



Episode 12 – Re-imagining employee communications, COVID-19 edition

LINDSAY STORTZ: The key right now is that communication and engagement with the people needs to be easy, mobile first, and what we're calling "in snackable bites" of information.

SPEAKER 1: Hi, everyone. And welcome to The Cure for the Common Co, COVID Edition. We put together a series of quick burst sessions for our clients on topical issues of importance. We'll speak with our experts and our clients, and also hear clips from some of the startups who've been on the pod.

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My name is Steve Blumenfield from Willis Towers Watson's health and benefits. And I'm joined today by Julie Stone, our head of investment capital. Hi, Julie.

JULIE STONE: Hi, Steve. Glad to be here.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Great to have you. And our guest today is Lindsay Stortz, an expert on employee engagement from our firm. Hi, Lindsay.

LINDSAY STORTZ: Hi there. Thanks for having me.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Absolutely. Well we're really excited about this conversation. So start us off. What's the most important thing employers need to be thinking about with regard to employee engagement in this unusual COVID-19 environment?

LINDSAY STORTZ: Yeah. So that's a great question, Steve. I mean this is a totally new unprecedented time for everyone. And what's really unique about this time, you know universally, is that we're all in this together. This isn't a change that any employer planned. And we're all reacting and figuring this out. So I think there's a couple things that employers really need to think about. What's the one most important thing? You know, I think it's demonstrating a sincere interest in employee well-being. Really showing empathy and compassion and authentic focus on employee well-being.

That's going to build trust with employees now and in the future. We recently conducted a talent implication survey and what we found was interesting. The majority of respondents indicated that they've increased communication about benefits during this time. 91% have done that. And 78% have increased their communication about company purpose. And when we think about culture, you know, that's a great way to get people aligned and collaborating during this time is really around a shared sense of purpose.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Absolutely. And we all have a shared sense of purpose right now, probably more than any time I can remember since 9/11 in this country.

JULIE STONE: Lindsay, thank you for emphasizing the importance of talent and engagement in the communications with employees. As we think about this season we're in and planning for annual enrollment, can you talk a little bit about how employers can plan for both in-person as well as virtual annual enrollment meetings and different ways to engage people at this unique time at point of enrollment?

LINDSAY STORTZ: Yeah. That's a great question, too, Julie. One challenge that we're starting to address right now is how to rethink, or we're calling it re-imagine, open enrollment. We know it's very likely going to be much different for employers than it's been in the past. And you know to your point there needs to be a backup plan about how to create a positive employee experience when people may not be in person as many organizations are used to doing things like the live meetings with their people. So there's a couple of different digital things to think about.

One of them would be virtual benefits fairs which is literally a virtual environment where organizations can get all employees into the same environment outside the firewall and provide that positive experience where people can watch videos, download flyers and FAQs, attend live sessions within a virtual benefits fair. So that's one thing that we're seeing a number of employers start to think about quite a bit.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: So doing more virtually, being prepared for that. Moving away a bit from that open enrollment opportunity, what other things are you seeing that employers are facing around engagement with their people?

LINDSAY STORTZ: It's a lot of digital right now, right? The way to reach people is digitally. And that applies whether people are working from home or not. We're seeing the key right now is that communication and engagement with the people needs to be easy, mobile first, and what we're calling "in snackable bites" of information.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: So give us an example of what a snackable bite looks like.

LINDSAY STORTZ: Yes. So think about smaller bits of information more often, not overwhelming people, and something you know, that people can ideally access from their mobile device outside the firewall, as I know I've mentioned. That's really key right now. People are struggling with internet access and we don't want people to feel distant because they can't access information.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: So how do you do that? How do most employers, like can you do that? Do people want to be texted or is that different now that we have COVID?

LINDSAY STORTZ: I think it is different now, actually. I think this is creating a new opportunity for employers to temporarily, or permanently, look at how they reach people. I mean text messaging is one thing and we encourage text messaging, especially around actionable information. So no one likes to be overwhelmed with too many text messages. But if we need someone to take action and really look at something, that's a great time for a text message. But remember a text message is really a push communication. And I think the key is also to offer opportunities for employees to pull information right now.

So something that we're seeing is really common is like a microsite, or a public webpage, or a mobile wallet card, something that people can access from anywhere. Their families can access, as well, to be able to get at the information that they need around their benefits during this time.

JULIE STONE: I have another question around the actual positioning and decision making, whether it's an annual enrollment or off cycle changes. As I think of the current state of affairs for many individual employees, things like contributing, matching 401K, or putting money into a health savings account, and they may have a spouse or partner that has been furloughed or out of work and the actual best use of the next dollar is not to contribute to those accounts at the moment, but to have that for cash and current expenses.

