Forging Stronger Virtual Connections Among Employees

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, remote work was a fringe benefit at many organizations. Now, nearly 40% of employees have transitioned to remote working arrangements, according to a survey from Boston Consulting Group. This signals the new workplace reality: Remote work is here to stay.

Unfortunately, that's not a welcomed change for many people. Namely, some employers are concerned about burnout and dwindling employee connections. Considering that impromptu hallway talks and quick chats after meetings are effectively gone, this sentiment is understandable. With workers virtually isolated, it can seem like entire teams have been broken up into individual silos, no longer operating in tandem.

However, remote work doesn't need to come at the cost of human connections. With a little effort, employers can help foster virtual connections among their employees. And that's important, especially given that 43% of workers consider team building and collaboration as critical workplace aspects, according to a Gensler Research Institute survey.

This article offers some ways employers can bring teams together and forge stronger connections, no matter how far apart employees may be.

Encourage Webcams

Social distancing doesn't mean the end of face-to-face interactions. There are plenty of software solutions that are great tools for giving employees face time with one another. Employers should consider making webcams mandatory during meetings, instead of only using audio. Not only can this help meeting engagement and attentiveness, but it can also foster deeper interpersonal connections.

Be Mindful of Word Choice

When relying on written communication, words must be used carefully, since there are no nonverbal cues to pick up on. Employees may need additional context in emails to prevent misunderstandings, especially if the topic is critical in nature. For example, an email that says "Do this again" reads a lot differently than "I thought you did a nice job on this, but we need you to redo it for X, Y, Z reasons." Employers can't rely on a quick check-in to ensure an employee understood the sentiment in their email— they must get it right the first time.

Respect Everyone's Time

Meeting fatigue is increasingly cited as a top workplace complaint — especially now, since all meetings are conducted on the same laptop screen. Employers must be aware of this and should do their best to reduce unnecessary meetings. Understanding that meeting fatigue can work against efforts to increase connectivity, some organizations have blocked off certain days of the week when no meetings are allowed.

Promote Team-building Activities

Socialization is a big part of the workplace. When employees are separated, they need new ways to

decompress and get their minds off work. Employers can help by hosting team-building activities or similar events. Ideas include:

- Virtual trivia or board games
- Virtual happy hours or recipe swaps
- Virtual craft nights
- Holiday costume contests

Employers don't necessarily need to facilitate these events, either. Instead, they can assemble a team of employee volunteers who can coordinate and schedule different social events.

Get Management Involved

It's important for managers to be connected with their employees, as this can strengthen workplace bonds, increase worker buy-in and show employees they're valued. Managers should be tuned in to employee engagement and should make themselves present around the virtual workplace. This means sending emails directly to employees, participating in social activities and providing transparency on important organization news.

Hold Virtual Office Hours

Sometimes employees need to talk to their managers about topics that aren't appropriate for group settings. And since managers are notoriously in and out of meetings all day, it can be hard to find time to bring up these conversations. Managers can get around this by holding virtual office hours. These would be times when employees can virtually connect and discuss what's on their mind. Without dedicated time slots for these talks, employees may question whether their topic is important enough to warrant a meeting and may never bring it up. By holding office hours, employers are showing that they want to connect with their employees, no matter the subject.

Summary

Remote working has not eliminated the need for social connectivity in the workplace. If anything, it's only gone up. That means employers must get creative if they want to keep workers engaged and productive. Luckily, there are many virtual opportunities to do this.

Speak with Employco for more virtual workplace guidance, including resources for employees.

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