Top Challenges for Managers in 2021

By Kathleen Doheny
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Weeks before the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic, experts said gig-worker laws, Generation Z workers, mental health and vaping would be the top issues (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/people-managers/pages/top-challenges-for-managers-in-2020.aspx) managers would face in 2020. Little did they know of the challenges that the pandemic, remote work and social unrest would bring to the workplace.

All of those issues and more are still on the table in 2021. Here is an updated view of what experts said will occupy managers most this year.

Remote Work and Social Capital Loss

Remote-work arrangements, still common and probably here to stay, create not only feelings of isolation, but also a loss of "social capital," said Alec Levenson, Ph.D., senior research scientist at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business Center for Effective Organizations in Los Angeles. "Social capital" describes the building of relationships, personal and professional, that help you do your work well.

Pre-pandemic, people who worked remotely still needed to visit the office at least occasionally for two reasons: "The times you come into the office are important for getting key work done you can't do remotely and for keeping strong relationships you already have, building new ones or rebuilding them," Levenson said.

To keep social capital flowing, he said, managers need to reach out to workers. One way might be to host a social Zoom gathering, Levenson said, acknowledging that many workers are suffering from Zoom fatigue. Another option for maintaining employee connections: Encourage workers to create communities on the company intranet based on their off-hours interests—running, raising cats, cross-stitching—with co-workers inside and outside their departments.

Same Storm, Different Boats

Managers need to be aware that the pandemic likely has affected each worker differently, said Chicago-based Ravin Jesuthasan, global leader for transformation services at Mercer, a global human capital solutions firm. "Each worker is going through a unique experience," he said.

Managers shouldn't assume they know who is most stressed out, said Regina Ihrke, senior director and well-being leader at the Minneapolis office of Willis Towers Watson, a risk management and insurance company. "Don't jump to conclusions. You have to put your own experiences aside."

People living alone may be lonely or may cherish the extra alone time remote work provides. Those living in a large household, working and learning under the same roof as others, may dream of escaping for alone time. Try to check in, one-on-one, once a week with employees to see how they are doing, Ihrke suggested.
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Before you talk in depth to workers about their needs, "understand the portfolio of resources available to support them," Jesuthasan said. Reach out to HR and read the company website to know what's available and what you may need to research further, he suggested.

New Remote Hires, Bad Remote Fires

New hires who were brought on board remotely during the pandemic told survey takers that they are doing fine, but the researchers who examined their behavior (https://www.tinypulse.com/blog/new-hires-suffering-in-silence-wfh-remote-onboarding) found otherwise, said Elora Voyles, an industrial organizational psychologist partnering with TINYpulse, an employment engagement survey company in Seattle. The researchers compared 500 new hires brought into companies in 2019 with 500 new hires brought on in 2020. They tracked the use of TINYpulse's online recognition platform, Cheers for Peers, (https://www.tinypulse.com/cheers-employee-recognition) which allows workers to send kudos to colleagues. Compared to the 2019 new hires, the 2020 new hires gave 34 percent less of this recognition to co-workers and were 28 percent less likely to respond when co-workers reached out to them with a cheer.

To be inclusive, Voyles said, managers could "emphasize the organizational values." For example, if the company promotes volunteering in the community, invite new hires to join the effort.

Also, a mentoring program specifically for new hires could help these employees feel welcomed and engaged. Mentoring is always a good idea, Voyles said, "but during the pandemic, a necessity."

Firing or laying off workers is never easy, but handling a termination impersonally during a pandemic can affect not only those who are let go, but those who stay, said Jason Dorsey, management speaker, researcher and president of The Center for Generational Kinetics, a research and solutions company in Austin, Texas. "Employers are letting go of employees (https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2020/06/15/in-a-sign-of-the-times-cold-zoom-call-firings-are-now-common/?sh=5409ad0c13db) in groups over Zoom or in mass, generic e-mails and messages," he said. "Not only does that feel impersonal to the employee who is let go, but it also sends a very clear, negative message about how the company really views its people to the employees who remain."

Avoiding a remote layoff might not be possible, but "it is best to have that conversation one-on-one via a video chat if possible," Dorsey said. Managers should also help the laid-off employees by asking HR to be sure to let them know about transition services or insurance coverage after their departure.

Re-Entry: Stressful or Flexible?

As workplaces try to resume in-person operations, managers should expect some workers to seek different positions or other changes, said Cheryl Cran, founder of NextMapping, a future-of-work consultancy headquartered in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Many workers are asking themselves, "Is this job what I really want to do?" Cran explained, "The pandemic has increased that soul-searching."

"Remote work will be a larger percentage of what we do, when it is possible," said Robert Sutton, professor of management science and engineering at Stanford University. If options are available and some employees choose remote over in-office work, "the challenge of hybrid teams will be an issue."

If six people are in a conference room and two people have joined the meeting on Zoom, the manager must find a way to include everyone, Sutton said. Managers should also be aware of any bias they may have in favor of workers who are in the room, he said.

Managers should be ready for differences of opinion about work arrangements. In surveys of her clients, Cran said, 89 percent of 2,500 workers polled wanted to continue to work remotely at least part of the time. But only 54 percent of 1,000 managers felt workers are as productive working from home, with Baby Boomer managers having the most trouble with the arrangement. Among Millennial workers, 86
percent of 3,000 polled said they want to work remotely and would change jobs if offered more remote-work options.

To find a way to inject flexibility into every job, "go beyond thinking about the role of the job to the activities of the job," Jesuthasan advised managers. When a lab-based pharmaceutical worker breaks down his tasks, for instance, he may find he spends 30 percent of his time revising research reports and analyzing data. "Those are things he could do at home," Jesuthasan said.

Kathleen Doheny is a freelance writer in Los Angeles.