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# SUMMARY KEYWORDS

campus, people, home, staff, pandemic, department, hr, faculty, employees, transition, flexible work arrangement, position, office, task force, work, person, supervisors, helping, student

# SPEAKERS

Interviewer L:, Male Participant, Female Participant

**Interviewer L:** 00:00:03

Okay, so if you would each just briefly, state your name and what your position is in the HR world at [U3].

**Female Participant** 00:00:15

You're on mute [REDACTED]. I'll go for a second. I'm [REDACTED] and I've been at [U3] for four years as the benefits manager. That's what I do here. Thank you.

**Male Participant** 00:00:31

And my name is [REDACTED]. I am the Deputy Chief HR officer here at [U3] been here 28 years. And previous to this position was the director of human resources, then, about a year ago, a new position was created for an AVP position of HR. So [REDACTED] is in that role. [REDACTED] came to us, he joined us in February of 2022. But [REDACTED] and I were here during the pandemic. Okay.

**Interviewer L:** 00:01:08

Great. Well, let's start with the pandemic. I mean, most of us can remember exactly where we were when we heard shutdown was happening on our campuses, right. So tell me what happened in the HR department when you learned that information.

**Male Participant** 00:01:24

One of the things that I think benefited our specific department is the fact that prior to the pandemic, the decision was made to purchase laptop computers. And we had not had those previously. And so that allowed us to transition I think, a little bit easier to working from home, the decision was made that we would have one full time staff person in the office every day. But the rest of us would rotate through the office or work at home. And then we also think [REDACTED], we had maybe one or two student employees helping us in the office each day

**Female Participant** 00:02:02

Yeah, they were comfortable to come in, but try to limit it to two to three people in the office at any time. But that that decision to buy laptops was completely unrelated to COVID. But a like a brainiac thing, we decided to do some on campus training, and each of our specialties was going to go to the departments directly. And so [REDACTED]

had got it. Got it so that we could all have laptops, so we could be more mobile anyways, which turned out to be a six month premonition.

**Male Participant** 00:02:36

And then we had a, we, we transitioned to the administrative assistant position, a clerical position in our office into a programmer analyst position or of a IT tech person position to help us with our reporting and, and those types of things. And so he was instrumental in helping us also make that transition as far as our office, using jabber to take phone calls at home using slack to communicate, you know, as a team. And so that plus learning zoom, you know, we're, we were able to make that transition. I think the thing that was challenging for us, though, was the stress that was being placed on staff, having to transition and go through the pandemic and all of those things and also still work at the same time. And [REDACTED] is involved with women's network on campus, and we teamed up with them to have two of our faculty, one from psychology and one from big caps to present some some training to our faculty and staff, specifically surrounding suicide prevention and ways that we could find more balance with work life and those types of things. And that's one of the things that we did. From a from a university standpoint, though, the provost office under the direction of [REDACTED], our provost, he chaired the COVID Campus Task Force committee. And so there was representation from, you know, across campus, to help with testing to help with, you know, the messaging, the information that would be going out from campus. So I think that that was a huge part of all of this, too, is just having that flow of information from the administration, from the COVID Task Force committee, to campus to staff, the faculty and the students.

**Interviewer L:** 00:04:49

Can you talk a little bit about the mechanisms that you used for the communication and about how frequently that was coming out?

**Male Participant** 00:05:02 Speak to that, [REDACTED].

**Female Participant** 00:05:05

So when you log into your, your employee portal, there's a Portal and Portal announcements. And that's probably the biggest place that people looked. And that links to our COVID Response page, which was done by that COVID task force. So most people looked there for that information, and then we had emails. And then if you signed up to get the text information from the COVID, testing centers from there, as well, but probably the main place that people were looking while they were on and off campus was that very first, when you log into [the university website], you get your own portal. And all those announcements were there. And we tried to keep those pretty tailored to the updates at that time.

