

A MINI CASE STUDY

We've Virtualized Our Workforce—Now What?

Client Demographics

Nonprofit Practice Area: HR Outsourcing

Location: Washington, D.C.

Sector: Social Enterprise

Mission Type: Consulting and Professional Services on Membership for Associations

Staff Size: Under 50 Full-Time Employees

Annual Budget: N/A

Scenario

A Washington, D.C.-based consulting and professional services organization transitioned to fully remote work, shifting its culture building and employee engagement initiatives to a virtual setting. Given a large portion of the organization's staff members were in their twenties or early thirties, leadership wanted to provide the Generation Y (millennial) and Generation Z employees opportunities to expand social networks in the workplace and to build friendships with their colleagues both inside and outside work. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization would frequently hold company happy hours, picnics and other events to foster these types of connections. Through fully virtual events, the organization aspired to garner the same level of connection as the previous in-person gatherings.

Considerations

This Nonprofit HR client sought to understand the effectiveness of virtual social gatherings. Based on anecdotal research and conversations with employees, the organization took the following results into consideration.

- 1 Virtual gatherings provide valuable touch points, but do not relay the same effect as in-person gatherings; it is not a one-to-one replacement.
- 2 Employee bonding must be reimagined for the virtual workspace; it cannot be a simple duplication of in-person gatherings.
- 3 The focus for virtual gatherings need to remain on fostering organic moments and organic connections among employees.

Solutions

First, the organization formalized internal mentoring by providing employees avenues to make connections either on a weekly, monthly or other regular cadence. This provided employees who were seeking mentorship opportunities to reach out. A well-designed mentoring program also split the logistical burden between the mentor and the mentee, ensuring it was not only one person's responsibility to foster the connection.

The second solution was the integration of multiple colleague touch points during the workday, beginning with five-minute chats at the start of each virtual meeting. Employees were asked to turn their cameras and mics on to chat about their day or weekend for a few minutes. This small adjustment created organic connection and resulted in increased employee engagement.

Another solution the organization implemented were staff chat forums. Leaders created topical threads on a chosen chat platform and encouraged employees to create their own. Additionally, the organization implemented a weekly agenda-free meeting, where employees had the opportunity to chat with their colleagues for 15-20 minutes on Friday morning over coffee.

As these solutions developed, the organization remained flexible and committed to receiving feedback from staff in order to assess, improve and adapt engagement initiatives.

Recap & Reflect

Walk through this scenario in your organization by reflecting on the following questions.

- 1 What type of virtual events have been well-liked by staff and effective in creating organic connection?
- 2 How can the successful aspects of previous in-person gatherings be reimaged and applied to the virtual environment?
- 3 How can you creatively utilize the technology your organization employs to provide opportunity for organic connections?



Final Point to Ponder

How can your organization replicate in-person organic connections virtually in a way that does not feel forced, but does feel formalized and intentional?

