

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE WORKPLACE

▶ *Laurie Cooke, President and CEO of the Healthcare Businesswomen's Association (HBA), highlights some of the ways the pandemic is impacting companies and employees across the industry.*

**PV:** The HBA conducted a survey among its corporate partner companies regarding the impact that COVID-19 is having on their employee bases. What were some of the results?

**COOKE:** Numerous workplace surveys have recently revealed that workers are not feeling supported by their employers to manage the “new normal” work and home environment. So, in a recent member survey, we asked our HBA community and specifically members who work for our corporate partners about their experience. We were happy to learn that 80% of our members — and 88% of members working for our corporate partners — said their employer has taken steps to support them with family and caregiving responsibilities during the pandemic. We also learned that nearly 50% of HBA members who are parents are concerned that increased time on childcare, educational, and household responsibilities will impact their health, perceived job performance, or ability to continue working.

**PV:** Building on that almost 50%, there are a number of reports noting that the pandemic is going to disproportionately impact women's careers. What can companies do to support their female employees? What is the HBA doing in terms of outreach?

**COOKE:** We know that these types of social and health crises historically have impacted women's careers by disproportionately. Fortunately, based on data from the McKinsey Women in the Workplace survey, we know women in our industry fare better than in other industries. However, we have heard from our company contacts that the pandemic is becoming a more urgent issue for women who need to devote time to home-schooling and care for family members in light of no longer having support systems in place. We're seeing companies offering flexible work schedules, creating reduced hour work weeks, and even temporary downsizing of a role as some approaches to address the challenges of the pandemic. We are having discussions with our advisory board and corporate partners representing well more than 150 companies to understand the complexities associated with working during the pandemic. The HBA is offering webinars and setting up small group discussions and community chat boards to enable women to share their challenges and



Laurie Cooke

hear how others are managing this challenging situation.

**PV:** Empathy is rising quickly to the top of leadership skills that leaders need to employ during the pandemic. This has often been considered a soft skill; why do you think empathetic leadership is currently trending?

**COOKE:** As a result of the pandemic and the racial injustices we are experiencing today, it's understandable that employees — all of us — are coping with loss in one shape or another, or multiple losses. Like never before, there is a need for leaders to serve as a “comforter-in-chief” and the ability to provide the required solace and authentic support to a workforce mandates empathy and emotional intelligence. Not surprisingly, business media has called attention to female leaders for their effective management of current situations, and in some cases citing “softer” skills such as empathy as critical to their success. Now is the time that those of us who have this skill should capitalize on the opportunity by not only displaying empathy, but connecting the application of the skill to positive business outcomes and to call attention to this often maligned and underappreciated ability.

**PV:** What advice do you have for leaders who are having to pivot to address virtual workforces?

**COOKE:** First of all, what works for one person doesn't necessarily work for everyone. So while COVID-19 forced us all to immediately pivot to virtual working conditions, how we're managing this new environment is not so uniform. At HBA, we've been operating successfully with a fully virtual workforce for the past 15 years. The key

success factors for us have been: trust your team to be committed to achieving their goals, however this requires additional effort to clarify the goal as there are fewer opportunities to see interim work products, that previously happened informally when you stopped by someone's desk; ensure your team knows how to disconnect from work since work is now in their home, so create a space where you can close the door and leave the office or set specific work hours and step away; schedule time in your calendar to connect with your team to check in, not just about work but more so to find out how they're doing — you may be surprised to find out you are learning more about your team working virtually; have the right technical tools with appropriate training to maintain the ability to conduct your work efficiently and stay connected; be prepared for a different experience when some of your team members return to the office and the rest are virtual; and don't assume everyone thinks like you and is desperate to return or loves the virtual model — see if you can offer options.

**PV:** What is the latest coming from the HBA's Gender Parity Collaborative, which was recently recognized by the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE)?

**COOKE:** Data from the 2019 Women in the Workplace study revealed that HBA Collaborative member companies employed 12% more women on average across all staffing levels than their industry peers, outperformed their peers at retaining senior VP and C-suite level women, and significantly reduced attrition at these levels. They are achieving this level of progress through commitment from top leadership, a relentless use of data to understand not only where they currently are but to clarify the goal they're striving to achieve, and better understanding if strategies are working by measuring progress. The impact and results realized by the Gender Parity Collaborative are due to these companies' shared commitment and accountability toward systemic gender parity progress.

We're also very proud that the Collaborative was recognized with a Power of A Summit Award by the ASAE for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace. Securing this accolade is a major coup for associations like the HBA and initiatives like the Collaborative. With more than 46,000 members representing nearly 7,500 associations, ASAE is considered the association industry's preeminent organization. **PV**



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