Supporting the workforce in today's challenging landscape

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The COVID-19 pandemic has forever changed the face of the workforce. The threat and spread of a novel, once-in-a-century virus prompted a transformational period of collective introspection. Much like an individual who survived a near-death experience, members of the global workforce have *en masse* taken stock of their lives during the past two years, reconsidering their priorities, longevity and what they want out of their jobs.

The volatility and unpredictability caused by COVID have led millions of workers around the world to explore new career opportunities — a phenomenon known as the Great Resignation. This disruption has made employers' war for talent more competitive than ever. Organizations are struggling to keep pace and will need to implement a variety of strategies to ensure they can successfully attract and retain the right people. In our view, the challenge facing employers is not to radically redesign workflows or business processes; rather, it's to get back to the basics of the employee experience and adopt a people-first mentality.

ENGAGEMENT AND CONNECTEDNESS

More than two years after the outbreak of COVID-19, a significant percentage of the workforce is still working remotely at least part of the time. Employers continue to (re)define what "hybrid" means for their organizations as the public health situation evolves. These shifts make building and maintaining meaningful employee connections that much more difficult.

Many remote/hybrid employees are eager for social interaction as an antidote to the isolation brought on by COVID. Without the casual workplace conversations that naturally occurred by the office water fountain or coffee maker pre-pandemic, people managers/leaders now bear responsibility for facilitating those connections virtually. Personal manager outreach, leadership town halls, regular employee communication and informal group meetings (even if virtual) are a few ways to foster a culture of caring and belonging. More formally, having employees set performance goals helps them connect their daily efforts to the organizational mission and objectives.

Another way to promote engagement and connection is through employee resource groups (ERGs). ERGs are voluntary, employee-led groups centered on a shared characteristic of the participants, such as gender, race, ethnicity, lifestyle or interest. While ERGs are traditionally a cornerstone of diversity and inclusion programs, they've taken on renewed relevance during the pandemic as employees seek safe opportunities to connect and be their authentic selves. (ERGs are also an effective recruiting tool, as many candidates today look for employers who have them.) Some organizations have started new ERGs focused on COVID-era concerns like homeschooling and fitness outside the gym so employees can learn from and share experiences with each other.

It's important to keep in mind that engagement levels can vary significantly over the course of the employee lifecycle. Providing an effective onboarding experience that secures new employees' buy-in to the organizational culture can help to reduce attrition and pave the way for high engagement throughout their tenure. Particularly during the first year of employment, it's critical to provide education on the organization's mission, values and practices, along with guidance on what new employees can expect regarding career paths and skills development. With so many people changing jobs and employers amid the upheaval of COVID, successful onboarding and acclimation must be a key focus area to ensure workforce continuity and sustainability.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

The conditions of the COVID era have had a devastating impact on mental health. Anxiety, depression, stress, guilt, trauma, fatigue and isolation are only some of the concerns that have spiked in the past two years.

Employers' traditional approach to addressing mental health is through employee assistance programs (EAPs). However, no matter how robust the service offerings or how many reassurances of confidentiality are provided, many employees have inherent distrust for EAPs. Concerns about their personal information being shared with management and human resources or EAP use negatively affecting their careers have led to widespread avoidance; research shows that EAPs are among the most underutilized of all employee benefits, with fewer than 8% of those eligible taking advantage of their services.

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To truly support a workforce struggling with mental health challenges, employers need to think beyond the EAP and consider alternative models of care. Community-based mental health practitioners, as well as telehealth options, should be accessible through employee health plans. Additionally, there are a variety of wellness mobile apps and well-being programs that employers can subscribe to and promote in order to demonstrate support for employees; these programs — which represent one way to meet employees where they are, rather than pushing them to conform to a single model of care — offer guidance on stress management, positivity, coping skills, mindfulness and focused breathing, among other habits that contribute to mental health.

Another step organizations can take is to train managers on how to recognize the signs of psychological distress in their team members and provide an appropriate level of support based on empathy and respect. High-quality training programs that employers can leverage include:

- Mental Health First Aid at Work, from the National Council for Mental Well-Being.
- Notice. Talk. Act. At Work, from the Center for Workplace Mental Health, a division of the American Psychiatric Association.

Giving people managers the tools to know when and how to get involved shows both personal and organizational support for employee mental health, reduces potential productivity losses, and increases the likelihood of employees seeking help when they need it.

THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT

Perhaps the greatest lesson in management to emerge from the era of COVID is the importance of the intangibles. When the physical workspace is stripped away and employees are no longer co-located, what remains is a social compact that must have at its core the kinds of values that motivate employees to stay connected and engaged. Many important concepts fall into this framework, and we'll highlight just two of them here.

- **Autonomy.** During the pandemic, when so many have experienced a loss of control over many areas of their lives, autonomy is critical to job satisfaction. Especially for knowledge workers, whose work product is often intertwined with their identity and sense of self-worth, employer confidence in their ability to self-manage goes a long way. The pressures of family life in the COVID era — such as sporadic periods of remote schooling, unexpected quarantines and loss of reliable caregiving support — have made flexibility in how and when to work indispensable for many in the workforce. And with most organizations finding that the "work-at-home experiment" prompted by COVID has not resulted in significant losses of quality or productivity, the workforce has demonstrated that they are deserving of grace and can and should be trusted to perform well without micromanagement.

- **Purpose.** At a time when people are taking stock of their lives and career trajectories, they want to feel they're performing purposeful work and aligning their passions with their professions. Employers will benefit from investing in technologies that automate rote work processes, so employees can focus on higher-level tasks and areas where they bring unique value. Additionally, organizations should develop brand stories that highlight for employees and the public the meaning behind the work they do and how they improve people's lives and the world at-large.

PEOPLE FIRST

As organizations vie to attract new talent, they must not forget about one of their most valuable resources: current employees. Retaining talent is significantly more cost-effective than hiring new talent, but it does require investing in the things that matter most to employees. Promoting retention and reducing attrition can be achieved by supporting employees' multifaceted needs during an already stressful time. These include providing avenues for connection, addressing mental health concerns, and offering people a renewed sense of autonomy and purpose in their work.

If we've learned anything from the COVID-19 pandemic, it's hopefully about the value of each individual person. Adopting a people-first philosophy is key to employers weathering this tumultuous storm and making it through to "new normal" on the other side.

RESOURCES

Mental Health First Aid at Work
https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/population-focused-modules/workplace/

Notice. Talk. Act. At Work
https://workplacementalhealth.org/employer-resources/notice-talk-act-at-work

APPS THAT SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH HABITS

Mood Tools
uses evidence-based techniques to address depression and negative thoughts

What's Up
helps with thought patterns, grounding and catastrophizing

MindShift
cognitive-based tools especially well-suited to teens and young adults

Happify
tools to help people take control of their feelings and thoughts

Think Up
provides positive affirmations and motivation

Panic Relief
guides users through panic attacks and helps them overcome their fears

Breathe2Relax (Apple | Android)
teaches breathing techniques for stress management

EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING PROGRAMS

Grokker
personalized experiences to help employees feel happier, healthier and connected

WellBalance
focuses on healthy habits and improving overall mental well-being

HBD International
innovative workplace health, well-being and injury prevention programs

wayForward
combines identification, navigation and delivery to ensure employees have access to clinically relevant care

Overcoming U
courses that create accountability, education and mindset shifts

Navigate
promotes eight pillars of well-being to improve health and happiness

Wellworks for You
programs to keep employees actively engaged in own wellness

Bravo
wellness incentive programs, health screenings/assessment and more