

Leading a
blended
workforce –
maintaining
engagement
while
“Returning to
Office”



SIGRED
GROUP

Welcome,

We are excited to share with you findings from our **Global Engagement and Culture Survey** combined with interviews of employers as they navigate how to safely return employees to the office.

We are now entering a phase that we see as a “blended” Work from Home / Return to Office (WFH/RTO) environment. In April, we conducted our Global Engagement and Culture Survey to identify the drivers of employee engagement and how they were being impacted at the time by the COVID-19 crisis. To supplement those findings, we had conversations with large and small organizations, both global and domestic, to ask how they were helping their employees navigate the WFH/RTO environment. All of these organizations are developing individual approaches to managing their employees.

What struck us from the interviews is the overall messages of positivity. Yes, these are challenging times, but the companies we interviewed were all working closely with their employees to pull through together.

We hope that the findings are helpful as you look to recover and thrive in this “new normal.”

Stay safe,



Kristi



Mike

About Sigred Group

Talent drives company profitability and viability. However, attracting, retaining, and developing leadership talent is hard work and requires expertise. Great employers rely on Sigred Group to identify, hire, and develop amazing leadership talent.

We take the pain out of your talent management processes by leveraging our unique skillsets and diverse experiences to create pragmatic and effective solutions. Our team members have all walked in your shoes – we have run companies, we have led teams, and we have consulted across multiple industries. We know how to find and develop the best talent for you.

From our work with company leaders, it has become clear that many organizations will have to manage a “blended” Work from Home / Return to Office (WFH/RTO) approach for the foreseeable future. This blended approach will create challenges for employers trying to maintain the company culture and ensure on-going employee engagement. However, employers are leaning into the challenge to create stronger and more resilient organizations.

“This is a long-term play for our employees and our company.”

We have taken the results of our **Global Engagement and Culture Survey** and combined them with interviews of executives from large, small, for-profit and non-profit organizations to develop an understanding of how companies can successfully thrive in a blended WFH/RTO environment.

The survey results were obtained from over 100 respondents from 11 sectors across three continents. Through our interviews and conversations, we have spoken with executives at global automotive and manufacturing equipment suppliers, financial services companies, healthcare and insurance providers, airlines as well as non-profit social service organizations.

From our conversations, a couple of common themes emerged:

1. The health and well-being of employees was central to the planning of all the employers we interviewed. In most cases, if employees did not feel comfortable returning to the office, they would find work-arounds.
2. Organizations focused on communication more so than ever before. A strong effort was made by most of the companies to increase the level of open and transparent communication with their employees.
3. Managers and supervisors need as much support as employees to thrive in a blended environment.

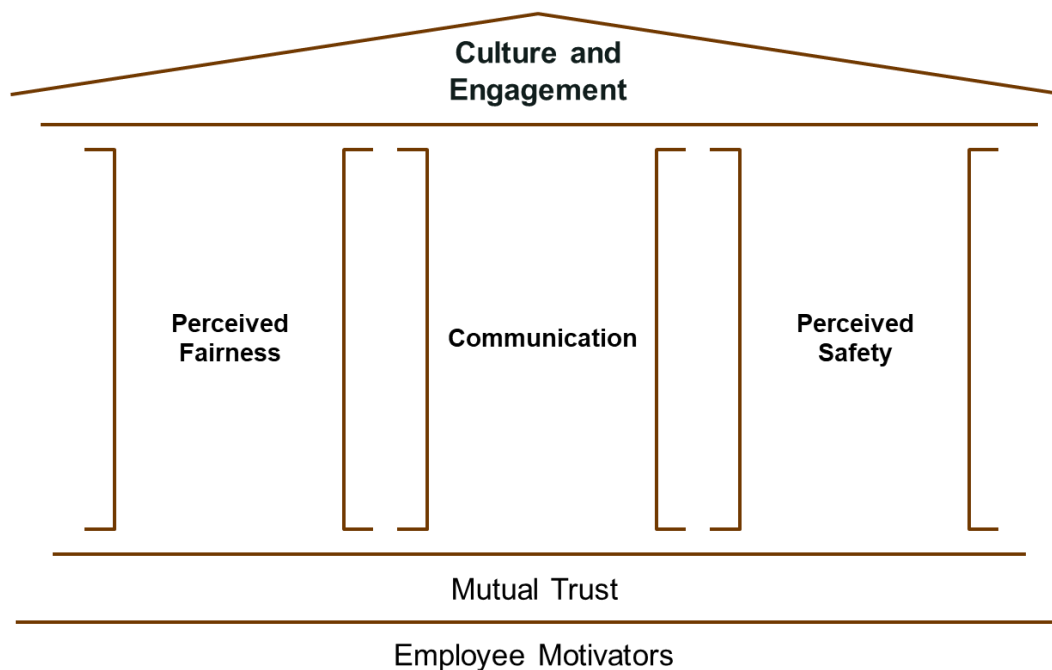
Moving forward, managing a blended workforce to maintain engagement and the corporate culture will require a combination of empathy, communication and trust that was not as critical just 6 months ago.

