

Mental Health Series: Improving You and Your Employees' Mental Wellbeing in the Virtual Workplace

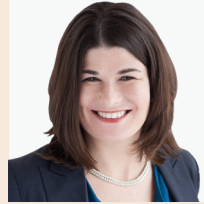
PAYCHEX
Business Series

Coronavirus



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Full transcript

Gene Marks:

Hey everybody. This is Gene Marks and welcome to the Paychex Business Series podcast. My special guest today is Dr. Cathleen Swody. Cathleen is the Founding Partner and Director of Assessment at Thrive Leadership. They're basically a coaching and counseling firm for employees and businesses. Cathleen and I had a great conversation where we talked about all the stresses that people are undergoing working from home. As much as it is a valuable and a really requested benefit, there are some downsides to it, and a lot of things that both we as people working from home and employers need to know to make it a better experience. And Cathleen and I also talked about just some things that both employees and employers can be doing in the workplace to improve our mental health, as well as benefits that should be offered and certain considerations that need to be done.

Gene Marks:

Mental health is becoming a major, major issue among employees, particularly as younger generations are being less afraid to come out and admit if they're struggling with certain issues. And we as employers have to be able to react to that if we want to recruit and have the best employees possible. Cathleen, and I hope it's okay if I do call you Cathleen, some people may prefer to be called Doctor all the time, I don't know, I like it to be more personal. Is that okay?

Cathleen Swody:

Yes, absolutely.

Gene Marks:

I'm glad to hear that. Good. Cathleen, you are the Founding Partner and Director of Assessment at Thrive Leadership. So first of all, tell us exactly what Thrive Leadership is and tell us exactly what you do.

Cathleen Swody:

Sure. Thrive Leadership is a leadership development company. So, we work with individual leaders, executives, we work with their teams, we work with their companies, to make sure that they're reaching their goals, and that they're successful, and that they're focusing on things that are interpersonal. How to best manage themselves, how to best manage other people, so they can be truly successful in a sustainable way. And so, we do executive coaching, we do workshops on emotional intelligence, communication, stress management, all of the things that they don't teach in business school.

Gene Marks:

I got it. It's funny, people ask me if I were ever to go back to school again, I have a degree in economics and I'm a CPA, but if I went back to college, man, I would major or get a Master's in Psychology.

Cathleen Swody:

It's endlessly fascinating. And I always tell people, if you work with other human beings, psychology can help you. Organizational psychology can help you. We deal with all of the headaches, from working with people, from conflicts, from people who are having emotional reactions to things, to why did that person do that over there? There's a lot of work for us, fortunately and unfortunately.

Gene Marks:

Cathleen, let me jump into some questions that I have for you. Now, just recently, I wrote a column for the Guardian which got a bunch of views, like half a million views, and it was about a recent study that came out from Microsoft, and it was about working from home. I want to share with you some of the data. They surveyed 31,000 full-time or self-employed workers, and I'm reading this right out of what I wrote, in 31 markets around the world. Two thirds of these workers said that they are craving, that is the word they used, more in-person time with their teams. 37% of these workers said that their companies are asking too much of them out of the office. 54% of these work from home workers that we've all been dealing with over the pandemic feel overworked. 39% say they're simply exhausted.

Gene Marks:

The headline of my article, and I don't choose the headlines was that, "Work from Home is Failing". In these ways, when it comes to mental health, as much as it's really saved a lot of jobs and saved a lot of companies during the pandemic, there's been a lot of costs to employees working from home. So, what are your takeaways on this work from home experience from a mental health aspect?

Cathleen Swody:

There's pros and cons, just like any other work policy or just any other work arrangement. And so, while there's been a lot of upside, people feel like they're more productive, they put in more hours. A lot of people are having trouble disconnecting at the end of the day. The line between work and personal life has blurred. So, people can't step back and get the mental refresh to hit the ground running the next day, they feel like they're always on. The laptop's there, so they might as well answer a few more emails, they might as well keep working, and they don't do the sorts of things that help them clear their mind and get a fresh start. So that's a big part of it.

