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The Way Forward: A Look at Post-crisis Work Life



Laurie Ruettimann, author and host of Punk Rock HR

The novel coronavirus was the workforce trend nobody saw coming.

COVID-19 disrupted everything we know about HR, labor policies, and technology. The virus closed our offices, tested our collective ability to stay connected, and pushed our teams to collaborate in fresh ways.

The coronavirus canceled work. Can human resources bring it back?

The simple answer is yes, HR can do anything. But nothing happens in human resources without the partnership of leaders, employees, and even contractors and suppliers. Considering the massive scope of disruption, the onus is on the total workforce to work together and develop and implement flexible, personalized, and adaptable post-COVID-19 people management strategies.

Karina Schultheis is a Manager of Human Insights & HCM Evangelism with UKG who believes that human resources departments and executive teams are in a unique position to rethink the future of work beginning right now. Whether it's extending remote work policies or rethinking compensation practices, Karina believes we're all in this together. She said, "The most successful employers will take this opportunity to be transparent and collaborative. More than anything, business leaders will need to carefully balance taking care of the bottom line with taking extraordinary care of their people."

Every human resources leader will face a once-in-a-lifetime challenge at work. Yours is to help employees return to work and create a safe, inclusive, productive environment where people gain dignity, self-worth, and financial security in the wake of a pandemic. How is this done? By partnering with your leadership team and addressing culture, benefits and compensation, technology, and the emerging work-from-home trend. You will also need to consider the impact of diversity, inclusion, equity, and belonging on your business strategies.

This is no straightforward task. The world is uncertain, and everything about work is different, but it's leaders like **you** who will rise to the challenge and be at the heart of considerable transformation in the next decade. Let's go!

Everything starts with culture

Legendary management consultant Peter Drucker once said that “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” He didn’t mean that strategy was a worthless endeavor. He meant that organizations with defined values and healthy behaviors outperform companies with toxic environments and rigid policies. To be the best in the marketplace, leaders must inspire the best within your workforce. In that way, it’s easy to see how a healthy culture and people-first strategy go hand in hand with traditional business goals and objectives.

In the glory days before COVID-19, some companies struggled to get culture and strategy right. Instead of putting employees first or thinking of ways to empower and promote workers who are historically underrepresented, they offered ping-pong tables and beer fridges as part of an illogical strategy to show that they were an employer of choice.

Nobody was fooled then, and they won’t be fooled now.

How you treat your workers, suppliers, vendors, consultants, and even freelancers will be the measure of how you’re judged by customers and clients in the post-COVID-19 world. Nobody knows this better than Brian Chesky, the CEO of Airbnb. He wrote a heartfelt letter to his workforce informing them of layoffs.¹ His team then created and published a 21st-century alumni list to help the talented former employees who were out of work due to the reductions-in-force.²

The Airbnb layoff announcement is the gold standard of COVID-19 crisis communications. Why? People are at the heart of the message. If you read the memo, there’s a logical strategy to help the affected employees find work. They keep the business jargon to a minimum and replace buzzwords with direct language. And Chesky reassures investors, suppliers, vendors, and consultants that Airbnb takes its responsibilities seriously without making it the primary message.

Brian Chesky also answers questions that every leader will have to answer in the age of the coronavirus.

- Have we operated in good faith and with a **people-first** agenda?
- Is our decision-making process **transparent**?
- Did we **do right** by our total workforce, suppliers, and business partners?

These are tough questions during the best of times. During a pandemic, they are the critical markers of an organization’s commitment to its healthy culture and people-first strategy.

How would your company fare if it had to communicate unwelcome news? Jason Lauritsen is an author, keynote speaker, and consultant who helps executives tackle employee engagement issues. Jason believes that COVID-19 reveals an organization’s true values and behaviors in a time of crisis.

When we spoke about the impact of the coronavirus on culture, Jason said, “You don’t know who your genuine friends are until something hard needs to happen. Who drives you to the airport? Who comforts you during a tragedy? Who shows up to help you move, every single time? Real friends are there when things are hard and the fun disappears. The same is true in a work relationship.”



Jason warns companies not to wait for a crisis, or a financial meltdown, to think of how culture and strategy go hand in hand. He adds, “The residual effect of how organizations are treating people right now will probably color that relationship for years to come. Companies that get culture and strategy wrong in a post-COVID-19 world will have trouble recovering down the road.”