Maintaining company culture and engagement

Maintaining organizational culture and employee engagement is an issue that companies are struggling with as they decide how and when to bring their employees back to the office. From the survey and the follow-on interviews, we have found that on-going engagement is supported by five core elements:

- Employee motivators
- Mutual trust between employees and employer
- Communication
- Perceived fairness of the policies
- Perceived safety

Foundations of Company Culture and Engagement



The interviews have shown that employers have been very proactive about addressing some of these foundations to help ensure that they maintain the company culture and help employees stay engaged as they continue to struggle with the fallout from the pandemic.

Employee Motivators

The survey looked at twelve motivators of employee engagement and asked two questions: First, how happy are you with the current level of the motivator and second, how important is the motivator to you.

We were able to compare the data across generation and gender. As with our COVID-19 study, there were significant differences in how the motivators were viewed.

Ranking of importance of top 5 employee motivators

	Overall	Boomer	Gen X	Millennial	Female	Male
1	Feeling Valued	Feeling Valued	Compensation	Having Impact	Feeling Valued	Feeling Valued
2	Having Impact	Work/ Life Balance	Feeling Valued	Responsibility	Having Impact	Having Impact
3	Work/ Life Balance	Having Impact	Having Impact	Work/ Life Balance	Work/ Life Balance	Work/ Life Balance
4	Compensation	Responsibility	Being Challenged	Feeling Valued	Job Security	Responsibility
5	Responsibility	Job Security	Responsibility	Being Challenged	Compensation	Compensation

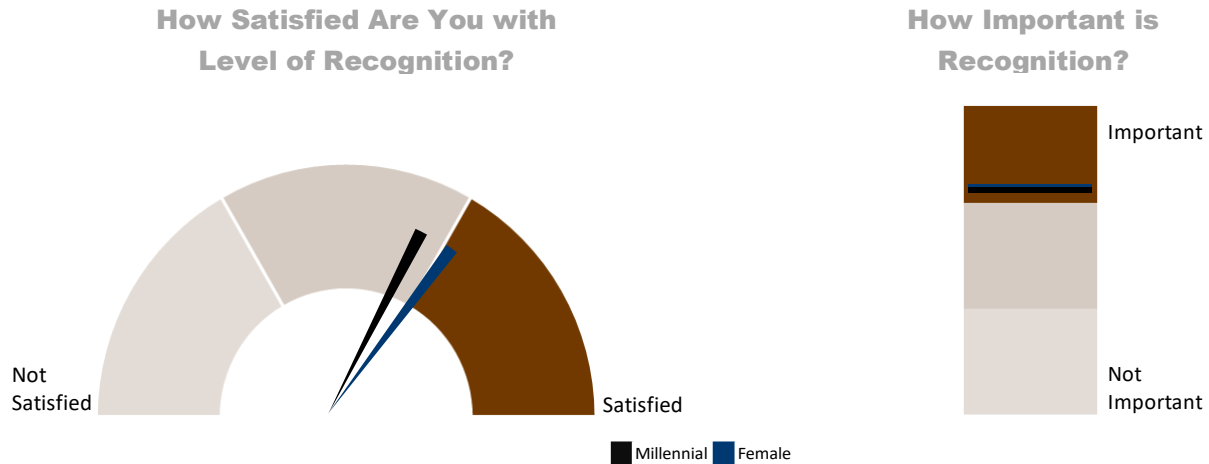
Only two motivators (Feeling Valued and Having an Impact) made it into the top 5 ranking of importance across all demographics.