Gene Marks:

Let's talk about that. Work from home is going to continue. We all know that's a fact. I mean, when I say it's a failed experiments, I mean, this part of it I think is failing, but good companies have got to be offering work from home benefits going forward if they want to attract good workers because people still really do desire the idea of working from home and having that balance. So let's start with employees. If we know this is going to be part of the future for sure, what advice do you give to people myself, like I worked from home, what advice do you give to maintain your mental health while working from home?

Cathleen Swody:

Yeah. Lots of ideas, and the keyword here is experimentation. Experiment to find what works for you as an individual. When are you most productive? Center your work around that. Making sure that you're taking breaks on a regular basis. Stepping away. Some people set a timer on their phone for 90 minutes. So every 90 minutes they get up and stretch their legs, get a glass of water.

Cathleen Swody:

I think the biggest thing people can do is have an end time, have a goal end time of, okay, at this hour of the evening, I'm going to step away from work and I'm going to put my phone over here, and unless it's an emergency going to do something else. That's the big thing is building in that space for breaks.

Cathleen Swody:

And I think the other thing is making sure you're getting enough sleep. A lot of Americans, the majority of Americans say that their sleep has been disrupted in the last year. And that affects working from home as well. So making sure some good sleep habits are in order, making sure people get the exercise they need, they're making good nutritional choices. Those all help us manage our stress better.

Gene Marks:

What are your thoughts on sleep? Can I take a nap during the day?

Cathleen Swody:

Oh, that's a great question. I have not gotten that one recently. I think short naps at the right time, a time of the day where you know you're not going to be most productive, but put a cap on it, we're not talking a two hours snooze here, we're talking maybe like a 20 minute cat nap, wake up, refresh and go for a second round of work.

Gene Marks:

Different people nap differently. I don't know the way you nap. Sometimes my wife, she needs like two hours in bed under the covers, and I can put my head down on my desk for 20 minutes or half an hour and feel pretty good, I'm not thrilled to wake up, but within a few minutes afterwards, I'm feeling very refreshed. So I guess it really depends on the person, doesn't it?

Cathleen Swody:

Yeah, it does. It does. I think the research says that shorter tends to be better because if you start to fall asleep too much and get into that deep sleep, sometimes it's hard for people to come out really awake and ready to go. If people like your wife are, well, then hey, that's what works, is finding what works for you. If you can fit in a two hour nap and feel better afterwards and be more productive, that's great. It's about getting the most out of the time you have at work and focusing on what you get out of it, not just the time you put in.

Gene Marks:

I agree with you. And I can speak as an employer, Cathleen. I mean, I have 10 employees. I run a virtual company, and we've been doing it since 2005. So this whole work from home thing is not new to us. And there are pros and cons to doing it. I don't care when my employees get their work done. If they're not available for a couple hours during the day because they're doing whatever else that they're doing, I'm actually fine with that as long as they're taking care of their clients. When we're done this conversation today, I'm going to ride my bike. I do that in the middle of the day, I live in Philly and I take like an hour out and I ride, and it just clears my head, you know what I mean? I think employers need to be flexible, more flexible with their employees.

Cathleen Swody:

Oh, absolutely. It's that quality of work that you're talking about there, that they're fulfilling the responsibilities, they are doing what needs to be done, serving your clients, but they're able to arrange the work in a way that works best for them and their energy levels. And I think that's why employees are going to have a hard time bringing everybody back to the office 100% because people are learning, hey, if I go out for a bike ride, I come back and I'm able to problem solve things better because I have a fresh take on things.

Gene Marks:

It's amazing too. Again, that Guardian column that I wrote saying like, oh, work from home is a failed experiment and there's all these problems with it, the backlash I got on Twitter. I mean, there are people, they really want to keep working from home. Some of it's for health reasons, they're still concerned about COVID. Others are just like, hey, I like this lifestyle. But I guess it just depends, it really does depend on the person because there are other people that really enjoy the office.

