Communitea: Building Community at WHOI

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1   Introduction

The "Communitea" event that took place on April 28, 2022 aimed to understand the needs of the WHOI community as many of us begin to return to campus and some employees continue to work remotely. The pandemic has reshaped how many of us interact socially in the workplace and the goal of this session was to accomplish the following:

1. Summarize issues that employees are facing when trying to build community
2. Understand the kind of community ties individuals want at the lab, department, and institutional level
3. Brainstorm ideas for action for both remote and in person works
4. After the meeting, report findings to the WHOI community

The session was hybrid and included approximately 30 in person attendees and 20 online attendees. The session began with an introduction by Sheri White and then broke out into small groups for discussion. In person attendees broke into groups and remote attendees were randomly assigned in groups of 4. The groups were asked to respond to prompts and take notes on their discussion. Additionally, a virtual white board (IdeaBoardz) was posted that attendees could list their thoughts to share with the other groups in real time. These thoughts and opinions are collected here.

2   Responses on the IdeaBoardz

2.1   Pros and Cons of Working Remotely

The groups were encouraged to write down pros and cons of working remotely.

The pros included the following:

1. Increased scheduling flexibility for working and meetings
2. Allows work/life balance to happen simultaneously
3. No time lost to commuting
4. Saves WHOI resources (less heating, water) and could ease parking spaces
5. It can ease space issues on WHOI campus
6. Remote workers can work from anywhere and this could open up employment to a wider range of candidates

7. Many may experience increased productivity when working from home (introverts were expressly mentioned)

8. Good for those with mobility issues

9. The cape often experiences weather and remote workers are not always impacted by these issues

10. Events that are online, like the communitea, encourage the togetherness of those who may not know each other

Generally, this feedback underscored that there are some benefits to working from home. These benefits are especially observed in introverts and those who may need to work non-traditional hours. Several folks also pointed out that remote work may be greener as it limits long commutes.

Similarly, the groups were asked to think about the cons of working from home. The cons are listed here:

1. Establishing boundaries between work and home can be challenging. It can feel like you are never away from work.

2. Meetings are all over zoom, which leads to zoom burnout

3. You don't have informal conversations with people and this limits community building in the workplace

4. Not everyone has the option to work remotely

5. Those who started at WHOI during COVID did not get to build community and are now having a hard time breaking the ice

6. When remote workers come to work in-person, people want to build community so badly that they spend large parts of the day chatting

7. Feelings of disconnection from WHOI, isolation, and loss of communication

8. Some report feeling less productive while working from home

9. Hybrid meetings are particularly challenging for remote workers. This is challenging, too, because there needs to be buy-in from all parties in a hybrid work and there can be resistance to using new tools and technology

10. There is a loss of clear communication

11. Bad weather can impact remote work and there is no emergency leave so vacation hours must be used

Several people reported that the cons for them had to do with less productivity and feelings of social isolation. Others reported that they felt like they never left work and felt disconnected from their coworkers.

2.2 Building Community at every level

The next question on the idea board has to do with how to build community at three levels: the lab/group level, the department level and the institution level. Here, we summarize the ideas that were posted to the idea board.

Lab/Group

1. Have regular meetings with the whole group and ensure remote members feel included if it is a hybrid meeting

2. Non-work events for the group. Ideas include BBQs, team outings, or a "field day"

3. Implementation of tools that encourage communication like Slack or Jabber

4. Include administration in the group, especially if it is social in nature. Sometimes there are lab get-togethers, but admin have not been included

Department

1. Department social hours are great. The MCG coffee hour is one successful model

2. Use of public spaces where people can meet up and have informal chats

3. Have a "save your poster" event where everyone saves a previous year's poster and have a department session/social

4. For new hires, organize a monthly tour of rooms and places at WHOI that are useful to know

5. Departments can organize a monthly activity where someone in the group takes the lead and organizes a social

6. Junior staff are encouraged to have get togethers to socialize and bond

7. Continue with remote social events so that those who cannot attend in-person can still socialize

Institution

1. More social gatherings like TGIT and BBQs

2. TGIT but that include a segment where different departments can present their work and see how it is good for WHOI

3. Organize a potluck with random seating to encourage people to interact with people they may not know

4. Creating an institution-wide get together for new people. An example may be a tour of the institution and a lunch to socialize

