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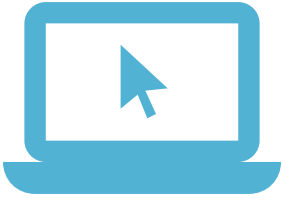
The Future of Work & Return to the Office — or Not?

- Colleen Affeldt, moderator: Managing Director, RGT Wealth Advisors
- Christine Gooch: Executive Assistant, Novartis
- Melinda Vail Goodnight: Executive Assistant, Southwest Airlines
- Meredith Hayes: Executive Assistant, DaVita
- Alice F. Howard: Sponsorship Coordinator, Toyota
- Kathleen Robinson: Executive Assistant, Marvell Semiconductor

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1 | Understanding the pros and cons of remote work in the Admin function



When it comes to policies surrounding remote work, it's important to move beyond simple business continuity and look instead at how EAs and leaders can work together to ensure the business grows and thrives, says Colleen Affeldt, Managing Director of RGT Wealth Advisors. Part of making that happen involves honestly communicating the pros and cons of remote vs. hybrid vs. fully in-person work schedules — and considering the potential impacts on employee productivity and happiness.

PRODUCTIVITY AS A TWO-WAY STREET. You may be more productive at home ... but what about your executive? Figuring out the best arrangement for maximum efficiency often requires communication, strategy, and flexibility, says Meredith Hayes, an EA at DaVita who has worked a hybrid schedule for the past 10 years — and she says it's a silver lining to see that other Admins are finally being afforded the same luxury. But there are important considerations. "My executive is more productive when we're together," Hayes says. "If she's in the office, I'm in the office. If she's traveling or in closed-door meetings, I work from home." It's a good template to mention, she says, for Admins who want to bring up the hybrid option to their executive. "Ask, 'When you're traveling or in meetings all day, do you mind if we try this arrangement?'" Hayes advises.



DRAW ON YOUR PIVOTING ABILITIES. If there's one thing the pandemic has proven, it's the ability of EAs to adapt to any situation. Remind your executive about all the various ways that communication can happen and use that as a springboard to figure out the best work arrangement for a post-COVID workplace. "My leader and I worked out a rhythm during the pandemic," says Melinda Vail Goodnight, EA at Southwest Airlines. "We talked every morning at or before 8 — we talked about the day, what needed attention, what we needed to adjust. And at the end of the day, we debriefed." That commitment to intentional communication can strengthen bonds and lead to real discussions about employee satisfaction and work environments moving forward.



AVOID THE 'OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND' TRAP. When you're working remotely, don't be afraid to remind your executive that you're here — and that they should really be drawing on your many talents. For Alice F. Howard, a former EA and current Sponsorship Coordinator at Toyota, she was floored to find her boss was handling everything from scheduling her own lunches to planning full retreats without telling her. "I supported her entire team, and it was happening with everyone," Howard says. "Are they forgetting about my job and what I can do?"

For Howard, it was motivation to move into a new role — but there are other ways to deal with that drop in duties. Some suggestions include starting weekly recaps with your leader that outline what you've been doing each day. And don't be afraid to interject yourself into Zoom meetings you would otherwise not attend in person — when you're working remotely, it's important to see and hear the conversations that you would typically pick up on when in the office.

2 | How to build strong company culture with a remote workforce



The main piece of advice: Get creative. That's certainly been the case for many of the companies represented by the panelists. But if your team isn't used to having virtual (or virtual/hybrid) events, Hayes suggests starting small because the options can be overwhelming. "Monthly, bi-weekly, weekly — choose a cadence to start with, and put it on the calendars," she says. "Know that the events may take a while to take flight and capitalize on word of mouth; those attendees who made it should encourage others to join next time." And, she adds, there are numerous online resources for virtual team-building activities, so start Googling, networking with other Admins, or checking out Facebook's many EA/Admin groups. Here's a look at some of the initiatives the panelists' organizations have launched to keep employees feeling included and connected during the pandemic and beyond.



CHIEF MORALE OFFICER. The role of Chief Morale Officer was created at RGT Wealth Advisors during the early days of COVID with the intention of uniting and connecting remote employees during uncertain times. In brief, each employee — from the CEO to the interns — was assigned a day to serve as Chief Morale Officer and help boost the morale of coworkers. Employees were asked to share a personal story or something meaningful to them via a company-wide email that would inspire one another. "Every day seemed to start with, 'Have you read the Chief Morale Officer entry today?'" says Affeldt. "I think I cried every day for 88 days." An unexpected byproduct was RGT turning the entries into a book that serves as a marketing piece. "When people ask us, 'Why you instead of your competitor?' we tell them our people are the strategic differentiator, and you should get to know them," Affeldt says. "And we give them the book."



MAKE COMMUNICATION A PRIORITY. At Marvell, connection begins at the top with weekly CEO emails. "They're really thought-provoking," says Robinson. "For example, he puts messages out there about the importance of mental health." Additionally, the company has created collaboration channels for people to talk about their shared interests, and channels that include child, adult, and pet care resources. Marvell also offers online fitness classes, mental wellness tools, and helpful webinars that employees can take at their leisure. But the No. 1 benefit Marvell provides is its quarterly "recharge weekends" — four-day weekends where the whole company closes, and everyone is expected to take a break. At an individual level, Robinson also recommends scheduling one-on-ones with other assistants to get to know them. "Put out there that you're available," she says. "When you're remote, people are often afraid to 'bother' you because they can't see what you're doing."



