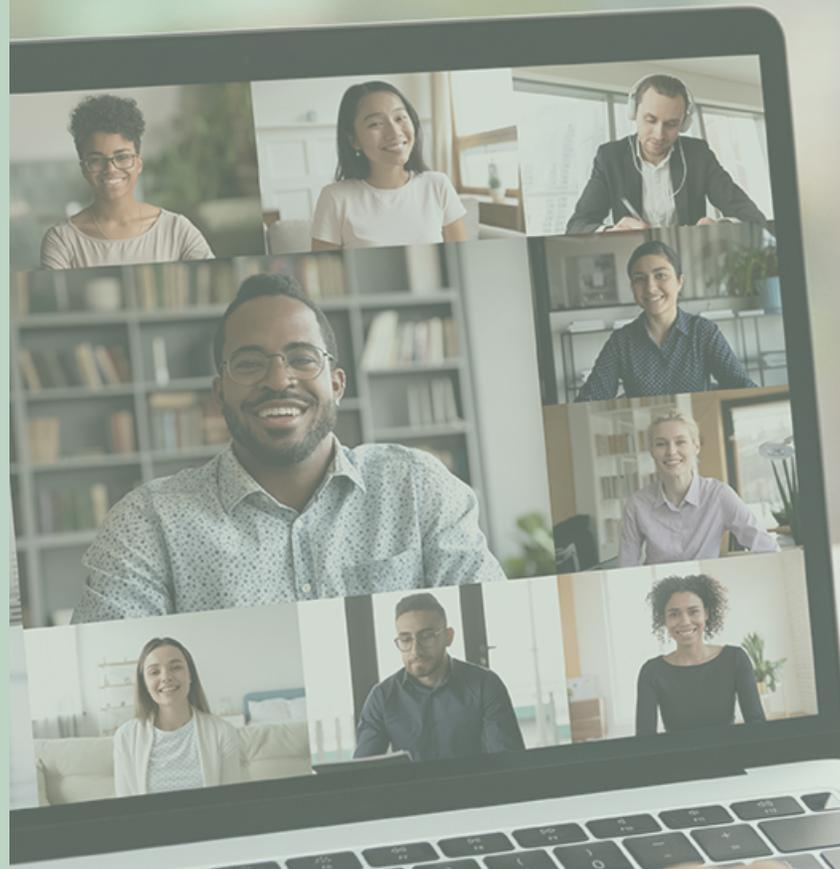


IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

PART TWO

*Disparities Among
Executive Leadership,
Mid-Level Management,
and Individual Contributors*



WORKPLACE PEACE
INSTITUTE

REPORT

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

*Disparities Among Executive Leadership, Mid-Level Management,
and Individual Contributors*

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We are living in an era of unprecedented change. The only constant we can rely on is the human propensity to seek out basic human needs. When human needs are consistently met, people thrive. When people thrive, organizations thrive.

—Robyn Short, CEO
Workplace Peace Institute

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Impact of Covid-19 on Employee Engagement is a two-part series that examines the ways in which the global pandemic affected and continues to affect employee engagement in the U.S. American workforce. This second of two reports explores the disparities that emerged among executive leaders, mid-level managers, and individual contributors working in remote work environments.

Part one of this series explores the disparities that emerged during Covid-19 between women of all racial ethnic and identity groups and people of color. You can download and that report [here](#).

This report is based on Workplace Peace Institute's research which was conducted to support organizational leaders in creating workplace cultures of peace and dignity during times of extraordinary disruption and change. Peace exists in the workplace when all employees experience human security. Human security is the fulfillment of basic human needs such as psychological safety, security, including cultural security, belonging, self-esteem, personal fulfillment, participation, and

This report offers leaders a clear understanding of what is necessary for all employees to thrive during periods of extraordinary workplace disruption, change, and social isolation.

the acceptance of identity. Dignity exists when all employees experience their inherent worth and value.