How do we help our employers understand that decisions today and in the near term may need to take, or be looked at through a different lens, than a year ago or at some point in the future?

LINDSAY STORTZ: Yeah. For the content itself, Julie, I think you're right on that we need to look broadly at well-being. And we look at that from the physical, emotional, social, and financial well-being perspective. We need to take all that into consideration right now in terms of what the content is that we're serving up to employees. So we're really seeing a focus on programs like telemedicine, nurse lines, employee assistance programs, other mental health or stress reduction apps.

And from that financial well-being perspective, looking at helping people with budgeting tools or you know being honest about some of those messages. You know, if you want to make a change right now to how much you're contributing to your 401K or your health savings account, let's provide those instructions and make it easy for people to understand how to do that so that they can make those choices.

JULIE STONE: And, Steve, I'm going to turn the tables on you for a minute and ask you a question. To some of the points that Lindsay just made, and particularly around well-being and EAPs, and we're finding that the needs are so great. You are engaging in a number of activities that can help employers with a different set of solutions on some of these and maybe just take a minute to weave that into our employee engagement conversation.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Yeah, I think so. You're referring to the many solutions that have cropped up to try to satisfy the incredible need around emotional well-being and mental health support that has to do with things like many of us feeling alone. I know any given day, I might feel isolated or alone, have higher anxiety, and possibly even some mild depression. And of course there's more clinically oriented types of behavior health needs, as well, and some people can't get to doctors or access any kind of doctor.

Even with telemedicine, maybe uncomfortable or may have problems staying with their medications if that's appropriate. So there are a number of tools out there. And we interviewed, in fact on this podcast, Joyable. It was our first podcast. Many tools like that are out there in the market today to extend behavioral health solutions down to the individual.

There's some available that are for consumers, but many increasingly available to companies, whether that be companies that provide actual access to therapists and even prescribing, or digital tools that provide stress relief, or tools that provide navigation or digital cognitive behavioral therapy. Joyable's an example of that. MeQuilibrium and myStrength would be examples of companies more in that resiliency space, although the lines blur in all these. And then there's solutions like Lyra and Spring Health that provide a more robust set of access to care, as well as companies like like Ginger.

There are many companies out there, a growing set of companies that are out there trying to meet these needs. Many of them are offering free solutions and trial periods right now. So if there's ever a time to be thinking about those companies, that might be a way for some folks, in a time of crisis, to help their people.

JULIE STONE: And Steve, I mean, I totally agree that everyone is feeling high levels of stress right now. And one thing that we're seeing employers do is to help understand the stress that their people are feeling and really what are those stress points, is either one-on-ones between a manager and an employee to talk about feelings and emotional support.

Or if that's not realistic, something that we're seeing organizations do is like a virtual focus group so you can get a large group of employees onto the same platform for a short period of time to get feedback from them about what they need during this time, especially when it comes to emotional well-being and stress.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Great. Great points. So let's talk about communications and engagement as it relates to care beyond behavioral health. Because there's a lot of care that's - say in fact we know, the most vulnerable populations are the ones that are most at risk for severe implications for COVID-19. So there's diabetics that employers try to reach through solutions out there that might be remote care. There's other people with conditions to manage that may not be able to get to their doctors.

What kinds of tools do you think can be used by the employer to help make people aware of this? How do you do it? How do you keep this up when we're also distracted with families that we're suddenly working with

all day, and maybe kids we're trying to caregive and adults we're trying to caregive? You know, how can we break through that clutter and help people to stay focused on what they need to for their health?

LINDSAY STORTZ: So personalizing and targeting the digital communications is really essential during this time. The challenge that we're going to face when it comes to certain chronic conditions is that employers don't know, right, who specifically within their population may have these conditions. So that's where I think this becomes a great time to use some of those, for example, diabetic support vendors that are providing that virtual care and really working with them to do some outreach.

Because you know, playing out your example, we do know for example, someone with diabetes may be feeling more isolated and more stressed during this time. So wouldn't this be a great opportunity to really demonstrate support as an employer and give that population a sense of connection right now by working with that vendor, for example, to do some additional outreach to those employees who the vendor knows who they are even if the employer doesn't? So that might be one good example of how something like that could work.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: So lean in, work with those vendors, see if you can come up with something creative maybe using the tools you mentioned to reach out to those folks at their time of need.

LINDSAY STORTZ: Yep. Yep. And on a broader level, I mean I mentioned personalizing and targeting digital communications. So some of the things we're seeing, you know, when employers send those emails out, you know, I already mentioned the small bites of information that's important. But also targeting information so it's relevant to people. For example, we know, as an employee, where you live, right? So if you live in New York City you may be feeling a different level of stress than someone who lives in a more rural community.

