An evidence-based approach to virtual workforce programmes

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Abstract   Healthcare organisations across the country have or are currently exploring the potential for continued telework/flexible work environments for both staff and leaders. In this paper the authors share their experiences beginning with harnessing the employee voice to engage leaders and staff and better understand important infrastructural factors for successful telework. A focus of this listening strategy was in developing an inventory of best practices, technology needs and policies and processes to support digital telework for both leaders, medical, clinical and support staff. Space planning utilised these learnings to organise optimal work environments, understand efficiency and cost savings on leased space. The pandemic subsequently encouraged a wider adoption of remote practices by more groups, many of whom have since learned that remote work can be not only effective but also a talent recruitment and retention strategy for employees.

KEYWORDS: employee engagement, employee satisfaction, hybrid work, remote work

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

Given the high degree of effectiveness of current telework and the desire for continued remote and hybrid-remote work, healthcare organisations are implementing permanent programmes post pandemic.[1]

A successful programme benefits from a partnership between human resources, information technology (IT) and facilities planning departments to develop a formal remote and hybrid work programme with the goal of ensuring that a robust, effective, and responsive structure is in place to support the long-term needs of system employees.[2]

Coincidentally, the COVID-19 pandemic encouraged a wider adoption of remote practices by more groups, many of whom have since learned that remote work cannot only be effective, but also beneficial for their teams and employees.

Continuing and formalising a remote and hybrid-remote work strategy will advance a variety of existing organisational goals, ranging from enhancing employee experience to improving environmental sustainability.[3]

Strong considerations during this process include sound policy development, including a role assessment tool to assist managers

and staff alike. Procuring the necessary IT equipment and support was also a top priority in addition to change management training. Lastly, physical campus space analysis should be performed in adapting to this new work environment.

As demonstrated in the case studies in this paper, employees are very keen on continuing to work remotely. Only 12 per cent of employees surveyed desired to return to the office full-time (4–5 days/week).

A SHIFTING NATIONAL ENVIRONMENT
National/local trends

The healthcare industry is shifting to remote work policies. A benchmarking study of 10 California medical institutions in late 2020 revealed that every institution studied planned to adopt a remote or hybrid work policy of some kind for their administrative units. The question is no longer if but how to implement a successful plan that provides a competitive edge in the market.[4]

US remote workers reported being as productive as, if not more productive than, they were in the workplace before the pandemic. Remote workers might also benefit from the elimination of commute time, increased autonomy and job control, improved work–life balance, increased participation in the community and flexible work hours. Many of these positive conditions of work have been associated with improved employee health outcomes and well-being.[5]

In addition, organisations seeking to be the 'employer of choice' are embracing remote work and even employees living out of state. This trend sheds new light on service coverage demands, travel expenses for on-site presence needs, etc.

COVID, pandemic to endemic

It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has more negatively impacted the social and economic status of women, who form the majority of the healthcare workforce, compared with men. While the acute consequences of COVID-19 in terms of illness severity and mortality are unable to explain this discrepancy, the lingering effects of long COVID will likely continue to disrupt the lives of women for some time.

The pandemic accelerated the need for flexible arrangements, including asynchronous work and working from home. These arrangements were initially necessary to comply with public health directives and have shown themselves to be manageable and effective for workers and employers alike over time. They also provide another lever for improving health equity for those most negatively impacted by the pandemic.[6]

There are, however, challenges. It can be difficult to lead in an environment when the team members have divergent core working hours and are not available for collaboration. This can be compounded by the perception of inequitable treatment of employee needs or preferences by management, which can strain team dynamics.

HARNESSING THE EMPLOYEE VOICE (CASE STUDY EXAMPLES)
Example: Digital Workplace Program at UC Davis Health

Founded and grounded in employee voice, the Digital Workplace Program (DWP) at UC Davis Health establishes a successful case study in the healthcare arena pertaining to the significance of responding to the changing workplace landscape with evidence-based management practice. While the development of the programme was initiated with executive sponsorship from the CEO of UC Davis Health System (UCDH), its development harnessed employee voice to leverage the learnings from remote work during the pandemic and enhance the effectiveness of programme elements based on leader and employee feedback. Some important drivers of exploring the DWP at

UCDH included prioritisation of employee preferences and experiences to becoming an employer of choice, enhancing innovation and diversity along with clinical and operational experience, environmental sustainability, fiscal responsibility and resource stewardship.