These findings and recommendations reflect employees' feedback on how they experienced basic human needs and dignity needs in the workplace during the period between March 2020 and March 2021. The report focuses on the U.S. American employees who shifted from an in-office work life to a remote work life during the pandemic. The report is intended to give leaders a clear understanding of what is necessary for all employees to thrive during periods of extraordinary workplace disruption, change, and social isolation.

Workplace Peace Institute developed the *Impact of Covid-19 on Employee Engagement Report* using data collected from more than 200 U.S. American employees across a myriad industries and sectors via the Employee Engagement and Covid-19 online

assessment. Using questions grounded in basic human needs theory and dignity theory, the assessment measured whether employee engagement had increased, decreased, or stayed the same during the Covid-19 global pandemic. Because the assessment specifically requested participants respond to questions based off their experiences in the workplace during the period of March 2020 and March 2021, it is important to note that social and political events – and how organizational leaders responded to these events – such as the murder of George Floyd and the worldwide Black Lives Matter protests that erupted as a result and the politically polarizing presidential election and the insurrection on the U.S. Capitol that followed, likely influenced employee engagement and the results of this assessment.

Our primary finding is that humans come together and collaborate in times of crisis. This ability to collaborate has sustained organizations and employees throughout the Covid-19 crisis. However, disparities emerged among executive leadership, mid-level management, and individual contributors. To successfully engage employees in a sustained remote work environment, organizational leaders will need to be intentional about cultivating dignity among all employees with particular attention given to employee in mid-level management and individual contributors .

Humans come together and collaborate in times of crisis. This ability to collaborate has sustained organizations and employees throughout the Covid-19 crisis.

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ABOUT WORKPLACE PEACE INSTITUTE

Workplace Peace Institute is on a mission to create highly engaged workplaces where dignity is consistently honored and experienced. Our organization systems design services support small- to mid-sized businesses in optimizing employee engagement, maximizing organizational productivity, and improving profitability by infusing human security and dignity as foundational attributes of their business model.

Our vision is a workplace in which human security and dignity are the bottom line.

For more information about Workplace Peace Institute's solutions for optimizing employee engagement, maximizing organizational productivity, and improving bottom line profit, please visit www.workplacepeaceinstitute.com.

**Watch this video to learn more about
Workplace Peace Institute**



INTRODUCTION BY WORKPLACE PEACE INSTITUTE CEO

According to the 2020 Gallup report, “The State of the Global Workplace,” there are 100 million full-time U.S. American employees.¹ Of that 100 million employees, only 33 percent report being engaged in the workplace. Gallup defines employee engagement as, “involved in, enthusiastic about and committed to their work and workplace.”² This means 67 percent of the U.S. American workforce is not actively involved in, enthusiastic about or committed to their work and workplace. From an organizational perspective, this lack of engagement implies an extraordinary waste of organizational productivity. From a human perspective, this implies a stunning waste of human potential.³

Gallup found that when organizations orient performance management systems around basic human needs, including

psychological needs such as acceptance, acknowledgment, recognition, fairness, emotional safety, employees experience more engagement and contribute to the organization at higher levels. This translates directly to increased productivity and improved bottom line profit.⁴ With a 33 percent employee engagement rate at the time of the Gallup study and this Workplace Peace Institute study, U.S. organizations were missing opportunities for innovation, organizational growth, and profitability. Individuals were missing opportunities for accessing their potential, and were, therefore, failing to thrive in the individual and collective human experience – and then came the global pandemic.

Cultivating workplace cultures that incorporate dignity as a key attribute is essential to addressing the basic human needs and dignity needs inherent to a highly motivated and engaged workforce.

¹ Gallup, Inc. “Executive Summary.” Essay. In *State of the Global Workplace*. New York, NY: Gallup Press, 2020.

² Gallup, Inc. “Gallup Daily: U.S. Employee Engagement.” Gallup.com. Gallup, November 21, 2020. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/180404/gallup-daily-employee-engagement.aspx>.