5. Leverage AVAST for talks and events

6. There is a need for more positive environment at WHOI and in interactions with others

7. Increased emphasis on kindness and professionalism in day-to-day and in emails

8. More vacation time is needed as people suffer from burn-out

9. Do a 1 week power-down in July that saves on energy costs and give everyone a planned week off

10. Equitable support of WHOI employees that are struggling

11. Bring back an event where non-scientists were able to experience what sea-going was like

12. Create a virtual photo-board that allows us to search for eachother online all in one place

It is clear that those who attended the communitea were invested in building community. Many spoke about the need to be sure that remote workers were included in these social activities. At the group level, folks were interested in having social events and better methods of communication. At the department level, a need for social hours and social spaces (online and in-person) were desired. At the institution, there was a need for a positive work environment, support for those suffering from burnout, and additional vacation time was requested.

3 Group Reporting

After the members of the communitea separated into six groups, they had discussions among themselves and reported back out to the entire group. Hannah Mark tabulated those responses in notes that were given to the WCC. The cross-cutting themes and generalized takeaways will be reported here. The two key themes that emerged were (1) Remote work and integrating hybrid teams needed TLC and (2) it is necessary to find ways to rebuild community after the pandemic.

3.1 Remote Work and Hybrid Teams

The issues that were brought up with regards to remote and hybrid working were similar to those listed on the IdeaBoardz. The need for strong leadership and team building was evident. Several people expressed that clear communication between leaders and group members would alleviate stresses that came from the struggle to achieve work/life balance and integrating remote and in-person team members. Furthermore, the groups expressed that management could help by modelling and encouraging good practices.

Additionally, remote workers indicated that they felt isolated from team members who were working in-person. People suggested that the option to have phone or zoom calls with their direct supervisor or other team embers may help remote workers feel more connected. The use of group and team platforms like Jabber and Slack may be more useful than email. At least one group expressed that they would use a virtual chat space and would like WHOI to provide guidelines/suggestions for setting up an institution virtual chat space. The chat space may include hobbies like gardening or other general interests in addition to work.

3.2 Rebuilding the WHOI Community after the Pandemic

There are a few general themes that were discussed that may help to build community. The first was to have more community events like TGIT, BBQs, and sporting events. An additional community event may be to reinstate an old practice that allowed folks who did not have sea-going opportunities (facilities, admin, and communication folks) to sail on short transits. These opportunities were given based on a lottery and helped those who weren't scientists to understand what science they are supporting and build community across departments. Finally, several people brought up that there should be a new hire orientation that happens every so often to allow new hires to get to know the entire campus. This type of orientation happened in the past, but several people mentioned that it has not happened in awhile.

Another way to build community is to invest in community spaces. Several folks brought up the renovated space in the Redfield lobby as a positive example. People suggested more nice spaces like this would encourage individuals to meet up for coffee to chat and get to know one another. People also noted that it is important to have some of these events be organized. The organization can take place at the individual or department level. Some people brought up the idea that the MCG department had a good social hour that is organized by admin to bring the department together and they felt that a monthly event like that built community. But, volunteers were needed to lead these efforts.

4 Conclusions

This communitea underscored the need for building community both for workers who have returned to campus and those who remain virtual. The attendees came up with several good ideas that were listed on the IdeaBoardz and are shared in this document. The WCC supports these efforts and are in conversations about how to implement some of them. If you have any ideas please reach out!

5 Meeting "Reporting Out" Notes Taken by Hannah Mark

Group 1 (online)

1. Pros/cons from working from home: flexibility, but harder to define work hours.

2. Managers can help with defining work/life boundaries

3. Contact/talking to managers is important

4. For building community: communi-teas work, especially virtually because breakout rooms mix people up

5. Informal slack channels to talk about non-work things - gardening?

6. Housing is an issue - people who come here are very concerned about it, could use more support when people first get here

7. Other activities: good to have these outdoors so immuno-compromised people can attend

8. Masking: social pressure to *not* wear them, questioning why people are still wearing them

Group 2 (in person)

1. Remote work advantages: shorter commute, can work when you're most productive, don't need to run home for deliveries etc

