



Looking Forward

A CONVERSATION ABOUT
THE FUTURE OF WORK WITH
MELISSA MCLAUGHLIN,
CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER AT AGIOS

Looking Forward: A conversation about the future of work with Melissa McLaughlin, Chief People Officer at Agios

- Published on May 29, 2019

Anna Auerbach

At Werk, we get the opportunity to team up with a lot of great companies. But what really stands out about Agios Pharmaceuticals is their commitment to customizing the employee experience in order to meet the unique needs of their diverse workforce. Over the span of just seven months, we saw Agios take some important steps to [revolutionize the employee experience](#) through flexibility.

"What we emphasized was shared values and principles across the organization, with individual expression of those values and people's needs," Melissa McLaughlin, Chief People Officer at Agios, explained to me for this edition of "Looking Forward."

In the rest of our chat, Melissa shared with me how the future of work will entail collaboration and complexity going hand-in-hand, how the physicalities of work are changing, how leadership is about balancing poetry and plumbing, and how "flexibility won't be *an* approach, it'll be the *only* approach." Here's our full conversation:

What is your prediction on what work will look like 10 years from now?

Some big trends that we're seeing now around collaboration and complexity will continue to become more and more important.

When it comes to increased collaboration, I'm not just talking about what happens within company boundaries; collaboration will also be critical for how we do business *externally* with partners as well as competitors. This kind of collaboration will require thinking differently about how we interact, which will continue becoming easier as technology evolves.

What goes hand-in-hand with collaboration is complexity—meaning the ability to solve complex problems through collaboration and new ways of thinking. This is something that we've done some work around at Agios with the help of Jennifer Garvey Berger, who is an expert in complexity leadership. She has worked with our leadership team on navigating complexity – not just helping us apply past experiences or technical solutions to future unpredictable problems, but really to help us handle emerging issues by asking different questions and experimenting with new approaches. As we think about how rapidly the world is changing, it's important to recognize that the past may not always be a good predictor of what's coming in the future, which is why navigating and leading in complexity just becomes more and more important.

What tools do you think will be obsolete in 10 years that we very much take as a given today?

There are some physical components of work that will become outdated, like chairs. Obviously, we'll still need chairs! [*Laughs.*] But with all the data about the negative impacts of sitting and

the push for increased collaboration, I think we'll move away from “desk jobs,” if you will, and embrace walking meetings and collaboration spaces. And as people embrace flexibility, we'll also see shorter meetings to encourage space to move and think.

In 10 years, I think flexibility won't just be *an* approach, it'll be the *only* approach. And we'll really see that in the physical environment. We may also see that in communication, in terms of moving away from intranet sites and emails to more interactive technologies that better foster two-way conversations. And with shared files and e-readers becoming the norm, we'll probably see less printing.

While those are some of the physical components of work, more interestingly, some of the conceptual tools and frameworks we associate with work—like career paths—I think will become obsolete, too.

Customization was a big theme for you over the past year. Will this continue to be a focus in the future? And more broadly, what do you think customization will look like in the HR space over the next few years?

You're right: Customization has been really important to us at Agios. A big part of that is emphasizing our shared values and principles across the organization, with individual expression of those values and people's needs. For example, through our work with Werk, we're able to better understand what matters most to each person and how we need to adapt or customize to that need or to that interest. This is an important shift from how HR often operates in terms of historically being more oriented around fairness and consistency and taking a more programmatic approach.

Customization is key because what's meaningful—what brings out the best in people—feels and looks different for everyone. And that applies to the overall employee experience, from schedules and workspaces to career paths and total rewards. As I mentioned before, I don't think there's really going to be a “career path,” so to speak, in the future. There probably never was. But sometimes in HR, we try to find the path for employees to give them answers to what is next instead of allowing individuals to create the answers to what's next—to find the experience that fits them best based on their passion, their strengths, their desire. That's just one example of where I see the opportunity for further customization in an organization: helping people tailor an experience to what's meaningful to them and yet still participate in the broader collective—that shared experience within the organization.

Do you think all companies are thinking about this? Or do you think some companies are leading the charge? How universal do you think this feeling is?

It's a good question. I think there's a lot of certainty and comfort for everyone in having a formal career path, which is why many larger organizations are likely still leveraging that as a part of their people strategy. But as we think about some of the earlier topics, like complexity and how

the past doesn't always predict the future, and as we think about the agile organizations in tech and biotech that are innovating and iterating on the employee experience based on the shifting workforce, I think that will lead us to this place where the organizational tools and the concepts of the past don't make sense in the future. In many ways, we're still operating on people practices and processes that were developed in the 1950s. That's just not working for today's workforce, especially millennials and Gen Z employees who don't just want to be engaged at work, but want to be fulfilled and feel inspired. I don't think that comes in the package of a path with a ladder. It comes in thinking about different experiences and what people find inspiring. I think that's going to move us in a completely new direction when it comes to career development and infrastructure.

What keeps you up at night about people at Agios?

The first thing is really about the work that we do. We're doing hard work in service of patients, which has high meaning and high stakes, so I am always reflecting on how we do our best every single day. Then I think about the operating environment, the overall health of the organization, which is impacted by a few things. There was a Stanford professor, James March, who talked about leadership being about plumbing and poetry. For me, it's about getting the right mix of both—meaning, the inspiration of poetry as well as the ability to operationalize that poetry, particularly as you scale. And at Agios we're scaling pretty rapidly. So I try to make sure we're not spending too much time on operation and too little time on inspiration; and equally, that we keep thinking about how we get even more effective in our operations. Because again, back to the first point, we're doing really important work for people who need new options—new medicines—which takes big thinking. So I think that making sure we have the right environment—one that's inspiring and scalable so we can sustain what we are building and doing and deliver extraordinary things—is really important.

The other thing I think about is how we continue to value and leverage differences in the organization. We have a culture that we're really proud of, and we also want that to evolve and continue to make space for new people and new approaches. The best way to do that is by recognizing and encouraging new ideas and making sure people have the foundation and safety to speak up. If people can't express themselves and we don't grow in our individual perspectives, then we're not going to grow as an organization. So I think for us, that's a part of creating a sustainable growth platform in the organization. It really starts with space for people to be who they are and to say what's important to them so we can continue to evolve and innovate as a company.