**Interviewer L:** 00:05:50

And was that all done at the task force level, or did some of that filter down as work that you were doing in HR,

**Female Participant** 00:05:56

a lot of it pointed to our work, [REDACTED]

did a form to help people make a flexible work arrangement agreement with their department that has an approval queue. So it pointed to that if you needed to make a flexible work arrangement, like if you needed to change your work at your desk to work from home three days a week, the the biggest impact I saw was we're very small community with very limited resources. 26,000 people here. So when schools shut down, and moms had to go home. So the the flexible work arrangement form made it so that you can easily communicate with your supervisor and your supervisor, supervisor, you didn't have to go see all those people in person or create a huge email chain to get that approval to make that that work for schedule. Okay.

**Male Participant** 00:06:49

We also had to coordinate the COVID Leave.

# Female Participant

Oh, the COVID leave…. (chuckles)

# Interviewer L

There’s a story there.

**Female Participant** 00:06:55

There's a form for that, too. But that one was, that was horrible. That was on paper!

**Interviewer L:** 00:07:04

Did it stay on paper or did you ever move it to electronic?

**Female Participant** 00:07:09

It stayed on paper. And people could sign it electronically, but where the students had to be paid, and the hourly had to be paid. And, and this is only for staff, of course. Faculty, just if they needed to make those arrangements, they made those arrangements. But yeah, it stayed on paper.

**Interviewer L:** 00:07:29 That is fascinating.

**Female Participant** 00:07:31

Fascinating. And then we had to… the IT person that was in HR that [REDACTED]

was talking about had to go into [REDACTED information system]. And if you've ever tried to manipulate [REDACTED information system], you're sorry for us… to make an additional line on the leave reports so that they could report specifically their COVID time off. Okay.

**Interviewer L:** 00:07:53

So, can we talk for just a minute about a little bit more about the detail of people's work arrangements? So they would be filling out this form that says I'd like to have an arrangement other than being on the campus? Did everybody have to do that locked down? Or was there a period of time where that happened for everybody. And then if they wanted to stay, they had to fill that out?

**Male Participant** 00:08:16

Now, that's more how it happened the initial several months, we just allowed people to go home and work remotely. Okay, then over time, if they wanted it to remain more of a permanent basis, and they needed to fill out that form.

**Interviewer L:** 00:08:34 Okay, got it.

**Interviewer L:** 00:08:36

How can we work with the people who had desktops? Did they get to take their office station home? I don't remember. So many.

**Male Participant** 00:08:45

Yeah, I think I think some may have done that. So there was a lot of purchasing going on to maybe in those early months to try and get people you know, equipped.

**Interviewer L:** 00:08:59

That would have been across the campus, right, that everybody was sort of dealing with that. Was that a central purchasing process? Or did departments have to do that individually?

**Male Participant** 00:09:13

It took departments had to do it individually is my understanding. You know, otherwise, [REDACTED]?

**Female Participant** 00:09:19

I don't think and we did that. We certainly didn't facilitate it, but I didn't know. I'm sure it happened; department by department.

**Interviewer L:** 00:09:28

Were there other kinds of things that you had to do in order to allow employees to work away from the campus?

**Female Participant** 00:09:35

We had to deal with our crap… We had kids when we got home! <laughing> Well I had to. [REDACTED] only has dogs. Not that I know of? Just helping them get their office equipment set up at home.

**Male Participant** 00:09:54

We would field questions from supervisors periodically asking about, you know, I have a employee who's tested positive, you know, why do you know? How do I respond? And then we kind of walked them through the steps and COVID leave, and you know, what the CDC was saying and how soon they could return and those types of things. And then we had a, we, we had a contact tracing going on also on campus. And HR helped with some of that, kind of on a volunteer type. They had volunteers throughout campus that were helping with that, that effort.

**Interviewer L:** 00:10:37

Okay. When you were making changes, did you feel like you were able to respond in a pretty timely fashion? Or were there challenges as you were fielding questions, and you were having to, you know, come up with answers. What were those challenges like? And what seems pretty easy to do?

