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Q&A: Boston Scientific, BD, Steris Tell How They're Backing Up Their Workers In 'The New Normal'

by [Shawn M. Schmitt](#)

Quality and regulatory officials at the three companies offer tips on supporting the mental health of employees, virtually onboarding new hires, and more in the age of COVID-19.

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has forced companies to reassess how their employees work and interact.

In this Q&A, Bill Brodbeck, senior director of regulatory affairs for sterilization and decontamination technology firm Steris Corp., Aaron Dunbar, director of corporate quality systems for Boston Scientific Corp., and Fatemeh Razjouyan, director of regulatory policy and public affairs for Becton Dickinson, offer insight into how they're keeping workers engaged and high-spirited in "the new normal."

The trio's comments – which came on 6 May at MedCon 2021, hosted by the US Food and Drug Administration and Cincinnati's Xavier University – were lightly edited for content and clarity.

Q What are some successful practices your company has implemented around supporting your employees' ability to balance work and life, while working from home?

A Bill Brodbeck: When we were first told to work from home during the pandemic, the first concern we had was that everybody's going to be walking around in pajamas, they're not going to be doing much work, and we're going to have an issue of trying to get some productivity. So we set some clear expectations in the beginning, and

that's what guided us. We set up expectations regarding individuals' availability, make sure they're available certain hours of the day, certain times, during meetings, et cetera, and then obviously set definite parameters around different projects and tasks and making sure we could stick to those.

Surprisingly ... we started going the other way, in which we saw too many people spending more time doing work than actually spending time with their family or away from work. So we had to put some parameters around that as well. What we started doing is having some virtual happy hours. It was a reason to get away from work, make it a very informal setting, and just sit down and say, "How's the family? How are things going? Is there anything I can do for you?" outside or during business hours, just to try to take that break away from work.

A big thing we had a look at too is trying to establish a way to see what others are doing online. We use Teams at Steris, and Teams shows a person's activity. So if I'm on – not that I ever would be on past 5 o'clock in the afternoon – but if I were and I saw someone else online, it would give me the opportunity to tap them and say, "What are you doing? Is there something you're doing a little too much? Maybe you should back off a little bit."

And the opposite is, we have seen people who have not been online at noon, or right before noon – so [we would ask], "Is everything OK? I didn't know you were off. Is there anything we can do?" So just being able to know their availability because obviously you can't walk down to their cube or their office and see if they're there, so you're trying to keep in touch with them that way.

A Aaron Dunbar: Some of the best things I've seen done for employees were some of the simplest you can do as a leader. I made a goal for myself this year and last year that my employees' and team members' wellbeing was my top priority. If the team's not working, we can't get anything done. So I made a performance goal for myself, and I'm measuring my performance as a leader, and my bonus – if get one sometime – will be based on that. So that was something nice, and I shared that with my team. I let them know, to the point where ... they're probably annoyed with how many times

I say that and bring it up.

Wellbeing and work/life balance is a recurring agenda item in our team meetings, at least every other week; reminding team members of employee resources; providing links to SharePoints; and everything. And then, one-on-one, simply asking the question: “How are you doing?” There’s a lot going on socially, personally, health, school, children – “What is your week like right now?” As their leader, leading with some compassion and being flexible to know that life happens right now, and support their needs and be flexible.

Also provide them some recommendations and refreshers on all of the resources available to them. I think the key was listening and watching them. What Bill was saying, if you see someone staying online, give them a poke. And if they’re working too long, give them two pokes.

Q How is your firm proactively supporting the mental health of employees during these unprecedented times of isolation?

A Fatemeh Razjouyan: At BD we’re also being proactive. The first step toward supporting the mental health of our employees is definitely promoting awareness, and by the same token, making sure we stop treating mental health as taboo.

And in light of the month of May being the Mental Health Awareness Month, we have encouraged all of our associates to sign up for what we call the 21-Day Mindfulness Challenge. So everyday you get an email from the service that we subscribe to, and it shares tips every day. Today’s tip was to remember to breathe, and breathe deeply and correctly. So it gives these little tips that I find very helpful.

And we’ve been offering webinars. We also have set up short meetings within our smaller groups. We call our one group “Lunch and Laughs,” so we try to talk about everything and anything except work to encourage interaction at a more closer level, a more personal level.

“Remain open and be flexible in terms of what works for different people.” – Fatemeh Razjouyan

Q Onboarding new hires is particularly challenging right now. What practices has your company adjusted to support those new employees?

A Dunbar: As an organization we've enhanced our onboarding programs with virtual training activities. Some of the best practices from our teams were pairing new hires or people new to the organization with a mentor on their team, to lead them through their journey. That's something we would normally do, but even more higher expectations on those mentors. [And have] virtual team meetings, breakfast, lunch, dinners, happy hours, coffees – you name it – to welcome the team member as best possible. Schedule one-on-one meetings with them for their peers or key points of contact through the organizations. Help them get to understand culture, their team, their broader team, the company, directors, vice presidents, executives, lower level – you name it, everyone.

I think a nice activity we have available to us at Boston Scientific is, we have very active employee resource groups for various social matters or backgrounds, or diversity – really encouraging participation in those activities or events that were already virtual and continue even more, to get an understanding of the company culture and make connections outside their team. That's been a very nice resource for everyone.

Employees simply miss the office chatter. You're not in a cubicle, you're not at a desk, you can't hear what's going on around you to kind of feel what's going on. So some managers and hiring managers have actually started to invite their newer team members to meetings they have really no reason to be at, other than just to listen and hear. It's been extremely valuable.

A Brodbeck: One big thing that we've done ... is that a lot of the training that normally

happens when you bring in a new hire, is the read and acknowledge. “Here’s a bunch of SOPs or work instructions. Read and acknowledge.” We changed that a lot to basically make them live tutorials so they have that one-on-one interaction. It’s one of the ways that we make sure that they’re interacting with people.

Q Going forward, are there any new practices that your firm will likely keep?

A Razjouyan: I think all of us learned a lot during the pandemic. I think No. 1 is, just remain open and be flexible in terms of what works for different people. So keep an open mind. But I think one thing that definitely resonated with me personally – and we will certainly encourage continue practicing in the future – is encouraging employees to take mental health days off. And it doesn’t have to be necessarily a full day because sometimes there are certain meetings that we can’t really control. So it could be just getting sort of a jumpstart to a weekend. Maybe unplugging at lunchtime on a Friday. And encouraging that – if you are off, then you’re off, and you shouldn’t have your phone or laptop on.

And something that’s encouraged BD-wide is offering flexibility to employees and embracing that hybrid model of splitting time between physically working in the office and remotely working.