



# THE FUTURE OF THE WORKPLACE

**Albuquerque Business First and Family Friendly New Mexico hosted a virtual roundtable to hear from local experts on how the workplace has been forever changed by the pandemic and what employers can do to stay ahead in one of the most competitive labor markets ever seen.**

**ABF Sales Manager Will Martinez moderated the panel.**

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**MARTINEZ:** How can employers in New Mexico contribute to the success of the economic recovery coming out of Covid?

**ESPARZA:** When you talk about the economic recovery in New Mexico, you cannot talk about having a recovery without businesses playing a major role. They are the economy. Ninety percent of businesses in New Mexico are small businesses. What role can they play? One of the most important things is making sure that they have a culture, that they have an environment and a workplace that's flexible and welcoming. Then also be very honest and transparent with their employees. The past year certainly nudged employers toward thinking in that manner; making sure that they're soliciting input, getting as much insight and perspective from their employees as possible, and fostering an environment that's going to help their employees not just thrive professionally, but also thrive personally.

**TANNEN:** I'm in agreement with Del. It's the listening in formal ways, like surveys and things like that, but also having your ear to the ground on other tones of the organization. Responding more quickly and not waiting to act. Really being responsive and paying attention to big and small things.

**ROSSI:** Businesses in New Mexico have a really unique opportunity right now to play a big part in economic recovery, and I think the way we do that is by supporting businesses to really offer and maintain great jobs. If businesses and employers are offering great opportunities to people, right in New Mexico, then consumers reciprocate. I think we are at this point in our culture and in our history where people are really willing to step up and spend their dollars at the businesses that are creating good jobs and treating people with respect and dignity. We can talk more about what "good jobs" means, but a lot of what Del and Maggie identified play a part in that.



**MARTINEZ:** Let's talk about the future of work as a whole. The way we interact, virtually versus in person, has definitely changed a lot of things. How can businesses take the lead in creating the future of work and making sure that employees are successful moving forward?

**ROSSI:** We have this incredible opportunity right now to play a big part in creating the future of work. This is not about getting back to normal or back to where we were – I think that would be losing an opportunity, not learning from the lessons that we've had. Part of the answer to your question is to really make sure that we rebuild and recover, and look to the future using our experiences, the lessons we've learned, the data, and really building on that. That takes time and investment, and it takes real intention. If business owners and employers can be really intentional about how they want to participate in the future of work, I think we can have some really creative solutions.

**TANNEN:** I agree with what Giovanna said about the intention and not losing the lesson. That's something we've talked about a lot in our organization – never wanting to go back to what was normal. What a disservice that would be to us. Just the way our members do business with us has changed. Wanting to do remote work was

a long-term goal, something we had on our plate beforehand. This really accelerated that. So, we're really looking at it as a huge opportunity for us. Then adding in diversity, equity and inclusion on top of that, we find opportunities to move away from a corporate ladder-type of thinking. Blending that in with family-friendly practices and realizing that depending on any employee's situation at any one time in their career, they may move up, down, around, over and diagonal. And that's still good. That's still keeping all of the best and it is smart business; keeping a good employee, keeping that institutional knowledge, and being flexible enough to know situations change.

**ESPARZA:** When you ask the question of what businesses can do as far as taking the lead in creating the future of the work environment, I don't think it's the business' role to take the lead. I think it's their role to listen. Ultimately, it's the employees that are going to craft what environment makes the most sense. It's not about work-life balance, because when you talk about work-life balance, something is going to have to give in order to receive on the other end. What we like to speak to at Esparza is, "How do we foster work-life integration?"

You integrate the two together. You want to be just as successful professionally as you do personally. One of the things that I've heard from my team when we are talking about the future of the workplace is having an environment with integration, where you can blend the two together. There are going to be weeks where one upsets the other. Maybe you're working 60 hours and you're not able to make a soccer game, but there should be other weeks where it's the complete opposite. The whole idea of work-life balance – I don't think it can exist, because what it's telling an employer and an employee is that something has to give. In reality, life is hard. What you want is some integration; you want an employer to be able to foster that integration and allow for that integration among employees.

To answer the question about the future of work, it's really listening to your employees. What do they want in terms of flexibility? What do they want in terms of resources? What do they want in terms of coworkers, or in terms of a work atmosphere? Listening is the number one tool that any employer can deploy when talking about the future of the workplace.



**MARTINEZ:** What did you learn from your employees during the pandemic? What has worked and what hasn't?

**TANNEN:** We have incredible employees. What we learned through this whole process is how much we can get done quickly, and what was getting in our way. When the rubber meets the road and you have to do things quickly, we were amazed at how much we were able to adapt and change, and really foster the culture of the organization.