³ Gallup, Inc. “Executive Summary.” Essay. In *State of the Global Workplace*. New York, NY: Gallup Press, 2020.

⁴ Ibid.



Recognizing the baseline employee engagement of 33 percent, the goal of this research was to gain an understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on employee engagement. Participants were asked 18 questions designed to gain insight into how basic human needs and dignity were experienced and how this impacted the research participants' ability to be involved in, enthusiastic about and committed to their work and workplace during the time period of March 2020 and March 2021.

This research study sought to gain a greater understanding of the disruptions associated with Covid-19 and the impact on employee engagement. The results of this study can assist for-profit and nonprofit organizations in designing and implementing business models in which employees are able to sustain their involvement in work, their enthusiasm for work, and their commitment to their work and the workplace during periods of extreme disruption and in an on-going remote working environment.

Dr. Robyn Short

Robyn Short

Founder & CEO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The main finding of this research study is that humans come together and collaborate in times of crisis. This ability to collaborate has sustained organizations and employees throughout the Covid-19 crisis. However, there are disparities between executive leadership, mid-level management, and individual contributors working in a remote environment. To successfully engage employees in all roles in a sustained remote or hybrid work environment, organizational leaders must be intentional about cultivating dignity among employees at the mid-management and individual contributor levels.

Key Areas of Success

- 1 Research participants working remotely reported an increase in their ability to experience authenticity individually and among coworkers.
- 2 Participants in all roles and working environments experienced an increase in having their expertise both sought after and valued by the organization.

- 3 Participants working remotely experienced an increase in acknowledgement and recognition for their contributions to the workplace, which led to an increase in feeling appreciated.
- 4 Employees experienced an increase in their personal commitments to the success of their colleagues, as well as the success of the organization.

Key Areas for Improvement

Disparities emerged between the executive leadership, mid-level management, and individual contributors working groups as it relates to the following areas:

- 1 Experiencing emotional connections in the workplace
- 2 Respecting boundaries between work life and home life
- 3 Trusting that decisions that impact one's work life are made fairly
- 4 Feeling motivated and enthusiastic about one's work and role in the workplace

FOUR KEY AREAS OF SUCCESS

This research study found that organizations experienced positive results in four key areas related to employee engagement, defined as direct involvement and enthusiasm in their work. Research participants working remotely reported an increase in their ability to experience authenticity individually and among coworkers. Remote workers experienced an increase in having their expertise sought after and valued by leadership. Participants working remotely also reported a significant increase in acknowledgement and recognition for their contributions to the workplace, which led to an increase in feeling appreciated. Employees experienced an increase in their personal commitments to the success of their colleagues, as well as the success of the organization. Additionally, employees gave credit to organizations for providing the opportunities for professional development necessary to meet the changing demands of the workplace. This is positive news since employee engagement means higher productivity and higher profitability according to the *State of the Global Workplace 2021 Gallup Report*.⁵

⁵ Gallup, Inc. "Executive Summary." Essay. In *State of the Global Workplace*. New York, NY: Gallup Press, 2020

⁶ Short, Robyn. "Developing and Sustaining Organizational Systems That Honor the Dignity Needs of Stakeholder," 2020.

Authenticity in the Workplace

Workplace Peace Institute research found that the core requirement of experiencing dignity in the workplace is having one's voice genuinely heard and having one's authentic self fully embraced and honored.⁶ Overall, remote employees reported a 40 percent increase in authenticity compared to a 30 percent decrease reported by in-office employees.

Participants from this study reported that working from home allowed employees to be more relaxed, physically comfortable, and able to exercise control over their environment in such a way that supported their honest and authentic selves.

Remote C-Suite participants expressed a 40 percent increase in authenticity among coworkers, including their ability to be themselves in the workplace. The percentage was even more significant among C-Suite participants who remained in the office during the pandemic and experienced a 67 percent increase in their ability to experience authenticity. Executive leaders working remotely expressed a 60 percent increase in

authenticity among coworkers and themselves. Mid-level remote directors and managers participants reported lower levels of authenticity with 33 and 40 percent increases respectively. At the individual contribution level, remote participants reported a 35 percent increase in their ability to be authentic.

