

Pandemic a catalyst for companies to prioritize flexibility, wellness for women

Like many other business leaders, Alyssa Whitfield had to pivot and alter the way her organization operated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Her goal of helping women get job ready and achieve economic dependence, however, did not waver.

"Making sure our women kept up their skills during this time was important," says Whitfield, founder and CEO of Dress for Success Rochester. Whitfield says a number of women her organization works with have faced challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, from food insecurity because they were out of work to not being able to get a job due to childcare issues. "There have been so many barriers for women," Whitfield says. "People may think it's just about a job, but there are so many other factors that hinder women from getting work."

Women have had to bear the brunt of job loss during the pandemic, Whitfield says, noting that women make up a large percentage of those in the fields most impacted by COVID-19, from retail to restaurants.

In response to the challenges, Dress for Success altered some of its programs. The organization moved to an online format, offering webinars, online workshops and virtual coaching.

The content changed to fit the times, as well.

There were online sessions on what to wear to a Zoom call and how to set up a professional looking background for the virtual meetings.

The efforts paid off, Whitfield says, noting the online programs allowed women to log in at times that worked best for them and also meant they did not have to deal with transportation issues or finding childcare if they had had to get to the Dress for Success boutique on State Street in person.

"It was a good opportunity for us because we were able to do things differently and ended up reaching more women," she says.

The online offerings will continue post-pandemic, Whitfield says.

The organization will also introduce a mobile boutique this summer which will allow it to reach more women in rural areas, neighboring counties and even those in the city who struggle with finding bus routes that work with their schedules.

Whitfield believes the corporate world can learn from the pandemic and do more to help women in the workforce. That includes focusing on reskilling and upskilling entry level workers and giving them opportunities to grow at a business.

Continuing to be flexible and providing some virtual work opportunities could also help, as well, because those options could eliminate some transportation and childcare barriers women may face.

"Helping build up and support women is going to be key," she says. Ann Marie White, Director of the Office of Mental Health Promotion and Associate Professor of Psychiatry at



Whitfield



White



Metcalfe

the University of Rochester Medical Center, says communication has been essential, especially for working women, during these challenging times.

Such communication can help women see they are not alone, she says, noting they may also learn from another's similar experiences.

"It's important to share resources to help each other get through the fog," she says.

White has been involved with community and university groups looking at what new pressures have arisen as a result of the pandemic and what steps can be taken to help combat those pressures.

One of her committees, for example, saw the challenges childcare providers were having in obtaining personal protection equip-

ment so the committee led an equipment distribution to over 20 local agencies.

Businesses have opportunities to help, as well, she says, by providing support on a number of policies that could help working women, from supporting the minimum wage increase to providing more tax credits for childcare.

Companies can also place more of an emphasis on workplace wellness, looking at flexible work options and having conversations with employees on what needs they may have and how the company can help meet those needs.

White says women are needed in the workforce, noting it helps with gender equality as well as a post-pandemic economic recovery.

"The more support there is for women, the better off we will be in the long-run," she says. Katherine Metcalfe, chief culture officer at CPL, agrees the pandemic has impacted women's well-being.

"There is a very real undercurrent of stress," she says.

While the pandemic has impacted all family members, Metcalfe also points to studies that show women have taken on the most extra work, whether that be meeting childcare responsibilities or providing school-work assistance.

"It's a very real disparity and not something we are just imagining," she says. "The impact really has fallen on women's shoulders."

It can become hard for women to separate work versus home and that kind of stress is unsustainable, she says.

To help navigate the changes over the past year, Metcalfe refigured her healthcare routines, making her well-being a priority.

An avid runner, Metcalfe would often hit the pavement in the early hours before work and if she did not have time, she may skip the run.

Now, however, if she is unable to get an early start instead of forfeiting the run, she changes her schedule and may arrive at the office a little later, prioritizing the exercise that helps keep her centered.

Metcalfe counts herself fortunate to have a flexible schedule that allows her to build in time for self-care, quiet and reflection, which is not always possible for working women even during non-pandemic times.

"We put a lot of pressure on ourselves to be 'on' all the time," Metcalfe says.

It ultimately comes down to flexibility, Metcalfe says, adding providing that flexible scheduling has been a priority at CPL.

"Flexibility when it comes to how people do their work is huge," she says.

The architectural, engineering and planning firm focused on communication early on in the pandemic, Metcalfe says.

Instead of having a companywide schedule, for example, team leaders worked with team members to come up with the best schedule that would suit their needs.

The company also used some of its online resources to keep employees up to date on information, from the status of the pandemic to tips for working at home. A wellness committee also provided resources.

In addition, CPL has created a committee made up of employees of all ages and backgrounds to look at the next steps with a focus on maintaining a company culture and setting performance expectations while still being flexible in meeting employee needs.

Metcalfe believes the impacts from COVID-19 may be long lasting and are unknown at this point.

One issue that may come up is whether women missed out on opportunities and growth because of the multiple hats they had to wear over this time, including possibly taking a leave of absence from work to meet their various other responsibilities.

While there may be challenges, there are also opportunities for growth, she says, noting the corporate world can re-examine its policies and practices, taking into account the past year, and make some changes that could be a significant benefit to employees.

"There's a huge opportunity to continue to make some positive change," she says.

Andrea Deckert is a Rochester-area freelance writer.