With all this talk of getting culture wrong, it’s important to talk about who’s getting it right. The Business Roundtable is an esteemed group of America’s most notable CEOs. These leaders recognize the historic magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis and are focused on ways to support employees, customers, communities, and the country. You can learn more about these companies and how they are responding by visiting their [website](#).

Another outstanding example of people-first leadership during the coronavirus is PepsiCo. At the beginning of the pandemic, they increased pay for some workers by \$100 a week. They also committed to hiring 6,000 workers, offered sick leave for quarantined employees, and paid employees who are forced to stay home to take care of their children two-thirds of their normal wages for up to 12 weeks.³

The Phoenix Suns are a professional basketball team whose players and staff were sidelined since the NBA season was canceled on March 11 due to the coronavirus. Philanthropy is a core value of the organization, and they have provided meals for healthcare workers, funded antibody test kits for first responders, and donated thousands of pounds of food and other supplies for children and families.⁴

So, was Peter Drucker correct? Does culture eat strategy for breakfast? In the age of COVID-19, the most successful organizations are harkening back to their core values and embracing what makes them great in the first place: **their people**. If you want to survive and thrive in the post-COVID-19 world, it’s time to take a page from some of the best businesses in the world and prioritize a healthy culture and people-first strategy before it’s too late.

Compensation and benefits are a lifeline

Companies faced a shortage of skilled workers long before COVID-19, and recruiters all over the world used lavish compensation and benefits packages to attract and keep the best and brightest workers. A healthy base salary and bonuses were common. So were other perks like tuition reimbursement, childcare benefits, gym memberships, corporate discounts, commuter benefits, and even personal concierge services so that employees could spend more time thinking about work and less time doing ordinary chores around the home.

Today, the market has shifted. It’s tempting for employers to slash compensation budgets and eliminate benefits and perks to reduce operating expenses; however, your organization’s instinct to cut costs will make you less competitive.

Willis Towers Watson, a leading global advisory firm, conducted a survey examining the business impact of COVID-19 on health and wellness benefits.⁵ They found that nearly half of respondents (47%) are enhancing health benefits, 45% are broadening well-being programs, and 33% plan to improve their paid time off (PTO) or vacation programs. Many are preserving well-being plans because of the significant physical, emotional, and financial challenges faced by employees and recent hires.



It may seem counterintuitive to enhance healthcare and well-being programs in an environment where furloughs, layoffs, and economic uncertainty are common. But sometimes compensation and benefits are more than just a tool to find and keep great workers. They are a lifeline.

Mollie Lombardi is a Boston-based researcher, speaker, and technology consultant who works with leading organizations to help rethink the world of work. Mollie believes that companies have a moral responsibility to safeguard the emotional, physical, and financial well-being of the workforce.

When asked about the link between COVID-19 and the importance of compensation and benefits, Mollie said, “Stress is linked to almost every illness and medical condition. It’s also linked to organizational productivity. You can’t afford to have your workers worrying about bills and unpaid medical expenses. It will wreck your business down the road. Now is the time to consider robust benefits packages and on-demand ways to pay your workers.”

If you’re looking for permission to drop the on-site dry-cleaning perks and subsidized pet walking services, you got it. Some of those benefits no longer make sense in an era when work is changing. But investing in health and well-being, along with recognizing your workforce and thanking them for their hard work, will never go out of style.

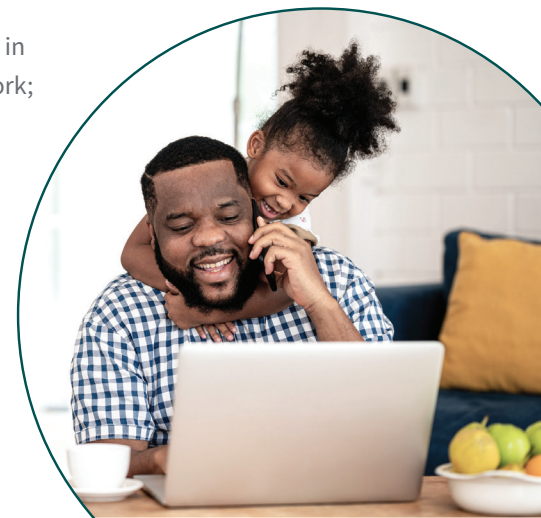
Mary Faulkner is a Denver-based former HR leader turned consultant who helps companies tackle complex transformation projects. She believes that COVID-19 is an opportunity for human resources leaders to help employees regain control of their finances. She said, “I think you’ll see a greater shift towards including financial health as part of the benefits package. This was happening before the pandemic. Benefits providers partnered with financial firms or third-party intermediaries to provide a dashboard and resources for employees.”

