



THOUGHT LEADERS

WITH DON BOYD, JENNIFER HASSE AND KIM NAVAGH

COVID TURNED THE WORKPLACE UPSIDE DOWN AND THAT'S GOOD

Teamwork is the word most commonly heard today and that's because everyone – from employers to employees – realized that's exactly what's needed



GETTY IMAGES

BY KATIE ANDERSON
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Navigating constantly changing regulations and protocols throughout the pandemic has been a primary challenge for employers and is likely to continue, according to panelists in the Sept. 23 Thought Leaders discussion presented by Hodgson Russ LLP.

"I think the biggest thing is how quickly everything has changed," said Andrew Drilling, senior associate with Hodgson Russ. "Things really haven't slowed down. They still continue to change daily or

weekly."

Staying up to date has been an ongoing process for Don Boyd, president and COO of Kaleida Health. The biggest challenge, he said, is "continuing to keep a workforce informed, focused, safe and being able to do what they do best, which is take care of patients."

Kim Navagh, director of people strategy and recruitment for Lawley Insurance, has similar issues. Her six-person strategy team has focused primarily on outreach and communication with Lawley's workforce.

"It's managing people's uncer-

tainty during these times," she said. "So, how do you keep them engaged and connected and stable while trying to work."

Early in the pandemic, rules were changing daily, said Elizabeth McPhail, partner at Hodgson Russ.

"We were in real time, going from call to call with clients, trying to answer those questions," she said.

Now, the law firm is fielding questions about federally mandated vaccinations.

"We were thinking that potentially there wouldn't be any recognition of the religious exemption from any mandatory vaccination require-

ments," McPhail said.

Now, those employers may be required to evaluate medical exemptions and "sincerely held" religious exemptions, based on a recent federal court case, she said.

"So, over these last 18 months really, all we've been doing is trying to adjust to those changing sands and make sure that we can tell our clients both the broad strokes of what those requirements are and the details about how does that get implemented for the 435, or 470 or 9,000 employees you have," McPhail said.

If an employee chooses to not

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“We’ve always been a company where our culture has been near and dear to us, but it has taught us how to communicate even better. So I think there definitely are some positives.”

KIM NAVAGH, director of people strategy and recruitment, Lawley



“Overall, outside of our company or industry, I think this focus on analyzing and assessing what companies are offering their employees is long overdue.”

JENNIFER HASSE, human resources leader, J.M. Smucker Co.’s Milk-Bone plant



“I think the pandemic and the stresses of it just highlighted that to be able to do what we do, it takes the entire team.”

DON BOYD, president and COO, Kaleida Health

get the vaccination and is terminated, it’s yet to be determined if they qualify for unemployment benefits, Drilling said.

“A vaccine mandate, especially if it’s clearly communicated to employees and there’s a reasonable and sufficient basis for imposing it in your workforce, could be considered just like any other safety rule, like drug testing or background checks,” he said. “So in the unemployment world, if the employee engages in misconduct or voluntarily leaves their job, they would not be eligible for unemployment benefits.”

On the flip side, Drilling said, if an employee has a good reason, a medical or religious exemption, that would be considered by administrative law judges. Additional mandates could further complicate an already tight labor market.

Jennifer Hasse, human resources leader at the J.M. Smucker Co.’s Milk-Bone plant in Buffalo, said the company is trying to fill entry-level positions, and a training program has made it possible.

“Historically, we would have required manufacturing experience for these types of positions, but we have since laxed a little bit

on that,” she said. “Because of our robust training program, we feel that they can acclimate just as fine even if they didn’t have a manufacturing background.”

Kaleida recently hosted a job fair where many of the procedural tasks – background checks and interviews – were done on site.

“We just looked at the timeframe and worked to compress that and make it more competitive and frankly easier for individuals who are seeking employment to be able to make a decision right there, when they’re in the moment,” Boyd said.

Kaleida is working on a long-term strategy for employment to build “a career ladder” in the health-care industry.

Navagh said they have had many employees take paid family leave time, and have examined overtime options and cross training to fill those gaps. Any shortages could put stress on different departments, so her team has come up with ways to help relieve that.

“When the hurricanes hit, we feed our claims department extra special food because it’s very stressful and there’s been a lot of that,” Navagh said.

Last year, she said Lawley employees weren’t taking any paid time off, so they mandated that people must use 50% of their vacation time by September.

“We were trying to do what was best for them in the mental health capacity,” she said. “People needed it, and we knew it.”

Those gestures can go a long way when it comes to retention of a workforce. Hasse said that maintaining a fun company culture also goes a long way.

“Culture is such a complex thing to initiate and instill and maintain throughout the organization, especially if you’re facing things like turnover and uncertainties,” she said. “It has to be from the top down. If leadership isn’t practicing what they preach, staff can see right through that.”

Boyd said that when people leave an organization it’s often because of their boss. That’s why, he said, Kaleida focuses on communication and shared decision making.

“If you think about what are the things that have compelled you to be excited and energized and passionate about what you do,” Boyd said, “it’s the people you work with, it’s the type of work you do and how the organization values the difference that you make.”

HODGSON’S TAKE



“What this has forced employers to do is take a closer look and reevaluate why are we doing things the way that we’re doing them? Is it because that’s the way it’s always been, or is it because it actually is the most compelling, most effective, most efficient way to get things done?”

ELIZABETH MCPHAIL, partner, Hodgson Russ LLP



“Although there’s been a lot of struggle and a lot of issues that had to be dealt with, I think there’s been a lot of good that people have been able to pull out from what happened over the past year and a half.”

ANDREW DRILLING, senior associate, Hodgson Russ LLP

CLOSER LOOK AT THOUGHT LEADERS

Thought Leaders is an ongoing series of discussions with Western New York business leaders and attorneys at Hodgson Russ LLP.

Ten times a year, leaders in diverse industries meet for a roundtable discussion moderated by Business First journalists.

The conversations are usually held in the law firm’s Pearl Street offices in Buffalo, but have shifted to a virtual format during the Covid-19 crisis.