BEST PRACTICES IN EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

In the following brief, Hanover provides an analysis of best practices in employee engagement and community building, particularly focusing on virtual and hybrid working environments.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2021, the U.S. labor market has been reshaped by the mass movement of employees known as the Great Resignation. Higher education institutions have not been immune to this trend, and indeed some estimates show that turnover among colleges and universities could be roughly 10 percent higher than other types of employers. As colleges and universities work to retain staff in an employment landscape where workers are mobile and often working remotely, Hanover Research offers these suggestions for best practices in employee engagement.

KEY FINDINGS

Colleges and universities should design and implement a clear onboarding program to ensure the success of new remote workers. Onboarding programs should clearly set milestones and expectations, communicate organizational culture and engage new employees with managers and coworkers through one-on-one and team meetings, and onboarding buddies. Managers should play an active role in supporting new remote workers through frequent follow-ups and open communication.

Organizations can improve employee engagement through effective leadership, social interaction opportunities, and employee recognition programs. Team leaders and managers can play a key role in creating a supportive virtual and hybrid working environment by keeping open lines of communication, avoiding micromanagement, and prioritizing employment wellness. Organizations can leverage online communication tools (i.e., video and web conferencing platforms) to provide remote and in-person employees with social interaction opportunities, particularly encouraging informal meetings and gatherings among like-minded individuals. Likewise, organizations should implement employee recognition programs that are consistent, visible, and specific to the employee's preferences and to the action being recognized.

It is important to measure employee engagement, which can be done with both quantitative and qualitative tools. Organizations should continuously measure employee engagement better understand the work climate, monitor progress toward new initiatives, and identify areas for improvement. Qualitative tools include annual and pulse surveys, exit/stay interviews, and one-on-one meetings. Quantitative tools include employee-related data, such as turnover rate, employee absenteeism, and employee work hours.
.

BEST PRACTICES IN NEW EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

ONBOARDING PRACTICES

Human resources firm Ciphr highlights the importance of the onboarding process for the success of new remote workers. The onboarding process is a critical time for new remote employers, as it sets the tone for their tenure at the organization. If not done correctly, employers can lose new employees.

Ciphr also notes the two-fold onboarding process for settling remote workers in their new environment. The first aspect, designed and led by the Human Resources (HR) team, should aim to share details about the team structure and culture. The second aspect, led by the employer's line manager, involves everyone in the team to help new employees build relationships with their new colleagues.

Likewise, LinkedIn emphasizes having a clear structure as the key to an effective virtual onboarding program. The figure on the right shows a list of practices to ensure an effective onboarding process for remote workers, including best practices related to the structure of the onboarding plan. LinkedIn further notes that onboarding plans should strike the right balance of activities and content to make the new employee feel connected rather than overwhelmed and isolated.

Establish an Onboarding Plan With Clear Milestones and Expectations.

- Design a clear onboarding program that includes one-on-one meetings with colleagues and managers
- The onboarding plan should include goals and timelines that can be used to measure the new employee's progress and give the new starter a sense of structure.
- The onboarding program should include the job description, expected scope, upcoming meetings, and immediate deliverables.

Communicate the Organization's Culture

- An organizational culture that works in a remote-friendly environment is crucial for the success of the onboarding process. Hence, employers should establish and communicate remote-friendly rules (i.e., video call etiquette, hours, dress code, and messaging norms).

Try Onboarding With Groups

- Group onboarding can address the issue of isolation for remote workers and can help create personal connections.

Ensure Employee-Manager Relationship Building

- Ensure that managers play an active role in setting up employees for a successful start

Assign an Onboarding Buddy

- Provide new hires with an onboarding buddy that helps them get context and information about how the college/university runs.

Schedule Frequent Follow-Ups

- Regular follow-ups with new higher through emails and video calls help new employees feel included and provide the opportunity for them t ask questions, highlight any concerns, and provide feedback on the onboarding process.

Secure Access to Essential Tools

- Ensure that starters have access to the software and accounts they need to be self-independent and do their job effectively.