Fortunately, we have a people-mean-more-type culture to begin with, so when you're building off of that already and you have a business continuity plan in place – we certainly didn't imagine 18 plus months of a worldwide pandemic, we didn't role play that in the tabletop exercises – but you have

something to go off of. We learned to really listen and break any silos, perceived or real. We had to work together. All of our different business lines came together and worked on being transparent, honest and vulnerable, saying, "We're figuring this out together. We're going to try it; some things will work and some things won't." And we kept having that cycle of communication so we could keep adapting more quickly. Building that trust so you can do that was super important, which we had beforehand, but we really put it to the test and had some great outcomes, new projects and things coming out of it. We really grew.

**ROSSI:** Flexibility is huge. We all really had to figure out flexibility, and when you have to do something like that, you make it work. That is one of the big lessons I was referring to earlier. If we don't really learn from these and take those lessons with us, we will have missed a great opportunity. So, I would say that number one is flexibility. Number two, collaboration, which goes to what Del was talking about. Really looking at what it takes to actually collaborate on solutions, and that starts with listening. The third one is doubling down on what it really means to have a diverse workplace and have equity and inclusion.

**ESPARZA:** We started working remotely on March 16 of 2020, so a year and a half ago. I was scared to death. I've been in business for 21 years, and I've probably never been so scared in my entire life. What I learned from my employees is how resilient they are, and I love it.

I loved Maggie using the term "vulnerable." So often, I think it's a huge misnomer that leaders feel like they can't be vulnerable. One of the outcomes of this past year is that I became comfortable with being vulnerable with my team. I was completely honest with my employees about my fears, what I was doing to try to address the fears, the risks to the company, and how I was going to try to take care of them. In demonstrating that vulnerability, we saw a lot of people rise up and take on challenges that I would never have expected them to take on before. So, really what I learned is how resilient and strong my employees are. How willing they are to roll up their sleeves and do whatever they need to do to help me out personally, to help me out professionally, and to do the same for their teammates. We came together and coalesced as a team which made us much stronger than before the pandemic.

We also saw a lot of ad hoc, one-off phone calls taking place; check-ins taking place that would have never happened before. A lot of people became much closer on a personal level than ever before. It showed the best of human nature.



**MARTINEZ:** What are the most important elements of a good return-to-work policy?

**TANNEN:** We closed our branches for a time period with just drive-up services. The rest of us have remained at remote status for the most part. We postponed going back in – we were going to go back in the beginning of August but held back a little bit. For us, it's safety first. What's important is making sure that employees are safe, physical and emotionally. Every employee has had a different story through the last 18 months, the

## MEET OUR PANELISTS



**GIOVANNA ROSSI**  
Owner, *Collective Action Strategies*

Giovanna is a leadership coach and consultant with 20+ years working with entrepreneurs, government and non-profits to improve the lives of women and families. She holds a Master of Science degree in Public Policy from the London School of Economics and is the founder of the Family Friendly Business Award® and host of The Well Woman Show on KUNM and

National Public Radio.



**MAGGIE TANNEN**  
VP of Human Resources/Learning & Development, *U.S. Eagle Federal Credit Union*

As a member of the Executive Leadership Team, Maggie's responsibilities are to ensure the organization remains competitive with compensation and benefits strategies. To accomplish that strategy, Maggie leads a team that fosters a culture of continuous learning and performance improvement to support the

strategic objectives and goals of the credit union. Additionally, they design and deliver creative HR solutions that encourage employee engagement and help cultivate a diverse, collaborative, motivated, and high-performing culture. Previously, she was Director of HR and Training Manager at U.S. Eagle. Prior to that, she worked at Charter Bank Mortgage Insurance for six years. She has a bachelor of arts from Marymount University.



**DEL ESPARZA**  
CEO of *Esparza Digital + Advertising*.

Founded in 2000, Esparza is a New Mexico based business that provides strategic marketing, advertising, and business solutions to a broad range of national public and private clients.

A native of Albuquerque, Del acquired his marketing expertise in a range of fields, from high tech to healthcare. He began his career at IBM, and later advanced to a marketing position with DuPont and Conoco Oil Corporation in Houston, Texas. Transferring his talents to the health arena, Del has worked for many regional and national health care providers before starting Esparza Advertising.

Sophisticated strategic thinking, healthy growth, and explosive creativity continue to make Esparza clients happy and industry peers take notice. As ever, Esparza remains committed to providing clients the highest standards of integrated marketing communications in the industry.