Cathleen Swody:

Oh, absolutely. It depends on the person. It also depends on the type of work. There's certain work that we do where I need to focus, I need to write reports, I need to write an article, I need to code. Those are things that take deep focus, no interruption. So those lend themselves to working from home. But then there's others where real collaboration really makes a difference. And so, coming in a few days a week to get together and problem solve as a group or as a function is really beneficial too. So I think the answer is going to be a hybrid for a lot of people and a lot of companies.

Gene Marks:

I think both employers and employees have got to realize that they've got to meet somewhere in the middle. And you're right, I mean, my company, we're a virtual company and we are like the world's most dysfunctional company. We never see each other as a group face to face, and we miss out on that innovation and collaboration. Mental health itself has become, continue to be a more focused issue. I was writing on this recently that it was an all time high year for venture capital funding and mental health startups, clearly there's a lot of attention.

Gene Marks:

So, still in the work from home issue, it's tough to identify even when somebody is in front of you. But how has an employer can you, what are potential warning signs, Cathleen, as me as an employer that maybe an employee is struggling, maybe working from home isn't working out for them, maybe a different type of arrangement might be needed? Can you give me any of your thoughts on that?

Cathleen Swody:

Yes, keeping the lines of communication open are critical. So being sure from the get go to say to employees, hey, if anything's bothering you, if there's something that we could do differently that would help you be more productive or help you get your job done, please come to me, we can have a confidential conversation. So making sure the welcome mat is out for people. But as an employer, as a manager, you need to keep an eye on people, and just kind of sense, what's going on here, where should I have a conversation? So that might be a sudden shift in performance. That could be somebody who's all of a sudden showing up late for meetings, Zoom calls, regular touch points, they seem to be missing in action a little bit. Their energy level seems to have shifted.

Cathleen Swody:

I've heard a couple stories where all of a sudden where somebody who used to be a on person on Zoom call, all of a sudden just had a picture up, or they put a little toy from their desk as their picture. All of a sudden, there's been a shift. So I think that's the key thing is look for those changes. It doesn't mean the person automatically has an issue, but that's an entry to having that conversation, to say, hey, I've noticed you weren't as engaged in that client conversation we just had, or I noticed you late to this. What's going on? Is there something bothering you, and talk about it? So I think change is the keyword there.

Gene Marks:

Okay, let's move that into the office now. The average age of the US small business owner is over 50 years old. I mean, there are people that are my generation and it is a different generation. Many of my clients, family owned businesses, people that are, they've been in this for a while, there are people of this generation that sometimes have a hard time getting their arms around mental health issues. It's more like, just be quiet and get to work, or I don't want to hear it, I just, whatever.

Gene Marks:

So tell me a little bit, do you think that the issue of mental health has become a greater issue as the age level of employees in this country has gotten younger? Do you think that that requires more of a focus from business owners and managers?

Cathleen Swody:

Definitely. If we look at the research trends, the younger generations, for example, gen Z right now, they're reporting experiencing the symptoms of anxiety and depression and burnout more often. And part of it is because they've accepted it more, there's less of a stigma for them and, and talking about these things. And some of the research is more recently about work trends, shows that they're struggling with going back to the office versus wanting to work from home. They're experiencing stress in both those routes.

Cathleen Swody:

So, I think it absolutely is a growing concern. And then the other thing to keep in mind is the number one barrier to people seeking help for mental issues and challenges, it's not cost, it's not logistics, it's not finding a therapist, it's the culture of the work environment and feeling like there's some sort of stigma, or there's something weak about asking for some additional help. I think there's some shifts that employers can make to maybe not think about it in terms of anxiety and depression and these clinical definitions, but think about the symptoms. Do you really want somebody making decisions at your company who's not getting great sleep or isn't feeling well or is overly worried about things? So maybe thinking about in terms of symptoms and experiences and not these clinical diagnoses.

Gene Marks:

How about privacy though, Cathleen? As an employer, it's awkward to get together and talk to somebody about their mental health and that person themselves might be concerned, they don't want their employer to know about this stuff. How would you recommend handling that?

