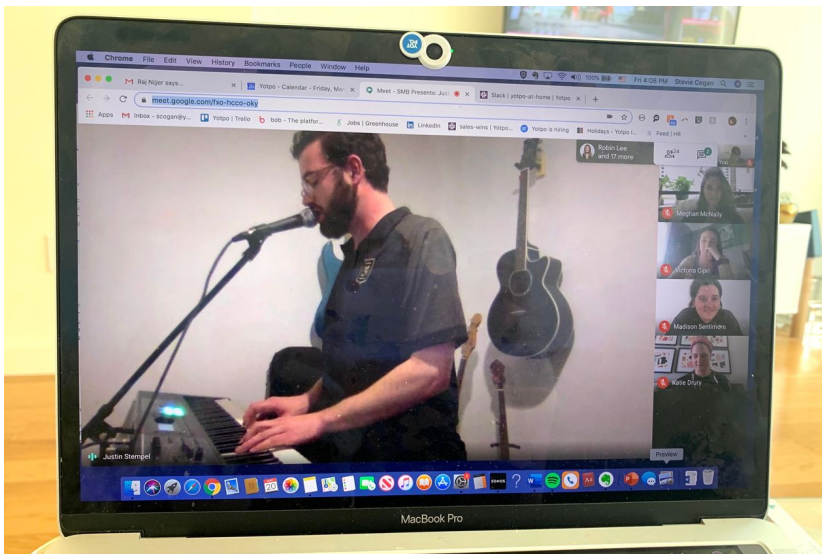


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As Virtual Happy Hours Get Old, Employers Seek Fresh Ways to Engage Remote Workers

The employee experience takes on new importance when no one can go to work



A Yotpo Inc. employee holds a virtual concert for colleagues. Company employees have been working from home since March 11.

PHOTO: YOTPO

By Ann-Marie Alcántara

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As it enters its sixth week of working from home, Handshake, a job-search company for college students, is escalating its efforts to keep employees engaged during the coronavirus pandemic.

A companywide virtual talent show is scheduled for Friday, with a trivia night to follow. The company also has complemented its usual Tuesday all-hands videoconferences with new “Ask Me Anything” video sessions on Fridays.

“At the beginning of work from home, there was energy around ‘Hey this is new, this is

different, let's all dive into this,'" said Ben Christensen, vice president of people and co-founder at Handshake, which has the legal name Stryder Corp. "Now that it's been a while, some of the fatigue is setting in for folks."

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"We do have to constantly keep looking—what is the next thing we can add, what's the new one, 'Oh, this isn't working anymore, how do we adjust,'" Mr. Christensen said.

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Handshake is based in San Francisco, where authorities last week extended their stay-at-home order for nonessential workers through May 3. California is operating under a similar statewide order without an end date.

As many companies start to contemplate working from home for a few more weeks at least, they are trying to find strategies beyond virtual happy hours to keep their workers feeling connected. Employees' experiences at work affect business results, executives say—including, and perhaps especially, when nobody can actually go to work.

Companies should be flexible on deadlines and other matters, offer useful perks such as gift cards to local restaurants that deliver, and communicate as much as possible without making everything a video call, said Roberta Matuson, an executive coach.

She added that the current situation will eventually pass and people will remember how their

managers dealt with it.

“How good a job you do leading right now through this crisis will have an impact on your career,” Ms. Matuson said. “There will be a time when the organization comes back together and people will assess who are the leaders that did really well through this crisis and who didn’t.”

Virtual team lunches

When North 6th Agency Inc., a New York-based public-relations firm, started working from home on March 13, it made its weekly team lunches virtual—with meals delivered to employees’ homes instead of the office.

A culture committee is coming up with other activities, such as a virtual book club and a shared music playlist to keep employees engaged, said Nina Velasquez, executive vice president of talent development.

“We’re doing everything we can to make sure interactions are constant,” Ms. Velasquez said.

New York state on Monday extended its work-from-home order through April 29.

Yotpo Inc., a provider of e-commerce tools based in New York, has tried yoga classes, story time for parents with children and a Slack channel for puppy photos since its work from home began March 11.

It still does happy hours, but instead of just drinking together over video, co-workers use the sessions to show off other skills, even performing mini concerts.

The company is soliciting feedback from employees to see what’s working and what’s not. One finding so far: Employees are interested in learning more about nutrition.

“We’re all kinda finding the new norm,” said Stevie Cogan, director of people at Yotpo.

Marketing and advertising agency Sid Lee is taking a different approach. In addition to using videoconferencing software to hold yoga and exercise classes, it has started a private Instagram account with tips and resources on how to set up to working from home.

The Instagram account also serves as a place where the agency can test different creative ideas. And some of the work-from-home guides have migrated to the company’s public Instagram

account. Agency executives are now thinking about offering some of the content to clients or adapting it to their specific needs.

“We were looking for something that was natural and a departure from sitting in front of your computer,” said Vito Piazza, group president at Sid Lee.

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