Remote workers expressed a **40% increase in authenticity** in contrast to 30% of in-office participants and 50% of hybrid participants, who expressed a decrease.

One company's founder and CEO working remotely noted that she "worked very hard to create a culture that allows people to be authentic every day." The C-Suite participant reported that these efforts resulted in a culture that helped to sustain employees during a difficult time. In contrast, a hybrid executive-level employee described some limitations to authenticity working remotely. The male participant commented that "it's more difficult to project personality and character via the web." At the individual contributor level, a participant felt the remote communication was "much less comfortable and casual" and caused her to situate herself in a more professional presence. It

is noteworthy that in-office individual contributor participants reported a 30 percent decrease in their ability to be authentic.



It's more difficult to project personality and character via the web. I believe because we don't have our neighbors at the office to bounce ideas off of, more people are asking for my help including more senior leadership.

Recommendation

As organizations explore remote and hybrid work post-pandemic, there is an opportunity for leaders to develop a new conceptual design, one that allows employees to bring their authentic selves to their workplace. Leaders should seek training programs that share practices that support a highly engaged workplace where dignity and authenticity are consistently honored and experience by all employees.

Expertise Sought After and Valued

During the pandemic, sharing and valuing expertise is a vital source needed to uncover challenges and ideate possible solutions for organizations to succeed. It is even more critical for employees to feel their expertise is wanted and valued. This research study found that participants in all roles and working environments experienced an increase in having their expertise both sought after and valued by leadership. Executive leaders and mid-level management working remotely reported on average a 45 percent increase in their expertise being sought. In contrast, remote individual contributors only conveyed a 32 percent increase, and those working in a hybrid environment reported a 25 percent decrease in their expertise being wanted. Employees working in a hybrid environment experienced a 100 percent increase in both being sought and valued for their expertise. One executive hybrid participant noted he was somewhat more in demand simply due to the separation from his team. The remote environment caused a loss of organic engagement for a director, as well as the frequency of “many of the 1:1 meetings.” Another remote director reported a reduction in opportunities to be visible with senior leadership.



In-person interactions facilitated opportunities for me to be more visible with our organizational leadership. This is reduced now because I don't see senior leaders in our physical space.

Recommendation

Moving forward organizations must learn and use approaches to uncover both individual and collective expertise of its workforce. The present labor shortage demands that leaders achieve the best result with their current employees by inviting the knowledge, wisdom, and expertise of everyone within the organization. This could be supported by a reduction in hierarchical decision-making and ensuring those closest to a problem are empowered and authorized to solve the problem.

Acknowledgment, Recognition, and Appreciation

Acknowledgement and recognition are the offering of non-monetary appreciation delivered verbally or with written praise for accomplishment and achievements. Certainly, monetary awards can also be used to recognize effort and performance; however, research around work satisfaction has shown that feeling appreciated is a top priority for many employees and its own reward. The degree to which employees feel acknowledged, recognized, and appreciated has a direct and positive effect on employee engagement. Furthermore, employees' well-being, willingness to learn, job satisfaction, and intrinsic motivation are increased through recognition.^{7,8}

An increase in recognition for individual contributions was reported by all remote roles. One remote director indicated that he “worked on high visibility projects,” presumably leading to greater acknowledgement. Conversely, another director stated that “since we aren't in the office, I feel *out of sight is out of mind.*”

⁷ Appelbaum, S. H., & Kamal, R. (2000). An Analysis of the Utilization and Effectiveness of Nonfinancial Incentives in Small Business. *Journal of Management Development*, 19, 733-763. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02621710010378200>

⁸ Merino, D., & Privado, J. (2015). Does Employee Recognition Affect Positive Psychological Functioning and Well-Being? *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 18, E64. <https://doi.org/10.1017/sjp.2015.67>

The same did not hold true for those participants working in the office and significant decreases were revealed. At the director level, 40 percent of the in-office employees reported a decrease in recognition. The greater concern resides with the in-office managers who reported a 67 percent decrease in recognition, compared to the remote managers who noted a 53 percent increase in their recognition.