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different impacts in their professional and personal lives, their family situation. Just being aware that no two people are going to react the same way, and having that awareness and kindness. One employee says, "Why do I have to wear a mask?" And others are like, "I feel so much better knowing that the sanitation stations are there." And knowing that we're physically setting up our locations in a way where people can return safely and feel comfortable, and communicating that ahead of time so nothing is a surprise. Laying out those expectations.

We really double down on those direct manager conversations too because that's where the most vulnerability and trust happens. Having something from the executive team, setting that framework of "Here's where we're going and we're looking for that feedback." Making sure those channels are open and really providing our managers with the information so they can have those one-on-one conversations with their staff. Let us know where we can make adjustments, and always ask, "What can we do better? What more are you looking for? What's one thing we can do differently?" Communicate often and in different ways. An email blast isn't enough. It's making sure they've got those resources to really help them be safe and productive.

**ESPARZA:** About three months ago, we returned to the office with a hybrid-type of a structure. We are still working remotely on Mondays and Fridays. When working in the office, we have core office

hours from 9:00 a.m. and 3 p.m. We encourage all to try to be in the office, but we allow for some flexibility as well. If you have something happening on a Wednesday, or if you have to do something on a Tuesday, you're still welcome to work from home. Another big takeaway: I did not anticipate the amount of productivity that was going to come out of my team. And it was significant.

The hybrid model was going to be temporary with the intent of going back to 5 days a week in the office. But through listening to my team and my employees, we learned they really liked that hybrid structure, so we're going to keep that structure in place indefinitely. We'll make a determination of when it might make sense for us to make some changes, but for the time being, it seems to work. We have a number of employees that have school age kids, which warrant flexibility – especially with COVID.



**MARTINEZ: What benefits is your company currently implementing to promote wellbeing in your workplace?**

**TANNEN:** What we did during the heart of the pandemic was offer a mental health day. Everyone obviously has PTO and short-term absence and things like that, and we've removed some of the barriers of getting access to those benefits. We also gave our managers and employees the ability to say, "I need a day, an hour or two days." It was

at manager discretion, and employee need, to say, "Do that." And recognize that it's real. We know you need to step away and deal with whatever you have, or just have a day unplugged. That's the other byproduct of the pandemic: we're so onto screens all the time. It'll be curious what we do to close screens and disconnect electronically more.

Those are things we've done throughout the pandemic, and we'll be looking to build those into our normal work. We have locations all over the state, so there are health insurance benefits and things like that being offered. We also do gym reimbursements; whether you're using an app or gym, we find ways to help carry that cost and give them the time to do that.

**ROSSI:** Wellness and wellbeing are some of the policies in the Family Friendly Business Award®, so I can speak to that. In our team, we actually started giving a stipend for whatever staff members wanted to do. We look at wellbeing as physical, mental, and emotional health, so if you wanted to spend your stipend on online yoga classes, great. If you wanted to buy yourself flowers every week, because that helps your mental health, then that's what you could do. It's like a wellbeing stipend, but broader than that.

I think there is an opportunity to really challenge some of the status quo practices in business.

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Perfectionism and urgency are two things that we can look at and say, “Does this need to be perfect? Is this urgent?” We are so entrenched and ingrained in this way of working where everything has to be perfect, and everything is urgent. The pandemic has given us a pause and has created some space for us to slow down without hurting our productivity. If we can agree that supporting emotional and mental health for our employees is not hurting productivity, we can actually slow down. We can challenge the status quo business practices, and it can work for us. I would really encourage businesses to look at that.

**ESPARZA:** We have an unlimited PTO policy, which means you can take as much time as often as you want, whenever you need. It just needs to be approved by your supervisor so that we can manage the company appropriately. What we did about a year ago with that policy in place was really push mental health. We made everybody aware of the mental health benefits that were available and the resources available.

I think the most significant thing we did was really take a hard look at our values as a company. We took a collective look of everyone’s personal values and how they live by those values. We then found common and shared values and we restructured our one-to-one meetings that a supervisor has with an employee on a monthly basis. Now we touch on every single one of those values, and what we can do to help contribute toward those values being realized by every employee.



**MARTINEZ:** What are the benefits and policies of a Family Friendly workplace?

**ROSSI:** Family Friendly New Mexico developed several categories of policies. We had initially four categories, and we added another three. Those are all available at our website. They include a lot of things that we’ve been talking about today, such as flexible schedules, paid leave, diversity, equity, inclusion, and a whole lot of wellness and wellbeing that when implemented, creates a better workplace and supports employees to thrive in their personal lives. We know that when people thrive in their personal lives, they do better at work. So, it’s a win-win.

