

Working with Work Arrangements

Introduction:

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Ryan Shuler:

On this episode of UnDeniably Well, I will be talking with Beth Finkle, Director of Employee Health & Wellbeing, about how to make work arrangements work. So much as influx right now. Teams are needing different things. The goal of this conversation was really to provide some tangible steps that people can take to move forward in a positive direction and highlight some resources here at the University of Delaware to help teams propel forward in this new world of flexible work arrangements.

Welcome to this episode of UnDeniably Well. My name is Ryan Shuler. I am the Associate Director with Employee Health & Wellbeing at the University of Delaware. And today I have the pleasure of speaking with my boss, Beth Finkle, who is the Director of the program. Beth, welcome back. We've had a couple of conversations now, and I think this one sort of around work arrangements is a conversation that is hot everywhere. And I think people are just looking for some insights. So I'm happy to have you to kind of share in a bigger picture, why this is this way. So I just want to start real quick by saying a lot of people tend to ask why wellbeing is relevant in this field. And I will say specific to the University of Delaware, we have incorporated Future of Work into our strategy. So for us, it's embedded in a lot of things we're doing, but I'm curious, Beth, sort of on the organizational level, how does wellbeing and work arrangements kind of fit together?

Beth Finkle:

Yes. And thank you, Ryan, for having me back. I love being in these conversations, and being able to provide any small tidbit of value that we can. I would say the first thing, you know, off the top of my head when asked that question is we are the people, the unit that are really trying to simplify it for everyone. And when things get thrown out there, like work arrangements, flexible work design, we can talk about language and all of that as well. But when that gets put out there, we have to be able to make it make sense for our employees. And so it's one thing to talk about what it is, but then they have to understand how to actually put it into process, into practice. And I think that's where we come in and fit very nicely is that we can shoulder this work with our team leaders, our teams that we're trying to develop in this space and really help them understand how to make work arrangements, various work arrangements, hybrid work, we can help them to navigate this piece.

Ryan Shuler:

Yeah. And I think one thing that I have learned in sort of speaking with various units across campus for the last few months is that people are thinking very black and white in this subject. Either we're 100% back in the office, or we're 100% remote. And I think to your point, so much of our role in this is helping units understand what is your actual operation need? Do people need to be in the office every day? Do people need to be in the office once a week? And really help teams start to understand that, yes, a huge part of this is the individual preference, the individual's wants, needs. How can we set that individual up

for success? But the bottom line is still that this is our job, and we are hired by our institution to do our jobs well, so how can we help teams sort of meet in the middle and compromise, what is the operational needs of the unit versus what are the preferences of staff?

Beth Finkle:

I think at the end of the day, it starts with a simple conversation and involving the people on your team, in that process. So we talk about this a lot, but you know, when you ask someone what it is that they need to be successful, allow them to actually be heard and share what that is. Whether the decision goes a different way, at least you allowed that person to have a chance to really talk it through and connect with you. They may offer a different perspective. We talk about equitable mindset quite a bit. There may be pockets of information that the managers and senior leaders don't see in the day-to-day. So even just inviting the employee into that process is a step that should not be missed.

Ryan Shuler:

And we even talked about this at our most recent staff meeting. There is so much of our work that goes unnoticed. That's not part of that job description. So a big piece of this is learning to manage your workflow throughout the week and understand, you know, are there days where it may be beneficial for me to be in the office, collaborating with colleagues, is that a more effective way to accomplish these tasks? And then there may be some days where it's more beneficial for you to be working remotely, so you can have quiet focused time to work on some of these projects. But again, if you're not having, if a manager and a staff person are not having those conversations, there's so much that is always being missed, sort of in that little gray area.

Beth Finkle:

One thing that I'd like to bring to the discussion today is just the notion of empathetic leadership. And I think that's what you're saying. And when you're asking people to sort of lead the ship of what that looks like, doesn't mean that it's going to be right the first time, second time, or even third time. Work with teams to really get that iteration correct. And so that both needs are met. The employee has the mental health and wellbeing time that they need through flexibility or various work arrangements or whatever. But then also the unit is producing in accordance to what needs to be done as well. And I think, you know, we just need to be very clear that a one size fits all approach, the data really supports that this is just not how people want to be governed. It's not how people want to be managed. So again, just reemphasizing to pull them back into the process and invite them into the process, instead of telling them what to do is going to go a really long way.

