

The ‘New Normal’ for Biopharma

HR leaders share how COVID-19 stirred them to rethink some aspects of their businesses

By Jennifer Read and Jessica Watson

On June 30, Egon Zehnder virtually gathered 15 top HR leaders from across biopharma, including European-based and U.S.-based companies, ranging from big pharma to start-up biotech. It was a lively discussion, with participants curious to learn from one another and generous in sharing their own insights, hopes, and concerns.

Silver Linings from COVID-19

While biopharma companies have been stretched – and will continue to be stretched – in unprecedented ways due to the COVID-19 crisis, HR leaders are proud of how their organizations have responded. Productivity has been consistently high, in some cases because employees were worried about job security, but largely because of a shared sense of commitment to doing everything possible to continue innovating and serving patients.

Many acknowledged emerging signs of employee fatigue due to the intensity (both personal and professional) of the past months also recognized the value of newfound camaraderie and appreciation of the opportunities to get to know colleagues in new, more profound ways – usually over Zoom. At the same time,

executive leadership teams are now confronting, often more head-on than before, topics such as culture, workplace sustainability, and employee wellbeing. Leadership increasingly sees these topics as fundamental strategic pillars of the business, ones that will make or break the ability to attract and retain talent in what remains a highly competitive market.

Employees Cherish Flexibility: What Will That Look Like Going Forward?

In most companies, even where top leadership previously resisted flexible working arrangements, there is now executive buy-in about the need for flexibility on a permanent basis. Given the logistical and emotional ups-and-downs for employees and their families during the past few months, no one wants to see flexibility disappear. Even for employees who are eager to get back to the office, there are new concerns about how traffic may get even worse – and already long commutes much longer – as public transportation is avoided while COVID-19 remains a threat. The go-forward approach is about – in the words of one CHRO – “what did we learn and how can we get the best of both worlds in the future.”

With on-site COVID safety measures now largely in place everywhere from labs and manufacturing sites to office buildings, companies are starting to take more structured approaches to thinking through the types of flexibility that could apply to a variety of levels and roles in the future. For roles where working from home is impossible, creative ideas emerged around job-share programs, shift swapping, and greater flexibility in starting and finishing schedules. In addition to looking at individual roles and the possibilities for flexibility, companies are examining how to apply flexibility to cross-functional teams, where there are still great benefits in coming together in person.

The common theme was about acknowledging the wide range of personal work-style preferences and flexing to accommodate those preferences whenever possible, without jeopardizing culture or undermining engagement and connectivity.

The ‘New Normal’ Is a Work in Progress

As the flexibility discussion unfolds, companies are also re-evaluating the role of the office and what amount of office space is truly needed. Some are looking to reduce their footprint, particularly the traditional model of “office locations in every single country,” while others see the need for increased office space given the new requirements around social distancing.

Biopharma HR leaders are also leading the charge on rethinking how to measure and manage performance in this new reality. In many companies, performance metrics were reviewed and adjusted early in the crisis, in order to assuage employee concerns and set more realistic expectations given new constraints (e.g., reps unable to call on doctors) and family pressures. The participants agreed that redefining performance management would continue to be a topic of focus in the coming months, particularly as managers seek guidance from their HR partners on how to ensure visibility and accountability on their teams.

Open questions and ongoing experimentation remain on critical issues, such as how to promote creativity and innovation, how to effectively on-board new employees, and how to foster true connection in a largely virtual environment. Biopharma's HR leaders are at the forefront of shaping these organizations of the future, and we look forward to continuing the dialogue to share best practices and insight across the industry.

For more information, contact:



Jennifer Read

New York

jennifer.c.read@egonzehnder.com



Jessica Watson

Washington DC

jessica.watson@egonzehnder.com

Covid-19 Micro-Website

We have launched a micro-website where this and other informative pieces are posted. This site will be regularly updated: [click here](#) for further details.

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Our more than 500 Consultants in 68 offices and 40 countries form one powerful, collaborative team. Our services include: leadership development, individual, team and organizational effectiveness, CEO search and succession, executive search and assessment, Board advisory, and cultural transformation.

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