Cathleen Swody:

Confidentiality all the way. It has to be clear from the get-go, it's a confidential conversation. And I think as managers and business owners, we need to be aware of where's that line between this person's telling me how stressed they are and maybe I should recommend that they use some of our resources and find more professional help. But if they're talking about being stressed and they're talking about the work environment, it can still be a confidential conversation, but it's less about that mental health HIPAA piece, and it's more about, okay, how can we work together to help this person work in the environment.

Gene Marks:

Do you think with people coming back now to work, I mean, there is a higher level of anxiety coming back to work, there's a safety concern. Like you had said, a lot of people have a lot of anxiety that they're identifying right now. Do you think you're going to see more and more employers in the future offer therapeutic service, psychological services, things that might help their employees, and have you seen any clients that are already doing that?

Cathleen Swody:

Yeah, absolutely. A lot of organizations are offering it through their benefits packages. So just like they would provide some dental care and just like they would provide medical benefits, they're providing it as part of their benefits. There's also organizations that have support groups. So they'll have small groups that are meeting together to talk about different challenges. So maybe it's not pure mental health advocacy, but they're talking about, hey, what's it like to work in an environment, and maybe it's a group that meets once a week about meditation or mindfulness or focus. So there's ways of doing that.

Cathleen Swody:

Other organizations have offered mental health apps to their employees. So, for example, Calm or other meditation apps. And what's really interesting about that is that it doesn't take the place of therapy, but people who are, they're more prone to use it because it's an app, it's easy, it's meditation. But then they like it and it helps them so much that they seek other resources on their own further. So perhaps therapy to further benefit from the process.

Gene Marks:

So you've worked with a number of clients and I'm sure that pre-COVID, you were visiting a lot of these clients on site. So, tell me, Cathleen, when you walk into a business that is a client or a prospective client, what red flags kind of come to your mind where you're like, oh my God, this place looks like a stressful place to work at. Where this is like, I can see why we got to work, make some changes here to this company's culture. What kinds of things that kind of get your attention?

Cathleen Swody:

I love this question. It depends on how much time you have, Gene.

Gene Marks:

The reason why I ask is because you do this for a living and you know, you walk into a place for 10 minutes and you're probably like, oh my God, these guys have some issues that they need to resolve, right? Go ahead.

Cathleen Swody:

All right. A few things right off the bat is everyone stops talking when a manager walks by. All of a sudden it's like people have no personality, it's just completely gone. Two, I'm talking to the leader, a leader in the organization, and they say things like I don't suffer any fools. Other things they might say is, well, I pay them, that should be enough.

Gene Marks:

Okay.

Cathleen Swody:

You're lucky you have a job.

Gene Marks:

You see this all the time, I think you're almost describing me, but carry on, keep going.

Cathleen Swody:

Those are the few big ones. Or you're in a meeting and you could see down the table people are rolling their eyes a little bit or making eye contact with one other person in the room raising their eyebrows. And that there's a meeting that happens after the meeting. During the meeting is pretty quiet, except for these strange nonverbal communications. And then after the meeting, you see people in clumps talking in the hallway. That's a sure sign they're not running very efficiently.

Gene Marks:

I was at a client, it was only a month or so ago, and the owner of the company was talking to me, I was in a small conference room. And just by coincidence in the hallway, coming by him was one of his employees, a young woman, and she was crying. You could tell he was like, oh boy, and he said to her, is everything okay? And she was telling him a story about cars, she had car troubles and she didn't know how she was going to pay for it and she, whatever. And then she moved on. You could see that he looked at me and he started rolling his eyes, like, oh boy. What would you say to a guy like that? It's clearly that, again, I get back to generational, but it's clear she had a specific issue that was really weighing her down and he really didn't seem to care. If that was your client, what kind of advice would you give them?