Several other motivators were close. The importance of Work/Life Balance was in the top 5 for all demographics except Generation X. Compensation was in the top 5 for all but Baby Boomers.

As companies define their Return to Office (RTO) plan and future Work From Home (WFH) policies, it will be crucial to focus on what is important for employees and to ensure that they are feeling valued by the company, that they feel they are having an impact on the organization and that they are able to maintain a sustainable work/life balance.

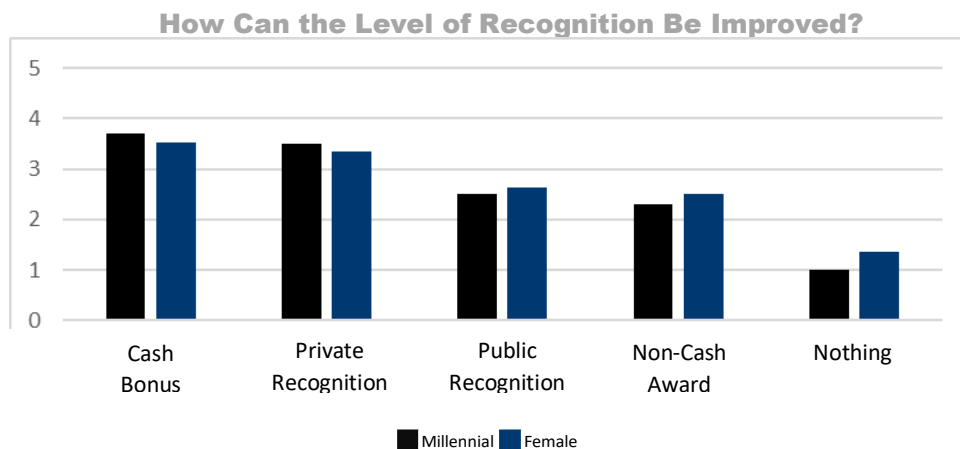
We also looked at how happy the respondents were with each motivator. If a motivator is important and the employee is happy with it, there is no cause for concern. However, if it is important and they are unhappy, leadership might want to look into it. Again, there were interesting differences across the demographics.

For example, female and millennial participants stated that **recognition** was relatively important to them, but that they were only moderately satisfied with the level of recognition they were receiving.



Other areas of potential concerns which are specifically impacted by the Post-COVID work environment include: the **pace of growth** over the last 12 months (the only concern that crossed all demographics with respondents finding it relatively important, but being relatively unsatisfied with it); having **supportive policies and procedures**; and **job security**.

As the workforce continues to have a high WFH component, it will be increasing important for employers to ensure their managers are providing sufficient feedback and recognition to workers that they might not see every day. The survey asked about various ways employers could positively impact the motivators. For recognition for both millennials and females, the results were fairly consistent.



Motivators assessed in the survey

The survey asked participants to assess their how happy (satisfied) they are with twelve different motivators. In addition, they were asked how important each motivator was to them. Here is the list in order of overall importance:

- Feeling like a valued member of your team and company
- Level of impact you are having
- Current work / life balance
- Appropriately compensated
- Current level of responsibility
- Current level of challenge in job
- Job security
- Understanding of goals, performance requirements and feedback received
- Work environment
- Pace of growth over the last 12 months
- Level of support by the company's policies and procedures
- Current level of recognition

Note: For the demographics, participants were given the option of “non-binary” as a gender option, but we did not have any respondents that identified that way.