**Male Participant** 00:11:02

I think one of the benefits of a smaller campus is that you can respond, maybe a little more quickly. I mean, that's just kind of my perception. I think the COVID task force was meeting weekly, if not, sometimes daily. And so, and with with the provost, heading up that task force, you know, he had direct access to the President and the President's Council or the cabinet. And so I think, I think decision making was, at least from my perspective, seemed to be happening pretty quickly. [REDACTED], do you? How would you assess that?

**Female Participant** 00:11:41

The only thing I can think of that had any kind of bump was… and I should have talked a year ago when we remembered stuff… (laughter) What did we do [REDACTED] that like when there was a department that didn't have any work, and we had to reassign student workers, and we facilitated the reassignment of student workers?

**Male Participant** 00:12:03

That's right, because the Cabinet had a commitment that we would try and help out the student workers as much as we could. And so there, you're right, [REDACTED], there was some reassignment going on. Departments would basically still continue to pay their employees, and we'd find places for those hourly employees to work.

**Female Participant** 00:12:27

If we had student workers that couldn't go to their office because it was shut down, they submitted a form to HR and our HR, like, reached out to aviation or facilities and said, Do you have work that we can have these people do? So they can, like if they hadn't been exposed, and they didn't fall into any of those pay categories? They still needed money. So we had a pretty dynamic process to get the student workers back to work. Yeah, to continue to work. Okay. That’s the only thing that felt clunky.

**Interviewer L:** 00:13:01

huh, hmm. Were there things that you felt were outside the scope of your expertise for managing them? And if that was true, who did you talk to about that? Or were there things outside the employees scope? And how did they manage that? Like one of the things we think about is you go to work and

somebody set up all the internet for you, right? But you go home, it's not quite the same sometimes. So can you talk about that from the HR perspective, and then things you might have heard from staff?

**Female Participant** 00:13:37

You mean, like, if I went to work at home, and I couldn't get my VPN to work, and I am not a VPN expert. We have an amazing IT department here. And they are so helpful. And most of our staff depend on them a lot anyways, but like when I got home and got jammed up, I knew who to call, or who to send a message to straight away. So in the IT, I think, I think people just already had been involved enough with them to know how to use them. I don't know, I know there was a big our online teaching and learning center had just done this big hire because they were going to do this big program. And then when COVID came, they had all these brand new employees that really hadn't been formally assigned jobs, like work duties, and so they just got to jump in. And they did a lot with faculty and staff to get us up and going at home. Like [REDACTED] said, like our IT person already knew about Jabber and already knew about Slack and knew how to create teams that were used to seeing each other face to face. But probably just our IT department’s so willing. And then our online teaching and learning department didn't just narrow themselves to faculty. They were very willing to help any kind of connectivity we needed and staff as well.

**Interviewer L:** 00:15:05

Yeah, that that first couple of week learning curve was steep, wasn't it?

**Female Participant** 00:15:11

Well, the good news it was it was happening to everyone. So nobody, like there's no zoom emergencies. You just sent out a message in stalemate next week… It felt like it… I don't know, the urgency didn't seem, it didn't seem as urgent. Like if you're missing a meeting right now, it seems pretty urgent. But if you missed a meeting that year, you were just gonna follow up with the meeting later.

**Interviewer L:** 00:15:35

Okay. So out of all these kinds of changes that were going on, that happened initially, right, and now we're transitioning back more towards what we think of as normal. What are you keeping? What are you reversing and going back to your pre COVID? Normal? Like, tell me about work from home for employees, or some of these other things that you guys were doing to accommodate what was happening early on in the pandemic?

