

How To Drive Employee Engagement During (and After) COVID-19



Why Now?

Remote work has increased significantly as a result of COVID-19. According to ThinkHR surveys of mostly small-to-medium businesses and organizations (SMBs) conducted in early January 2020 and late March 2020, ¹ the number of employers with some number of remote employees increased from 58% to 84%. The number of employers with at least half of a remote workforce jumped dramatically from 8% to 41%.

While many employers are understandably under siege from the effects of COVID-19, a good number of employers are focused on employee engagement as a top priority. And it is expected to grow. **The uptick in remote work creates an opportunity for better employee engagement in a variety of ways:** between employees, between employees and their employers, and the holy grail of both enabled through education and training.

¹ <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Gc23lcOTjsGET7YQo4rBTaQmbcj3JnHWZxYwbWxUro/edit>



Employees Interacting with Each Other

People will always find a way to connect with each other. Roughly three-quarters (76%) of Americans say they have used email or messaging services to communicate with others during the pandemic.² This is in addition to the digital bouquet of social media and video software available that has allowed people to simulate in-person bonding as much as possible.

Interactions between people are important for the workforce, particularly as loneliness and isolation are imminent dangers. According to an article in Scientific American, people who feel disconnected are more likely to catch colds, experience depression, and have lower cognitive function, among other causes. “We can all benefit from developing digital habits that support meaningful human connections—especially now that it may be our only option until the outbreak calms.”³ While work from home flexibility has many benefits, employers should be thoughtful of employees’ needs to build meaningful connections digitally during the pandemic.

Employers Facilitating Employees

For many employers, the effect of COVID-19 has made digital interactions a business necessity. To be sure, emails and intranets were commonplace before COVID-19 forced employers to move to remote work. But there is traction on employers providing more ways to facilitate employee connections. According to a Pew survey, one-quarter of Americans said they have used video calling or an online conferencing service, like Zoom or WebEx, to attend a work-related meeting due to the pandemic.⁴ The options for other kinds of employer-provided software are seemingly endless.



² <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/31/americans-turn-to-technology-during-covid-19-outbreak-say-an-outage-would-be-a-problem/>

³ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-to-prevent-loneliness-in-a-time-of-social-distancing/>

⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/31/americans-turn-to-technology-during-covid-19-outbreak-say-an-outage-would-be-a-problem/>



While digital tools are necessary, they alone aren't sufficient to engage employees in a new remote landscape. Whether remote work is new or not, this is an opportunity for employers to recalibrate and be thoughtful about facilitating employee engagement. Some strategies that have worked:

- Implement work from home policies, including how to access tools
- Set formal expectations with management
- Enable news feeds to unify people across the company
- Make means of engagement available (but not required) via mobile device

Employers have a variety of options to optimize the remote workplace. In some cases, they might make the organization even better than before.

The Benefits of Remote Work

Whether voluntary or forced upon, organizations can reap benefits from a remote workforce. A two-year study conducted by Stanford University researchers found that workers who were allowed to choose to work from home were:

- 13.5% more productive
- 9% more engaged
- 50% less likely to leave⁵

While the study was conducted in a particular environment, the implications apply to any workplace where certain roles are vulnerable to distraction or where employees value flexibility.



5 <https://nbloom.people.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj4746/f/wfh.pdf>



Complete Engagement

Employee engagement can occur between employees, and between an employer and their employees. What tactic an employer chooses will depend on their goals and expected outcomes (and especially right now, resources). However, there are proven ways for any organization to achieve complete engagement. Workforce education and training is an impactful way for employers to engage employees working remotely, even during challenging times.

According to learning and development expert Dr. Carmen Poole, **engagement is appreciating information, not for its own sake, but with the goal of applying it towards something else. Essentially, engagement is learning.**

And employees are looking to learn. Ninety-four percent (94%) of learners say that they see career benefits of making time to learn.⁶ Employees want to build knowledge and skills as they work towards a certain goal.⁷ That goal could be personal (“I want to know how to code”), organizational (“I want to do my best job”), or a combination of both (“I want to be a senior leader at my organization”). For better or for worse, employees are not putting their careers on pause as a result of COVID-19.

Fortunately, learning is good for employees. A couple of examples demonstrate how employees benefit from learning. First, soft skills. Learning and development professionals believe that soft skills, like leadership, creative, and communication skills, are “foundational for every employee’s success.”⁸ Second, harassment and discrimination training is necessary. A groundbreaking EEOC report found countless negative effects on employees who experience and witness harassment and discrimination in the workplace.⁹ Training in these topics enables employees to apply what they learned to progress their careers and make a better workplace.

Learning is also good for employers. 94% of employees say they would stay at a company longer if it invested in their learning and development.¹⁰ The sentiment might seem counterintuitive, but according to human resources experts, it’s an “investment that will pay dividends in the future.”¹¹ Workplace training is directly connected to employee recruitment, retention, and engagement. Learning is the future. Employers, especially small businesses, are understandably busy with dealing with the effects of COVID-19. But at some point, and likely soon, employers will need to take steps to set up their workplace for near-future success. Learning can do that, aligning employee expectations with employer goals to encourage benefits for both.

6 <https://learning.linkedin.com/resources/workplace-learning-report>

7 <https://hbr.org/2018/09/great-employees-want-to-learn-great-managers-know-how-to-teach>

8 <https://learning.linkedin.com/resources/workplace-learning-report>

9 https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/task_force/harassment/report.cfm#_Toc453686304

10 <https://learning.linkedin.com/content/dam/me/business/en-us/amp/learning-solutions/images/workplace-learning-report-2019/pdf/workplace-learning-report-2019.pdf>

11 <https://www.hrdiver.com/news/why-employers-are-spending-more-on-learning-and-development/545903/>



Conclusion

As organizations get used to the new paradigm of a remote workforce, they can employ a variety of employee engagement strategies. Some won't have the capability, some will. But in either situation, it's OK (and possibly, helpful) to think about the continued success of an organization through employee engagement.