One example of a company taking a novel approach to benefits is One Medical. They offer employees the opportunity to cash out unused PTO days, giving them freedom to manage their total rewards packages in uncertain times. The Container Store is another great organization that was affected by the coronavirus but still offers a 24-hour employee assistance program, online leadership development courses, and celebrations like “We Love Our Employees Day.” And Minnesota-based manufacturer 3M doubled down on flexible work arrangements, stress management coaching, and parenting resources during the pandemic.

Work is where people should gain dignity, self-worth, and financial security. If you keep the well-being of your workers in mind, even when you’re forced to make tough decisions, you will end up on the right side of history.

HR technology will always need humans

Years ago, HR teams were designed around skills and specialties defined in the 1990s. There were administrators who managed mounds of paperwork; recruiters who coordinated hiring; payroll and benefits specialists who owned onboarding and managed paychecks and deductions; training managers who made sure you knew how to do your job; and HR generalists with expertise in employee relations. At some point, companies hired human resource information system (HRIS) specialists to deal with newfangled computers.



The Great Recession of 2008 sparked a significant change in the structure and delivery of HR services. Roles were evaluated, positions were consolidated, and companies leaned heavily on technology and outsourced service providers to reduce inefficiencies and improve productivity.

The results were less than stellar, and employees felt like their local human resources team was more distant than ever. So, companies created the role of the HR business partner. While technology isn't going anywhere, companies realized that healthy cultures and people-first strategies are built in partnership with robust HR teams. Chatbots and algorithms alone won't do.

The novel coronavirus presents an additional challenge to human resources departments. How do you embrace emerging technologies while still staying relevant, valid, and *employed*?

The first step is to stop fearing the unknown and start developing IT expertise ourselves. If we can see the future, we can shape it.

Don MacPherson is an HR technology veteran and entrepreneur who is now exploring the trends shaping the way we live and work through the 12 Geniuses podcast. I asked Don about the future of HR and technology, and he's betting on human resources leaders to be the missing link between machines and a healthy culture.

He said, "We overstate the promise of technology. Any program or platform without an advisor or support is years from being able to solve the sophisticated people challenges most enterprise organizations face."

Can HR professionals learn to advise and support a technology-friendly environment? Of course. Most of them are comfortable using their mobile phones. They embraced alternative work policies, instituted new programs, and hopped on video conference calls during the early days of the pandemic. And they already rely on dashboards and spreadsheets to communicate vital people-related information to leaders and supervisors throughout their organizations.

But some HR professionals may worry about the technology on the horizon. That's why future-thinking human resources leaders should depend on their technology partners and ask for the best training out there. Some companies are leveraging novel forms of learning like microlearning, augmented reality, and virtual reality. Does it sound scary? It doesn't have to be. The right partner will teach you how to use their platforms, sharpen your skills, and help you grow as a leader.

There are other options for learning too. User conferences, local user groups, and participation in regional user group meetings are other ways to stay on top of the latest trends in HR technology. The novel coronavirus disrupted many of these live events, but the best technology companies are using virtual event platforms to help customers learn and grow without leaving the safety of their homes.

The past ten years showed us that HR's reliance on technology will increase. It's impossible to source, screen, hire, onboard, pay, assess, review, train, promote, motivate or exit a worker without some proficiency in cloud-based HR platforms. Thankfully, HR technology companies are investing time and money in creating a user experience that mimics some of the best consumer websites.

Technology plays a role in all aspects of HR — from disaster readiness to payroll to benefits. Companies and HR departments who take the time to invest and become proficient in a people-first technology strategy will reap the rewards of consistency and continuity if COVID-19 or another disaster ever rears its head again.



The “how” of work is changing

As the COVID-19 crisis unfolded, business language expanded to include terms like work from home, remote work, and virtual everything. Unfortunately, people used those words to mean various things. One company might use the phrase *telecommuting*, while another might call it *remote work*, but they both mean a temporary policy change meant to accommodate employees, contractors, and consultants during a pandemic.

Or is it a permanent change? And how do we know this isn't a fad?

The very nature of work is changing, and leaders are faced with the impossible task of setting a people-first strategy while differentiating between the temporary nature of a crisis and the long-term impact of rapidly growing worker expectations. Before you get lost in a debate on the future of work or try to rewrite your company's handbook to accommodate alternative work policies and programs, try aligning your leadership team around the common definitions of today's most important terms.



