Talking politics in the workplace up for debate

LINDA WHITE

Politics may be top of mind for many people, but employees are divided on whether it's a safe topic at work.

According to new research from global staffing firm Robert Half, 15% of workers believe it's acceptable, 19% believe it's inappropriate, and 66% believe it depends on the situation and people involved.

"While it can be tempting to engage in political discussions in the workplace, it is important for professionals to be respectful of opinions and perspectives that differ from their own," said David King, senior district president of Robert Half in Canada.

"As many employees continue to work remotely, it is also natural to see a slight rise in social conversations as a way to stay connected with colleagues," King said. "Being considerate in these exchanges is critical to help avoid miscommunication and unnecessary conflict, as these can be catalysts for compromising productivity and morale."

If you choose to participate in political conversations, Robert Half recommends keeping it light and constructive. If the discussion becomes confrontational, move onto another subject. Don't feel pressured into sharing your political views. Just let others know you prefer not to contribute to a conversation. If a colleague says or does something that makes you uncomfortable, pull the person aside and explain what's bothering you. For more serious matters, consult your manager or human resources.

Managing the impact of COVID-19

Hiring freezes have been the most common strategy organizations across the country have used to manage the impact of COVID-19, according to a survey by The Conference Board of Canada.

Other measures implemented by organizations include voluntary leaves of absence (28%), a temporary workforce reduction (27%) and decreased work hours (17%).

More than half of organizations aren't having difficulty attracting, recruiting or retaining talent. That's not a surprise, given the amount of hiring freezes and workforce reductions in place across the country, the board noted.

KEEPING REMOTE WORKERS ENGAGED

Employers need to provide support, mentorship, learning

LINDA WHITE

Like many professionals who've been working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, you hardly miss the dreaded commute that gobbled up hours of your time each week. But you might be missing the things that make work a great environment.

According to a survey by Telus International, a global customer experience and digital solutions provider, 51 per cent of Americans working during the pandemic admit feeling less connected to their company culture while working remotely.

Small talk and interacting with colleagues top the list of what they miss most about the office at 57 per cent, followed by collaborating in person with a team (53 per cent) and the separation between work and home (50 per cent).

Company culture, of course, plays a crucial role in attracting and retaining top talent. And while that may be associated with the company's office, physical space does not define culture, assures Marilyn Tyfting, chief corporate officer of Telus International. "We believe it is a curated collection of values, vision and purpose that are reflected in a company's actions and decisions, and what comes to life in moments of connection and interaction between employees to inspire a sense of meaning and belonging."

Especially now, as workplaces have transitioned from on-site to remote work models, culture is an "increasingly critical success factor for companies," Tyfting said. "It's our

Andrew Au, co-founder and president of Intercept Group. *PHOTOS SUPPLIED*

job as employers to ensure we provide meaningful support, mentorship and learning opportunities in order to help (employees) remain engaged."

While that may sound daunting, 90 per cent of workers surveyed agree someone can be a great leader in person or virtually. Respondents consider the following to be the top components of a thoughtful remote check-in from a manager or company leader: the manager asking how they can help the employee (60 per cent); sharing updates on the state of the business (51 per cent); and creating employee development plans and suggesting new learning opportunities (47 per cent).

"Employees expect leaders to continue to engage with them as frequently or more often when transitioning from an on-site to a remote work model, and they need them to demonstrate empathy and authenticity in those touchpoints, which can be achieved by leveraging high-tech tools, platforms and apps," said

Marilyn Tyfting, chief corporate officer of Telus International.

Tyfting. "Leaders must set the tone in these new virtual environments, using them to recognize and thank individuals, share knowledge and company updates, or even connect over a shared hobby or by posting a funny meme."

Corporate learning and development programs are important to 78 per cent of those surveyed, but a quarter say they haven't learned anything new since they began working remotely. The virtual learning and development opportunities respondents were most interested in receiving include online courses, regular feedback and professional development seminars.

There are many ways company leaders can adapt culture-building strategies to benefit an online team that has been accustomed to in-person relationships, said Andrew Au, co-founder and president of Intercept Group, a Toronto-based consultancy that helps global brands optimize their sales and marketing strategies in the age of digital transformation.

"Those who are leading their industries are building new routines that speak to their core values," he said. "For organizations that see themselves as innovators, sharing failures has become a popular ritual. 'Friday Failures' is becoming a new routine that supports more authentic conversations, ultimately building trust in the organization."

Companies should address the social void remote work has created. "Creative organizations are creating unique experiences such as virtual cookouts with a celebrity chef, virtual escape room activities, and gamified trivia events," he said. "It's important to tag these experiences with a learning component that relates back to an associated company value. Experience alone is not culture building."

Au also encourages leaders to work with their teams to set new processes and expectations together. "By doing so, leaders keep the team focused on team goals and creates a culture of acceptance versus compliance," he said.

Laying the groundwork now will pay dividends down the road — a future in which Au predicts a blend of remote and on-site work, as well as a higher proportion of contract workers compared to full-time employees, in order to meet the increased agility required from workflow demand. "With the shift to remote work, I predict there will be more global teams and asynchronous workflows. This opens global employment opportunities for Canadians," he said.

Au also predicts increased use of automation technologies to achieve increased cost efficiencies and workplace safety. "We will begin to see organizations embrace mixed reality solutions that make remote collaboration feel more realistic," he said. "The ability to impose holographic content onto physical objects to simulate scenarios is already being explored across manufacturing, automotive, architecture and entertainment sectors. These types of immersive experiences will redefine telepresence."