Perhaps the rural community has a different kind of stress that we need to address. So to the extent that we can target content to relevant populations and use email or an online platform to do that, that's the ideal thing to be doing right now. I think everyone's totally overwhelmed with the onslaught of email and information so the more relevant, the better.

JULIE STONE: Lindsay, I really appreciate and maybe we take the geographic distinction a step further. Because as I talk with multi-state employers, there really are meaningful differences right now in cities, states, both in the formal guidance and what the other aspects of returning to the workplace may be. So that shows whether people are using public transportation, trains, subways, buses, or in a car where they're less likely to be exposed.

And there are a number of other sort of community and societal factors that I would think we'd want employers to take into account in the messaging, kind of building on your comment about personalization and I'll use the term regionalization.

LINDSAY STORTZ: I think that's right. I think we know, you know, even in our own experience as employees that the return to work policies or restoring policies are going to be different based on location. Hygiene routines may be different. Physical distancing protocols are still going to likely be in place as we start to adjust. So I think that's important, as well, to look at some of that content and keep it relevant for employees.

And to the extent that we can identify where someone is, which most employers can, and to the extent that those people have email addresses, then we can really start to target in on appropriate messaging for that population, as well.

JULIE STONE: So something just occurred to me as you were adding those comments that maybe we could frame it as no detail is too small. I had a friend who returned to her workplace this week and even information about the ladies room, and the common kitchen, and refrigerator, and all of those things, and protocols, and behaviors, and setting guidance sound like small things but they were very material to her on her first day back in a physical location.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Well that's just an amazing example of making it real for all of us as we think about kind of re-immersing ourselves in the world. Now in supermarkets, many of us, particularly in states that have requirements around this, have to wear gloves and wear face masks. And even if we don't have to, we're being told that we should. And how does that look in the workplace? Is that acceptable? Where do you get that equipment if you don't have it? These are all things to be answered. But regardless of the answer, the questions are still there for all of us.

Let's just let's just go another click down on this one just a little bit further. So for the typical employer, they're thinking through their planning. I think I heard you say that they need to be thinking through what they want to communicate. No detail is too small, Julie, as you've put out there. Try to get this down to where they are, send them emails, make it specific. You've mentioned earlier, Lindsay, using texts. I mean anything else?

Any other communication or engagement modalities that come to mind as you're trying to tackle a challenge of a completely changing workforce experience when they return to a facility?

LINDSAY STORTZ: So I mean, I think there are some additional things to think about for an employer, whether that's, for example, low production videos, right, to help people feel comfortable. And I like that idea of maybe taking it on a really tactical level. I think that's really important right now. And helping people understand, for example, this is what it's going to look like when you come back to work. Things are going to be different and here's what we're doing to really keep you safe. I think that that's essential messaging right now. So I could envision something like maybe even it's a podcast like this.

Maybe it's a low production video. Maybe it's a quick online module that people can look at just to help them understand this is the new world for now. This is what it's going to look like. And one thing to keep in mind, just from a pure technology perspective, many employers block YouTube and other sites from work computers. Maybe this is time to temporarily unblock those and give people some access to, you know, either an employer type video. Or the CDC, for example, has some great videos about safety and hygiene. Give people access to some of those things during this time.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Yeah. I love the notion of kind of mobilizing offices locally. And I can also see the value in, you know, making available employee resource groups, or you know frequent meetings with people standing socially distanced, or in their offices to talk about issues. You know, thinking through the whole experience of coming back into the organization to recognize how different-- there's also the needs that people will have as they come in.

And that is to say nothing about the large number of folks that may not return to an office environment because companies may realize, and I think some are, that they can be pretty efficient and effective depending upon their business model with having people work remotely.

LINDSAY STORTZ: Completely. And I think one other thing to keep in mind, especially when we go back to the theme around returning to work, but also for the vulnerable populations who might be managing a health problem. You know, managers are going to need that same training, those same learning modules or videos to help them understand how to handle employees' concerns around going back to work.

And I think a piece of that is there's some stigma involved in all this and we need managers to be ready to tackle some tough subjects when the employee doesn't feel comfortable returning to work because they do have high blood pressure and that makes them, you know, a population that's especially concerned during this time, for example. So thinking not just about employees, but also about managers as well.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Lindsay, thank you for those fantastic responses, and, Julie, for those great questions. Thank you both for being here.

JULIE STONE: Great to be here, Steve.

LINDSAY STORTZ: Thank you for having me.

STEVE BLUMENFIELD: Absolutely. And to all of our listeners, thank you for listening to our Cure for the Common Co Podcast, COVID Edition. We look forward to setting out additional COVID editions on this pod and then soon returning back to our normal interviews with founders of innovative companies. Thanks, everyone. Stay safe.

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