I completed some long-term projects this past year for which I was acknowledged by the leadership. It was not, however, recognized in any formal or financial way.

Recommendation

Organizations must continually strive to meet their employees at the human level to meet basic human needs. One of these basic human needs is recognition and validation of individual contributors for the work they do and the ideas they contribute to the workplace. Leaders at all levels can increase their knowledge of core principles and theories regarding the psychology of human behavior and the benefits of intentionally demonstrating appreciation and recognition. Some approaches include making sure no achievement goes unnoticed, being generous and specific with praise, and celebrating wins (big and small).

Commitment to Colleagues and Organization

Organizations cannot perform at ultimate levels unless employees are committed to both the objectives and goals of the organization.⁹ Undeniably, employees' commitment to each other and the organization is even more crucial during the challenges presented during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study found that remote participants of all roles and environments reported an

increase in commitment to the success of their colleagues and their organization. However, this increase was reported higher by executive leadership than at mid-level management employees working in a remote environment.

Remote workers reported a 46% increase in commitment to the success of their colleagues and a 50% increase in commitment to the success of their organization.

Executive leadership reported a 50 percent increase in commitment to colleagues compared to only a 29 percent increase noted by remote managers. Similarly, the disparity was found in commitment to the success of the organization, where executive leadership reported a 70 percent increase and managers reported only a 35 percent increase in organization commitment. One executive leader working in a hybrid environment noted that as result of sharing difficulties, there was an awareness of others and attention to their needs. A

⁹ Estigoy, E, & Sulasula, J. (2020). Factors Affecting Employee Commitment in the Workplace: An Analysis. Journal of Education and Practice, 11(27), 160-171. DOI: 10.7176/JEP/11-27-19

remote director did not share the same experience because she “did not feel the same sense of teamwork” and noted that she felt more isolated.”



My company was so good to me and my family after we contracted Covid, so I feel that I want to work harder to reciprocate in kind.

Recommendation

Training and coaching can support leaders’ ability to create new practices, policies, and mindset that can build a culture of collaboration. Other strategies that encourage commitment to each other and the organization include providing opportunities and space for two-way feedback, providing radically transparent communication from leadership, encouraging employee development, and supporting career plans with employees.

FIVE KEY AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

This research study found that disparities emerged among executive leadership, mid-level management, and individual contributors working groups, specifically as it relates to the ability to experience:

1. Emotional connections in the workplace
2. Respectful boundaries between work life and home life
3. Trust that decisions that impact one’s work life are made fairly
4. Motivation and enthusiasm about one’s work and role in the workplace

Emotional Connections

The desire for emotional connections is a basic human need that is often misunderstood because, according to the Center for Coaching Excellence, “it’s not about being emotional or showing emotion. It’s about making a human connection – one person to

another.”¹⁰ This type of personal connection is not only beneficial to the individual employees but also “results in stronger ties, higher loyalty and overall better profits for the organization.”¹¹



Overtime I felt less motivated and noticed my team is feeling the same way because I missed connections and opportunities in two more team building.

This research study found that 37 percent of remote participants expressed a decrease in experiencing emotional connection and support in the workplace, and in-office participants also reported a 30 percent decrease. This decrease was significantly higher among mid-level management at the workplace. In-office

director participants reported an 80 percent decrease in emotional connection and support, while manager-level workers reported at 67 percent decrease. A significant challenge was reported among director and manager-level hybrid participants who reported a 100 percent decrease. An executive working in a hybrid environment concluded that “nothing can replace face-to-face interaction, both formal and informal.”

This research study found decreases in emotional connection and support among all participant levels and in all working environments: remote, in-office, and hybrid.

