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COMMENTARY GIOVANNA ROSSI

## Don't go back to 'normal' — create a new one

By Giovanna Rossi

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Businesses are hurting, in large part due to the challenges of the past 18 months, and employers are now finding it difficult to hire. So what will it take to get people back in the workforce? We must learn from the experiences to recover fully. The business community is being called upon to take the lead in creating a new way forward that will not only contribute to economic recovery but also to supporting employees and their families to thrive.

We have an opportunity and a responsibility to rebuild and recover using all the resources, data, experiences and lessons from the past 18 months. We can pave a new path forward from the rubble of the pandemic. We can have a future of work that includes worker well-being and business profits, that includes diverse teams that are highly productive, that supports parents of young children to stay in the workforce to contribute their talents and creativity to solving our biggest challenges. There is a way forward. But we will not reach it by using the same tools and workplace policies we did pre-pandemic.

We must stop referring to “getting back to normal” or returning to the way things were. We are in a different time now, and we must respond with innovation, imagination and courage if we are to create a future of business and workplaces that will be sustainable and lucrative.

There are three pillars which, when implemented, create a robust foundation for businesses and their employees to thrive. These include flexibility, collaboration and equity. All of these put together create the conditions necessary for innovation and productivity, which will ultimately lead to successful economic recovery.

First, it's time to acknowledge that an employee has major family responsibilities and, with flexibility, can take care of those while also producing great results for their employers. Instead of doubling down on rigid schedules and return-to-work policies, some employers are implementing

new ideas and strategies. In 2019, 72.3 percent of all women with children under 18 were in the labor force, and many workers are also caring for a partner, spouse or elderly relative.

What we know from the pandemic is flexibility can work. Let's take this lesson and build upon it to find our way forward. Some examples of flexibility include schedule options, work from home, scheduling in-person meetings with an online component for those still working from home and letting go of urgency when it's not needed.

Second, we must collaborate with our employees, and this starts with listening to them. We know workers want health care, flexible schedules, work-from-home options, good wages and paid leave. And we also know it is possible to provide these and thrive as a business. Collaboration also can be included in management and decision-making. According to *Forbes*, employees who acted collaboratively stuck at their tasks 64 percent longer than their peers working alone, while also reporting higher engagement levels, lower fatigue levels and higher success rates.

The lesson from the past 18 months is that collaboration is necessary and can result in innovation, productivity, a sense of community and higher rates of retention. Collaborative leaders regularly seek diverse opinions and ideas among teammates to develop strategies and problem-solve. As a result, employees are more engaged, feel trusted and are more likely to take ownership of their work.

And finally, we must commit to diversity, equity and inclusion in hiring and workplace practices. According to Glassdoor, 67 percent of job seekers consider workplace diversity an important factor when considering employment opportunities, and more than 50 percent of current employees want their workplace to do more to increase diversity. What we learned from the pandemic is that diversity, equality and inclusion can't wait. It's not an extra thing to work on when we have spare time; it is integral to the success of everything else we're prioritizing. Some things employers can do include assessing pay gaps and creating policy to address the gaps, as well as committing to an actively anti-racist workplace.

We know that when employees thrive, businesses thrive. And we have an unprecedented opportunity for employers to rethink their hiring practices and workplace policies in order to support employees to thrive.

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