Tips to maintain engagement in a blended WFH/RTO environment

Employee motivators

- Develop an understanding of what motivates your employees: Conduct regular assessments and act on the results.
- Provide training and development opportunities for managers to hone their ability to address the issues impacting employee motivation.
- Increase communication that focuses on areas where employees are most concerned.
- Ask your employees what will increase their sense of feeling valued.
- Ask your employees how they want to have an impact in the organization.

Mutual Trust

Working from Home requires an increase in the level of trust between the employee and manager, and vice versa.

Employers with managers who judge productivity by “butts in seats” must be coached in managing people based on tasks and results, not on being in the office and at their desk 40 hours a week.

Employees have to develop trust that their employers are doing everything they can to keep them safe during and after the crisis, and that when they returned to the office, they will continue to stay safe.

The survey was conducted before there was a lot of talk about how and when to Return to Office (although many employers and employees felt the return would be relatively quick), so the questions dealing with aspects of trust don't include the RTO perspective.

The survey asked participants to rank several statements to indirectly assess the employees' perception of trust in the organization:

- I feel I belong in this organization and am included in the work it is doing.
- If you take a risk in this organization to make things better, it is usually praised, even if unsuccessful.
- This organization involves people in the decisions that impact their work.
- I feel like a valued member of my team and the company.

Across the board, among all demographic groups, “feeling like a valued member of the team” and “belonging” had the strongest level of agreement, with an average

Developing mutual trust across the organization

Whatever the blended office looks like, one thing is clear, the working models of the past do not meet the needs of today.

As we shift into the next normal, employees will require more flexibility, especially those with children.

Parents are grappling with how to navigate schooling their children and working from home. Even those without children might be working at home with a spouse or roommate whose work schedule conflicts with theirs.

Flexibility might mean taking breaks throughout the day to focus on family responsibilities but returning in the evening to finish the day's tasks.

Leaders need to trust employees to find a schedule that works for them. Establish minimal work standards and focus on outcomes, not hours, being as flexible as possible.

Cheryl Czach – Cheryl Czach Coaching

of 4.2 and 4.0 respectively (on a scale of 1 to 5). Baby Boomers tended to feel the most positive about the trust statements, while Millennials felt the least positive.

Agreement with “trust” statements



Coaching managers on ways to increase inclusion among their team will go a long way to improving trust.

Many of the employers interviewed noted that they have invested a lot of effort

“We are now way more willing to trust employees and to loosen controls on decision making.”

working to develop the trust their managers have in their employees. For two companies, this meant providing training for their managers on how to effectively manage their newly remote workforce. One company’s training for

managers focused on how to manage remote teams (with coaching on engaging personally, focusing on more than just the task, making frequent contact, offering frequent praise).

Transparency and communication were mentioned by nearly all of the companies as one of their main levers to build trust. By increasing the level of communication and being openly transparent, they were actively working to improve trust. The different communication approaches will be discussed later in the report.

There were some cases where companies felt that their trust was being stretched – employee participation lagging in the afternoon, productivity on new projects not as high as on previous projects, or managers “rubber stamping” the time cards of their direct reports without doing any follow up. In all of those cases, open communication with the teams and the managers helped to resolve the issues.

One Company’s Story

We tried to start building trust from the start. Prior to COVID-19, we had been trying to move away from a “command and control” structure to become more trusting and to improve employee attraction and retention. This crisis has sped up that process.

In the beginning, we sent out resources on best practices for virtual work and helped managers set expectations. Still, there is a lot of variability. Some managers want everyone back in the office to ensure they are doing their work (butts in seats), others feel comfortable with their teams working from home through the end of the year.

VP of HR – Global Automotive Supplier

Tips to maintain engagement in a blended WFH/RTO environment

Increasing Mutual Trust

- Ensure open and transparent communication
- Provide coaching to managers on how to successfully manage remote workforces (e.g. proactively exhibit trust; set clear expectations; empathetic communication).
- Shift perception of productivity from time in the office to deliverables
- Work with employees to understand their perceptions of belonging, involvement in decisions and feeling valued.
- Proactively ask for feedback and openly act upon it (or communicate why a change can’t be made).