There are many low-cost, or no-cost, ways to implement these things. It does take some creativity and it takes some intention. That’s why we have so many champions now in New Mexico who are creating workplaces that work for families, because they’ve taken the time to really figure it out. One of the things that we do at Family Friendly New Mexico is we don’t make you go and figure it out on your own. We’re here to support you. We can share sample policies with you. We have business owners, like the ones on our panel today, that can share examples of how they have done this, how it’s worked for them in rural areas, how it works for them in small businesses, and in all different sizes and industries. What we hear over and over is that when companies implement our family-friendly policies, they hire high-quality employees who stick around. Isn’t that what any employer wants?



**MARTINEZ:** Can you speak on the benefits that you’ve experienced being a part of Family Friendly New Mexico and working with those policies?

**ESPARZA:** First and foremost, I think we have a really strong culture and a good morale that is not necessarily driven by me but driven by the entire team. I give Giovanna and Family Friendly New Mexico a lot of credit; she established a model that companies can use as a resource to help craft their own human resource policies within their own organization.

We live in a world right now that is being dubbed “the great resignation.” Nine out of 10 employees are considering quitting their jobs or their industry altogether, because they want to try something different. A lot of the reasons why is because of what we’re talking about: they don’t feel appreciated, they don’t feel listened to, they don’t feel heard, they don’t have the flexibility that they want for personal/professional life integration. Taking Giovanna’s lead and incorporating her family-friendly practices has added tremendous value to my company.

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**TANNEN:** Having the Family Friendly New Mexico policies has helped move us. With culture, it’s almost where the rubber meets the road. It’s what makes it stick. It’s what puts the structure behind it and puts good intentions into actions.

We had a culture that was family friendly, in ways you would think so, but putting the policies in place and continuing to challenge ourselves to practice those policies has helped with employee retention. It certainly helped me recruit. I’ve often heard in interviews, “I saw you won that Family Friendly award,” and more and more I’m finding candidates looking for that. They’re not only looking at what they want to do, but also at who they want to work with. That’s a value that is really hard to put a dollar amount on. It helps me recruit and retain good employees, all employees.



**MARTINEZ:** What has your company done to implement diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace? And what have you done to foster flexibility and collaboration?

**ESPARZA:** Well, I can say that at Esparza, we have always embraced diversity, equity and inclusion. We’ve been in business for a little over 21 years. That was certainly one of the tenets of the company – celebrating diverse thoughts from diverse people. Including all different minds actually elevates ideas, makes your products better, and helps you deliver a better service. It’s always been ingrained because it’s always been something we have celebrated. There hasn’t ever been a shift because it’s so much a part of who we are, and so much a part of our culture in our organization.

**TANNEN:** We’re in the same boat with Del. It’s always been part of our DNA, just as being a credit union is focused specifically on serving the underserved. It’s what we do.

But we have renewed focused into really applying that in business as well. We’re not only looking at what we’re doing as an employer, but also at our products and services and our connection with our communities. Having that DEI lens and really taking this opportunity to refresh, and making sure we’re putting that lens on everything we do, from start to finish. It’s been exciting and revealing. You really have to ask yourself the tough questions as a business and challenge yourself to dig deeper.

**ROSSI:** We definitely learned during the pandemic that diversity, equity and inclusion cannot wait. That came through loud and clear. Family Friendly New Mexico had a lot of companies already integrating diversity, equity and inclusion, and then a lot of companies were like, “How do I start? How do I actually operationalize this? What does it mean?” And it really must mean more than just hiring more people of different demographics. It has to mean more than putting someone on your board that represents some demographic that you’re missing. Those are good things and that’s a start, but you really need to go further than that. Family Friendly New Mexico has spent a lot of time and resources, through different trainings and workshops, really looking at how to operationalize diversity, equity and inclusion. How do we go beyond just the basics? How does it become part of our everyday and the way we operate? Not just who we hire and who the faces

are in the staff or the boards, but how do we operate in a way that is really including diverse opinions and perspectives?

Some of those things take real attention and intention. I've talked a lot about intention today, but I think it really does take a lot of intention. Again, slowing down and saying, "We're not going to rush this decision just because it's easier to ask these two people. We're actually going to create a focus group with different perspectives and ideas." That does take more time and intention, but as you have heard from our other panelists, it is possible.

**ESPARZA:** It's not just the right thing to do. It's the right thing to do for your future business success. We just completed a research white paper that showed that six out of 10 B2C customers are not just expecting [DEI initiatives], they're demanding that from brands. And it's going to continue. I don't anticipate it stopping anytime soon.