2. Slack has helped people stay engaged, teams too; helps with not being overwhelmed by email

3. Difficult to built community on-site because people aren't here

4. Helps to have spaces where people can gather for coffee, chat - like a water cooler, spaces to bring people together. Regular things like morning coffee once a month

5. WHOI tours that used to happen for people (new people, not-new people)?

6. Work-life balance

7. Supervisors should encourage staff to attend this kind of event and find ways to pay for it

8. Importance of communication and good management, keeping discussion going between people.

Group 3 (virtual)

1. Slack, jabber, similar for messaging within teams/groups; those who used these found them very very helpful

2. Going remote was a problem for some teams that did not use these kinds of messaging platforms at all and stuck to email

3. Institution could have set out some guidelines for teams to use tools like slack, set up lab/team/group communications and social-building things

4. What can WHOI do? Maybe more of the pre-pandemic activities, smaller normal events - not an enormous event where some people might feel uncomfortable

Group 4 (virtual)

1. Advantages of remote work: flexibility to schedule your own workday, possibility of having a broader applicant pool to jobs if they don't have to move to the Cape

2. Can be good for work-life balance for some people

3. No boundaries for connecting with people around the world

4. Save gas, good for environment

5. Can make better use of space/resources at WHOI if we do things like power down A/C in unoccupied offices

6. Engaging with remote workers: make sure people are up to speed with using technology, maybe pick up the phone and talk to people once in a while since spontaneous encounters don't happen, encourage people to focus in video meetings rather than working on other tasks during zooms

7. Be mindful of people's schedules

8. Coffee hour on zoom is a thing that can happen

9. WHOI open online chat space where people can connect

10. Bring back pre-pandemic things where possible

11. Ring road meetings - go for a walk

12. When on campus, schedule your office days for days when other people are also around

13. Director-grams and AMAs are positive things

Group 5 (in person)

1. Starting during the pandemic/starting in general: how to engage people?

2. Introduce new people every week at department seminars etc to make sure everyone knows names

3. Orientation/tours at WHOI have stopped; should be restarted for new hires

4. Photos: these should be added to more of the WHOI directory, maybe when people are hired

5. Hybrid schedules are hard, going from zoom meetings to in-person, need time to run from place to place

6. Put out a survey and find out why people are fully remote, if they're happy, what might prevent them from coming back?

7. Community spaces on campus: flexible workspace, maybe for people mostly remote who don't need an office all the time, can reserve on an as-needed basis. Help people meet different people!

8. Redfield lobby has been renovated and is nice; should have more spaces like that for chatting. Chemistry is starting a coffee cart which will be wheeled around? Buttery is underused for that too

9. Lawn games - there are two sheds on campus, one quisset one village, email Steph Madsen for the lock combination and games can be used for fun casual hangouts with group, dept, whoever, as long as you return the equipment.

10. WHOI is us; we need to organize events if we want them

11. Headlines is really long (maybe too long); can we have separate key info about community events?

12. Can we have zoom holidays every so often? All of May no zoom???

13. Events later in the day are hard for people with kids (4-6p is tough, for example)

Group 6 (in person)

1. Used to bring non-science WHOI employees on transits, give people a chance to go to sea and see what it is WHOI is all about as an enterprise. Should restart this

2. More talking/conversation between science folks and facilities, tech staff, admins, graphics, etc - tell people what it is they're supporting! Maybe have science talks (short) for facilities? Part of TGIF/T? Or just, when a carpenter helps you set up something in the lab, take a minute to tell them what they're working on.

3. At things like TGIF/T events, require that people sit with folks they don't already know to break up cliques. If you have an event where there's a known set of attendees, try assigning seating to make sure people get mixed up.

4. Note that remote work did not apply to anyone in facilities

5. For folks who work remotely, regular check-ins with bosses/managers, talking on the phone at a scheduled time, is helpful

6. Context-switching is a thing - time fragmentation, switching between different types of tasks, can be very inefficient since our brains literally need to switch between doing different things (eg checking email vs working on a project)

7. Time cards are a burden for some people, take forever to fill out and don't always align with the ways people work (eg creative folks who don't really work in 15 minute increments)