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Putting people first: law firms' resilient workforce

Communicate. Collaborate. Innovate.



Suzanne Jakstavich, Chief Human Resources Officer at the national law firm, Hinshaw & Culbertson LLP, discusses the people challenges faced by law and other professional service firms as they respond to the critical issues driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, and prepare for the rapidly changing demands of a post-pandemic world.

Fostering a team environment that promotes connectivity and engagement is always a priority for a Human Resources leader but operating through a pandemic and working remotely for over a year adds new and complex challenges. As a leader, what measures have you taken and what suggestions would you have for other firms?

Communicate, communicate, communicate

The first thing which seems simple but is fundamental, is to communicate with your employees. Amid this extraordinary pandemic and post-pandemic working environment, establishing and maintaining a regular cadence of communication helps us – as colleagues, as leaders, and as a firm – to connect as human beings. The pandemic demonstrated the importance of sensitivity, transparency and clear communication. As a leader, I also believe we need to get comfortable with acknowledging that we do not always have the answer. Talking honestly about the unknowns and the measures you're taking to find the answer creates a platform for collaboration, and invites others to contribute, discuss, and identify solutions collectively.

Prioritize well-being

Taking an outsized approach to wellbeing is another important thing leaders can do. The challenges we have faced since the outbreak of COVID-19 have focused attention on the importance of this topic, especially around mental health. I think the legal industry recognizes the different struggles and coping mechanisms each individual faces—from family and financial stress, to anxiety around career, as well as workplace loneliness. Since everyone is different, it is important to identify a variety of interventions to support the well-being of our colleagues. No doubt, it will require an integrated approach that is supportive and broad enough to reach individuals wherever they might be on their well-being journey.

Engage in regular check-in meetings

We are accomplished and experienced multitaskers, but the pandemic has amplified the diverse demands on our time. Many of us are wearing multiple hats, requiring us to switch between being a caregiver for our loved ones, a teacher for our children, and a team player for our colleagues. Our individual experiences, even within our firm, are vastly different. While I am a working mother with an autistic child who is balancing my family and career responsibilities, some of my colleagues have been living alone. They have been facing a very different reality by coping with loneliness and isolation. We as leaders need to move beyond the business and work questions and ask genuine questions – *How are you doing? What is new at home that you would like to share? How can I help you?* – to check in on a personal level and establish a safe space for open and honest discussions.

Focus beyond COVID-19

This global pandemic has dominated every aspect of our lives since its outbreak in March 2020, so shifting the focus and conversations to preparing for the future can feel overwhelming. As a firm, maintaining our communication about growth and evolution – for the firm and for individuals – has been quite reassuring for our colleagues. Encouraging future-focused discussions enables everyone to look ahead and move forward with confidence, knowing that the firm is prepared to support their professional development, and provide an anchor to some pre-pandemic conventionality.

Since joining Hinshaw in the spring of 2020, you've been tasked with building out the HR team, so how have you effectively attracted and developed a high-performing team in the current environment?

I am fortunate to have joined a strong team with outstanding colleagues, so initially, my focus was on observing how the team worked as a collective. From there, I began identifying opportunities to complement their approach ensuring alignment with broader business objectives for the firm. Throughout my 20-year+ professional career, I have been fortunate to work alongside a number of talented individuals. Hinshaw colleagues are phenomenal, and we continue to collaborate to build our Human Resources roadmap to support the firm now and into the future.

What suggestions and advice do you have for CHROs relating to their post-pandemic benefit strategies?

COVID-19 has made it necessary for HR leaders to focus on evolving their health and welfare strategies. First, partner with your broker – I meet regularly with Aon to not only discuss the firm's current benefit needs but to also explore further options and ideas and to share my broader HR roadmap. These future options may include access to Aon experts who are able to listen and to test and challenge my thinking. Health and welfare efforts should not be siloed from the broader people strategies and we need to consider benefits beyond individual programs. Specifically, I'd like to call out three areas I consider of particular importance.