**MARTINEZ:** What has your company done to foster flexibility and collaboration in the workplace?

**ROSSI:** Flexibility is a major component of our workplace policies. Flexibility can work for everybody; it's a win-win. Things like different scheduling options and working from home. Now, when some people are in the office and some people are online, I think it is going to require a lot of flexibility in terms of how it's going to happen. I'm sure Maggie or Del can talk to how they're managing that.

Other flexible options include job sharing; that hasn't really taken off in a huge way here in this country, but we have lots of examples of how it works very well to keep high-level professionals in their jobs, benefiting both the employer and the employee.

**ESPARZA:** Aside from what we offer with unlimited PTO, one of the things we also offer is this thing called VTO, not PTO. That's "Volunteer Time Off" where we encourage our employees, and they have up to a week per year to do this, to coach their kid's soccer team, or be a band parent, or do things that are important to them. Not necessarily important to the agency, but important to them. I think the term "flexibility" should never really be defined by the employer. It should always be defined by the employee and what's important to them. Making sure that you have an environment and a structure that fosters that dialogue allows employees to feel safe.

**TANNEN:** I agree with all that. We obviously have hours that we are open for business as we need to have the tellers there at certain times. But beyond that, we do have flexible hours that mean if you start early or stay late, the managers have all the ability to work through those types of things. There are regular and flexible schedules. We also incorporate the flex time for community service. We have people clock in and go work at Meals on Wheels, Casa Esperanza, or the Rio Grande Project, and all of those things while they're on the clock for us. We also have an employee resource group called "The Flight Crew" that works through all of our charitable benefits, and we get a lot of those ideas from our employees. We ask, "What charities and things are important

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to you? Do you want to do the suicide awareness walk, or breast cancer walk?" All of that comes from our employees and our membership. That's what we choose to spend our time and money on. Having that flexibility for what's important to our employees, and then we show up as their employers. I think that feels really good to say, "I said this is important to me, and my employer showed up and backed me with it."



**MARTINEZ:** What can you share with other employers about implementing family friendly workplace policies in times of crisis?

**ESPARZA:** I'm a big believer of never letting a good crisis to pass you by. This allows for a lot of self-reflection as an employer, as a business owner, and also as an individual.

I would say that the hardest step to implementing these practices is taking that first step. That's the most critical thing: being committed to taking that first step. Then fostering an open and honest environment with your employees – identify what's important to them, what you can realistically do within your respective business model, and then incorporate that. Make your employees feel like they're there and they are listened to. Feeling like they're listened to makes an employee feel valued. The most logical next step for any employer is to take that first step.

**TANNEN:** Ask. Ask your employees and ask your management team what they know. We talked about having an ear on what's happening and what's important to your employees. Start with the ask and build the scenario where they are free to answer honestly, and not "I think this what they want me to say."

We really want the answers because it will help us develop and keep checking back. It's that first step. And know going in that you're going to keep changing it. This isn't a "said it and forget it" type of business model. It will continually evolve, so accept that going in right away. It will always change – and celebrate that! Because that's the point, isn't it? As we get better, we do better. We keep moving through and your employee makeup may change, so you should always be reevaluating.



**MARTINEZ:** Giovanna, I'll let you close this out. Anything else that you would recommend?

**ROSSI:** I'm going to recommend that you go over to [nmfamilyfriendlybusiness.org](http://nmfamilyfriendlybusiness.org) and look at all of the policies that we have already created for you. We've already done the research – not that you as employer shouldn't do your own surveys of your employees – but we've done a lot of research and gathered all this information. We've talked to so many people about what really works. We've developed seven categories of policies that you can follow along. There's a toolkit that helps you learn about how to implement them, and it includes things that we've talked about today, like health supports, good wages, flexibility, community engagement and other supportive family friendly workplace policies.

Start where you are. If we're talking about how to implement this now in difficult times, look at where you are now – start there. Don't try to leap ahead into doing all kinds of things that you're not ready for. That's what Family Friendly New Mexico is really good at – we meet you where you are as an employer, and we say, "Okay, what do you have going on right now? What are your resources? What are your challenges and needs? What do your employees need?" And then we help you craft your policies based on where you already are. To Del's point, it's just like taking the first step.

I want to reiterate what I said earlier, which is that we really have an unprecedented opportunity right now to take a look at what really works for people. If there was ever a time where we thought it was important for people to thrive – mentally, emotionally, and physically – it's right now. Let's not miss this opportunity. Let's really grab and take hold of this opportunity. I truly believe that when employees thrive, businesses thrive. It's a win-win