**Female Participant** 00:16:08

[REDACTED], can you think of anything we didn't keep? It seems like all of it just worked out to be just a new way to have an additional option to work. Like in the end, it feels like we all got a lot more dynamic and and a lot more flexible. I can't think of anything, we didn't go, this is what works and we're keeping it

**Male Participant** 00:16:29

initially, though, there was kind of an expectation that kind of a certain point in time, that we'd be back on campus. But then, at the same time, I think we came to the realization that our workforce, our faculty and staff, expecting more flexibility. I think the faculty had quite a bit of flexibility coming out of the

pandemic, or not coming out, but like 2021, even into 2022 Being able to teach remotely if they felt that there were health and safety concerns. I think the Provost Office is pretty accommodating about that. But then it seemed like at a certain point that it was kind of expected - okay, now we need to be back on campus. I can't remember if it was August of 2021. We have a new president now, though.

President [REDACTED]. I think she - the feeling, I think that [REDACTED] and I are getting from her and the rest of the campus is getting from her - is that she's going to expect supervisors and leaders to be more focused on work life balance, and being flexible about work arrangements. You know, just as an example, I have a granddaughter who's going to be joining our family next month in Ohio. And so we're gonna fly out to greet her to meet her. And then I'm going to spend, like, half a week back there working remotely spending time with family in the evenings. You know, pre COVID, I wouldn't have asked to do that. That wouldn't have been possible. And so I think we just, I think of [REDACTED], our IT person. His wife just got a teaching job up in Payson. And it was like, oh, no, no, he's leaving. But you know, the decision was made, and he was interested in working remotely from from up there, and so up [REDACTED], and so he's still working with us. I think we've also had some, some success with remote work, and flexibility in that. Oh, my gosh, our database administrator for our system. She worked for us for a few years here in [REDACTED] and then because of family needs needed to move back to Texas. Well, she was the first person that I was aware of that was really working remotely for the campus, and she's been with us for 15 years or something. Yes. 15 or 16 years. Yeah. Amazing database administrator, if we hadn't been willing to be flexible with that, we would have lost her.

**Female Participant** 00:19:26

And that's that was a good point, [REDACTED]. It has significantly impacted our return to work for FMLA. So our people who normally would would say, show back up to work on January one. Now we have some flexibility and saying as long as you've got the sick leave to cover it. We're willing to work with you to work a part time day while you transition back into work. And that's really helped some of our mommies coming back and you know, just just the return to work on our illnesses or people are able to do They already know how to work from home, they did it so they can recover from home a little better not returned so soon.

**Interviewer L:** 00:20:07

Okay. Tell me a little bit about the kinds of problems that got raised from staff that sort of filtered up to you that you were dealing with.

**Female Participant** 00:20:20

People turning in time, but not doing their work <laugh>. That was that I think that happened everywhere. You know, of course, we send people home with laptops, and then they haven't checked the email in two weeks, you know, and they're still turning in time. That was, that was hard. Because that everybody was learning how to work from home or learning that they couldn't work from home. You know, it was it's a real, a real process. So in the beginning, it was a lot of how do I manage? Or how do I supervise people I can’t see and touch, you know, how do I? How do I keep them going down the road? And I believe that people in the beginning that couldn't do it learned they couldn't do it, they either came back to the office, or they didn't stay employed. But I think that's a that's a learning curve, you're gonna go through with anyone that you allow remote work, I think.

**Interviewer L:** 00:21:19

Were there things that you did, from the HR perspective, to help managers and supervisors figure out how to do that how to work with remote employees?

**Male Participant** 00:21:33

We did. Yeah, training, and then a lot of one on one, you know, coaching and counseling with supervisors.

**Female Participant** 00:21:44

I think our first, our first launch, our first initial feedback was that we really needed to help them learn how, I think. So we did training programs, virtually, on best practices, basically.

**Interviewer L:** 00:22:02

And is that also something that you'll continue?

**Female Participant** 00:22:07

Oh, yeah, that's [REDACTED]'s, [REDACTED]'s whole jam.

**Male Participant** 00:22:13

It's interesting, we just finished two days or three days, two days of professional development for faculty and staff this week, and you know, pre COVID, it would have been, we're holding this professional development, and if you want to attend, you gotta be here. But now, it seems like there's this expectation that, well, if I can't be there, I still want to be involved. And, you know, now to be able to involve more people through Zoom is pretty awesome. The President's Council meetings, there are more people involved. There are more people involved with other campus gatherings, when we give that zoom option, and so that I think has increased the level and flow of communication on campus by allowing people to come in person or also join by zoom.