For starters, we need to change the narrative to start viewing healthcare as an investment in our workforce, not just a cost. What helps to further this conversation is to consider the long game of our benefits strategy, and integrate it with the broader people initiatives, as they go hand-in-hand. Law firms will need to keep refining their benefits offerings to fulfill the needs of the current workforce, and attract and retain the next generation of leaders. An increasingly multigenerational workforce is looking to their employers to provide them with benefit offerings that meet their current diverse needs. Things are changing quickly in our world and the expectation is we should support our workforce in meeting or exceeding that pace. Achieving this will be a delicate balancing act – it requires CHROs to be innovative, thoughtful, and open to the ideas of their workforce.

The other key area of impact is wellbeing. It is necessary to prioritize a holistic and objective look at our current benefits policies, offerings and practices to determine how much they support workforce-centered wellbeing. Asking questions like, "How do our current benefit practices and offerings mitigate burnout?" Once again drawing from the pandemic experience, our focus needs to encompass the whole person. No doubt, this will require a seismic and significant change.

The digitalization of healthcare has grown drastically because of the uptick in demand for virtual services largely due to COVID-19. Although this has resulted in easier access and ease of scheduling, many employees have not yet had time to familiarize themselves with the new technology and may remain uncomfortable given the lack of comparable solutions to an in-person experience and ability to customize to their particular situation. There is both an opportunity as well as a responsibility for HR leaders to help manage the shift by providing support and education for new offerings, after careful vetting to ensure these tools are able to deliver to expectation. Again, as we continue to look for ways to effectively support our workforce in navigating the constant change of our times, an agile method will prove paramount.

What lessons can law firms take from your previous professional and community experiences?

My previous experiences taught me the power of storytelling and value of experimentation.

Storytelling is powerful and frankly under-utilized in the workplace. You can update, reinforce values, motivate teams and persuade through storytelling. Let's face it – most leaders default to sharing information using PowerPoint presentations that display a disproportionate amount of words, facts and figures. A more effective way to move the needle is by sharing experiences that allow you to connect and inspire your teams. Bringing in an emotional element to share knowledge is both memorable and influential. Throughout my career, I have witnessed how my colleagues were transformed by stories.

Being willing to embrace the unknown and use new activities as learning experiences provides a clear direction – regardless of whether we continued on that path or changed course. Embarking on these journeys as a team is a valuable way to boost collaboration and innovation. We don't make widgets, we're in the people business. Embracing experimentation in operating models translates directly into team collaboration, shared experiences and increased innovation – all of which enable us to serve our clients more effectively.

Key takeaways and closing thoughts from our expert:

- The pandemic has acted as a catalyst for change in the healthcare arena
- Vital questions will need to be addressed in the near- and mid-term.
How can employers prioritize wellness?
- Employers have a duty to support our workforce by:
 - Checking in beyond the work and connecting as people
 - Being intentional about communication and boosting inclusivity by sharing success stories from across all parts of the firm
 - Focusing on the future by encouraging career and development conversations
 - Providing additional support to operate new digital healthcare delivery systems, where needed

To end where we began: communication is key. Communicate with colleagues regularly, not just for a request or when there is an issue, helps to create a space for open dialogue and feedback. Take time to communicate with other firms, share best practices and exchange ideas that will drive real change across the industry to support the legal workforce in a meaningful way, allowing colleagues to tackle challenges and pursue new opportunities now and into the future.

To discuss any of the topics discussed in this article, please contact **Mark Scarafone**.

About Hinshaw & Culbertson LLP: Hinshaw is a U.S. based law firm with offices nationwide and in London. The firm's national reputation spans the insurance industry, the financial services sector and other highly regulated industries. Hinshaw also serves as counsel to the professional services sector, and provides business advisory and transactional services to clients of all sizes. Visit www.hinshawlaw.com for more information.