

Workplace Lessons Learned During the Pandemic

By Kathy Gurchiek

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The COVID-19 global pandemic turned the workplace on its head a year ago. Suddenly, travel was limited or canceled completely. Employees who had never worked remotely found themselves working from home for the first time, sometimes while juggling caregiving responsibilities. Workplace connections that had occurred casually in the lunchroom or in the office corridor were no more, and meetings were held virtually.

So what have HR professionals and their organizations learned from this experience in the last year? *SHRM Online* collected the following responses about how the pandemic changed the way work gets done.

The Meaning of 'Flexibility'

"Before the pandemic, we thought employees asking for 'flexibility' meant working from home. But now we realize that what they actually meant was the ability to fit their work into their lives in more manageable ways. Working from home during the pandemic has meant more pressure and more work hours for many employees. ... Prior to the pandemic, wellness programs were considered an employee benefit, but throughout last year, managers had to take employee wellness into their own hands and make it a core business priority.

"Whereas my conversations about employee engagement and burnout prevention used to primarily be with HR executives, last year I had more conversations about our mental fitness programs with board members, CEOs and other executive leaders."

—Elizabeth Sander, SHRM-SCP, HR consultant and CEO of Juliette Works in New York City

Communication

"One thing that became abundantly clear from the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic was the need for regular communication with all of our 3,000 employees. They not only needed to hear about the actions we were taking to keep our employees safe, they also needed the communication to feel connected to the business. Before the pandemic, we only sporadically had executive-level communications to our teams, but ever since the pandemic began, we've had at least biweekly communications from our executive leadership team."

—Jim Hefti, vice president of HR for Advanced Technology Services, based in Peoria, Ill.

"I have learned that even the quiet ones need to be connected with. Our New York-based company is global, and there are many employees who are generally happy to be left to their devices when working on projects. ... I didn't mind; we are not a company that requires constant meetings and activity on communication channels.

"During the pandemic, I decided to reach out to everyone individually to simply ask them how they are getting on. I really wasn't expecting some of the responses I got. The generally quiet ones jumped at the opportunity of my reaching out to really pour out their hearts, their fears and worries. I realized that as an HR manager, I was lacking the initiative to reach out to all employees.

"I now have it a part of my monthly strategy to reach out to all employees to just ask simply how are they getting on. ... It has helped build a relationship with my whole team, and I have even noticed the quieter employees becoming more productive."

—Ann Young, co-inventor, co-founder and CEO of Fit The Photo in New York City

"While some organizations historically have been hesitant to survey or conduct focus groups, 2020 was the year of 'listening.' HR leaders played an active role in collecting information from employees to ensure strategies developed met both organizational objectives and what employees most needed, wanted and valued. At the top of the list [were] additional resources to support emotional well-being. ... HR leaders responded with additional resources, communications and new policies to support employees, thereby accelerating and normalizing the often 'taboo' conversation around mental health in the workplace."

—Kathleen Schulz, global innovation leader, organizational wellbeing, at Gallagher's, headquartered in Rolling Meadows, Ill.

Wellness

"We've focused on learning ways to realistically effect a healthy work/life balance for our staff. Burnout has historically been very high in IT, but that's only increased during the pandemic. ... Even for me, someone who harps on healthy work habits for our employees, [I] found myself looking at the clock and realizing I hadn't gotten up from my desk since 8 a.m. This just goes to show that we have to be intentional in order to maintain a healthy work culture.

"We began introducing step challenges and non-work-related events like virtual Bingo, workouts and book clubs last year. We've learned that there is a sweet spot when it comes to requiring video in meetings; at first, we set up video for every meeting, but then recognized it was most effective in smaller team settings. We've mastered the skill of creating a positive onboarding experience for employees with zero face-to-face interaction—something I never thought I'd do."

—Meg Riat, SHRM-SCP, HR director at Leaseweb USA in Baltimore

"The pandemic definitely showed us the need to invest in mental health care. It was important to us beforehand, but our group plan's care was shoddy at best. We invested in an add-on as well as a voucher for therapy sessions for any employees who wanted them. In addition to that, our employees spontaneously started up a group therapy session over Zoom. It took place in the mornings before work hours and was completely voluntary—just a place for people to vent, share their fears and concerns, and anything else they wanted to talk about in a safe environment."