Distributed work

When an organization has employees working in different geographic locations and collaborating in real time. This can be between office locations, remote workers, and telecommuters. (This can be a combination of different out-of-office work strategies.)



Flexible schedules

With flexible schedules, employees may work outside of normal office hours and are often allowed to complete part of their work at an out-of-office location.



Compressed workweeks

A compressed workweek allows an employee to work a traditional 40-hour workweek in less than the traditional number of workdays. For example, four 10-hour days in a week for 40 hours.⁶



Remote work

An employee can work from anywhere in the world, unrestricted by time zones, geographical location or country. They are rarely (and sometimes never) required to come into the office.



Telecommuting

An employee can work from anywhere outside the office within specific parameters set by the company. These parameters often include a geographical location, time zone or remote office setting. When telecommuting, employees are expected to occasionally come to the office for in-person meetings, client meetings, and training.



Work from home

People working from where they live. It's that simple.

Once you align the language within your organization, it's time to answer the question: Is my organization a candidate for alternative work policies and programs?

Lars Schmidt is a former human resources leader at National Public Radio (NPR) and Ticketmaster. Lars believes that distributed work is on the rise, but he cautions that a one-size-fits-all approach will never work.

“The shift to remote happened overnight as COVID-19 became the great accelerator for change. People who had the privilege of working remotely also bore the brunt as they juggled childcare, eldercare, and the general stress and anxiety of living through a global pandemic. As more companies embrace distributed work, whether through fully remote or hybrid models, companies will need to adapt their HR practices and technology systems for this shift.”

Companies like Twitter⁷ and Shopify⁸ are leading the charge to reduce commercial real estate expenses and keep workers at home forever. They examined their cultures at great length and deemed them healthy enough to exist outside of a cubicle. But not every company can facilitate alternative work policies and programs, and not every employee will be comfortable working from an apartment or a local coffee shop.

Back in 2017, enormous companies like Aetna, Bank of America, IBM, and Yahoo either eliminated or reduced their telecommuting programs to increase productivity.⁹ Also, working from home is expensive. Beyond the cost of a desk and a comfortable chair, there are other expenses like higher household electricity bills, printers, additional monitors, and reliable Wi-Fi. And here's the most important question: Who restocks the espresso machine?

Companies build the best alternative work policies and programs on **security, collaboration, and workflow**. Each organization will have unique conditions that require consideration. However, before you take a bite of the work-from-home apple, it's important to perform a job analysis and understand who makes up your total workforce, how they contribute to your organization, and how they make your company shine.

An in-depth job analysis provides information on the roles that exist and which employees are the best fit for specific jobs. It's a crucial exercise to conduct before you make any major changes that impact where people work and how they do their jobs.

Whatever path you choose, it's essential to use consistent and clear terminology, and communicate expectations to the workforce at large. Remote work is not telecommuting. A distributed workforce does not always mean the entire company is remote. Knowing the definitions helps to set clear expectations for your current and future employees.

Robin Schooling is a Louisiana-based human resources leader whom I fondly call “America's HR Lady.” While a lot of time and attention has been spent on the professional workforce, Robin believes that companies need to think creatively about the non-exempt workforce too.



It's easy to say that hourly workers don't qualify for alternative work programs because of regulatory demands for pay. That's just not true. Robin adds, "We need to expand our thinking of the future of work. When we start this transition, it must be from a foundation of trust. Hourly workers provide value, and they deserve an HR team that paves the way for them to derive personal value and balance in their jobs."

If you're unsure about how the future of work looks at your organization, don't just jump on the bandwagon. Do your research and explore the history of companies that embraced a multifaceted approach in the past and emerged with good results. Dell, UnitedHealth Group, and Deloitte¹⁰ implemented strategies for their employees that included full-time telecommuting, occasional telecommuting (some days in the office, some days at home/remote), flexible schedules, and compressed workweeks. If you don't know anybody at those organizations, consider reaching out to your local Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) chapter and asking for help in researching best practices.

How we work looks different in 2020 than it looked in 2019. And if history serves as an example, the future of work will continue to change. Alternative work policies and programs might be attractive to your employees and crafting the right policy to fit your organization's goals could be the ticket to a healthier, happier, and more productive workforce in the months and years ahead.

Don't wait for another pandemic to define how work happens at your company. Tackle this now so you can do the work of reinforcing a healthy culture and leveraging a people-first agenda during the next crisis.