Communication

Communication is central to maintaining engagement and having a successful blended Work From Home / Return to Office approach.

On the employer side, companies were very deliberate in trying to “over communicate.”

Leaders in the companies we interviewed really worked to increase the level of communication with employees. Weekly virtual townhalls with senior leadership were used by several companies both to get information out to the employees, but also to receive feedback and answer questions. For companies with essential workforces, several CEOs made it a point to physically visit with employees in the field.

“The visibility of us as leaders was important. My being there helped the employees to feel safe.”

Other approaches to communication included semi-weekly e-mails to all employees, daily calls for members of teams, and coaching for managers on how to increase the level and empathy of their communication.

All of the larger companies with blended WFH/RTO teams have made the commitment that all meetings will happen virtually, regardless of whether the participants are in the office or not. This has two benefits: First, it allows companies to maintain safe social distancing; second, it allows all participants to have the same experience, regardless of if they are in the office or remote.

To maintain communication while balancing “Zoom fatigue,” one company set up twice weekly team meetings. The Monday meeting was audio only to catch up on the weekend activities and set the plan for the week. The Friday meeting was a video call to reflect on the week’s activities and allow the team to all see each other.

From the employee side, we asked our survey respondents how well their employers were doing on communication by asking them to rate three statements:

1. Leadership communicates the “why.”
2. Leadership articulates a clear vision for the future.
3. Leaders “close the loop” after getting input from team members to communicate how their input was used.

Communicate the “why”



State a clear vision



Close the loop



Two things stood out from the results. First, there was a clear demographic split in the results. Millennials had the lowest opinion of how leadership communicated. In fact, Millennials scored the communication questions lowest out of all the culture questions they were asked. Second, “Closing the loop” scored the lowest out of all culture questions across all demographics.

Companies are doing a reasonable job (although they can always do more) communicating why they are taking certain actions and what their vision is for the future. However, they are not doing enough to communicate how employee input is used in the decision-making process.

As companies move to a blended WFH/RTO environment, being able to close the loop in communication will become increasingly important (especially if more is done to gauge employee engagement – see the next chapter).

Communicating the “Why” and “Closing the Loop”

Things are rapidly changing at a pace that is faster than most people and organizations can clearly communicate news. Consistently sharing the “why” and closing the loop on “how” employee input impacts decisions will help drive trust, understanding, acceptance and – ideally – engagement.

If employees trust that you are communicating openly and honestly with them, they will be more understanding when the situation changes faster than you can communicate.

Now is the time to listen. Find out what matters most, craft a compelling narrative that reaches employees where they are at, and leverage all available communication channels – especially face-to-face (be creative and safe during these COVID-19 times). Yes, you must do this because your company likely can’t afford not to.”

Robert Herta – Herta Communications

Tips to maintain engagement in a blended WFH/RTO environment

Increasing Communication

- Conduct a weekly Q & A session where employees can submit in advance or ask on the spot questions. Demonstrate your willingness to take any question and answer it as honestly as possible.
- Over communicate – if you think you are communicating too much, increase it.
- Ask for feedback – ensure the communication is two-way.
- Ensure teams have multiple opportunities to interact and have virtual “water cooler” conversations.
- Maintain the same level of communication between those in the office and those who continue to work from home.

Perceived Fairness and Safety

Employers have gone to great lengths to ensure that their COVID-19 policies are seen as fair and that any Return to Office procedures are equitable. Many companies are leaving the RTO decision up to the employee.

Examples of approaches that companies took include:

- Giving hazard pay to all employees regardless of whether they were essential workers in the field or people working from home.
- Looking at COVID-19 policies in conjunction with Diversity, Equity & Inclusion to make sure that they are inclusive, fair and equitable.
- Surveying employees to make sure that they felt listened to and validated.
- Discussing all policies and procedures up front with the union.

Safety (both physical and mental) is another area that employers have focused on. Overall, companies have landed on the side of not mandating that non-essential employees must come to the office. If someone feels they need to work from home for safety reasons, they are allowed to do so.