Source: FlexOS, ciphr

BEST PRACTICES IN CURRENT EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

COMMUNITY BUILDING

A Harvard University article notes the challenges in engaging remote workers as one of the main barriers for organizations to adopt remote work policies when telecommuting programs started developing with the expansion of the internet. These challenges remain even after the spread of remote work derived from the COVID-19 pandemic. The article notes that "**a successful telecommuting program must provide an online social network for telecommuters within the organization**" to make remote workers feel part of the workplace. Although informal interactions between coworkers that usually happen in an in-person office environment are hard to replicate, organizations and team leaders can adopt practices and provide several platforms to encourage camaraderie-building in a virtual office.
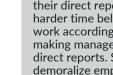
EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Leaders play a key role in creating and implementing a successful virtual and hybrid working environment. HRD notes that leaders must deliberately create the right environment to make virtual employees feel included. Hence, HRD highlights three key ingredients that leaders must embrace to engage hybrid employers: leading with empathy and intent, creating a thoughtful work structure, and making culture-building deliberate. However, "company leaders and HR teams must support managers with specialized onboarding, training, metrics, and ready-to-use FAQs and playbooks" to be able to support their remote workers, as the Harvard Business Review suggests.

Keep the Lines of Communication Open

- Leaders should encourage digital communications that consider remote workers' context. For instance, remote employees, especially those who work nontraditional hours or are outside the headquarters' time zone, may feel excluded from the team. Hence, managers and team leaders should consider everyone's time zone when setting meeting times or sending emails.

Avoid Micromanagement

- Some managers who can't collaborate with their direct reports in person, may have a harder time believing that their employees work according to what is expected. Thus, making managers prone to micromanage their direct reports. Since micromanagement can demoralize employees, managers should instead set down a system where everyone is accountable for their own goals to manage autonomous remote workers.

Prioritize Employee Wellness

- Leaders should foster a culture that truly prioritizes workers' well-being and make them feel part of the team. Hence, organizations should encourage employees to take wellness breaks, provide office setup assistance, offer health incentives, encourage conversations about mental health, and set clear limits on employee availability.

Source: Business News Daily, Forbes

BEST PRACTICES IN CURRENT EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

VIRTUAL MEETINGS AND CASUAL HANGOUTS

Employers can provide opportunities for social interaction for both in-person and remote workers by adopting the following practices:

Leverage virtual collaboration tools and platforms

- A Business News Daily article notes the use of video calls, instant messaging, email and web conferencing platforms, and communication and collaboration tools like Google Hangouts, Slack, and Trello to foster work and non-work-related interaction among coworkers in a virtual and hybrid workplace.

Allocate Time for Interaction in Work Meetings

- In a LinkedIn article, leadership coaches recommend checking in with employees during the start of a meeting to know how they are doing. Check-ins during meetings serve as a way to give everyone the opportunity to be seen, heard, and connect.
- Organizations can also use Zoom breakout rooms to make meetings more interactive and provide employees the opportunity to connect.

Schedule Casual Meetings

- Qualtrics notes arranging social events like virtual coffee breaks, happy hours, and other activities to quizzes to connect different employees for social interactions as a good strategy to keep remote employees connected
- A Forbes article recommends employers "try scheduling "random" meetings for employees to connect, which could remotely replicate the serendipitous encounters they might have in the office." Organizations can schedule video calls between colleagues from different departments to mix things up. For instance, monthly lunch meetings, where a rotating roster of managers from different departments join small teams for an informal virtual get-together.

Employment Engagement through Small Communities

Creating small groups of like-minded individuals can be an effective tool for engaging employees—more so than large, organization-wide events, as FlexOS notes. Hence, employers should invest time and resources to know their employees' interests and follow the guidelines below.

Collect relevant data
- Use surveys to collect data on employees' interests and passions.

Create communities
- Create communities of like-minded employees (i.e., teams, departments, project groups, or people with similar interests).

Create community-specific content
- Tailor events and activities to each group's needs and interests.

Celebrate birthdays and other milestones
- Provide new hires with an onboarding buddy that helps them get context and information about how the organization runs.