Diversity, Inclusion, Equity, and Belonging matter more than ever before

It's never been easy for corporations to address diversity, inclusion, equity, and belonging (DIEB). When the global economy recovered from the Great Recession, companies had a harder time attracting talent. They invested in minority-hiring programs and implemented new strategies to create inclusive environments, hoping for a clear return on investment on those efforts. But even with all of that money and attention, many organizations struggled to attract and retain diverse talent.

Now, what happens in the aftermath of a pandemic?

Businesses face a choice. They can continue the hard but important work of eliminating bias and empowering underrepresented members of their workforce, or they can stop investing in these programs because of budget cuts.

While it may be tempting to retreat from DIEB efforts while everybody is working from home or out of the office, the ethical implications alone are enough to question the integrity of leaders. The effects on an employer brand would be dire.



The novel coronavirus offers an opportunity to showcase executives who consistently led by example and doubled down on DIEB even when it wasn't convenient. In an age of uncertainty, investors and consumers are looking for leaders who strive to do the right thing, even when it's hard and inconvenient. If you work for one of those fine individuals who exemplifies leadership, it's imperative to share that story.

Torin Ellis is a Baltimore-based diversity strategist and talk show host with SiriusXM. When asked about the future of DIEB programs in corporations around the world, he said, “My hope is that leaders approach their programs how activist investors approach decision-making. The opportunity is there, and there is no time to wait. The value is in deciding to invest now.”

But many organizations found diversity, inclusion, equity, and belonging inconvenient long before COVID-19. Sometimes even the most progressive companies need a push in the media, or from feedback on employee surveys, to get things right.

When I asked Torin about the carrot-and-stick approach to DIEB, he said, “We want everyone to see that diversity and inclusion feel good and make sense. In my consultancy, I work with companies to enroll employees as evangelists, encourage them to develop a disruptive mindset, and provide them with resources and support to model the right behaviors and deliver results.”

Elena Valentine is an entrepreneur, filmmaker, and CEO of Skill Scout. She helps companies make better job videos, with a special emphasis on hourly and highly skilled technical roles. Elena is also optimistic about the future of DIEB programs, but she carefully reminds us that while we are all experiencing COVID-19 together, not all experiences are the same. If employees are not from a dominant majority group at your organization, they may feel more exposed to uncertainty. That's why investing in DIEB programs is more important than ever.

Elena believes we must rewrite the playbook and adds, “This is a new era for diversity and inclusion programs. People leaders should rise to the occasion to make the most impact for individuals, teams, and inevitably our organizations.”

Diversity, inclusion, equity, and belonging programs can be the initiatives that knit together everything that matters: a healthy culture, a people-first business strategy, compassionate benefits packages, flexible alternative work policies and programs, and the acquisition and implementation of helpful technology.

When you keep your total workforce in mind, not just the most vocal workers or the ones who occupy space in the upper corner of your nine-box grid, you make decisions that set your company up for success now.

Sonya Renee Taylor is an American activist and poet who summed up how COVID-19 provides an opportunity to rethink the employee experience for all workers. She wrote, “We will not go back to normal. Normal never was, our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequality, exhaustion, depletion, extraction ... We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment — one that fits all of humanity and nature.”¹¹

Let's stitch that garment together.

Where do we go from here?

Human resources leaders have a unique opportunity to help companies and employees recover from COVID-19's economic destruction and set a course for growth, safety, and renewed productivity. The key to accomplishing this goal is to weave it all together: culture, benefits, compensation, technology, alternative work policies and programs, and DIEB. You do this through data.

Karina Schultheis and the team at UKG recognize that there's been a decades-long push towards reimagining how work gets done, and much of it has been rooted in data and analytics. This type of data-based decision-making should also be applied to measuring (and acting on) employee sentiment as personalized feedback from your people provides much more valuable insight than broadly applied industry best practices.

Karina asks, "Are your people ready to come back to the office? Ask them. If cuts are inevitable, would they prefer salary decreases or layoffs? Ask them. We're all in this together, and the most successful employers will take this opportunity to be as transparent and collaborative as possible, even — especially — when hard decisions must be made."

The coronavirus tried to cancel work, but HR can and will fight back. Don't let the moment pass. Take this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to put everything on the table and dream big about how and where work happens. Consider your role in improving and enhancing the employee experience. And look to benefits, compensation, technology, policy, and DIEB as tools in your toolkit. If you start there, the odds are great that you'll fix work for today and generations to come.



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