The 18-month journey of programme development began with focusing on people and processes by continuing the creation of standards and policies to support a safe and equitable working environment. Central to this process was the organisational pursuit of a just culture by driving performance in measures of safety, quality, experience and financial stewardship. The goal was to create an environment where team members work effectively and efficiently in collaboration regardless of physical proximity of location and, in addition, without compromising the operational necessities of staffing necessary to run a healthcare organisation.[7,8]

Just as important was technology and equipment, which consisted of the tools, training and processes to enable individuals and teams to not only work but also stay connected. This included efforts in standardisation of computer hardware and software, office furniture and other equipment and tools required for remote work.

The organisation recognised that technology is only part of a successful employee experience and education and that training for that hardware and software is just as important as maintaining the security of access to health information or other data that may compromise the facility.

Considerations included the need for procedures for managing the technology, furniture or organisational assets, including their return to the organisation as applicable.

Above all, feedback on managerial effectiveness in managing a hybrid workforce and the developmental goals needed to create a seamless employee experience for on-site and off-site workforce, with manager and employee accountability was paramount to the socialisation process with UCDH leadership and staff.

Lessons learned nationally

Organisations that better understand the human experience, particularly the intersections of patient and employee experience, and their impact on quality performance consistently perform at the top of the industry. Press Ganey's work nationally demonstrated that positions across the spectrum declined on both measures of activation and decompression since 2020 with particularly significant declines in front-line clinical positions (registered nurses [RNs], Advanced Practice Provider [APPs], security personnel). While remote work programmes are not practical in all instances, significant shifts to less acute and home-based environments have made remote work more feasible for even the most clinically oriented positions.

Important attributes of more innovative organisations, particularly new entrants with a less concrete presence, include continuous listening strategies, pulse programmes and crowdsourcing platforms, as well as less digitally oriented information gathering via town halls, leader rounding and team or unit huddles. Harnessing this quantitative and qualitative data allows for a culturally sensitive and organisationally specific strategy development process for implementing an evidence-based approach to digital workplace programmes.[9]

DEVELOPING AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH
Remote work eligibility assessment framework

Evidence-based programmes recognise the need to support departmental leadership in order to determine role eligibility for remote work as depicted by the flowchart presented in Appendix A. This tool guides leaders and staff through a logical process that balances considerations around the operational needs of the organisation and employees' remote or hybrid work preferences for optimal on-site staffing decisions.

Primarily, a core tenet should include supporting the overall mission of the organisation in delivering services that support patients, families and the community. It is important to point out that the programme criteria do not compromise priorities such as patient safety, quality of care or service levels. These factors are important qualifiers to the assessment of hybrid work requests made by various levels of staff, including those that support direct caregivers.

Engaging employees

Based on work with a breadth of healthcare institutions across the country, it has been noted that there is typically a desire to continue remote work in the future, particularly from staff.

Leaders who demonstrate agility and adaptability in the transition to remote telework as well as sound management processes are clearly more successful. Developmental support greatly assists moving towards permanent remote and hybrid work, including the critical need for developing, understanding and explaining frameworks and guidelines.

Both staff and leaders cite lack of in-person interaction as the biggest barrier to effective communication, engagement and teamwork in the telework environment. Leaders also cite their increased focus on employee work–life balance, because remote digital telework affects the employee's ability to disconnect from work.[10]

It is important that any organisation identify and monitor those important drivers learned from responses to remote work surveys. When staff conveyed that adequate feedback and communication existed, they had the highest positive responses. In addition, when staff expressed that their leaders fostered accountability and managed remote employees effectively, staff had equally high positive responses.[11]

CHANGE MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

Strong organisations seek to reduce the associated challenges of working remotely and not treat the situation as only having a positive impact.

In the following graphic, work–life balance (15.9 per cent) was the leading challenge identified in one particular survey in a large academic medical centre. Never taking a break or lunch, working longer than usual hours and more meetings were comments directly related to this topic.

This survey also found that the time saved commuting to work was often overshadowed by staff continuing to work beyond their scheduled end of day (Figure 1).

Realising this, successful managers ensured that the employee knew that the department supported separating work and personal time. This increased focus on resiliency often results in more productive time during core work hours.