Many companies have had to develop multiple policies depending on the type of work done by the employee. One airline we interviewed developed different protocols for a wide variety of situations, including: administrative staff working in the office, customer service representatives at the counters, pilots and attendants, ground crew, and customers. In addition to developing the policies, companies have had to be able to constantly adjust them based on changing circumstances.

“We have become much more empathetic.”

One Approach to Fairness

From the beginning, we developed and implemented three guiding principles for how we would make changes:

1. The physical safety and health of our employees
2. The financial safety and health of our employees
3. The financial health and stability of the company

Everything we do is measured against these principles. There is no pushback for employees to come back if they are not comfortable.

Global Director of HR – Global Equipment Manufacturer

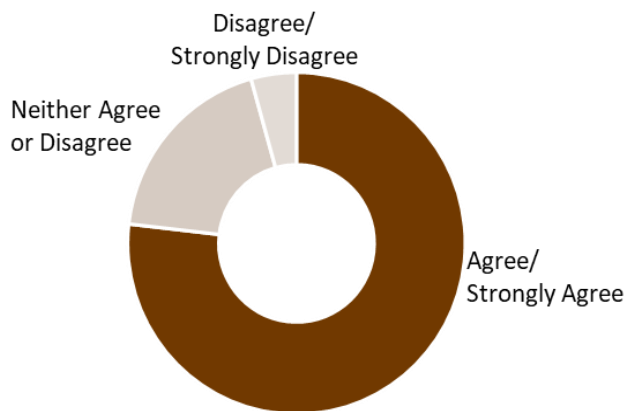
A global equipment manufacturer we interviewed has a staff of field service engineers that are responsible for servicing the company’s products. Whenever a service issue came up, the employees were given the option of accepting or declining the travel (with no pressure or repercussions).

The company provided as much data to the employees as possible: infection rates and trends in the county they were going to; local and company-specific safety protocols; the situation at the customer; etc. As a result of the approach, none of their FSEs declined to travel.

There wasn’t as much consistency regarding approaches to mental health and safety, but some companies were working to address that as well. Several companies focused on increasing communication and access to their Employee Assistance Programs (EAP). One company developed a mental health phone app and has brought in experts to staff the mental health lines. Another company started the tradition of beginning each meeting by asking “how are you doing?” Staff at a third company started a virtual yoga and meditation class for their peers.

“We have seen people go through the stages of grief and are putting in place the support to help with that.”

My employer has responded appropriately to the crisis



Based on the survey data, employees seem to feel that their employers have been successful in their approach to building fairness and safety into the process.

Tips to maintain engagement in a blended WFH/RTO environment

Increasing Perceived Fairness and Safety

- Make your employees' wellbeing your number one priority – both in communication and in action.
- Actively solicit suggestions from employees and remain open to new approaches to work.
- Develop policies and procedures that can be seen as fair for both WFH and RTO – communicate the “why” of the policies.
- Understand that the home lives of your employees (whether WFH or RTO) may have become more complicated and be open to alternatives that may make everyone's lives easier.
- Consider incorporating mental safety as well as physical safety into your approach.

Social Justice and COVID-19

While companies were dealing with the impact of COVID-19, the death of George Floyd prompted one of the largest protest movements in recent history and deep soul searching on the part of many organizational leaders. Many of the leaders we interviewed from small non-profits to large multi-nationals, shared that social justice has become intertwined with their responses to the pandemic. Efforts to address the challenges of racial inequality have included internal communication with employees and external communication of support for social justice to the communities they serve.

Internal support efforts largely mirrored organizations' pandemic responses and ranged from large employee town halls led by executive leaders to managers "checking-in" with their direct reports and reminding them that Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and other support services were available to them.

The leaders we interviewed also shared examples of employee-led externally-facing efforts, including "White Coats for Black Lives" where, in early June, health care workers across the US stepped out of their workplaces to kneel for 8 minutes and 46 seconds to remember George Floyd.

