

Preparing for how work will get done over the next decade, influenced by technological, generational and social shifts, also known as the “Future of Work,” has consistently included components of increasing opportunities for workplace flexibility. The onset of the global pandemic exponentially accelerated those plans and the need for increased flexibility is greater than ever before and here to stay for those industries that don’t rely on essential workers.

The forced experiment created by the pandemic to work remotely has reset employees’ expectations moving forward. According to the FlexJobs’ research study, 58% of respondents want to be full-time remote employees, while 39% desire a hybrid work environment, resulting in 97% of employees desiring some form of remote work. That same survey also found that 58% of respondents would ‘absolutely’ look for a new job if they cannot continue remote work.

Companies are responding. According to PwC’s Return to Work study, 55% of executives plan to extend options for most of their office workers to work from home at least one day per week, which is up from the 39% before the pandemic hit. In addition to offering flexibility, another absolutely vital component of attracting and retaining talent is having a healthy and engaged culture, which also drives business performance. A recent [Gallup study](#) found that that the engagement scores in their top- and bottom-quartile business units and teams had 82% less absenteeism, 41% increase in quality (defects), 18% increase in productivity (sales) and 23% increase in profitability.

And yet most leaders with whom we speak express concerns that their culture and the level of employee engagement don’t seem as strong in a hybrid working environment. And, the data supports this concern. [Gallup also found](#) that for the first year in more than a decade, the percentage of engaged workers in the U.S. declined in 2021.

We need to be able to offer flexibility **and** have a strong culture with highly engaged employees in order to thrive in the new paradigm of work. Do we have diametrically opposed competing priorities? Not necessarily. How and perhaps when the work gets done changes, but not the why. Strong cultures with high levels of employee engagement consistently put an emphasis on ensuring that their people feel cared for by individualizing experiences and interactions.

Here are few ideas for leaders to consider:

- **Consistently ask and actively listen:** Establish forums to understand your peoples’ unique needs and aspirations in a safe, genuine and thoughtful way.
- **Take a one-size-fits-one approach:** Organization-wide programs need to be fair and equitable, but there is a huge opportunity to customize the delivery and implementation of those programs based on what you understand about your people.
- **Connect, then lead:** Ask questions of your team members to better understand where they are, validate their feelings, and communicate with warmth and compassion.
- **Develop leaders to cultivate meaningful relationships:** Regardless of the means of connection, your people need to feel understood, cared for and respected as unique individuals.

About the Institute

The Dr. Nancy Grasmick Leadership Institute is an interdisciplinary research and action-based institute at Towson University. The Institute provides a continuum of leadership development opportunities for individuals and organizations that drives personal, professional, and organizational success. Programs focus on transformational outcomes, improving workplace culture and engagement, talent attraction and retention, and addresses today's most challenging issues.

In the early 2000s, I was a consultant with Accenture, and the idea of remote working felt less likely than winning the lottery. In fact, for several years I traversed the country to be on-site for my clients, leaving the East Coast on Sunday evenings and taking the red-eye back on Thursday nights. Not only did I have to travel across the country to perform my work, but my clients paid for my travel. And while I certainly didn't necessarily enjoy the intense travel schedule, given that experience, I had become wired to believe that adding value was best achieved in person.

Later on in my career, when I was a manager with the Great Place to Work Institute and members would request the opportunity to work remotely, I would repeatedly explain why I believed that being in person was so important for our productivity and our culture. And while I am not proud of it, in the back of my mind, I thought *"Geez, this new generation doesn't seem to understand the value of hard work!"*

When I was promoted to lead international operations, I inherited team members on every continent across the globe. And guess what?! I embarked on my own forced experiment to learn how to manage remotely. I was simultaneously thrilled with the promotion and terrified about the new dynamics.

In large part, I developed my management style by watching and learning from my managers. I had never been managed remotely, so I was going to have to try something new. I reached out to each of my new direct reports and shared that this was going to be a steep learning curve for me and that I was going to need their support by being open and honest about their needs and expectations—not only for what they needed as individuals, but what they needed to feel part of a great team. In the beginning, there was a ton of awkwardness. I asked about their needs and expectations and received basic responses. I began to ask lots of follow up and clarifying questions to encourage them to open up a little more.

I also shared how I was struggling to build a sense of team spirit in a virtual environment and clarified my expectation that they play a very active role in contributing to our virtual culture by offering ideas and feedback for improvements. I also began to try new tactics. I began every weekly team meeting with an icebreaker that provided more insight into other team members. I began every 1:1 meeting with a question about how things are going outside of work in an attempt for me to better understand them. I also shared about my life outside of work. I created awards to recognize when someone shared something that was hard to say or hear to try to reinforce honesty and vulnerability.

These are just a few of the things that I tried; some worked and others were absolute disasters. I learned this because after a while, the team started to share with me their feedback and I course corrected based on their input. And slowly, over time, we managed to build a very strong team that consistently achieved our goals. By no means do I think we were perfect, but we put in the time and the work to build and maintain strong working relationships.



Meet the executive director

ERIN MORAN is the Institute's inaugural executive director, leading the overall operations and fiscal management of the Institute. Moran has spent most of her 24-year career dedicated to developing leaders who create inspiring work environments that enable people to be fulfilled while also achieving extraordinary business results. Moran believes 'we create a better society when people work in healthy environments.'