Source: LinkedIn and FlexOS

HR | HIGHER EDUCATION

5

BEST PRACTICES IN CURRENT EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION

Recognizing the accomplishments of remote employees is an essential aspect of employee engagement and organizational culture. Although acknowledging and rewarding virtual workers can be easily overseen**,** employers should make sure to "make recognition visible so other members of the organization are aware of the valuable daily contributions that remote workers make," as Qualtrics recommends. Likewise, Forbes notes that public recognition of employees working remotely not only serves as a reminder to everyone that their efforts are being noticed and valued, despite them working remotely but also helps the team to feel connected to one another**.** The figure on the right summarizes the features of effective employee recognition programs.

Incentive Pay Programs

Incentive programs can be an effective way to engage remote and in-person workers. Organizations can use casual incentives (small-scale rewards, such as a non-monetary gift or small cash bonus for reaching a goal that is granted at any time) or structured incentives (well-outlined programs that include monetary paid awards for when reaching a specific production or sales target). Incentives in private industry can be cash- and non-cash-based, and employers should prioritize digital rewards for remote employees. Many of the incentives below can be adapted to meet the higher education context.

Cash-Based Incentives
- Quarterly or yearly bonuses
- Commission for a sales role
- Sign-on bonuses or performance bonuses
- Company stock shares
- Company-branded debit card rewards

Non-cash based
- Larger scale incentive travel or excursions
- Company lunches
- Merchandise rewards (online, points-based system)
- Gift card reward options
- Membership in a health/fitness club

Source: Human Resources Today, All Digital Rewards

Characteristics of Effective Employee Recognition Programs

Consistent
- Recognition should occur with appropriate consistency to be impactful. Employers should avoid showing appreciation as a one-and-done type of activity and be careful not to overdo it as to lose its efficacy or sincerity. Appreciation should happen as close to the event being recognized as possible.

Visible
- Visible recognition does not necessarily mean publicly visible – some employees will not respond well to being the center of attention in a public forum – but visible to the individual receiving the recognition.

Specific to the employee's preference
- Employers should match recognition to each individual's preferred style. Managers should ask their direct reports how they prefer to be recognized.

Specific to the action being recognized
- Employers should tell employees what they appreciate about their contribution to the company. In doing so, employers should be as specific as possible and explain why their work stands out and/or highlight the value of the impact they have brought to the organization.

Source: Qualtrics

BEST PRACTICES IN MEASURING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Organizations should find ways to measure employee engagement to better understand the work climate and monitor progress toward new initiatives. Organizations should, therefore, collect data on their employers through the quantitative and qualitative tools listed below.

QUALITATIVE TOOLS

Large-Scale Annual Surveys
- Annual engagement surveys are helpful to set a baseline on employee sentiment and engagement toward organization culture, working conditions, compensation and benefits, challenges, rewards, and communication, as well as reviewing progress against goals and seeing employee demographics.

Pulse Surveys
- Short surveys (up to 10 questions) that can be sent out frequently to measure employee engagement and organizational health.

Employee Net Promoter Score (eNPs)
- eNPS is a tool used to understand how loyal employees are to the brand. It works by asking employees one question: On a scale from 0-10, how likely are you to recommend our college/university to a friend or colleague?

Exit/Stay Interviews
- Organizations can use interviews to gain feedback at the end of an employee's working period as well as stay interviews to engage potential issues head-on and show that the employee is being listened to.

One-on-One Meetings
- One-to-one meetings with employees can be run as informal or formal chats, individually with a manager or HR lead, or in focus groups with a sample of employees.

Source: Qualtrics, HR Morning

QUANTITATIVE TOOLS

Turnover rate
- Organizations can see how frequently employees leave voluntarily. A high turnover rate means a lower level of employee engagement.

Employee Absenteeism
- A high absenteeism rate can help identify low levels of employee engagement.

Other Quantitative Measures
- Employee work hours, overtime, capacity, and activity can help organizations protect against employee burnout, review workloads, identify poor work/life balance and ensure work hour compliance.

Source: Qualtrics, Timely

HR

HIGHER EDUCATION