Organizations, including many of those we interviewed, published solidarity statements regarding social justice. Some organizations that did share statements have been accused of using social justice as brand-building exercise. Others are now facing legal and PR challenges due to personal accounts of negative workplace experiences from current and former employees.

One Company's Story

"Authenticity was more important than worrying that the cost of silence was too high."

After an executive team meeting where they discussed the impact of George Floyd's death, our CEO asked, "how would this conversation have been different if the team was more diverse?"

That question launched a difficult conversation about the company's approach to social justice. Rather than issue a watered-down statement of support, we started to evaluate our internal diversity and inclusion successes and failures, and assess our Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts. We are now developing and will implement a long-term D&I strategy.

SVP of HR – Global Construction Equipment Manufacturer

Statements are only a starting point. Leaders serious about diversity and inclusion (D&I) need to build a strategy tailored to their organization with a strong commitment and follow-through from the executive leadership team.

Tips to address Social Justice

Making a commitment to social justice

- Evaluate your current corporate culture and D&I status – leverage data including engagement surveys and demographic information to understand your starting point.
- Assess how successful you are at recruiting a diverse candidate pool and providing advancement opportunities – understand your D&I pipeline.
- Develop a D&I strategy that includes input from your leaders, employees at all levels of the organization and your stakeholder groups. The strategy should align with the mission and vision of your company.
- Develop goals and metrics too measure your progress and commit to communicating the results – positive or negative
- Plan to re-evaluate the strategy periodically to best align with organizational and market conditions

Maintaining Culture and Engagement

Culture and Engagement need to be actively managed as companies transition to a blended WFH/RTO environment. Maintaining your culture and engagement is hard enough when everyone is in the office. It becomes much more difficult in a time of uncertainty, when employees are impacted by both social and health related challenges, and may be working from anywhere.

The building blocks highlighted in the preceding chapters (understanding employee motivators, nurturing mutual trust, maintaining perceived safety and fairness, and “over” communicating) all contribute to maintaining your culture and the engagement levels of your employees.

On the culture side, companies need to be vigilant about maintaining their culture in a blended environment. Be proactive about modelling and developing the culture that you have and that you want to keep going forward. As some employees continue to work from home, and new employees join the company remotely, your culture can become unfocused. However, be open to changes in the culture that may be positive and work to incorporate them as well.

As a leader it is important to leverage the communication process to reinforce your company’s culture and train your managers to keep culture in mind as they work with their teams. One of the companies interviewed is taking advantage of the crisis to shift their culture from “command and control” to more collaborative.

“This has been a catalyst to show the need for culture change in the organization.”

Returning to the office will pose other challenges for employers and employees. Employees who have worked from home for five months or longer will have developed new work habits (some good and some bad). Employees that have been hired during WFH won’t have experienced anything different. As teams return, companies may want to consider additional coaching and “re-onboarding” to ensure that the RTO process is smooth and the company can maintain or improve its culture.

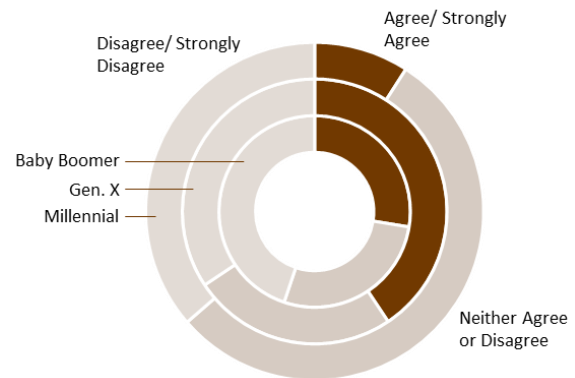
Measuring engagement with a blended workforce is very important. Many of the companies we spoke with have conducted several engagement surveys and “pulse” updates while their employees have been working from home.

Early in the crisis, survey respondents reported being as engaged, or more engaged than they were pre-COVID. Our belief is that as WFH has dragged on, overall engagement may have fallen.

One company continually monitors productivity and noticed that after a few months, it started dropping in the afternoons and that while existing projects were continuing to run smoothly, getting new projects going in a remote environment was more difficult. They used open communication and dialog with the employees to address the issue.

