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Confronting 2020's workplace challenges takes creativity, compassion, courage

By **BRENDA RICHARDSON**

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Maureen Hoersten, left, chief operating officer at LaSalle Network, and Jessica Schaeffer, head of marketing, converse Sept. 16, 2020, during a walk and talk meeting in Elmhurst. (James C. Svehla/For the Chicago Tribune)

Mental health. Physical well-being. Diversity. Inclusion. Isolation. The list of challenges facing organizations and their employees in 2020 is unlike any that people currently in the workforce have encountered. Agile employers have answered the adversity by listening to stressed colleagues and undertaking initiatives to keep employees focused and engaged, maintaining and even improving their organization's culture.

Finding creative ways to keep a corporate culture thriving goes far in nurturing a sense of community as companies look ahead to business as usual — pandemic and beyond.

It's important for companies to understand the opportunity they have, said Kate North, vice president at Colliers International's Workplace Advisory, which helps organizations develop work-from-home and workplace strategies.

"Smart organizations that are thinking about health and 'How do I engage my employees' hearts and minds during this period of time?' are going to be the heroes as we start to move through this into the next chapter," she said.

Faced with the reality that this work-from-home experiment could last indefinitely, Chicago's Top Workplaces are adopting new strategies and re-imagining how work gets done. They also are reflecting on their values and culture and the practices that promote that culture.

Promoting diversity and inclusion

The renewed momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement fueled by the death of George Floyd has resulted in more companies focusing on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, and with renewed urgency. ORBA, a Chicago-based public accounting firm, formed a diversity and inclusion committee to identify ways the firm can foster an environment where all employees feel included and respected.

"The committee actually was something we had planned to roll out in the next year or two, and it just got a swift kick in the butt with everything happening in America," said Sarah Wonnell, ORBA's human resources director. "We sent out a message shortly after the initial riots in Chicago saying we are troubled and saddened by everything that's going on, and we want to create a space where people can feel included and accepted no matter what type of diversity you are."

The committee sent out a survey asking employees what diversity, inclusion and inequality means to them, and what would they like to see.

"We don't want it to be a group that is the lecture police," Wonnell said. "We want it to be something that helps teach and celebrate our differences and how to have conversations that if you feel that you're being excluded or if you feel that you were having an adverse reaction because of it, that these are how to have the conversations. Our doors for upper management are always open as well as members of the committee."

How companies lead their employees right now is the ultimate test of organizational values and will define corporate footprints for generations to come, said Erin Thomas, vice president and head of talent acquisition and diversity, inclusion and belonging at Upwork, an online talent marketplace.

“There is no one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to creating an inclusive and psychologically safe culture,” said Thomas, who suggests companies create intentional spaces to uncover the experiences, sentiments and needs of employees of color.

Being the only woman in the room is still a common experience in much of corporate America. Last year, ORBA created a Women’s Alliance group to advance the personal and professional development of women throughout the industry.

“As an industry, we see that males and females come into accounting evenly,” Wonnell said. “But as they progress in their careers, we see the female numbers shrink industrywide. We wanted to make sure that we do everything we can to be supportive and to help people be successful in their career, whatever they want that to be.”

Chicago law firm Perkins Coie also received an outpouring of concern about civil unrest. The company conducted a workshop for Black employees to talk about the trauma of racial violence and what it’s like to be Black in America.

“We had four small group sessions and then offered them for one-on-one if employees wanted to set them up on their own,” said Jennifer Bluestein, Perkins Coie’s chief talent officer. “We’ve also rolled out additional self-service tools like Headspace, an app for meditation and wellness. In the first two weeks, 20% of our personnel downloaded it.”

Onboarding employees remotely

It’s not uncommon for companies to hire and offer orientation for new workers remotely during the pandemic. Technology is driving the process. Online applications, video interviewing and virtual onboarding are being combined to enable swift, effective hiring.

GoHealth’s onboarding program was in the planning phases before the company, a health insurance marketplace, went remote, but it was expedited during the lockdown.

The firm added more than 200 agents over the summer in Chicago and other locations, and GoHealth rolled out a series of live virtual training courses for new hires.

“It gives them the opportunity to learn about our business and what we do and what different departments do that impact our overall business model,” said Christa Gochenaur, human resources director. “And it gives them that opportunity to interact with leadership, other new hires and engage with peers that they wouldn’t have the benefit of meeting in their day-to-day business.”

GoHealth also paired each new hire with an employee who became their corporate cultural tour guide. The company shipped laptops to new hires to avoid having employees visit the office to pick up equipment. “We’ve had a few state requirements where we had to fingerprint people, so they had to show up to designated spots in Chicago and Lindon, Utah,” Gochenaur said. “But a huge percentage of our employees right now have never set foot in the office.”

Asahi Kasei Bioprocess America, a Glenview-based manufacturer in the virus filtration market, has hired 16 employees during the pandemic, eight of whom never visited the facility or met anyone in person before receiving job offers. Most new hires go through an onboarding process that is customized for their role and typically consists of a series of one-on-one or small group meetings via video conferences over a two-week period.

“All of our customers are racing each other to find vaccines or treatments for COVID-19,” said company President Christopher Nordhoff. “... We’ve been hiring like crazy, and it’s really been challenging for our HR team to fill so many open positions during a pandemic because we haven’t always been able to welcome them into the facility, and hiring managers are working from home themselves.”