Ryan Shuler:

Yeah, and sort of to that point too, we now have two years' worth of data to show what's working and what's not. So if we have had teams that have worked fully remote, and now you're telling them to be back in the office, just for the sake of being in the office, that may not be functional for your team. And your team is going to see through that your team is going to understand. Okay. Yes, there are some operational needs, where, you know, we're a student facing organization. So if you're in a unit where students may be coming in and out, or even if you're in an employee servicing department where people are coming in and out, your office should probably be covered. That does not mean that every person on your team needs to be there every day. But to your earlier point, give people autonomy to

create a schedule that works for them. So can your staff come up with a schedule to ensure that the office is covered? Someone is present, should there be an in-person event, but then people still have that time to work remotely if that works better for them.

Beth Finkle:

And the other thing I would add to this is of course, we are here for our students. We are here to prep them to be future leaders. We are here to prep them to be successful in the world. You know, their time, their shelf life with us is very short, so we have to do our best to meet their needs as well. All that to say is that I don't know that we're doing a good enough job even asking them what it is that they would like to see. How would they prefer to receive information, you know, contact time, programming, mentorship. I think that's another layer that, again, we can't skip because if you follow sort of generational themes, many of these students said that sort of the tele options to connect with their advisors and their mentors really did give them higher quality and satisfaction of life because they could fit it in, you know, in between classes instead of, you know, carving out a whole afternoon to travel here or there. So again, I think, you know, involving the customer that, that we're speaking about, whether it's a student, whether it's, you know, a business unit, whatever it may be. Bringing them into the fold to see how they would like us to show up for them as well.

Ryan Shuler:

Yeah, and I really, I know we keep coming back to this, but so much of this as unit dependent and conversation dependent. We talk a lot about psychologically safe teams. And I think, you know, for those out there listening, a psychologically safe team is really a team that can be truly open, honest with each other. And there's a level of trust there, you know, that there won't be ramifications or something negative if they are honest. And for those of us who are trying to work so hard to create these psychologically safe teams, these conversations will probably be a lot easier to have. It probably feels a lot more natural to go to your manager, to go to your supervisor and say, Hey, this isn't working for me or Hey, can we try this instead? But I also, you know, it would be remiss to not acknowledge there are so many teams out there who are not functioning in that way, but it is not a psychologically safe team. People do not feel comfortable having these conversations with their manager and then mental health really starts to suffer because what the manager is telling them and what the staff is wanting are two totally different things, but people are afraid to speak up.

So I just want to pull in a resource for the University of Delaware employees who are listening, on the Future of Working at UD webpage, that webpage is fully dedicated to how this new way of working will function. This is not a short time COVID-19 band-aid it's, you know, we may never go back a hundred percent in the office. Like this hybrid world is sort of how we're going to be moving forward. So this entire web page has resources dedicated to helping navigate all of this. There is a discussion guide, so you can sit down and it's almost like a checklist it's presented in a very clean way, so the manager understands their expectations. The staff can understand their expectations and it, sort of gives formality to the conversation where it may be difficult. There are also decision trees to show would your job be benefited by working remotely. Do you have opportunity to work remotely? And I think bottom line is there are a lot of jobs on campus who that's just not the nature of their work. So our University police officers, they can't work remotely. They have to be here servicing campus. Our Student Health nurses, our custodians, our facilities, they have to be here. So, you know, all of this to say, not everyone

can just choose, Hey, I want to work from home two times a week. Like that may not work based on your role.

Beth Finkle:

One thing that you're making me think about is something, that I learned about in restorative practices and it's called fair process. So for me, when you talk about psychologically well teams, a big component of that is also being able to make mistakes and that be okay. And so I want to sort of just give managers or supervisors out there that are listening autonomy to make some mistakes and just try it out. The biggest piece of the formula for me is that you involve that person in the process. You check in. No better time than now to do that. Like if you don't have to wait for an annual performance appraisal, you should be checking in frequently and often because people's needs change. Right. And people's wants and desires change. So I think once you check in with that employee, even again, if the expectation or the resolution of how that team is going to come back to campus looks is not in favor of what the employee wanted, you still have the opportunity to say why and pull that justification in. And then at the end of the day, if the employee is still needing a level different or a shade different, than they have the option to really look and think about that for themselves?