CHOICE WITH RESPONSIBILITY AND REJUVENATION WEEK. At Novartis, "Choice with Responsibility" was a pre-pandemic idea that was accelerated by COVID. The program empowers employees to choose when, where, and how they will work, including in office, hybrid, or fully remote. "They talk with their manager and team to make sure the arrangement works, but it's not dictated by the manager," says Christine Gooch, an EA at the company. "So it leads to transparent and open discussions about how COVID has impacted people's lives." The company's popular "Rejuvenation Week," which typically takes place the last week of July and first week of August, allows employees to either take vacation during those weeks or continue to work — but the work centers around trainings that will benefit them personally and professionally. "Rejuvenation also means no formal meetings," Gooch says.



QUIET FRIDAYS. This is another initiative courtesy of RGT Wealth Advisors, where each Friday is a "no meeting" day for the business. According to Affeldt, this allows employees to catch up after a long week — and ease into the weekend.

3 | How to navigate the evolving COVID-19 situation in the workplace



Everyone has an opinion, and these situations can get complicated fast. At RGT, the answer was to put it in these terms: Every employee should take personal responsibility for everyone's well-being. "It's important," Affeldt says, "that we don't have people feeling overly vulnerable."

HEALTHY AND SAFETY COMES FIRST. Everyone's office situation is different, including in the definition of what constitutes an "essential worker." The obvious questions that arise include: *Who must come back to the office? Why do I? Why does this person?* Think about what the essential functions of the office are and who should be performing them — then make a plan for determining that, as well as when it's possible to distribute that workload out, Affeldt recommends. Make it part of your business continuity plan.

Even if most of your employees can function remotely, there are often situations where people must be together in the office. In the case of Hayes, whose company operates dialysis clinics, there was an obligation to have new hires come to DaVita offices for new trainings. "We had to do it in a safe, confident, comfortable way," she says. "So we went with KISS — Keep It Simple Silly." The rule at DaVita was to follow the simple CDC guidelines — wash your hands, socially distance, and wear a mask. "Repeating those simple tenets over and over again, we were able to keep infection down," she says. Good communication also was key, as was making it clear that it was OK for employees to stay home when they weren't feeling well. "Create committees within the team, partner with HR and/or executives, and take ownership of your office processes," Hayes says. "Partner with colleagues in other businesses/industries and get ideas. Most importantly, be flexible since it's an ever-changing environment."



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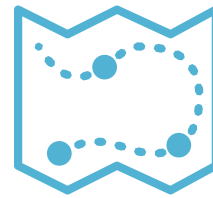
4 | How to handle difficult conversations around fragmentation of policy within different departments



The panelists overwhelmingly favored a hybrid schedule — but not every company, or every individual department within it, can approach business continuity in the same way. "There's going to be fragmentation — it's going to be pretty impossible for most companies to come up with a one-size-fits-all policy," Affeldt says. "We have to think about the implications to our business. We have to make decisions based on our businesses and what's in the best interest of the organization — which is typically what's in the best interest of the individual employees."



ACKNOWLEDGE THAT DIFFERENT DIVISIONS WITH A COMPANY MAY TAKE DIFFERENT APPROACHES. That's certainly been the case for Howard at Toyota. "So how are you handling vaccinated and unvaccinated people? With Toyota, it depends on the side you're on," she says. "We have Toyota Motors of North America and Toyota Financial Services, and both sides may handle that very differently." For example, the company as a whole may offer \$100 vaccine incentives or policies where employees could put on wristbands indicating that they are vaccinated and not have to wear a mask. "But now we're all wearing masks again," Howard says. "TMNA wants us all back, they want us to collaborate together as one group." It's not easy, she acknowledges, but it's important to figure out what works best for the business and employees to both thrive.



CONSIDER WHAT MAKES THE MOST SENSE FOR SAFETY — EVEN IF IT'S NOT AN OFFICIAL POLICY. Goodnight says that at the beginning of the pandemic, her CEO remained in the office to be supportive and respectful of front-facing employees — but there were unofficial policies that no one went near his office without a mask. And even though the official in-office policy now involves mask wearing, the general approach is that if you don't need to be in the office, don't be. It's one way to protect those who absolutely must be there for business continuity.

The same is true at Marvell, says Gooch, where scientists are critical to keeping the business open. "In the beginning, we sent everybody home, but we needed to have a really small percentage of scientists there; we started at 10% until we got back up to 100%," she says. "It was important security staff was there, too, to take calls and make sure people who came in had the right to be there." The company required masks and set up a health station that screened employees before entry. All office staff were invited back in person for about a month in July, but after the surge of the Delta variant, most of the office returned to at-home work. "We have to keep our scientists safe," Gooch says. "They're the ones who have to be in the office."



Upcoming Uber for Business Roundtable

The Power of Strategic Partnerships: Thursday, Sept. 23, 2021; 12 – 1:15 p.m. CST