Post-Pandemic, Firms Need Chief Social Connectivity Officers

By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD

In this new hybrid working environment, people shouldn't go to the office to stare at their computer, but to connect.

As the pandemic was winding down, Gerda, the CEO of a large retail chain, knew that she had to redefine the workplace for her employees. So she surveyed them on their concerns and desires regarding work in a post-pandemic world.

The survey results showed that a return to pre-pandemic work styles wasn't an option. She might lose many of her qualified people. With remote work, many people had found a better work-life balance. Some employees felt strongly about the reduced carbon footprint associated with the lack of commute. Others were longing for more face-to-face interactions.

From what she understood, most of her people liked the concept of hybrid work. Unquestionably, office occupancy was never going to be the same. But how to redesign the workplace? She had to find ways to make time spent at the office truly meaningful. It didn't make sense to have employees come to the office just to look at their computer screen.

In essence, she needed to reinterpret what could be called "presence" at work, in a world where work had become largely asynchronous in nature.

Gerda wondered: Could the satisfaction and productivity of her staff be the result of social capital that had been built up through countless water-cooler conversations, face-to-face meetings and social engagements before the onset of Covid-19? Now, due to the primacy of remote work, this social capital might atrophy. It worried her, knowing that interpersonal skills, teamwork and communication skills had always been critical ingredients for success.

Taking inspiration from the hospitality industry

In Gerda's mind, being together mattered when tasks were interdependent, necessitating the sharing of tacit knowledge in fluid ways; or when coordination could not be scripted. For example, orientation meetings, team building sessions and project kick-offs required physical presence. In contrast, working from home seemed most effective for relatively independent tasks and situations.

To make visits to the office truly attractive, Gerda needed to offer her people exciting physical spaces to converge, learn, grow, inspire, create and collaborate. The future involved a workplace where people could establish relationships, build culture, seed innovation and develop staff. It would be a social hub where her employees could come together to discuss ideas and come up with solutions to knotty problems. Her job was to facilitate the kinds of interactions that could not happen remotely.

With the need for social distancing, offices had to be less densely furnished. No more crowded sea of desks. This would leave more room for creative interior designs. The designs found in the hospitality world could be taken as a model, Gerda surmised. She had always thought that many of these places were quite inviting due to their strategic lighting, their creative furniture arrangements, their artwork and décor, and even their background music.

Still thinking of the hospitality industry, Gerda pictured more coffee corners, booths, communal tables, couches, whiteboards and mobile audiovisual equipment so teamwork could happen anywhere. She might also get the advice of a landscape consultant. Having plants and trees within the various workspaces – creating connections to the natural world – could have a positive psychological impact.

Of course, offices should also provide quiet spaces. Shouldn't it be possible to create library-like spaces divided by bookshelves? Or individual laptop desks surrounded by acoustic panelling? And to go completely overboard, how about including several spa-like relaxation rooms with reclining chairs and even soft music?

After all, an unconventional office design could boost her company's brand. It could be a great way to attract talented people.

A new role: Chief Social Connectivity Officer

No matter the final design, it was imperative to re-model offices into destinations where her employees wanted to come. Clearly, Gerda's role as a CEO had increased in complexity with the pandemic. In the future, she would be responsible for bringing the right people together at the right time.

In a sense, she had to wear a new hat, that of Chief Social Connectivity Officer (CSCO). She would have to find ways to promote human connectivity, to promote a sense of belonging for the purpose of enhancing the company's social capital. In other words, she needed to set expectations about the types of team activities that had to be attended in person and those that could proceed online.

Her new CSCO role would require great leadership and communication skills. Somehow, she needed to create an environment permeated by a shared belief: The company would move forward only if collaboration and cooperation were at the heart of all thinking, planning and decision making.

This new hybrid world would require her to design remote performance goal setting processes and employee evaluations. There were technical considerations, too. For instance, it was critical to set up ironclad remote IT systems to prevent leaking of sensitive information. A member of the board had suggested experimenting with various software programs to monitor productivity. Gerda wasn't comfortable with this kind of "policing" technology. She was aware how easily this kind of technology could backfire and destroy trust in the organisation.

After close to two years of remote working, Gerda knew full well how easily work could become all-encompassing. For remote work to be sustainable, it was important that nobody felt pressured to respond to emails and messages at all hours. A culture of being on call 24 hours a day was sure to

promote burnout. She also needed to address the drivers of the "Zoom fatigue" that employees had repeatedly mentioned in the survey.

Staving off a loneliness epidemic

Gerda's HR director had showed her several studies pointing out the stark increase in feelings of loneliness experienced by people working from home. In fact, it had **started before the pandemic**. He had also mentioned that – contrary to widely held assumptions – better technology didn't necessarily help with people's sense of connectedness. In fact, in many instances, it seemed to have the opposite effect. The world was facing a potential loneliness pandemic.

Gerda needed to help her employees create deeper connections by highlighting how their contributions were making an impact on the organisation as well as on society. As the pandemic was abating, she needed to **incorporate well-being** into every aspect of the design and delivery of work itself. By doing so, she hoped that she would enable her employees to both live and perform at their best.

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