Ryan Shuler:

And another point to bring up is I feel like a lot of teams are just waiting. They're waiting for the specific directive. And I think sort of based on my understanding of this whole scenario is that's never going to come because each team operates so differently. So we can't just continue to sit and wait for, you know, your company or your organization to say, you have to be in these days. We're not getting that at UD. And I think that that's a wonderful thing because it forces each team to really sit down and say, what are our operational needs? How do we all work best? How do we work best together? Do we need to have certain meetings in person, do some make sense in zoom? And it really gives each unit the opportunity to, to shape their unit to be successful.

Beth Finkle:

You know, so often you'll hear the word efficiency, right? Like we need people back in seats for workplace efficiency, but there's a lot of data to suggest that people are actually less, almost double, less efficient, if they're not set up for success well in the office. So, it's again, you know, we want to say, what are the technology uses at hand? How are we connecting and navigating a hybrid team environment? It's less about the where and more about the how we are doing our work. We want to set really clear expectations around the work. That's a big thing for our teams, like really getting clarity around their goals. And ensuring that they have opportunity to check in with their team leads and their managers to make sure that they're on the right track. And if they're not on the right track, we need to change some things up. But that work expectation piece really does happen well, if you're able to connect both in the office and out of the office, wherever it is that you're doing your work.

Ryan Shuler:

Yeah. I read something recently that kind of showed the pros and cons of this work arrangement style and hybrid work and flexible work. And it did show that a lot of people felt more productive

when they were working remotely. There were less distractions. They could focus easier. There was sort of this more efficient use of technology. So they felt like they were being more productive. But on the flip side of that, people are also reporting greater loneliness, more isolation, feeling less connected to their team. And there is so much that can be said for retention. If people are happy at their job, if people will stay at their job when they have those feelings of connection with their team. So even though, you know, our team, especially, we love working remotely. I mean, I don't think that's a secret. All of us have found so many benefits in sort of this hybrid work.

But all of us really understand the value of being together. And just to share with those listening, our Employee Health & Wellbeing team has sort of, you know, gone through some iterations of this. We didn't get it right the first time either, and I will say, you know, we fortunately have Beth as a leader who is aware of all of this and willing to try new things, and we've sort of come to a conclusion where instead of having specific days in the office every week, we kind of base our in-office days on who we need to collaborate with and when. So if there's a larger project we're working on where it makes more sense to be together to hash through some things, then those are the days we come into the office. If there are days where, you know, yesterday, my entire day was zoom meetings. For me to come into the office, just to sit on zoom all day that doesn't serve any purpose, so really trying to focus on the work that is being done instead of just where are we physically sitting in that moment?

Beth Finkle:

So the thing that, you know, for me, I have read similar research around that isolation piece. Just bringing back to the table, just realizing the generational differences that we have, especially here at UD. We have close to five generations with us working at UD right now, not even including our student working population. And so, most people that have really taken the time and opportunity to learn how to connect digitally probably aren't saying that they're feeling these super high rates of isolation, depression, and so on and so forth. So that's the other thing is just realizing that not all of our social wellbeing is filled through our colleagues, right? Like we can't just rely on that solely. We have to look at our greater communities where are we also being filled in those social wellbeing buckets elsewhere. And then again, when we are in the office with one another really making the most of that time, another great tactic that I encourage teams to think about is setting some core hours. So for us, we're 10 to two, and so some people again can have flexibility, whether they want to come in really early, like you and I, we have young kids, like a lot of times we're online really early, but we have to cut out, you know, to get them off the bus or whatever, but then we always are able to communicate and say what still needs to be done. And if there is still that thing that's still needs to be done, you better bet that we're on there later. We're accomplishing our tasks, but we we're still on campus servicing our population and our employees during the time that they needed us to be. So there's iterations and variations of how, depending on what you do here at University of Delaware, try to get creative and think about how you can meet those needs.

