Redefining the Workplace

TRANSPARENCY, LEADERSHIP CRITICAL DURING WORK-FROM-HOME ERA

A changing workplace. The evolution of how we work. Increasing needs of employees. Decision making during uncertainty. The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the human resources function, and a long overdue reckoning with systemic racism and inequality has emphasized the importance of diversity at all levels. Chief human resources officers are leading the way as companies navigate these challenges, which have accelerated changes in how we work, says Tracy Keogh, chief human resources officer at HP.

“The future is now,” Keogh says. “You’ll see the companies that have strong HR organizations come out of this better situated, which is always what happens in a crisis.”

The evolving role of human resources leaders during this unprecedented time, and lessons learned so far, were the focus of a FORTUNE CHRO Professional Council virtual gathering on August 27. Joining Keogh were Tracy Layney, chief human resources officer at Levi Strauss & Co.; Ellyn Shook, chief leadership and human resources officer at Accenture; Mala Singh, chief people officer at Electronic Arts; and Grace Zuncic, chief people and culture officer at Chobani. The conversation was moderated by Kristen Bellstrom, FORTUNE features editor and co-chair of FORTUNE MPW Summit.

The sudden switch to remote work in March, as the pandemic hit the U.S., continues to disrupt companies. Working from home crimps creativity when coworkers can’t sketch a design on a whiteboard nor gather around a monitor—“the serendipitous interaction” of office life, as Singh puts it. “All of those things are not as enabled by technology as we would hope,” she says. Singh says CHROs had to become work-model architects, understanding deeply the company’s work and determining how to do that work going forward.

Supporting parents who are home-schooling while working from home has been a priority. “Families are struggling with these needs,” says Zuncic, noting other employees may be caring for an older relative. “People are going to have different needs, and the most important thing is to listen to the needs, to be responsive, and to have elements of fairness and consistency about how policies are designed.”

New challenges require innovative solutions to meet employees’ needs. When schools shut down in March, Chobani immediately offered a $100/day subsidy for child care and offered refurbished computers for children’s remote learning. Accenture partnered with learning centers so employees’ children could receive proctoring and enrichment outside the home during distance learning. HP created homework clubs and offered ergonomic tips to create a small school within a home. HP also rescheduled morning meetings to start 5 or 10 minutes later, realizing home-schooling parents are helping children log on to laptops at the top of the hour. “All the parents have become the IT experts, they’re the help desk at home,” says Keogh.

While technology has unlocked productivity, it is also draining the people who are using it. Addressing employees’ well-being and mental health is an acute issue. “This is what’s keeping me up at night. This more than anything,” says Layney. Levi Strauss is launching a “well-being umbrella” to help managers support employees in a multifaceted way. “We are being asked to meet a set of needs that we’ve never been asked to meet before that are highly individualized, and that requires advanced leadership and management,” Layney says.
Burnout is at epidemic proportions, says Shook, and companies need to give employees tools to instill resilience. “I do think that the trauma of this time will be lasting,” Shook adds. And companies’ responses can have lasting effects. “People will remember long after the pandemic is over those companies that led with values, and also created value,” Shook says. “Transparency and trust are the central themes and currency of this time.”

Despite record unemployment in many countries, we will return to a time when people have choices for employment, says Shook. Keogh says people are using this time as an opportunity to recruit, resulting in a lot of talent movement, especially in diverse populations. She recommends managers have retention conversations with employees and understand the benefits they can offer for a flexible workplace, such as leaves of absence or job-sharing.

If the rapid switch to remote work in March seemed daunting, what’s ahead may be more difficult. “Returning our people back to our offices is actually going to be harder than removing them from the offices. Much harder,” says Singh, noting her company’s decisions will be anchored in scientific data. “It’s only been six adrenaline-fueled, acute months of work, and we’re not willing to say yet that how we have worked in this time should define what this company looks like going forward.”

While some employees crave a return to the office, executives should be careful about giving a date so they don’t lose employees’ trust if the timeline slips. “The level of communication you have—how transparent you are with your people—is more critical now than ever. It’s really, really important as you’re continuing to pivot and figure out how to operate in this environment,” says Keogh.

Zuncic says the moment offers the chance not just to survive, but to transform. “Heads of HR have more permission than ever to elevate their thinking and push forward the discussion with their leadership team,” she says. Zuncic thinks many workplace innovations in response to the pandemic should continue. “The things we like most off the menu that we did in a time of crisis, let’s keep doing them and let’s fine-tune them and let’s sharpen them up. Let’s make them work for long-term, sustainable policy business decisions,” she says.

The new way of working creates opportunities in the area of inclusion and belonging, with remote work allowing companies to hire from anywhere, says Layney. “I think there is so much opportunity embedded in this moment that if we just harness it, it can actually help us address multiple crises that we are facing right now.”

Keogh says the pandemic helped everybody focus on social issues like racial justice, and people—including shareholders—want companies to help solve these critical issues. “It is part of the business imperative,” says Keogh. “It’s never been such a critical time to be in HR to guide your company through these really, really important things, and to have an impact and make change happen. And the most important thing is keeping this momentum going.”