A second theme in the survey centred on meetings (13.9 per cent). Even though both technology and skills improved over the past two years, staff still missed the chance to meet and talk in person. That includes not having those short, small 'water cooler' chats with co-workers.
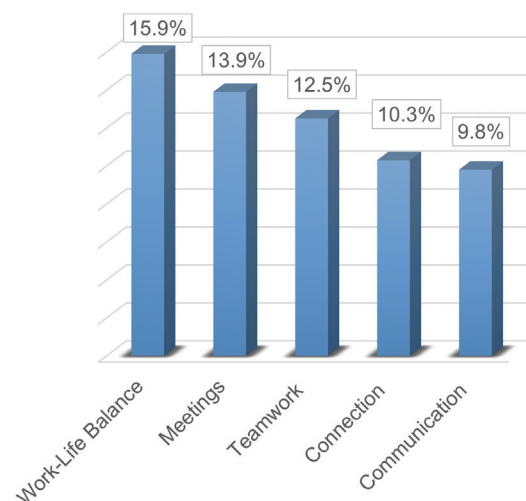

Figure 1   Staff Survey Results

Organisations recognising the benefits of strong teams such as better problem-solving, greater synergy, increased innovation and accelerating relationship development spend both time and energy engaging their staff. This includes establishing consistent and effective team and individual meetings that promote participation and informal connection.[12]

Of course, there are social components of work that cannot be overlooked as well. Some organisations have taken to virtual after-work get-togethers to foster this environment. Maslow has included this aspect in his hierarchy of needs as a 'sense of belonging' and a major need that motivates human behaviour.[13]

On the third major theme, teamwork (12.5 per cent), staff said that they believed there has been a reduction in collaboration. They reported that it was more difficult to maintain daily interactions with team members when they were not face-to-face. Organisations should seek ways to recognise and reward the additional effort leaders need to keep a team motivated, focused and sharing those practices with their colleagues.

Considering this feedback will assist organisations in leveraging best practices for digital remote telework. This framework, based on the employee voice, helps build credibility in the eyes of the staff and extends to involving those employees who are needed on-site daily.

In addition to the communication of an institutional framework, reporting of operational performance statistics, especially those teams that support the direct caregivers, is essential to monitoring the impact not only on productivity but also on measures of quality and performance. Any perceived break or reduction of service is better managed through clearly defined key performance indicators than through anecdotal concerns.

Regular communication around frameworks, performance and development of permanent remote work programmes is essential during the roll-out of listening results, programme components and tracking of performance over time. Providing leaders with talking points and listening venues during this process is essential to success.

Finally, these evidence-based results support the need for considerations on short- and long-term space planning.

Important considerations include the following:

1. Having a defined strategy for communal workspace
2. Clear communication around accommodations for hybrid workers, including office, desk and parking
3. Transparency as to the positive financial and environmental impact of reducing organisational real estate footprints

Employees clearly communicated, via survey and other listening strategies, that, given a choice, they would have both the ability to work from home and a dedicated workspace on-site. Recognising these desires helps convey to an employee group their important role in the change management process. It also emphasises the operational need to communicate daily and sometimes hourly schedules of shared space availability for on-site work when hybrid workers do not have a permanent space.

CONCLUSION

There are a few critical components for an organisation successfully embracing a permanent remote and hybrid workforce.

1. Creating procedures that support
   - compliance with existing policies and agreements[14]
   - advancement of the organisation's mission, vision, essential values and strategic goals
   - enabling the organisation to hire and keep highly qualified talent in a competitive market by supporting

flexibility to engage in meaningful work and support successes to facilitate careers to thrive

2. Clear organisational guidelines for on-site, hybrid and permanent remote work with department-specific criteria:
   - Clear daily schedules including where and when work takes place
   - Standard expectations per department and role following work and ergonomic assessments
   - Each role, including leaders, has expectations for permanently assigned or shared space
   - Collection of operational metrics used to illustrate success and areas of improvement

3. Provide clear expectations about roles and structure governing new and existing employees' performance:
   - Consistent communication of performance outcomes to employees
   - Each employee knows how their work contributes to the department and the organisation achieving strategic goals
   - Assessment of quality and quantity of work in a digital environment
   - Developmental support is provided by the organisation for staff members and leadership alike

4. Each role has a planned pathway for the employee up to the end of the probationary period:
   - Establishing guidelines so that onboarding can be planned for an employee's initial arrival
   - An employee knows the expected accomplishments with associated milestones: essential job functions, policy and procedures; specialised training and sign-offs, initial and annual competencies; etc.
   - Each role has clear direction on where education and training is conducted with the capability of handling exceptions related to individual performance

An organisation that creates a remote, hybrid and on-site workforce better prepares itself for the increasing competitiveness for talent. Successfully creating that environment involves clear goals and objectives, transparent communications and detailed planning. It begins with these processes, however, by listening to those affected by this change via the employee voice.

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APPENDIX A
Role assessment algorithm