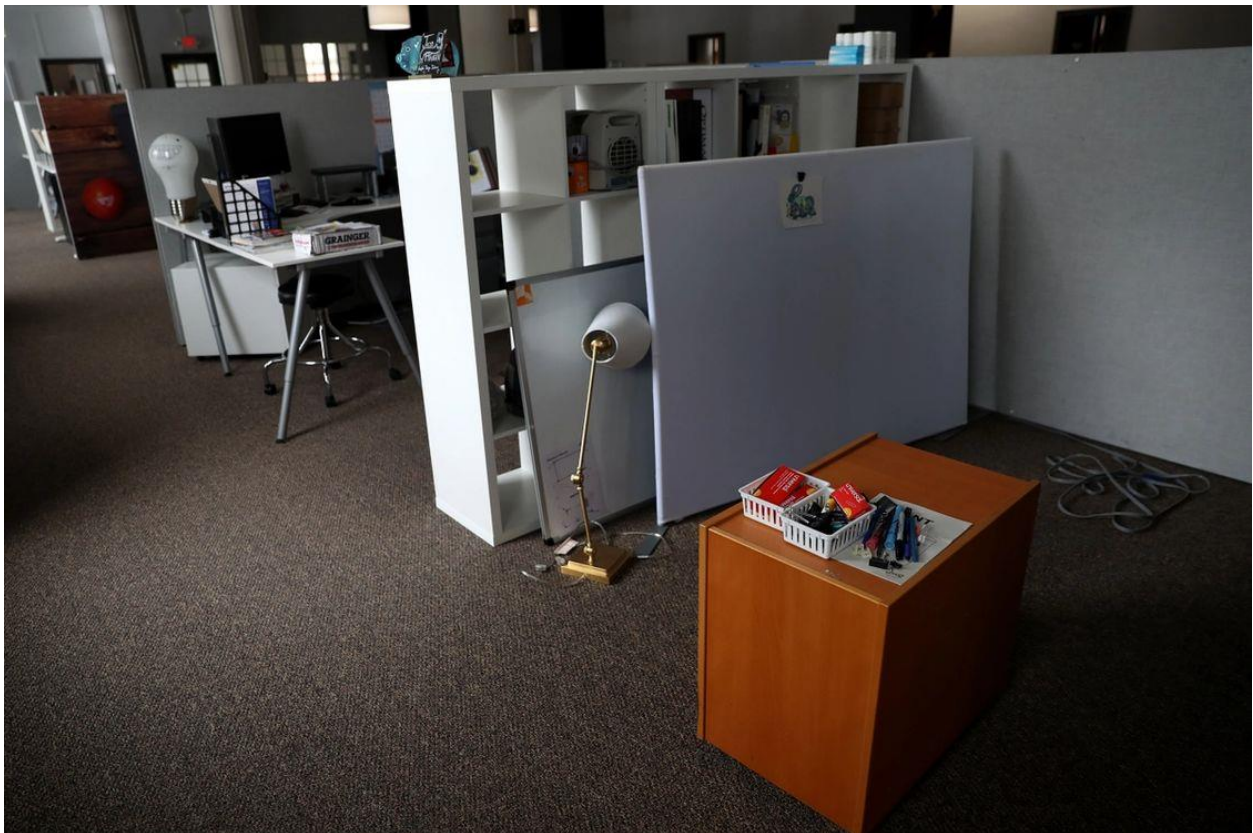


# “There’s No Playbook for This”: HR Professionals Look Back On March 2020

HR Brew | Susanna Vogel | March 22, 2022

*Two years later, HR professionals look back on the first weeks of lockdowns.*



Boston Globe/Getty Images

On March 5, 2020, Amy Spurling attended her last in-person networking event before Covid lockdowns began. She says her colleagues lightly kicked her shins by way of greeting. The Compt CEO remembers she found it funny—it was a previously unthinkable social faux pas that, as news of this ominous new virus took hold, was somehow now more acceptable than a handshake.

Her amusement didn’t stick.

