, or for a quick ice breaker, so you learn a little about your employees before you start working through your agenda.

Polite also notes that making time for social interaction may be a problem of "addition by subtraction." Asking your employees to stay late for a virtual scavenger hunt doesn't show them that you care about their wellbeing. To reap the benefits of a strong work culture, you need to be willing to replace some business hours with culture-building activities.

[5] "Virtual Reality: Remote Employees Experience More Workplace Politics Than Onsite Teammates." VitalSmarts Training, www.vitalsmarts.com/press/2017/11/virtual-reality-remote-employees-experience-workplace-politics/.
[6] Schwantes, Marcel. "New Study Reveals What Employees Miss About the Office (and How Remote Work Affects Their Jobs)." Inc.com, Inc., 2 Dec. 2020, www.inc.com/marcel-schwantes/new-study-reveals-what-employees-miss-about-office-and-how-remote-work-affects-their-jobs.html.
[7] "The Truth about Job Satisfaction & Friendships at Work." NBRI, 20 Nov. 2017, www.nbrii.com/employee-survey-white-papers/the-truth-about-job-satisfaction-and-friendships-at-work/.

4

Customized work situations

Every employee has unique needs and challenges. Perhaps one remote staff member can only work from noon until 8 PM, in order to be available to monitor a child's virtual schooling. Or maybe an employee who has three roommates requires a private Hotspot, or even a temporary co-office space, in order to log in. Part of increasing employee engagement is ensuring management is attentive to those needs.

Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to remote or hybrid work, leaders should consider what works best for each employee. This might look like providing access to technology, taking into consideration home environment, and adapting to varied work styles whenever possible.

SOLUTION

Measure engagement

The reality is that no one had a game plan for the sudden move to work-from-home – including employees. As companies write their remote work playbooks, it's important to ensure employees have a say in the process and feel like their company is willing and able to address their needs. Asking for feedback is important because it allows you to evaluate (and re-evaluate) your employee engagement strategies in real time.

To measure engagement, design surveys and feedback opportunities that encourage both quantitative and qualitative feedback. In those surveys, you need to make sure you are asking the right questions. **Ask yourself: what is really important to our company? How do these questions reflect our mission?**

Both Clint Kofford and Eric Polite speak about the importance of making sure employees are in the right role, and using quarterly and yearly reviews as an opportunity to make sure an employee feels good about their position and opportunities for growth. Michelle Smith also suggests feedback addresses employee wellbeing and mental health, particularly given the fact that one out of every seven employees struggles with a mental health or substance use disorder.[8]

Because we are now working in our homes, it's more important than ever to ask staff how their home environments are impacting their work life. Smith collects this data by simply asking for one word to describe the biggest source of at-home stress (like "virtual school" or "politics"). She then uses that data to develop programs around common themes, so that employees can get the support they need to thrive.

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[8] Ritchie, Hannah. "Global Mental Health: Five Key Insights Which Emerge from the Data." Our World in Data, ourworldindata.org/global-mental-health.

Centering culture in a
work-from-home world

Companies can leverage technology to fight many remote work challenges – particularly around connection, communication, and relationship-building. But even the most advanced tools won't keep employees engaged if they aren't rooted in strong company culture. **Don't forget that your technology should support, not replace, your cultural goals.** Center the needs of your workforce, and then use technology to build out solutions to those needs. And when in doubt, don't forget to reach out and ask employees what they need. The answer is often simpler than you would expect – and it goes a long way toward fostering morale and trust.

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