**Interviewer L:** 00:23:08

So I'm hearing a couple of things that sort of get at, did this work? And do people like it right, and, and you're seeing at least as good and oftentimes better participation in meetings when you have a remote option? Were there other ways that you evaluated? How this all worked?

**Female Participant** 00:23:26

I bet you our online teaching and learning people have got solid numbers, that guy loves numbers, and we could probably, that's probably where you need to go next is to our online teaching and learning.

Don't you think, [REDACTED], that [REDACTED] would have? He's kind of a data driven brain anyways? We're all, does everybody feel good about it? Yes. But, but [REDACTED] with online teaching and learning I, I can't remember what its new title is. But he would know those kinds of things. But I know I specifically heard a difference of when we started putting those President's Council meetings, when we went to zoom, their attendance went from 15 to 30 people to 130 people. So they feel like it quadrupled their interest and not that everybody didn't care it’s just leave your building, go to another building, sit outside of your office and in meeting, leave that building, come back to your building. Instead of being engaged in that meeting for an hour, you're engaged in that process for two

hours, you know, because it's putting your body someplace else. It's harder than your brain. And I know they'd said it's such a meaningful add to them that they never would have, that they never would have considered like. There was that whole transition, at least in my world, where I feel like if I can't have the person in person, it's not as meaningful, but getting a hundred people in virtual is a lot more meaningful than 30 people in person, you know. So making that crossover in my 1990s brain was hard. Like, you know, they're they don't learn as much if they're not in person. Well, can I teach 100 people a better, a better lesson?

**Female Participant** 00:25:21 Okay.

**Male Participant** 00:25:22

[REDACTED], he's in the center for teaching innovation. Okay, I think another thing that set us up well, for the pandemic, is that our former president, [REDACTED], had entered in the university had entered into an arrangement, an agreement with academic advisors, I think I'm trying to remember their names, are out of Arizona. They were helping us to kind of increase the quality and the level of some of our online programs and instruction. And then there were cameras that were being added to classrooms and some of those things that were already in motion. And so I think that helped us, especially the faculty make that transition, the fact that we were already open and had online courses going on. I think that helped with that transition, too.

**Interviewer L:** 00:26:32

So as we begin thinking about who else from your campus could help us get a sense of how all of this was working? Are there besides [REDACTED], are there people that you can think of, or departments where we would go in and say we we'd like to talk to several people and find out about the changes and the impact of them specifically? So can you think of groups where turnover was a big problem where they had real success or groups that really struggled with work from home compared to groups who said, wow, this is so great, we're going to continue doing it because it works really well for us or, or any other kinds of contrast like that, that we could begin exploring for individual staff people what that was like for them?

**Male Participant** 00:27:20

Our previous Staff Association President [REDACTED], and I guess, also [REDACTED], she was the Staff Association president prior to that, I think those two individuals might be good to talk to [REDACTED]'s email [REDACTED] He's now our director of purchasing. And then [REDACTED] her email is [REDACTED]. She's assistant to the Vice President for Business Strategy.

**Female Participant** 00:28:14

Okay. Those guys would probably actually have the pulse because they were in the thick of it with the staff at the time.

**Female Participant** 00:28:26

Okay, okay, we will talk to them. Do you know in terms of academic departments, is there anybody out there that we ought to talk to?

**Male Participant** 00:28:39 You? Have you spoken to?

**Interviewer L:** 00:28:42 [REDACTED]?

**Male Participant** 00:28:46

He might have a really good perspective. Not only an academic perspective, but also as the chair of the COVID task force. Okay.

