

What the Pandemic Taught Us About Supporting Employees

By Joanne Kamens, PhD, Founder of MASS AWIS, Board Chair at Seeding Labs
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In March of 2020, due to a super-spreader event at a large, local biotechnology conference, the Boston area research community was hit early and hit hard by COVID-19. At that early stage of the pandemic, we understood very little about how the disease was spreading, and we did not yet have any trusted protocols for how to work safely in close quarters. Anxiety was high for everyone, and uncertainty was taking a toll. Unsurprisingly, no one in biotech, including company leaders, could work at peak effectiveness.

Mandating Mental Health Days

By being attentive to the concerns and needs—to the pulse—of our employees at Addgene, we were able to respond quickly to these challenges. One priority was to close the company for a day to give everyone a chance to recoup and plan with their families. This approach seemed obvious to me at the time, and I was surprised by the outsized positive response I received when I posted on social media about this day off for mental health. It was important for us to

close, rather than just to send people home to work remotely. Only by temporarily stopping our operations would we allow everyone to really benefit without worrying that email was piling up or that there would be even more work upon their return. Certainly, it is an expensive proposition for an entire company to lose a full day's work hours, and especially expensive for a nonprofit as busy and stretched as Addgene. Our decision, however, not only gave our employees the time to process, adjust, and plan, but it also had a tremendous positive effect on their



mental well-being and enabled everyone to be more productive after the short break.

Addgene went on to use this approach of providing a company-wide day off three more times during 2020. We found that this time off was the most appreciated and effective way of helping all of our employees reduce their anxiety. Giving our employees these vacation days and emphasizing other supportive policies and practices dramatically increased productivity. We provided many other types of assistance to help employees manage their mental health during this trying time, including: reaching out to those living alone more often; providing resources for mental health support; offering online yoga classes; and creating social spaces online to keep people connected. Perhaps our most important practice was to emphasize flexibility and reasonable work expectations.

Embracing Radical Flexibility

Addgene has always emphasized flexibility with regard to both work hours and location of work. We have regularly acknowledged that people need time to deal with life's many tasks and challenges. Managers at Addgene are trained to trust their team members to make their own decisions about when, where, and how to work, so long as their outcomes are effective. During the pandemic, these "radical flexibility" practices kicked into high gear. The trust placed in our employees allowed for open and clear communication, which made remote working more effective and with a very short learning curve. I was personally invested in making sure that women would have the space they needed to succeed at work and at home, since the data suggested that the pandemic was having a

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Acknowledging Individuality

In our industry, we have often referred to employees as "full-time equivalents" or FTEs, as though people are equipment to be cataloged, like copy machines or freezers. But people are certainly not equipment. Each individual has unique strengths and needs. The benefit of addressing individual needs is that this approach creates a

more productive workplace, where employee retention is high. Turnover is, after all, expensive, costing an organization time and money and resulting in a loss of experience and knowledge that dramatically reduces the speed of an organization's success.

Acknowledging the individuality of each employee can also serve to create a more inclusive culture at a time when we are beginning to understand the insidious effects of bias on mental health and the importance of equity for under-recognized groups in the workplace. The pandemic forced employers to acknowledge the humanity of their coworkers in an unprecedented way . . . and it's about time. Attention to mental health and wellness can't just be a pandemic-related work perk. In any organization, people are the most important resource, and policy decisions and management practices must take this into consideration. ✪

Dr. Joanne Kamens has had a varied career in academia, pharma, biotech, and the nonprofit world. Most recently she served as the executive director of Addgene. Dr. Kamens received her PhD in genetics from Harvard Medical School then spent 20 years in pharma and biotech in research and leadership roles. She has been advancing diversity and inclusion for decades, including as founder of the Boston chapter of the Association for Women in Science (MASS AWIS). She is currently Chair of the Seeding Labs Board of Directors and also serves as an advisor to Scismic, a job-matching site for life scientists, and to Protocols.io.