

Virtual Walks and Free Chocolate? What Workplace Pros Say the New Office Will Look Like.

WorldatWork CEO Scott Cawood moderated a panel on the future of work during the digital WorldatWork 2020 Total Resilience conference.

WorldatWork

The traditional office's days are numbered; the office of the future will be a "collaboration center" with a mix of skeleton staff and remote workers meeting through virtual team walks and group meals via home-delivered Zoom lunches.

Millennials and Generation Z will have problems networking in the new remote work world with fewer face-to-face meetings; and mental health and well-being benefits will become more important than ever before.

Those were some of the predictions of compensation and benefits professionals at the first virtual gathering of the WorldatWork 2020 Total

Resilience conference — a digital substitute for an annual conference that was supposed to be held in Minneapolis this year, but was postponed in response to the global coronavirus crisis.

"The office environment will change," said panelist Steve Pennacchio, senior vice president of total rewards at Pfizer, during an online session on resilience on Wednesday. "Remote work is here to stay."

Pennacchio said a number of companies will shut down their office space, which will have serious ramifications for commercial real estate and new entrants into the workforce, who will be at a particular disadvantage because of the limits of networking and source building through remote technology.

He suggested more virtual engagement tactics, including virtual walks or group activities, including having teams eat together with coordinated deliveries of lunches or chocolate. "Nothing hurts with chocolate," he said. During the conference, which will continue with weekly panels through Sept. 2, organizers also hosted social events, including virtual trivia games and online networking.

Pfizer is investing \$1 billion on development of vaccines and treatments for coronavirus, he noted. “Hopefully ours and others will work. The world needs more than one,” he said.

Likewise, Susan Brown, senior director of compensation at Siemens, said her company has focused on four key areas of building a team, culture, management team and employees who can adjust to the new environment through virtual meet-and-greet sessions and lunches where all team members must be present visually.

“The relationship builds with seeing each other,” she said. “The camera on changes the dynamic more than a phone call.”

Brown also noted tremendous innovation around talent management happening during the coronavirus crisis. She said that progressive companies have made a quick shift to focus first on the mental health and well-being of staff as a priority, rather than having an emphasis on business metrics.

“The whole conversation changed to focus on people’s health and safety, how they were feeling and empathetic messaging rather than a focus on business results,” she said.

WorldatWork CEO Scott Cawood, who served as moderator, noted that employers’ responses are being closely watched by staff, and other companies.

“COVID-19 doesn’t define who you are; it actually reveals who you are,” said Cawood, sitting alone on a stage with a white chair and house plant, as panelists called in from around the country.

Kumar Kymal, global head of compensation and benefits at BNY Mellon, said the global financial services firm has 95 percent of staff working remotely.

"Times of crisis and change give us permission to rethink the way we do things, and it's an opportunity to decide what really matters to your organization," Kymal said, noting that the company announced that there will be no layoffs in 2020 to put staff at ease.

Management response should focus on “speed, speed, speed,” he said about responding to challenges under the coronavirus crisis, with special attention to empathetic corporate messaging.

Kymal said at his company, management focused on a new framework to address healthcare concerns globally, with a broad overview of their healthcare plans. Second, management focused on addressing stress and anxiety, particularly with attention to messaging and staff feedback. They also put an increased focus on well-being and resilience strategies, and accelerated a mental health program to allow employees to assess their ability to deal with stress. Finally, BNY Mellon improved social connections for managers to lead better on connecting with various teams.

Looking ahead to the return-to-work phase of the crisis, Kymal said the stakes are high. Challenges include dealing with temperature scans, wearing masks, closed cafeterias and social distancing.

“As we're starting to plan what the return to office looks like, it's clear to us it has the potential to become an awful, awful employee experience,” he

said. “We really need to rethink and redesign. What does an office experience look like? That's front and center in my mind.”

By Walden Siew