**Female Participant** 00:28:57

One thing about [REDACTED] as our provost was, he was here three months as our brand new provost when we had to go off campus for COVID. So he thought he was coming to a very small face to face university and had to move us all abruptly to online. And so, like blessings and curses, you know, it was probably a blessing that we had a guy in here trying to really understand structure and recreate some themes at the very time we had to recreate. So yeah, he would be a great person to talk to you because that was his intro to [U3] was to bring us online.

**Interviewer L:** 00:29:37 Fun job.

**Female Participant** 00:29:39 Yeah.

**Interviewer L:** 00:29:40

We've sort of covered the questions that I had outlined to talk with you about is there anything that you think, I wonder when she's gonna get to that, that we ought to know about?

**Female Participant** 00:29:53

No, I just hope we were. We were a very small HR team for a very big university at the time this was all happening. And so just trying to keep, you would think that onboarding and off boarding would have stopped, but our university grew at that time. So we were, we thought, like we lost a staff member because they weren't gonna replace them, because we thought there would be budget cuts, and then there wasn't. I feel like we just were kind of in the scramble with everybody else. But we didn't stop hiring people. We didn't downsize much, I mean.

**Male Participant** 00:30:32

You know, it's unfortunate that we couldn't replace that training coordinator position because I think that really could have been a great help to the university. She was amazing at reaching out to departments and working with faculty and staff and even students in her training efforts. And I think, looking back on it now, I think we really could have benefited by having that position. And it was ironic because it looked like we were gonna get it back at one point. And then a decision was made not to replace it like a year after she left.

**Female Participant** 00:31:14

Yeah, so all that all that training that could have been done was lost. [REDACTED] did a really great job of tracking down what we could, but honestly, where we thought we were gonna have this big lull and this big downturn, our HR office just kept grinding because there was still growth, and there was still hiring. And we never did have a lull, that I can remember, just more forms for COVID sick leave, and you know, yeah.

**Male Participant** 00:31:45

Another thing, too. The challenge for campus, and especially a challenge for staff is that there were a number of open positions that were frozen or put on hold, right. And so [REDACTED] talks about that growth, well, we had to keep up with that growth. And so people were really putting in a lot of effort to keep up with that growth. And then the administration, you know, heard from campus that we can only do this so long. And so now we've been going through the process of adding staffing throughout campus, to try and you know, keep up with the growth. And we've received two new positions here in human resources, the new AVP of HR, and the new benefits assistant, and a new comp[ensations] manager, so, it's been a big help.

**Interviewer L:** 00:32:51

We really appreciate you spending some time with us this afternoon to talk about this. Congratulations on the grand baby. Enjoy that.

# Male Participant

Thank you. Thank you.

**Female Participant** 00:33:00

They’re so much better than real babies.

**Interviewer L:** 00:33:08

We've been talking to several universities around the state, and several of them have said, would that they would like us to share the findings back with them. And we're happy to do that if you'd like that. So

**Male Participant** 00:33:21 Yeah, that would be great.

**Interviewer L:** 00:33:23

Yeah, we're hearing some similar things. And we're hearing some different things at places. So I think it'll be interesting for you to hear what other places are doing.

**Female Participant** 00:33:32 That's exciting.

**Male Participant** 00:33:34 One other thought, there was a

**Female Participant** 00:33:39

I wish we would have done this when our brains were better.

**Interviewer L:** 00:33:47

Really, this has been very important. You're on top of your game.

**Male Participant** 00:33:52

Was it through the Provost Office, that they did the kind of documenting the COVID experience on campus? And they had people you know, that would that were willing to write, you know, their experiences. And I think [REDACTED] would know about that.

**Female Participant** 00:34:10

Yeah. If you if you read [REDACTED] is his helper. And she's the one collecting that you knew who was out of touch with our marketing department if you haven't talked to very many marketing departments. Yeah. [REDACTED] and our marketing department was really trying to control the message, you know, make sure that we were giving the right information out there. So I think we funneled all of the all of that through [REDACTED]'s office too, and she might have been the one collecting the stories. Okay, that feels like you should talk to [REDACTED].