Cathleen Swody:

Empathy is underrated for leadership. I think it's part empathy and understanding this person is having a moment, and they just want to be heard, they want their story to be heard, it wasn't taking all day, at least I hope not. And what can he do to get her back on track? And if she catches him rolling his eyes, that's going to, there's not going to be some trust there. She's not going to run through the wall and work her hardest for him or his company. That's not the recipe that makes organizations work. So instead, if you could just take five minutes, count to 10 to himself, take a deep breath and just listen to this woman for five minutes, and then help her kind of get back on with her day, everybody wins. And so, he has to play the long game, not just the short-term in the moment, I don't want to be listening to the story about the car, what time is it, I got to go. But really just spending the time because it means something to people. People want to be treated like people, that's what I've learned in my years.

Gene Marks:

They want to be heard and they want to be respected. You're absolutely right. So listen, let me be selfish here. We've talked about employees, employees, employees. What about the business owner, Cathleen? It is a stressful life running a business and balancing your home and your work life and all the other stresses that you have. I have a few clients, and I've written about this before, that actually see therapists on the outside and are unabashed about doing it where they hire a person for an hour, somebody that does not have an agenda, somebody that is a professional like yourself to just hear out what their stresses are. What kind of other advice do you have for people running businesses to keep themselves sane and to keep their mental health well?

Cathleen Swody:

Oh, it is so important. One is don't be a one-person army. Like you said, who can you get on your support team to help you? Whether it's a therapist, whether it's an executive coach, maybe it's a fellow business owner, that's the only thing you have in common is you're trying to run businesses during a pandemic, where you can kind of get out of your own head and think about something from a different perspective. That is so critical. And the second thing is we got to be as small business owners aware of our overplayed strengths. And because of the nature of the beast, small business owners tend to be more resilient, they tend to just drive through stress, they're able to take on a lot. But that could be to a detriment. And if they keep taking it on, taking it on, we're human beings too, there's only so much they can take.

Cathleen Swody:

So understanding that muscling through isn't always the best way. So, take advantage of that perspective and think through, is there a smarter way to get things done, is there a different way? Am I focusing on something a little off? But not just muscle through. And what a message to their employees too, because if they're just muscling through, especially during a time like this, they're not going to be seen as empathetic and caring by their people. But if they can take some time out for themselves and say, hey, you know what, I need a break, I'm taking off this weekend, here's what I'm doing, they'll be seen as human beings and more trusted by their people. But they got to take care of themselves. It's the oxygen mask example.

Gene Marks:

Right. And I guess this is where the value, I know this sounds commercial, but it's true where a firm like Thrive Leadership comes in because a lot of times we don't really recognize that or get it and we're too wrapped up in the things that we're doing. We actually need somebody from the outside to give us that kind of message.

Cathleen Swody:

Yeah. And that space to reflect, to reflect in a comfortable environment and not be judged. And to your point, with people who don't have an agenda. Our only agenda is, hey, we want you to be successful so we're going to ask questions, we're going to listen, we're going to think things through. And that's powerful, especially business owners tend to be go, go, go, onto the next thing. To have that space to think through, okay, what am I really going through and how can I do it better, it's powerful.

Gene Marks:

That's great. Cathleen Swody, it's Dr. Cathleen Swody, is the Founding Partner and Director of Assessment at Thrive Leadership. Cathleen, first of all, what is Thrive Leadership's website?

Cathleen Swody:

It's www.thriveleadership.com.

Gene Marks:

That is great. Cathleen, thank you so much. Great information and great advice. I have more questions to ask you, but we've ran out of time. And I'm going to have to have you come back and we're going to talk more about mental health, particularly as we recover from this pandemic and get back to hopefully real life, there's still going to be a lot of different stresses, and I appreciate your input. So thank you.

Cathleen Swody:

Absolutely. Thank you for having me on.

Gene Marks:

For more information on running your business, for advice and tips and help visit us at paychex.com/worx, That's W-O-R-X. My name is Gene Marks. Thanks guys for joining us. Catch me on Twitter @genemarks, and again, @Paychex. We will see you again next time. Thanks.

Speaker 3:

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