The SCOOP

Cultural Dynamics When Returning to the Office

COVID-19 vaccinations are underway and at some point this year, many of us who have been working from home will be returning to the office in some capacity. Reopening offices, or increasing the numbers of employees working in the office, will require literally hundreds of decisions to be made and communicated.

Logistical issues to be addressed include:
- When to bring employees back to the office
- Who to bring back to the office
- Whether to require or encourage employees to return to the office
- How to ensure the health and safety of employees in the office

While much has been, and will be, written about the logistics of returning to the office, this Scoop focuses on the cultural implications that a return to the office may have.

Our organizational post-pandemic life will be different than our pre-pandemic life. To help employees transition, it may be helpful to talk about "moving forward" rather than "getting back to normal" or "the new normal."

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

As we move forward, it will be important to understand that our organizational cultures will not be what they were the last time everyone was physically together. Leaders and employees have all changed over the last year and the changes have occurred while largely isolated from managers, teams and peers. While video conferencing has helped maintain connections, it has limitations. It is likely that in some ways, while working remotely organizations have been spending cultural capital rather than building it. The strongest organizations will recognize that time and energy will be needed to rebuild the organizational culture as employees come back together.

As employees return to the office it's a great opportunity to affirm, and perhaps reimagine, your culture. For instance, if it has been a norm and a badge of honor in your organization for employees to come into work sick, now is the time to make it clear that staying home when you don't feel well is expected and will be respected.

Following are other cultural norms to consider:

The Expectation of Face Time in the Office. If coming in early and staying late is valued, what impact does that have on mothers and fathers? Does coming in early and staying late actually result in greater productivity? How will expectations change for the number of days employees in certain positions can work from home?

Office Chatter. Employees working from home and in the office have different expectations for disruptions. If employees have been working from home on their own, they are accustomed to managing their own schedule with few disruptions. Moving back into an office setting with more noise and visitors will be an adjustment. How can the organization help support employees through this transition? Some employees will be very excited to reconnect with coworkers and others may long for the quiet, uninterrupted days of working from home!

Employee Values. A lot has changed over the past year and a lot of individuals across the country have changed their priorities. Even employees eager to return to the office likely want to hang onto some aspects of the schedule and priorities they created during the pandemic. How can the organization support a renewed focus on personal wellbeing, family or work/life balance?

Office Celebrations. Most of us enjoy the office bagels, donuts, celebratory cakes and occasional shared lunches at work. How will that look different as you go back to the office? Setting expectations up front can help minimize hurt feelings and potential conflicts between coworkers.

Politics. While we've been socially distancing the political landscape has shifting significantly. Reminding employees of expectations to maintain a respectful work environment will be helpful as we transition from a life of social media to in-person interactions with co-workers.

Team Dynamics. If some employees have been working from home, while others have been required to work from the office, there may be feelings of guilt and resentment on both sides. Highlight the contributions of both those who have been in the office and those working from home. Look for opportunities to create cross-functional teams working toward a common goal.

EMPLOYEE NEEDS

A successful return to the office will also require organizations to pay attention to individual employees' needs. Many employees may experience fear and anxiety upon returning to the office.

The fear may be physical as employees worry about who has or has not been vaccinated, co-workers that refuse to wear a mask (or leave their nose uncovered), or the proximity to team members while in a conference room.

Social anxiety may be an issue as well. We have all, to one degree or another, had limited in-person social interactions over the last 10 months. Being in an office with other people may feel overwhelming at first.

Uncertainty around things we used to take for granted, such as how we greet each other, and what to talk about while waiting to get coffee, can lead to anxiety and stress. In addition, in-person facial expressions and body language may be difficult to interpret or result in sensory overload.

Both fear for physical safety and social anxiety may result in heightened sensitivity, miscommunication, increased use of sick leave and lower levels of engagement and productivity.

It will be helpful for organizations to be clear about expectations and provide tools and resources for employees to use to navigate the transition back to the office. It is also important to reaffirm respect and acceptance for other people's opinions on how close people should stand or sit. Chances are, people's personal "bubble" may be larger than it was this time last year!

Providing resources through an Employee Assistance Program and articles on self-care on your intranet are two ways to support employees. In addition, frequent check-ins with employees to see how they are coping with their return to the office can help identify and address potential issues.

It may also make sense to stagger the return to the office – perhaps one-third of employees come in for two days then return to working from home, then the next one-third and the next are in the office for two days, working up to having half the employees in the office at one time, and over several weeks getting to the point of having everyone in the office at one time.

SUMMARY

Transitioning back to the office will take preparation. Your state guidelines will provide resources on logistical requirements, but the cultural components will be what stands out to employees. The emotions employees feel as they return to the office, the work and social expectations placed on them, and the acceptance they receive from team members will play a critical role in a healthy transition back to the office.

Organizations and leaders that take these factors into account and clarify expectations will see their cultures rebound more quickly and with more resilience.

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