



CONNECT



PRESENT



A COVID-19 Virtual Ideation Experience

Team Topic and Number: Distributed Work – Team #10

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We cannot confidently predict how long an economic recession may last, nor when *exactly* global workplaces will move from triage to a more steady-state “New Normal.” That said, some certainties do exist, and it is around these fundamentals that we are envisioning the impact of a distributed workforce upon the Workplace of the Future.

As a “New Normal” emerges, corporate executives *will* more closely question firms’ ability to weather catastrophic events such as pandemics, terrorism, natural disasters or perhaps more generalized obsolescence of products or services. Business continuity planning *will* become a valued and not begrudged exercise. Most executives *will* confront how their employees have adapted to remote working and the psychological impacts of returning to work both in the short and long term.

*With the goal of entering the **2022 New Year** re-energized after surviving the recession brought on by COVID-19, CEOs are doing their best to adjust company strategy to better adapt to the rapidly changing demands from their shareholders, customers, consumers and employees. CFOs are making difficult budget and investment allocation decisions in the face of stalled global GDP growth, increased inflation and higher operating costs associated with securing their supply chains and providing safe and healthy workplaces. All the while, CPOs are working hard to adjust their workforce and talent management strategies to enhance employee retention and engagement scores, which have seen declines due to the permanent shift to a highly distributed workforce.*

AfCo knows their distributed workforce strategy is a competitive advantage. It came to fruition when their senior executive team collectively chose to focus on the total human experience of their employees and accelerated efforts to unlock the value of greater flexibility, inclusion and diversity. AfCo believes that employees, no matter where they choose to spend the workday, are at their best when they feel trusted and empowered. AfCo's genuine concern for its employees and relentless pursuit of digital and workplace transformation has enabled the company and its workforce to thrive. AfCo is winning the war for talent and sustaining exceptional employee engagement.

As AfCo's executives are aware, a people-centric culture is key to establishing a more distributed workforce. This is reflected in the 2017 Gallup report "State of the American Workplace," which suggested that remote workers can be 20 to 25 percent more productive than their on-site colleagues. Surveyed organizations were also able to save up to \$10,000 annually on real estate costs, and witnessed a decline in absenteeism. These savings can be reallocated toward new programs and ways of support, given that employee engagement is more crucial than ever. AfCo knows the key to success is to focus on trust, training and support. This enables employees to do their work and connect with others in their organization.

AfCo trusts that an employee knows best where and how to get their work done. This positive leadership is modeled at the C-Suite level and down. Jack, the company's CFO, gives financial updates from his home office and Jane, the company's CMO, has hosted a virtual hack-a-thon with her team on the latest marketing campaign. Their physical offices have been transformed into flexible workspaces where teams can come together on short notice or for longer periods of time to innovate. There is also a rooftop coffee bar with a full-time barista and a free cup of specialty coffee. AfCo considers this their own "co-working" space for employees who chose to work from the office. Those who work remotely may also utilize this space as their "local coffee hang-out," complete with preferred parking for added convenience.

Throughout 2020, the company has reinforced the importance of visual connectedness to further build relationships and trust throughout their organization. They have several employee resource groups, training sessions and programs that further connect the remote workforce with those who choose to work in-office. Consistent programming of these have been key. One of the most popular activities is the Wednesday power coffee break, a quick 15-minute virtual coffee break supported with a conversation topic that

pairs two employees from cross-functional roles to socialize virtually. Virtual happy hours held each Thursday have been equally popular. Through these activities, employees are building friendships and enhancing psychological security within the firm.

AfCo also has a robust support system for those who chose to work from home. They have a home office assistant that will work with each employee to set up their home office and ensure the ergonomics, security and tools are supportive of that employee and their role. Each employee also receives an annual budget for home office upgrades or well-being support, such as home gyms or massages.

Following the initial shift, AfCo moved to retool its strategy regarding the workplace, designing it to act more as a hub to support human interaction, learning, training, collaboration and culture indoctrination. “Think of it like a gym membership,” said AfCo COO Mary S. “You have the equipment to work (out) at home, but you choose to join a gym because it has better equipment, other like-minded people and an inspiring atmosphere to provide additional motivation”. Mary added that “Collaboration drives innovation. We want the hub to bring people together.” AfCo’s new prototype workplace provides a higher ratio of activity settings vs. individual work points and gives employees a greater choice in how they work together. “By providing the increased flexibility of choosing where they work, we know that our employees can’t always be there at the same time. Because of this, we’ve ratcheted up the collaborative technology tools at every setting to work seamlessly with team members regardless of whether they are sitting next to you or on the other side of the world.” Additionally, inner-office and inner-building amenities such as free food and beverage services, personal shopping assistance, health and wellness services and other conveniences have also been amped up, which in turn assists employees in maximizing their time and experience while visiting the hub. According to the COO, culture is key to an engaged workforce, and much of a company’s culture is driven by the actions of its leaders. AfCo understands this, which is why weekly schedules are coordinated so that at least half of the executive team is at the hub at any one time, and when they are there, they must be visible and available.

The “big experiment” during the pandemic has created the impetus behind the shift to distributed work. Culture was the driver, but unlocking the real power and capabilities of the technology has built a highway for change to occur. AfCo has rolled out top-of-the-line digital collaboration tools such as hands-free controls for door access, ergonomic settings and bathroom fixtures as well as food and beverage vending. The company has also implemented state-of-the-art zone controls for lighting, glare control, air-conditioning and sound masking. New phone and network applications allow teammates to quickly locate and communicate with each other. Most importantly, the firm provides continuous training and support, allowing employees to take full advantage of these elements.

As the distributed workforce continues to evolve, we believe there will be both quantitative and qualitative benefits for employees and employers. With the knowledge that there are still technology kinks to work out, it is important to prepare for not only a reduction in daily travel to the office, but also an increase in virtual meetings that, in the past, would have been conducted

in-person and required air or train travel. Both the daily office attendance and in-person meeting scenarios provide cost savings and a potential reduction to the carbon footprint. Employees who have historically commuted, whether a 20-minute walk or an hour's drive, will now find additional time in their days and money in their pockets. This could potentially lead to increased satisfaction in work/life balance, if employees are able to keep to their schedules and not remain tethered to their computers in this distributed workforce environment. Employees who traditionally commuted may use their newfound time to be with their families, focus on personal care or enjoy a hobby rarely touched.

As a result of the 2020 pandemic, firms are increasingly appreciating the value of a distributed workforce. It is an important option for employees and equally paramount for companies and global health as a whole. This new dynamic, while not without its challenges, is opening up doors to innovation and leadership that can be capitalized on by forward-thinking firms seeking to develop new connections both within the company and without. Building a distributed workforce is not about finding new places for employees to work. Rather, it is about unleashing the power of a new relationship between humanity and a connected world, so that whether face-to-face or through technology, we can come together in unique and diverse ways to innovate and build greater value for both employees and their organizations.