

Creative ways to inspire remote staff

How companies and employees are staying connected, motivated in a new era of work

MARLENE HABIB

For the past year and a half, Paige Chisholm's work rituals have included online check-ins where employees wear silly hats, chatting with a special job buddy, and chucking her cell-phone for distraction-free "power hours" – all from her home in Canmore, Alta.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 26-year-old has adopted ways to keep inspired and connected while working remotely for the global hospitality and attractions company Pursuit.

Working away from offices and other physical settings is part of the new era of doing business – so is putting resources into employee health and engagement in order to keep remote working staff inspired and connected.

Ms. Chisholm has been with Pursuit since 2017. She started out driving monster ice explorer trucks through Jasper National Park. Two years ago, she joined the people and culture department, but only made the daily 20-minute commute to the Banff office for a few months before COVID-19 changed everything.

"I was in the bad habit of going from my pyjamas to my computer for two weeks there at the beginning," Ms. Chisholm said. "I'd roll out of bed at 8:30 a.m. and have a coffee, but that's not the way to go."

"Now, I get up at 6:30 a.m., take the dog for a walk and prepare for the day instead of just melting into my computer."

Pursuit provides travel experiences, with hotel, restaurant and retail operations in Alberta, Vancouver, Alaska, Montana and Iceland. Of the 3,000-strong employees during the peak tourism season, about 1,000 work in offices, Karen Gadberry, vice-president of the people and culture department, says from Denver.

Since the pandemic's outset, Pursuit's employee engagement manager, Juliette Recompasat, has spent countless hours working on internal communications, team-building and other strategies.

"We're very comfortable with staying engaged remotely whether in a pandemic or not – we're rarely in the same room together as a management team," Ms. Gadberry says.

To keep staff up to speed, Pursuit holds monthly virtual town halls with a question-and-answer forum.

"We've found being transparent and responding to questions from staff has helped people feel connected, mentally well and included," she says.

Before the pandemic, many companies didn't often approve of staff working remotely, and that was especially the case with



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VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE
PEOPLE AND CULTURE
DEPARTMENT AT PURSUIT

micromanaging bosses.

But with the new normal of off-site work, employers had to let "those potential insecurities" go, says Ann Buckingham, executive human resources manager for ADP Canada, an HR solutions company.

"They've had to learn to trust their employees," she says from Calgary. "To deliver good business and be successful, they've got to put a lot more on their employees to deliver, because they don't have that engagement in that office environment, and [have] to adapt to get the best out of their employees."

The pandemic has "forced companies to say, 'Okay, I have to let them do their best work, but how can I support them?' and that's the shift in a lot of the work environments right now."

Research indicates business productivity has remained consistent or even improved during this new remote work era.

A survey by ADP Canada and Angus Reid polled 1,501 Canadians in April and found that of those doing remote work, 42 per cent felt they were more productive, compared with 21 per cent in April, 2020, and 37 per cent noticed an increase in the quality of their work, compared with 19 per cent.

In June, 2021, research by Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC) found that 74 per cent of businesses planned to allow employees to work remotely after the pandemic, and that 55 per cent of workers want to continue to work remotely. The poll of more than 700 small businesses

and 2,000 workers also found only 9 per cent of businesses saw productivity decline during the pandemic.

However, employee burnout and rising stress are real concerns, the ADP Canada-Angus Reid survey indicates.

"There isn't that physical separation from what is their home versus where is their office – it's all one space – so there's always that temptation to drop back to your desk to check in on something," Ms. Buckingham says.

For that reason, a common theme in remote work management is to guide staff on ways to log out and put work away.

To help employees, the University of Toronto gave staff three additional paid days off. The university also developed a Wellness and Work from Home Toolkit that includes tips for working while caring for kids, and ways for employees to boost their mental and physical health.

Mobile Escape, a global mail-order business based in Alberta, saw growing interest from remote workers and organizations for its Escape Mail adventure games and puzzles, which bolster "communication, problem-solving and creativity," co-founder Eric Reynolds says.

Mr. Reynolds says the Calgary Bridge Foundation and Alberta Health Services are users of Escape Mail, which is sold by the episode. Titles such as "Missing Person," "Family Secrets," and "Ancient Mysteries" are purchased online, then mailed out. There's a hands-on and online component to each interactive challenge.

Making employees feel valued and not forgotten – giving feedback, recognizing good work and offering professional development opportunities – can keep them engaged and motivated, Ms. Buckingham says.

She also suggests injecting fun and group activities into the workday, as it sparks creativity and productivity.

At ADP Canada, for instance, employees participate in virtual lunches and physical challenges.

