

Possibilities of a People-First Culture



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BKD's Human Resources Department enriches internal workforce priorities in response to COVID-19.

As clients look to their trusted advisor for clarity and direction during a crisis, we lean on our human resources (HR) team members for guidance on staying psychologically resilient, productive, and informed. BKD Chief Human Resources Officer Julie Cummings is leading valuable change throughout the firm through vital internal efforts: emphasizing employee connection and engagement with the development of new resources, reinforcing intentional and transparent communication, and strengthening BKD's SKY program—a firmwide diversity and inclusion initiative that uses focused strategies and solutions to build an environment where all BKDers are valued.

"Our goal in HR is to help people feel connected to their work and to one another. And our focus on being allies for one another and supportive as we work through challenging times is critical. Internally and externally, the culture we built prior to COVID-19 has propelled us forward to continue serving clients and meeting their needs during this time," says Julie.

Creating a sense of unity among our people

Historically, BKD has adopted a conservative approach to change to allow time to consider all possibilities, alternatives, and perspectives. But COVID-19 required the firm to make substantial decisions and act at a rapid pace. Fortunately, BKD's HR Department has been practicing HR agility for several years, which has proven successful to help the team stay nimble, adaptive, and shift focus as needs arise. Initial circumstances called for Julie to hold daily meetings with leadership to consider emerging matters and develop immediate action plans and effective strategies. Throughout the course of crisis, she's remained mindful to seize opportunities to recapture personal balance and perspective. Some of her favorite activities for recharging include running with her dog Jax, cooking a new recipe, spending a day at the lake, and simply enjoying time with family.



The HR team participated in a virtual unicorn cookie challenge during BKD's Experienced Talent Recruiter Summit. Julie had help from her work-from-home co-workers, her sons.

As a result of some of the HR team meetings, BKD's National Office in Springfield, Missouri, established Mocha Monday and Trivia Thursday and launched firmwide Meeting-Free Friday.

Mocha Monday and Trivia Thursday are two optional, virtual "water cooler" engagement activities that have proven beneficial in facilitating connection, discussion, and collaboration among personnel. Each Monday morning, BKDers are encouraged to grab a cup of their favorite drink and join in on the week's discussion topic, which has ranged from tips on managing stress to exceptional book and movie recommendations. Trivia Thursdays, also optional, give BKDers the opportunity to take a brief "brain break" to engage in fun competition. Trivia themes have included famous artists and paintings, summer songs, Harry Potter, and even BKD-specific themes such as BKD baby pictures and the classic game of three truths and a lie.

"A big part of success in our work relies on physical interaction in the workplace, and in the absence of that, we thought it was important to create those touchpoints so people felt connected and engaged to one another. It's important to find avenues to collaborate and connect. And for me, these activities are the highlight of my week," says Julie.

Staying aligned with the department's commitment to personnel health and well-being, the firm adopted Meeting-Free Friday to encourage BKDers to refrain from scheduling internal meetings on Fridays when possible. The idea, which came directly from BKD CEO Ted Dickman, aims to help personnel focus more on current tasks at hand and head into the weekend in a spot where they can better unplug and relax.

Finally, as the majority of the firm's workforce had limited experience in working from home, HR developed extensive tools and resources to support personnel in a remote working environment. BKDers are equipped with reliable health, financial, and well-being resources, as well as an online remote work resource center that compiles resources specific to individuals, leaders, and working parents. In addition, numerous surveys and feedback programs help ensure personnel voices are heard and the department responds with appropriate strategies.

Responding to recent events

Our Black and POC communities are living a much harsher reality than their privileged counterparts, and COVID-19 is only exacerbating and amplifying long-standing racial disparities. In response to the racial oppression, violence, and murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, BKDers wanted to know how the firm would respond and what steps leadership would take to continue building diversity and inclusion.



Managing Partner Bill Pickert tours the historic Dunbar Theatre.

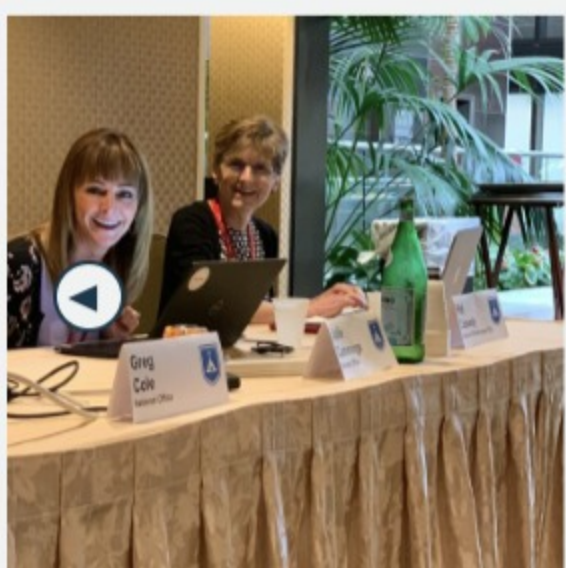
BKD's commitment to supporting our Black and POC allies and helping society address the need to end racism takes external and internal efforts. Managing Partner Bill Pickert and HR associate Jerica Newby toured Dunbar Theatre in the historic McAdams neighborhood in Wichita, Kansas, and later announced BKD's participation to help fund the renovation of this beloved landmark. You can learn more about the restoration project [here](#).

"Understanding the history of our city is vital in deciding how to positively move forward, because it grants us the hindsight to know where we've been. The Dunbar Theatre is a tangible link to our city's past and will offer a more complete telling of Wichita's story for future generations to come. Once restored, the Dunbar will stand as a symbol of inclusivity and hope that people can work together and build a space that lifts others up, especially at a time when they need it most," says Jerica.

Through increased transparent communications, the firm continues to expand the focus of the SKY initiative to encourage understanding, inclusion, and equity. By sharing self-reflection questions, podcasts, books, essays, and additional resources, BKD continues to facilitate a safe space for constructive conversations. BKDers are encouraged to use provided questions within coaching, team, department, or office meetings. Education is a critical step to develop greater awareness—and the BKD team is dedicated to put in the work to learn and grow.

"We want to send a message to the rest of the world on how BKD is a place where everyone belongs, regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity. We also want to empower our people to have a greater understanding of how to interact with one another and respect our differences internally," says Julie.

Building and fostering strong relationships throughout BKD and maintaining an innovative discipline has always been embedded in our culture, and our people-first mentality extends beyond our team of **BKD Trusted Advisors**™ to reach our friends, neighbors, and communities.



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