Promoting a work-life balance

The fear of not knowing what could happen next can take a toll on workers’ mental and physical health. Organizations are promoting well-being strategies to improve employee health and, in turn, the bottom line. At the team level, Upwork’s Thomas recommends employers humanize the workplace with more meaningful interactions.

“Leaders should be proactive and specific when asking how they can best provide support to employees,” she said. “Ask specific questions about employee well-being: ‘How are you, really?’ Or ‘Are you getting enough sleep?’”

Thomas suggests team leaders ask what they or their organization can do to support employees' unique needs. For example, what additional resources do people need right now? Or is there something the company can do to make life easier?

“Employees need leaders to give them explicit permission to take time to care for themselves and their loved ones and find ways to cope with the traumas this year has doled out,” she said.

She said managers should continue to prioritize work tasks so employees can focus on what is most important. Switching hats from work life to home life can be difficult for some employees.

Some organizations are encouraging employees to take off for the lunch hour, and no meetings are allowed. Perkins Coie rolled out policies such as reduced, flexible work schedules and 30 hours of paid emergency time off for employees to tend to personal issues related to or resulting from the health crisis.

“If you need time off because of this emergency, whether that’s to get your elderly parents groceries because they can’t go out or you’re sick or you don’t have day care or whatever, or you’re stressed out, you have this extra 30 hours now,” Bluestein said.

Some employees began taking time off for therapy. Others use it to care for children or parents. Some workers have requested time off during the day to run errands and grocery shop without having to worry about crowds, Bluestein said.

To help avoid burnout, North knows of one organization that decided to restructure the day.

“We thought about how people do focus work in the morning and then meetings are in the afternoon,” she said. “Other organizations are saying, ‘What if we all take off for the lunch hour and there are no meetings allowed, and we encourage everybody to take lunch or go for a walk?’ Then they have an internal Yammer communications tool where they can then blog about what they did to restore.”



Maureen Hoersten, center, chief operating officer at LaSalle Network, and Jessica Schaeffer, head of marketing, converse during a walk and talk meeting on Sept. 16, 2020, in Elmhurst. (James C. Svehla/For the Chicago Tribune)

LaSalle Network, a staffing, recruiting and culture firm, came up with some creative ways to keep employees connected and engaged.

“We did a virtual roast of the CEO, me, where we let the staff, whether you had been here a year or 15 years, you were eligible to do a roast of me to celebrate our 22nd year in business,” said CEO Tom Gimbel. “We also had a couple of barbecues in public areas where people could come in shifts of no more than 10 or 15 people, and I cooked hot dogs for people, one in the suburbs, one in the city.”

Not all jobs lend themselves to remote work. Brian Buesing, an associate scientist at Asahi Kasei Bioprocess, said he was at his workplace about 80% of the time during the summer working on research projects.

“The company took strides to minimize the number of people in the office at any time,” Buesing said. “The skeleton crew that was in the office was adhering to strict masking guidelines, and some increased cleaning practices helped keep the office as germ-free as possible. Management also made sure that all employees and contractors had unlimited paid sick time during this period. Folks who had a slight fever or a sore throat could stay home without needing to take a financial hit.”

He said there were a few instances where someone had family members who were exposed or tested positive for COVID-19, and those employees' departments would work from home for a short while to help mitigate any spread.

Juggling children and work

The pandemic has opened a window into the world of working from home with young children.

Some workplaces have responded by setting flexible work hours and providing child care services. For instance, Chicago financial services firm William Blair is providing discounted tutoring and nanny resources.

Plante Moran, a public accounting and management consulting firm, formed a parents committee to come up with creative opportunities to support working parents.

Executives at LaSalle Network set up individual chats with working parents.

“We said, ‘We understand that you’ve got to balance family with your kids not in school and no day care and work, and we’re here for you,’” Gimbel said. “All we ask is that you be honest with us and share with us what you’re feeling.’ I think that getting it out in the open and that it was OK to talk about it was really a game changer.”

Despite working from home with two rambunctious young boys, Alison Fetzer, an audit manager at ORBA, has managed to make it work. “It’s definitely been an adjustment,” she said. “We had a pretty good rhythm of getting them to school or getting them to day care, going to work and then coming home. And then when the pandemic started, the kindergartner went remote and we stopped sending the 3-year-old to day care.”

On top of that, Fetzer’s husband, a commercial pilot, has been home more as airlines weather the pandemic. “There’s been this new reshuffling in sort of figuring out how to have everybody in the house,” said Fetzer. “It was a great opportunity to spend more time together, and then as it progressed, I think it got more challenging. But I think we’re getting these rhythms down.”

Occasionally, Fetzer’s 6-year-old son will pop up in Zoom calls when she is talking with co-workers.

“What has been different about the pandemic is now everybody has to juggle it, whether they were the colleagues who have adult children, pets or roommates, you know they are home too,” she said. “More people, I think, are getting an insight into this dance that working parents do to make sure that everything gets done.”

An opportunity for reinvention

Facing the challenges of the COVID-19 landscape, there is an opportunity for companies to build a more sustainable and resilient future.

“When the only real clarity we have is that the future is uncertain, companies have the opportunity to shape a future of work that is highly human,” Thomas said.

“Current and prospective employees are paying attention," she said. "When the economy rebounds, they'll remember how you treated them and will be choosy about where they spend the majority of their waking hours.”

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