Recommendation

Humans are wired for connection meaning it is a basic human need. Research has shown that connections between employees help drive business value.¹² Organizations must consciously and intentionally commitment to cultivating deep interconnection

¹⁰ Verstraete, M. (n.d) Center For Coaching Excellence

¹¹ Carter, L. (2019), Forbes, Cultivating Employee Engagement with Emotional Connection

¹² Waber, B. Magmolfi, J., & Lindsay, G. (2104, October). Workspaces that move people. *Harvard Business Review*

with and among employees. Since emotional connection is largely dependent on proximity, organizations must create virtual and in-person events where employees can spend time syncing and building trust with each other. This means purposely designing work environments with dedicated space for collaboration and fellowship that allow for sharing of syncing and sharing positive emotions.¹³ This type of deep connection creates the desire to invest in the well-being of each other.

Respectful Boundaries Between Work Life and Home Life

The concepts and challenges of work-life boundaries did not originate from the global pandemic. The idea that humans would desire balance between “their professional and personal lives, more flexibility in managing their schedule, and presumptively increase satisfaction from work and life became a key concept in the late 20th century.”¹⁴

However, it is undeniable that new working paradigms caused by the pandemic exacerbated the need for respectful boundaries between work and home life.

¹³ Short, Robyn. “Developing and Sustaining Organizational Systems That Honor the Dignity Needs of Stakeholder,” 2020

¹⁴ Raja, S., & Stein, S. L. (2014). Work-life balance: history, costs, and budgeting for balance. <https://doi.org/10.1055/s-0034-1376172>



This has been a greater challenge than ever before. It is challenging to create boundaries for myself and my direct reports when we are all working various work hours.

This research data established that 51 percent of remote participants reported a decrease in respectful boundaries between work life and home life. One executive noted that “roles blurred and [required] more calls for my attention on both sides” because of the remote working environment. Another remote executive noted he found many distractions and interruptions to work and ability to focus on tasks when at home.

Further analysis revealed that 63 percent of remote director participants also noted a decrease in work-life boundaries. One director stated that there were no boundaries because “I am

available 24/7..." and "it's hard to stick to setting and keeping boundaries when your workplace is on your phone." Another director noted that she is "...working more and longer." The concept of working more and longer hours was a perspective held by employees in many roles. Executives noted that they had to "work longer hours because [they] can't turn off the laptop and walk away" and they had to "work harder to maintain."



It was challenging to navigate this separation given that I am working at my dining room table in the middle of my living room.

Recommendation

Burnout, due to high stress and low levels of balance, is leading to an unprecedented numbers of resignations. Leadership can reverse the downward trend in work-life balance by working

collaboratively with remote and hybrid employees to define clear expectations around work hours. Once established, it is critical that the work hours be respected by both the employer and the employees. Leaders need to acknowledge the connection between employees' well-being and subsequently their level of meaningful engagement and commitment to their organization.

Leaders can search for and eliminate stressors such as unnecessary and continuous or back-to-back meetings without a break in between.

Trust That Decisions That impact Work Life Are Made Fairly

One of the dignity superstars is fairness, which is defined and determined as "an even-handed way according to agreed-on laws, rules, guidelines, policies and procedures."¹⁵

The degree to which employees perceive fairness of policies and procedures has a direct impact on employees' commitment to their organization. Also, if employees trust their leadership and

¹⁵ Short, Robyn. "Developing and Sustaining Organizational Systems That Honor the Dignity Needs of Stakeholder," 2020

believe that workplace processes will produce results that are in the best interest of the organizations members, mission, and purpose,¹⁶ they are more likely to believe that leadership decisions affecting their work are made fairly.¹⁷

One executive reported noticing an “increase distress in policymakers and an increase suspicion of crimes against humanity.”

While research data show a 25 percent overall increase in remote participants reporting that they trust that workplace decisions are made fairly, in-office participants reported a significant decrease. Executive leadership participants working in the office reported at 30 percent decrease in trust that decisions that impact are work life are made fairly.