Many hoped Covid’s disruption to life and work would be brief, but it dragged on...and on...and on. As we pass the two-year mark since many workplaces announced a move to

“temporary” remote work in mid-March 2020, HR Brew asked HR professionals what they remember about the shocking spring of 2020 and how they led employees through the trauma of a global pandemic.

“There’s no playbook for this.” By late February 2020, Mineral’s chief people officer, Carla Yudhishthu, was thinking about Covid daily. Yudhishthu told HR Brew that she met with her CEO every morning at 7:30am to “comb the news” and discuss data from the World Health Organization and the CDC. Yudhishthu said the two would ask each other, “What are we going to do?”

Finally, Mineral, an HR compliance software company, decided to close offices in Portland, Oregon; Pleasanton, California; and Milwaukee. They made the decision on Wednesday, March 11, and would shut their doors by Friday.

“We had 48 hours...to get our communication ready,” Yudhishthu said.

Amy Rice, senior director of communications at Workhuman, told HR Brew that the decision for Workhuman to go remote came from a Covid “SWAT team” composed of C-suite executives: the CEO, CFO, chief legal officer, and representatives from supply chain.

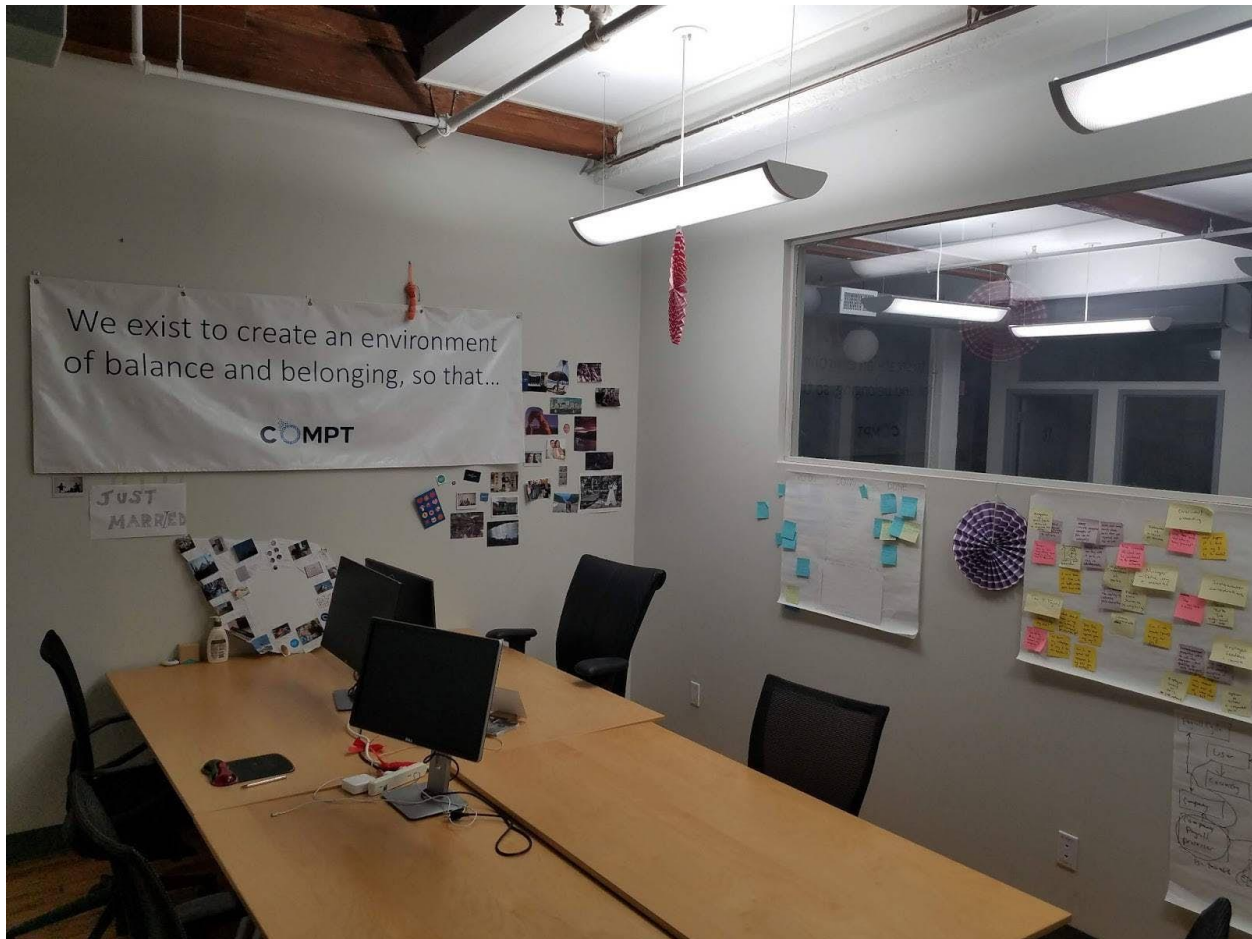
Other companies made the decision in a split second. Spurling remembers standing on a sidewalk in Boston’s Chinatown after a team lunch when a coworker received a text from her husband. He worked for a large tech firm and had just been told to pack up and go home. It was March 17.

