



feature

Managing workplace culture in the 21st century

Our HR expert breaks down the myriad challenges – and benefits – of a fast-changing corporate world.



JENNIFER MCCUSKER

Reflecting the changing face of global business, modern workplace culture has undergone a significant transformation in the past couple of decades, driven by rapid advances in technology and communication, as well as shifting philosophies on best practices and the benefits of an increasingly diverse workforce.

Think of how much has changed. Email was just coming into its own in the late '90s; now we have FaceTime, Zoom, and Skype bringing far-flung global partners together. New breakthroughs in Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning are revolutionizing data mining. A new focus on work-life balance has championed employee wellness.

And that's just for starters. Rampant consolidation, as well as disruption, have posed a new set of challenges for today's business professionals, starting with the HR department.

Companies need to stay agile and adapt on the fly to reap the rewards and benefits of today's workplace culture, said Jennifer McCusker, longtime HR professional and advisory committee member for DCE's Human Resources Management certificate program.

She contends that one of the most significant – and welcome – trends is an expanded definition of what diversity and inclusion mean.

"It has been wonderful to see the investment companies are making in diversity and inclusion, as I personally believe that companies have a responsibility to be difference-makers in the world," McCusker said. "I am seeing the landscape broaden to include things like brain-based diversity, which brings differences in thought and processing to the table. This is incredibly encouraging and opens the door to so many rich discussions and so much possibility."

Fully embracing diversity and inclusion enriches the conversation for employee groups of all kinds, nurturing creativity and encouraging open dialogue across the entire company, she added.

"It creates a culture that puts a premium on differences, visible representation, and decision-making that reinforces this as a value, just to name a few. This is a journey that we are all on together and I could not be more wide-eyed to see this area continue to push boundaries."

Adapting to new technology

Although new breakthroughs continue to advance at a speed beyond human consumption, there are many exciting possibilities with tremendous upside – especially in fields that have been stagnant and resistant to change. The ability for experts to focus more time on strategic and creative aspects of their role could lead to innovation that's long overdue, McCusker said.



“For example, AI is a topic that continues to interest me. The idea that we can make forward movement in these stagnant fields could produce some neat opportunities. On the flip side, we should proceed with caution so as not to walk ourselves into an episode of Black Mirror where we end up in a world of AI without any human oversight of governance.”

As high tech continues to make inroads, maintaining corporate responsibility, as well as “the magic that exists in the heartbeat and connection of humans,” is absolutely vital, she added. “As social beings we should not only be working to advance technology, we should also be finding new opportunities to connect along the way.”

Promoting employee wellness

As the pace of corporate upheaval quickens, tending to employee wellness has become imperative. It’s all about focusing on the whole person — nurturing the human aspect to complement the growing reliance on advanced tech.

Holistic wellness programs are becoming increasingly common, with yoga classes, 5K runs, brain-based training, life coaching and on-site healthcare clinics, to name a handful. Providing these accommodations is an important element of promoting a healthy and successful workplace culture, McCusker said.

“The concept of employee wellness has significantly expanded in the past decade. We have gone from basic benefits, to providing on-site gyms, to a focus on the whole person. Companies are finding ways to differentiate themselves in this space and integrate it into their culture and values.”

Recognizing the demands of managing day-to-day responsibilities, more companies are offering flexible work-at-home options. The idea is to create a work-life balance that benefits employees as well as a company’s bottom line.

“It’s difficult to unilaterally say that one size fits all, as the variables of company culture, type of work, personal working styles and technological support all come together to create a significant number of scenarios.”

Merging company cultures

One of the most impactful and challenging aspects of managing a vibrant workplace is integrating new, and often wildly divergent, cultures following mergers and acquisitions. It can require a great deal of up-front thought into the impact and effects on employees, and some companies are more successful than others at this, McCusker said.

The HR department is at the forefront of managing these types of scenarios, but in today’s workplace every department and employee is an equal participant in creating a successful corporate culture.

“As someone who spends a lot of her time thinking about workplace culture, I believe that HR, as well as every employee, has a role in surfacing cracks or fissures,” she added. “The real challenge for HR professionals exists in companies who make the mindset shift from culture residing in HR to culture being a living organism that is continuously shaped by every action of every employee.” ●

Human Resources professionals can play a leading role in creating a successful workplace culture and the fully online HR Management certificate program provides a solid background for anyone looking to update their skills or change careers. With expert instructors leading the way, the program is highly regarded by local employers for its “real-world” approach and up-to-date focus on the latest domestic and international HR practices and principles.

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