Ryan Shuler:

One thing that I think has been, I will say sort of eye-opening to a lot of people is from a manager perspective, this is a lot of work to manage a whole team full of preferences, a whole team full of schedules. And it seems like if you are trying to do this and figure this out solely as a manager, someone's always going to be upset. Something will always feel off. So when I've been working with teams, I really encourage the team to essentially come up with a solution and present it to their

manager. So instead of it being one person, trying to figure it out saying, Hey, look, guys are the expectation that the manager has said is that we are in the office.

The office needs to be covered everyday. So how can we all sit down as a unit and figure out a schedule that makes sense, so our needs are being met, but still our manager's needs are being met. And then you're presenting that as a solution to your manager saying, Hey, we heard you loud and clear. We hear the expectation that people need to be in the office. Here is our preference of when those days happen, sort of a win-win on both sides because to your earlier point, when you're just saying. You know, Beth, you're here Mondays and Wednesdays, Ryan you're here Tuesdays and Thursdays. But what if, I don't want that? What if my whole Tuesdays are always all zooms and it doesn't make sense to be in the office.

Beth Finkle:

Because you have certain recurring meetings and whatnot. You know, I've had this conversation and we did do this with the team. It's like at first, you know, the goal was just to get our spaces covered, our front desk covered. And so we went at that, but then the team wasn't really connecting, so the second iteration really was saying, you all pick, you know, minimum, put some guard rails around it. As a manager, you still have to give some guard rails up.

And so for me, it was like, you know, I surveyed the staff, what is it that you need most? And it was connection with each other and that's through various, you know, small meetings, whatever. And so before we were taking our full team meeting in-person, but now we're taking our team meeting on zoom and we find that to be a bit more inclusive. Everybody feels more empowered to have a voice in that larger setting, but they prefer to be in the small groups together. And so, you know, we kind of put that on them. They pick their schedule, and the same goal was met. The office is still covered every day. So again, it's just allowing them to be an inclusive part of the process is this is a piece and a point that you just can't skip past.

Ryan Shuler:

I think, one thing that I continue to hear too is, this is all just really new for people. I mean, we've had employees who are working for 25 years in our, you know, pre-COVID world. And now after 25 years, we've asked them to try something totally different that they are really uncomfortable with. So I think one thing that is very important is to continue to give one another sort of grace, to give one another opportunities to learn.

It's not like the decision we make today is the decision that we have forever. We can decide in six months from now that, Hey, this should look different or, Hey, we've learned new things. Our technology has changed. Can we change the way that we operate? Back to that Future of Working at UD webpage, there are a lot of nice resources on there and all of the University of Delaware employees now have access to LinkedIn Learning. And there's a whole section on that webpage sort of broken down into the individual, the supervisor and the team level, how to make flexible work arrangements, hybrid work arrangements, work for your team. So if this is something that, you know, you're not as well versed in, or you don't feel comfortable in, there's resources out there that can kind of help guide you along this path and help you navigate as you move through this.

Beth Finkle:

You make such a good point. I mean, the LinkedIn Learning is just a phenomenal resource. And because this is so new and because it continues to change and we're being asked to be adaptable and really agile, just really getting in the mindset of reskilling and taking some time and really going through and learning some new skills, I think will be very helpful, helping teams navigate new work arrangements. The other big thing that I talk about a good bit, and I know that you do as well, is just really getting comfortable to give and receive feedback in that team unit. So when I say that I'm not necessarily meaning manager to direct report, you know, formally, I'm really meaning like every day feedback, like, how is this working? How is this not working? You know, let your employees lead with questions that they have. You still may get to that end goal and you still may have a lot of overlap of where you can continue to change and move it so that it's successful for the individual. It's also successful for the University of Delaware and the goals that we're aiming to produce.

Ryan Shuler:

So I think there is a lot of content in this area. I think that there's always going to be a lot of questions in this area. I would just sort of put it to you. Bottom line, what is sort of one thing that you want people to know, or one thing that you want people to try over the next couple of weeks as we sort of move back into this space a little more formally?

Beth Finkle:

The first thing that honestly comes to mind is giving the employees, individual employees, empowerment to share what it is that they need. Without them sharing what they need, their manager or team lead may never know, and then that can easily turn into resentment. That can easily turn into dissatisfaction, poor engagement. So I would say, you know, when you're thinking of that zone of influence, we have the ability to really advocate for ourselves, and when I flip that to the manager and for our managers listening or senior leads listening, I want to encourage them to be open-minded that again, it's not a one size fits all, and it's very new for everyone.