—Dan Bailey, president of WikiLawn in Denton, Texas

Empathy

"This pandemic has taught me that empathy and transparency [are] key. Of course, working in HR requires us to always prioritize listening to the needs and concerns of all employees, but the stress and concerns that came with navigating the pandemic, social injustices and a crazy election called for something deeper.

"I learned to lead and listen with empathy by asking myself tough questions like 'Am I taking in others' points of view? Am I understanding where the different members of my team are coming from and their backgrounds and cultures that help them get to these types of decisions?' As our employees' needs quickly evolved, I knew that I had to be willing to leave my ego at the door to really learn about other people's ideas and experiences without being defensive or dismissive."

—Kathleen Weslock, chief people officer of Avalara in Seattle

Importance of HR

"HR has learned how valuable they are. While everyone is talking about AI taking over HR positions, we realized the human touch ... is, well, invaluable. Keeping up morale during the most trying of times was no small feat. Finding and exploring ways for people to keep in contact with each other was imperative. Handling each and every individual challenge as they navigated these waters tested HR's ability to adapt, stay strong and hold down the fort."

—Ravi Parikh, CEO of RoverPass, based in Austin, Texas

Security

"The pandemic has been a huge learning curve for most HR professionals, but one thing that I have noticed now more than ever is how much people need security. I am not just referring to the job and financial security that are always top of the list, but also maintaining secure working relationships, having defined job roles and working toward agreed goals. There has been so much upheaval this past year that I find our people want structure and [to] maintain some normality, which only comes with knowing exactly what is expected of them. These are things that can be controlled in an otherwise uncontrollable world."

—Jessica Salter, people operations specialist at Best Response Media, headquartered in London

Onboarding and Company Culture

"The pandemic taught me the importance of actively bringing new people into the company culture. ... Until 2020, we relied on our general camaraderie and the mood of the office to do the work for us. When you're faced with an entirely virtual onboarding process, it forces you to consider what your company is about and what values you want to instill in new hires.

"We've found it necessary for management and HR to work closely together on this. In some cases, we've assigned veteran co-workers mentorship roles to help ease new people in. You don't want anyone to feel left out or overlooked. We're going to take these lessons forward into 2021 and beyond, even after we are all back in the office."

—Daivat Dholakia, director of operations at Force by Mojo, located in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Training

"One year into the pandemic, I have learned how to value the welfare of my employees more and how to be able to give them the best support possible in times like this. I have been conducting more training and seminars, both for work and personal aspects, so I can help them to cope with work and stress brought about by the situation."

—Sonya Schwartz, founder of Her Norm in the greater Jackson, Miss., area

Digitalization

"Digitalization in the HR department was badly needed, and COVID-19 gave us the right push. Automation and AI-powered applications are indeed the next-generation tools."

—Arigbabu Abayomi, CEO of My Business Plan Writers in Los Angeles.

Adjusting Procedures

"We definitely learned that it's not enough to just set people loose in a work-from-home environment. This isn't about trusting employees to do their work unsupervised, either. We have complete trust in our employees, and this was never brought into question. The problem is that people have different proficiencies with tech and different abilities to work without guidance."

—Carter Seuthe, CEO of Credit Summit, based in Austin, Texas

Adapting Benefits to a Remote Workforce

"This past year at SalesLoft, we were on a mission to prioritize adapting our company perks to complement a remote workforce," including:

- Coordinating its first virtual holiday party.
- Introducing employee resource groups and community groups to bolster connection.
- Offering monthly rest and focus days to improve employees' mental health and well-being.
- Offering all employees a subscription to the Headspace app, and having a mental health counselor available to all employees on a monthly basis.
- Extending maternity leave to 16 weeks.

"There is so much that I learned this past year. I think the biggest thing is how COVID and social distancing [have] shown us that almost everyone can work remotely. I think this will forever change the way we look at work and what companies expect of employees."

—Katie Cox, director of employee experience & culture at SalesLoft in Atlanta

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