"We use a system whereby we can create teams and can challenge another team, even to do 50 squats a day, or a healthy eating challenge," Ms. Buckingham says.

There are signs the remote work trend will be around for the long haul. Canadian-based e-commerce giant Shopify announced last year it would adopt a remote work model. Tech giant Google has turned to flexible workdays, allowing staff to spend three days in the office and two days "wherever they work best."

Ms. Gadberry anticipates a near-full return to in-person work at Pursuit.

"We're in the business of connecting with internal and external guests ... we like to be in the room together, brainstorm together," she says.

"We'll continue to be as flexible as we need to be. We might even return some of the staff to some hybrid or flex schedule. But we're all keen to get back together and enjoy that camaraderie that we used to. ... We want to try to return to that energy in the room."

Special to The Globe and Mail

Managers will need new skills, tools, for the next phase of remote work

JARED LINDZON

Over the past 18 months, managers have had to adapt to rapidly evolving and uncertain circumstances, particularly when it comes to the transition from in-person to remote work and back again.

As organizations gradually enter the next chapter of the continuing workplace revolution – from remote work within the context of a global pandemic, to fewer restrictions on movement and the gradual reopening of offices – managers will need to master new skills and adopt new tools to be successful.

"How we worked over the last 18 months during a pandemic in a remote environment, that's actually not the future; that was a time of survival," says PwC Canada partner and chief people officer Sofia Theodorou. "There's a very important point around the backdrop of a pandemic – not always having the tools there, school closures et cetera – so it was a time of experimentation and learning, but it was also devoid of choice and flexibility."

As we gradually move away from seeing remote work as a health and safety necessity and toward a more flexible future of work, Ms. Theodorou says managers will face new challenges. At the same time, however, they will have the benefit of choice and flexibility, new tools and technologies, and more than a year of



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practice at managing a remote team.

"When we went virtual initially with the pandemic, all we did was we moved our in-office behaviours into a virtual setting," she says.

Her team learned to reduce the number of live video meetings they schedule, while intentionally creating space for social interactions virtually.

She says the pandemic has also forced leaders to shift the way in which they measure productivity, from an emphasis on day-to-day activities to outcomes and deliverables.

"You also need to show twice as much appreciation in the absence of non-verbal cues in a virtual environment, because it di-

minishes peoples' ability to evaluate how an interaction has gone or how they're doing," she says.

Not being physically accessible also means that managers will need to improve their asynchronous communication skills and be more intentional about knowledge management.

"People need to know where they can go to get the information they need, and to have a source of truth to not get held up or slowed down when they're not sitting together," says Janeen Speer, Shopify's vice-president of talent.

Ms. Speer says that her team uses Slack and Google Docs to communicate and collaborate. They've also started using videos to communicate with team members in a way that's more dynam-

ic, while reducing the volume of reading material staff need to stay on top of.

"In the past we'd just think about picking up the phone or hopping on a video chat, but now we have leaders who are dropping videos in slack channels to get their teams up to speed," she says, adding that videos don't necessarily need to be high quality or well scripted. "One of the healthiest things I've seen through the pandemic is people just getting scrappier and being willing to play and experiment and try different things and be okay if it's messy the first time."

In this more remote work environment, managers have also had to quickly improve their communication skills, both verbal and written, to compensate for the lack of in-person communication. In some cases that required them to be more precise, intentional and professional in their communications, but moving forward it may require adopting more casual communication techniques.

"You have to be engaging with the team and express some emotion, because if you're just doing it business as usual, you will come across as cold, you will discount rather than incent good behaviour," explains Kevin Collins, chief executive officer of Charli.AI, a Vancouver-based digital workplace automation solutions provider.

Mr. Collins explains that, just as younger employees often need

to adapt to a certain level of professional language upon entering the work force, managers should strive to understand their natural communication styles. Specifically, he says managers should look to social media to improve communication across generational lines and add more emotion to professional communications.

"They're going to have to adapt to the social-media tools and communication style, understanding things like the acronyms, the emojis, the language," he says. "Even looking at your skillset in use of e-mail has to be far better; if you were doing pre-pandemic doesn't come close to what you need to do post-pandemic."

Above all else, however, managers should strive to be as transparent as possible with their team members and collaborate with staff to set clear expectations. For example, Jeff Goplin, the senior vice-president of business development for Randstad Canada, says he asks team members to specify whether their needs are "urgent" or "important."

"Something I thought was urgent before might be important, but not urgent, kind of like 911 versus [the non-emergency police line]," he says. "If you work with your team members to define what that will mean to you and to them, that will save a lot of time and efficiency."

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