

University of Tennessee re-imagines HR with support from McLean & Company

Results



Accessed McLean & Company research and advisory services to deliver on HR strategy



Leveraged expert resources to quickly respond to pandemic requirements



Conducted employee surveys to identify opportunities for HR change



Benefited from expert, third-party status to advance DEI initiative

"The power and immediacy of the Engagement survey results gave us the ability to develop a strategy to help shift the paradigm and become the learning organization that we need to be. It's truly the reason that McLean & Company is a partner with UT System today."

Dr. Brian Dickens
Chief Human Resources Officer
University of Tennessee



MEMBER
Dr. Brian Dickens, CHRO,
University of Tennessee
System

INDUSTRY
Higher Education

MCLEAN & COMPANY SOLUTIONS

- [HR Diagnostics](#)
- [DEI Strategy Workshop](#)
- [‘Develop an Engagement Program Strategy’ Guided Implementation](#)
- [Executive Counselor Membership](#)

HR executive Brian Dickens navigates uncertainty to elevate HR across the organization

Tracing its roots back to 1794, the University of Tennessee (UT) System is the state's oldest and largest public higher education institution. The UT System has a presence in Tennessee's 95 counties and includes campuses in Knoxville, Chattanooga, Pulaski, and Martin; the Health Science Center at Memphis; the Space Institute at Tullahoma; and the statewide Institute of Agriculture and Institute for Public Service, serving more than 54,000 undergraduate and graduate students.

Heading up the Human Resources function at UT is Dr. Brian Dickens, Chief Human Resources Officer. Dickens joined UT near the end of 2019 in a new role designed to drive HR strategy and consolidate disparate HR functions across the UT System's many campuses and institutes. Not only would the task call

on Dickens' 20-plus-year background in university administration and HR management, it would also require a collaborative and data-driven approach to achieve consensus and drive change across the system.

As fate would have it, Dickens had only just gotten started at UT when he and the rest of the organization faced the unexpected upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the past, Dickens had used the services of HR research and advisory firm, McLean & Company, and he saw the opportunity to leverage their HR expertise once again as he navigated the compounded challenges of a demanding new role and the unprecedented workplace disruption caused by the pandemic.

With over 20 years of HR experience, Dr. Brian Dickens joined University of Tennessee System in 2019 in a new role designed to drive HR strategy and consolidate disparate HR functions across the UT System's many campuses and institutes.



Delivering actionable feedback to inform HR change

One of Dickens' first challenges at UT was to fulfill a request from the Board of Trustees for employee feedback. Because he had used McLean & Company in the past, he knew that their Employee Engagement survey would be the perfect way to quickly assess how staff were feeling about the organization. "When the Board and the President saw the results, the board chair said, 'I want every campus to participate in this process.' The power and immediacy of the Engagement survey results gave us the ability to develop a strategy to help shift the paradigm and become the learning organization that we need to be. It's truly the reason that McLean & Company is a partner with UT System today," stated Dickens.

With little warning, COVID-19 struck, and it was all hands on deck as Dickens and the HR team responded to the pandemic's urgent and shifting requirements. Once again relying on McLean & Company for support, Dickens used the Pandemic Engagement Pulse surveys as well as the firm's robust

COVID-19 resources to guide workforce strategies. Dickens estimated the value of the Pandemic Engagement surveys to be approximately \$60,000 in savings as they navigated myriad workplace changes related to the virus.

Later, as pandemic-related change became routine, Dickens turned to other McLean & Company survey-based diagnostic programs to gather and analyze feedback from employees, including Employee Engagement, Employee Experience Monitor, and Exit Surveys. He commented on the benefit of the Exit Survey in identifying opportunities for improvement: "The McLean & Company Exit Survey provided significant value to us. Between the pandemic and this volatile market, we're in a war for talent. It has been so beneficial to hear firsthand from people who are leaving the organization. It gives us actionable items to work on as we build our retention and recruitment strategies."

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Facilitating strategic change with training, counseling, and a neutral third party

As part of its efforts to improve the employee experience, UT recently launched a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiative. Dickens and his team used McLean & Company resources, including a DEI Engagement survey and DEI Strategy workshop, to bring objective expertise to the effort. He explained, “DEI is not the easiest conversation in this state. Through the DEI workshop, we were able to leverage McLean & Company as an objective third party who was advocating for the discussions to be rich and meaningful across the UT System. This facilitated a lighter lift to a heavy topic. As we navigated DEI, we would always go back to the research shared by McLean & Company to help justify the argument and move the discussion forward.”

In addition to research, diagnostics, and workshops to help advance HR change at UT, Dickens also benefits from a Counselor membership from McLean & Company, featuring a dedicated executive counselor

who provides expert guidance and unbiased feedback. He commented, “My executive counselor is one of the best partners you can possibly imagine. Just the other day, she helped me with a board presentation that needed a quick turnaround. Having that kind of support from McLean & Company really speaks to the agility that exists with this partnership.”

Further, Dickens has leveraged the eLearning program, McLean Academy, to develop UT System’s high-performing HR teams. Offering more than 30 courses and 7 certificates, the curriculum provides practical, outcome-driven content on tackling HR initiatives. Dickens noted, “When you’re building and developing HR teams, particularly in higher education, the McLean Academy is invaluable. It makes it easy for us. We see employees rise to the level of greater knowledge and feel confident based on the research that’s behind them through McLean & Company. It has been such a rewarding experience.”

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Taking HR to the next level at UT System

As Dickens reflects on an unforgettable start at UT System, he is proud of the strategic role HR played during the extraordinary turmoil of COVID-19, and he looks forward to maintaining an elevated role for HR in the post-pandemic world, with the help of McLean & Company. He summarized, “We are elevating our brand by leveraging McLean & Company resources.

We can raise the level of the game very quickly without having to use internal resources. When half the work is already done for you, the rest of it is easy. To see HR be more strategic in its thinking and in the way we approach our work is applauded by faculty and staff across the state. The McLean & Company partnership has been absolutely wonderful.”

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