The in-office executive leadership reported a 30 percent decrease in fairness of decision making. At the director level, in-office participants reported a 40 percent decrease in trusting

decision were made fairly. It’s conceivable that this discrepancy is caused implementation of a more flexible structure for remote workers during the pandemic.

However, the incongruity lays the foundation for conflict between employees in these two different work environments. Also, without trust it is almost impossible for employees to commit to and support an organization.



I hope my teams thinks I am handling issues fairly.

Recommendation

Hope is not enough. Leaders need data to really know if employees experience fairness. Leaders should conduct an organizational audit to ascertain the degree to which they visibly and consistently operate in an equitable manner and with

¹⁶ Seifert, M., Brockner, J., Bianchi, E., 7 Moon, H. (2115, November 5). How workplace fairness affects employee commitment. *MIT Sloan Management Review*.

¹⁷ Short, Robyn. “Developing and Sustaining Organizational Systems That Honor the Dignity Needs of Stakeholder,” 2020

impartiality for all employees, regardless of their role or work environment. Leaders must be willing to go first, do hard things, speak truth, advocate for justice, and embrace the unknown to build trust with employees. Leaders will benefit from training opportunities to strengthen their effective communication and assure that their communication is honest, empathetic, clear, and consistent in order to cultivate a cultural of trust among employees.

Experiencing Motivation and Enthusiasm

Executive leadership working remotely reported a 47 percent decrease in feeling motivated in the role. Managers working remotely reported 35 percent decrease in motivation and individual contributors also reported 39 percent decrease in motivation. One participant noted that they felt “more added pressure to perform at a higher level,” which negatively affected their motivation.

Change is our new normal and disruption is here to stay. Without motivation and enthusiasm for one’s work, leaders will fail to earn employees’ commitment to the organization. As one participant

reported, there’s less motivation because “the changes and instability have been exhausting.”

Inviting wholeness and dignity in the workplace allows space for experiencing the very best of oneself and allows for motivation and enthusiasm to flourish.

Leading with dignity requires an understanding of the dynamics of human behavior – what motivates high performance and, equally important, what de-incentivizes participation in individual and collective contribution in the workplace.



Enthusiasm has definitely decreased for myself and my coworkers, but I have hope that it’s temporary.

Recommendation

As workers begin to return to the office, leaders need to identify essential motivating factors in individuals and teams and consistently act on these essential motivating factors. Once identified, leaders must consistently ensure these essential

motivating factors are nurtured. This may require leadership training and coaching in order to build workplace cultures of peace and dignity throughout the continual disruption and change.

The labor shortage, deemed “the great resignation,” solidifies the need for organizations to abandon the business as usual mindset. Instead, organizations will need to transform their cultures so that meeting the basic human needs and dignity needs of employees are the top priority.

CONCLUSION

This *Impact of Covid-19 on Employee Engagement Report* is a two-part series that examined the ways in which the global pandemic affected and continues to affect employee engagement in the U.S. American workforce. This second of two reports explored the disparities among executive leadership, mid-level management, and individual contributors.

The primary finding of this research study is that humans come together and collaborate in times of crisis. This ability to collaborate has sustained organizations and employees throughout the Covid-19 crisis. However, disparities exist across

the organizational hierarchy and between racial and ethnic identity groups and among men and women in terms of employee engagement in a remote work environment. To successfully engage employees in a sustained remote work environment, organizational leaders will need to be intentional about cultivating dignity with all employees. This will involve educational and training programs that build leadership competencies in emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence, and dignity intelligence. It will also require that organizations make an intentional effort to infuse strategic Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion initiatives to meet the needs of a diverse workplace.

Organizations will need to build competencies in power-sharing and the democratization of decision-making to ensure that all voices are heard and that the wisdom, knowledge, skills, and expertise that resides within the organization is leveraged and valued. This will be challenging but necessary work for organizations seeking to sustain an equitable and highly engaged remote work or hybrid work environment post-pandemic.



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