“I just got chills thinking about that,” Spurling recalled. “That moment was like, ‘OK, big companies are telling their people you’re not coming back, [so] we’re done, [too.] Go home.’ This is very, very real and very serious.”

“The first week was very chaotic,” Rice remembered. “There’s no playbook for this.”

Downtown ghost town. As offices closed across the country, teams grabbed materials in a frenzy. Rice said it was “embarrassing”; she’d left several cups of coffee sitting unfinished on her desk, complete with lipstick on the brim.

When Spurling went back to Compt a month later, she said the office looked like they’d done a “drop and leave.”



Compt's office, a month and a half after her workforce did a "drop and leave." Employees had left brainstorm notes on whiteboards, hand lotion at their desks, and a celebratory "Just Married" sign on the wall. (Courtesy Compt)

"It looked as urgent as it felt at that time because none of us really thought it was going to be months and months," Spurling said. "People still had their hand lotion at their desk...It looked like people would be coming back in a minute, but now there was a layer of dust on everything."

Two years later, the office remains closed. Though pre-pandemic, Spurling "never wanted [Compt] to be a fully remote company," being forced to work from home in 2020 showed her there was "a lot of beauty" and "flexibility" in moving to remote arrangements. Today, Spurling has pivoted Compt to be a fully remote company.

What now? Yudhishtu told HR Brew the initial weeks of the pandemic didn't exact an emotional toll on her—she was too focused on keeping employees safe. The emotions only caught up with her when the pandemic kept going; Yudhishtu recalls how helpless she felt during company check-in calls.

"I can remember being in those calls particularly feeling like this isn't ending. I'm supposed to have answers I don't [and] this is a lot of science. This is so out of my

wheelhouse: constant worry about the health and well-being of our employees,” Yudhishthru shared. One of her weekly tasks was updating the company about the state of the pandemic. Over time, that became draining. “I was trying to figure out what to write...what somber news am I going to deliver with some emojis in Slack that can make people feel okay about the situation that we’re in?”

Rice said that she wouldn’t have survived the pandemic without her therapist, but also pointed out the experience pushed her to grow.

“I’m a type-A person. If I have plans, and they break, I cannot handle the fluidity of things,” Rice said. In a post-Covid world, that’s had to change. “[Before,] I was not able to roll with the punches or be flexible...And if I look back, I think the biggest growth area that I’ve had is to [say] ‘OK, we’re going to set a guidepost plan and if they change, okay, they change. Let’s figure out what’s next.’”

Workhuman began welcoming employees back to the office in the summer of 2021.

Yudhishthru now focuses on “controlling what we can control and letting go of what we can’t” Today, that means not getting hung up on supply-chain issues disrupting the opening of Mineral’s new California office—something that pre-Covid she says she would have viewed as a disaster.