Organizations have a unique opportunity to proactively make positive changes to their culture and to implement policies and procedures to impact employee engagement. To do that, they need to ask what is (or is not) working for the organization and what the employees feel is important. Leadership also needs to understand that there might not be a “one-size-fits-all” answer. They may need to adapt the policies for different demographics while maintaining an overall sense of fairness.

I am more engaged today than before Feb. 2020



Tips to maintain engagement in a blended WFH/RTO environment

Maintaining Culture and Engagement

- Coach your employees on how to set work boundaries and “leave the office” when working from home.
- Be as flexible as possible with employees on “when” the work is getting done – focus on deliverables, not time spent.
- Ask employees what changes they have seen in the culture and what they would like to keep.
- Conduct “re-onboarding” exercises for staff Returning To the Office to reinforce your corporate culture.
- Keep a focus on maintaining a single team environment instead of splitting into us (WFH) vs. them (RTO) mindsets.

Where do we go from here?

The unknowns that we discussed in our May 2020 COVID-19 report are just as valid today:

- When will the economy start to improve?
- Will there be a “second wave” of COVID-19? Or Will the “first wave” recede?
- How long will the economic recovery take?
- How can we restructure our business to keep our employees safe (both physically and mentally)?

In addition, the social justice issues raised by the death of George Floyd and others have increased the challenges being faced by companies and their employees.

Our survey and the company interviews identified some of the best practices that organizations are using to help ensure that they retain their talent and keep them engaged as they move to a blended Work From Home / Return to Office environment.

Many of the organizations we spoke with were focused on:

- Developing empathetic leadership – giving employees the benefit of the doubt when it comes to perceived safety and productivity
- Coaching leaders to effectively manage in a WFH environment
- Pushing proactive, open and honest two-way communication
- Measuring employee engagement and concerns
- Building mutual trust

Sigred Group and our partners who collaborated in this study have decades of experience helping companies and leaders develop plans to improve employee recruiting, retention and engagement.

We can discuss with you how best to hire and retain amazing talent in the blended workplace of the future.

About the Sigred Group Team

Sigred Group is a retained management recruiting and leadership advisory firm. Our mission is to drive the prosperity of great employers by connecting and developing amazing leadership talent.

Attracting, retaining and growing leadership talent is hard. We work with our clients to take the pain out of their talent management processes. Our team have all walked in your shoes – we have run companies, we have hired our own leadership teams, we have consulted across multiple industries. We know how to find and develop the best talent.

Mike Dergis

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Mike has over 25 years of experience in operational management, executive recruiting, organizational development, and international strategy consulting. Having served in senior management positions in industry and consulting, he has a well-rounded understanding of organizational strategy, recruiting and organizational development.



Mike is passionate about connecting people. He founded Sigred Group to help clients increase their profitability by leveraging the team's unique skills and experiences to create pragmatic solutions.

Kristi Stepp

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Kristi has over 25 years of experience in human resources across the automotive, healthcare and workforce solutions industries. Her experience includes strategic planning, change management, operational excellence, and team collaboration.



Kristi is passionate about education and learning. In addition to her professional experience leading global learning organizations for Fortune 500 companies, she is board vice president of the Cornerstone Jefferson-Douglass K-8 school board and sits on the board of the historic Pewabic Pottery, both based in Detroit, Michigan.

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As a business leader, Cheryl has been guiding professionals through their work and life journeys for over 20 years. Her passion for coaching employees, at all levels of the organization, to reach their personal and professional goals led her found Cheryl Czach Coaching and Consulting, LLC.

Cheryl is passionate about building community. Whether it be hosting networking events to bring people together or her work as board president for a local non-profit, she believes in the power of community to heal, connect, and uplift.

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Herta Communications specializes in solving complex business issues through strategic communications and marketing.

Robert Herta is passionate about helping Fortune 500 companies, startups and non-profits grow their customer base, improve bottom line results, and become (or stay) leaders in their respective fields.



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