Q&A with the Experts

The future of remote work in higher education.

The nature of work is changing all around us. In higher education, our fortunate circumstance is that the "why" of work never changes. Everyone in higher education is invested in successful outcomes for students. But we do not have an endless supply of money or time — and we need to use both wisely.

Adaptation and change are difficult in the best of circumstances. However, we have all been thrown into the unknown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Colleges and universities reacted quickly, moving classes online in a matter of weeks. There is still much to learn about how to move forward effectively, efficiently, and in the most engaging manner possible.

We are going to explore how technology may be able to help you manage remote staff and maintain labor compliance with rules and regulations, while continuing to maintain your institution's work culture.

Jen Perkins, Higher Education Industry Consultant, UKG (Ultimate Kronos Group)

Jen Perkins has over 20 years of public sector experience. She has served as CIO of the City of Boston and Director at the System Office of Higher Education for the State of Massachusetts. Expertise: Strategic goals, measurements of success, and operational efficiencies.

Dennis Miller

AVP of Human Resources and Benefits Administration
Claremont Colleges

Dennis is the Associate Vice President of Human Resources and Benefits Administration in a shared services environment at the Claremont Colleges, a consortium of seven separate and highly regarded institutions of higher education. Dennis has held several executive roles during his career in human resources and was formerly the Chief Employment Officer for Cal Poly Pomona Foundation.

Dennis' main focus in the workplace is organizational development with an emphasis on process improvement through the application of technology and team development.

Dennis holds a Senior Professional in Human Resources certification from the HR Certification Institute and a Senior Certified Professional from the Society for Human Resources Management. He holds a master's degree in Human Resources Development and Management from Chapman University. He is also a retired Marine Corps Air Traffic Controller.

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We have with us today Dennis Miller, who has years of experience managing people and thinking about ways to do so more effectively.

Dennis, what are the biggest issues that the Claremont Colleges are facing right now?

I think the answer to the question is not limited to the Claremont Colleges. It's relevant to most higher education institutions — which is how to run a university and deliver a high-quality collegiate experience to its students when these outcomes have historically been achieved in person.

So, the big questions for today are, what level of on-site attendance will there be and how we can manage and lead an entire workforce remotely when they are accustomed to working on-site?

Our higher education workers fall into two general categories:

- **Exempt employees.** They include faculty and are typically paid an annual salary. These roles may be highly compatible with working remotely and are not held to strict time and attendance reporting requirements.

- **Nonexempt employees.** These are staff who are paid hourly. Unlike exempt employees, these employees are required to follow strict federal and state requirements to track actual time worked. This category poses the highest risk for noncompliance with rules and regulations that could result in litigation.

Ensuring our nonexempt employees are maintaining compliance is our focus. When employees are physically present, supervisors can visually confirm they are performing duties. When employees are working remotely, that visual confirmation evaporates.

Many companies use the honor system for hourly employees to track and report time. But we know that employees tend to adjust their time reported to their benefit. To be honest, even I'm not sure what time I started working ten or even two days ago.

Research shows that time theft can cost organizations as much as **7% of gross payroll.** Without automation, this theft will likely go unreported.

Osterhaus, E. (2015, April 23*). 43% of Employees Commit Time Theft: How Software Can Reduce Payroll Losses*. Website: https://www.softwareadvice.com/hr/industryview/time-theft-report-2015/

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Yes, that makes sense — it's important to identify the areas that require the strictest compliance with rules.

With a mix of on-site and remote employees, how are the colleges tracking time worked?

The majority of our staff are working remotely. But those who are still on-site use either timeclocks or mobile to punch in and out.

Mobile has been a very helpful and effective tool for us. It's important for geographically distant or remote staff to be able to clock in and out without having to go into the office. Geofencing and geolocation are two additional tools that can help managers who want to know the physical location of a person when they are clocking in and out. Using geofencing at my previous institution helped us ensure employees were staying within the guardrails of clocking in/out.

Leveraging these technologies provides flexibility for your employees, but consistently maintaining compliance is also vital. It's important to understand that there is a risk associated with balancing privacy and employee relation issues with compliance issues.

So, we've got dashboards. We've got visibility through technology. We've got geofencing. We have people using their mobile phones. This all sounds great! But it's also starting to sound a little expensive.

How can we justify such an expense with all the fiscal pressures we are feeling?

Organizations that have existing tools in place may not be leveraging those tools or technologies as best they could. It's best to revisit how they're using technology and maximize its applicability.

For organizations that don't have technology in place, my recommendation is to develop a cost-benefit analysis. I know the American Payroll Association has statistics on rounding issues with employees who use automation versus paper timesheets. That alone will typically save enough money to justify implementing an automated solution.

In my opinion, electronic timekeeping systems are not as expensive as most people think. And they provide a lot of value to employees and metrics that managers can use to more effectively budget for labor.

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The future can be very hard to predict. Institutions have to be ready to pivot and adapt to the current challenge and prepare for the next one.

What changes in response to the pandemic do you see sticking?

I believe the status quo has been challenged, with respect to working remotely. We have proven over the past couple of months that there are more jobs compatible with working remotely than we thought three months ago. I expect more higher education jobs to migrate to working from home. And I believe on-site work will still exist.

The other trend I see sticking is the push for technology to manage the workforce. For organizations that use paper or manual processes, now is the ideal time to develop and execute a plan to migrate to an automated solution. Technology should become part of the higher education workforce culture — whether it's mobile access to record time or direct deposit. In fact, you'll probably ask yourself why you waited so long to do so. It's a smooth process that achieves something so necessary, and it's more than just ensuring employees are paid fairly and accurately.

Now is the very best time to prepare for incorporating workforce management technology into your methodologies, and the numbers are there to support such a budget expense.

I would say now is the very, very best time to prepare for the future for organizations that may be a little hesitant to migrate from paper to technology-based time collecting.

Dennis Miller

We've talked about some very interesting topics today, including the convenience of implementing automated management technology, the workforce visibility gained through using it, and some tips on how to justify such an expense. Your insight into the potential future status of the higher education workforce has been extremely valuable.

Thanks, Dennis, for sharing today!

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