I think I saw a prediction study that even by 2025, like we're still going to be working out some kinks, right, of this whole work arrangement, flexible work design. So I guess that would be what I would say is the didactic piece of the manager being open-minded. But then, the team members also having empowerment to voice what it is that they need.

Ryan Shuler:

And it sounds like a lot of that comes down to trust, you know, and I go back to this quite a bit too. We are all adults and we have been hired to do this job because our managers or the University of Delaware. Whoever you work for felt that you are the best person to complete this job. I don't need somebody to micromanage my every task. You hired me because of my skills, but it comes back to that trust level. So do you trust me, even when I'm not in front of your face to do my job well, and then on the flip side, do I trust you as my supervisor, as my leader to provide feedback, to let me do what I need. Do I have the opportunity to ask questions or try new things? So I do think a lot of this comes back to trust, and I do want to pull in that the equity approach again, and this has kind of been woven through a lot of what we've talked about these last couple episodes. To me, the easiest way to explain equity is giving people what they need to be successful. And I think a lot of people get confused, or this is a

harder concept to understand because equity for so long has been in the diversity and inclusion space, which obviously it holds a huge component of that, but still in just organizational wellbeing, organizational effectiveness, equity is a huge component of that. That some employees need different things to be more successful at their job. So if your end goal is high level work and a great product and great students that are leaving this University, you have to think with equity in mind. As a manager, I have to think I want Employee Health & Wellbeing to be the absolute best unit it can be. So if that's my goal, how am I going to set my team up in an equitable way to make sure that they have what they need to do their jobs really well. We continue to kind of loop back in this equity, but I do just want to clarify that it's not just a DEI concept, that it really is a workplace concept

Beth Finkle:

And it's not equal. It will never be equal. And I guess the other thing I would add to that is this is not one of those things, you know, we're working with humans. And so when you work with humans, it's not a set it and forget it approach. Like it's gonna take some time, some compassion, some caring, some grace on yourself, you know, if you're the one leading the process for your areas, to really try to get it right. And then it's, again, something that you check in, you gain feedback on. But I will say that web page, the Working at UD webpage, has some content on it that really says, how do we manage performance, in a remote, you know, hybrid type world. , and again, now that we sort of have out there, what various work arrangements are, let's learn how to actually do the thing and manage it and do it with success.

Ryan Shuler:

I think for those listening, especially for those at UD, there are so many resources to help you navigate this. The Working at UD collaborative is comprised of Employee Health & Wellbeing, the Office of Institutional Equity, Office of Human Resources. We can all help you navigate this. So if you have questions; if you're unsure how to start this conversation in your team; if you're a manager looking for more support and sort of balancing this workload, please reach out to us. I think that we are all really committed to getting this right. And we are all really committed to helping employees kind of ensure that... We all love UD. We love working here. Our students love being here. So how can we just, you know, continue to ensure that UD is this great place where students want to continue to come? I think we are all really committed and driven by that purpose. So if you are again, having questions about how to navigate any of this, or even it's a little detailed question, please don't hesitate to reach out to our group.

Beth Finkle:

That sounds good.

Ryan Shuler:

So we always close with the same question. And so I'll ask Beth, what are you doing right now to help you stay undeniably well?

Beth Finkle:

So right now, today, it's really practicing patience. And I, you and I laugh about this because it's sort of my ongoing intention. But I think right now, when so much is in flux, it's easy to try to go to battle and, you know, get wrapped up, and it's not always, you know, the right time. And so for me, it's practicing

patience and letting some things be what they are because sometimes it's just timing and things come back. I told this to our team yesterday, you know, it's swinging, the pendulum is swinging and it will swing back a little bit, but there has been a lot of tremendous progress that has been made in this space, and so I just continue to be patient and show up for people that are wanting to get it right, and hopefully that groundswell continues on and we can continue to service other teams across campus as they become more open-minded as well.

Ryan Shuler:

Wonderful. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Beth Finkle:

Thanks for having me.

Ryan Shuler:

And thank you all for listening. We'll talk to you soon.

Beth Finkle:

Take care.

Outro:

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