

# First Friday Five: Susan Cummings

## What does the workplace of the future look like to you?

When I think about the future of work, I get excited. The upside to 2020 is that what we knew was coming fast – remote work, anytime, anywhere, any device – arrived without notice, impacting the way most of our employees worked overnight. And, in many ways, we were more successful, delivered more business value and solutions and saw greater adoption than we ever had before. ‘Necessity is the mother of invention’ and I think the gears of innovation are at work in terms of how we live, how we work and the balance between the two. We were forced very quickly to identify the critical, re-prioritize, re-scope and deliver fast. There is a lesson in our success, particularly about speed, that we will carry forward.

At Ensemble Español, performances have always been live and local which is not possible during Covid-19. We are piloting virtual events, like many, to understand how we create virtual intimacy to simulate a live event. What we are finding is there is a world of opportunity to expand what the artist does - performance, dance lessons and speaking opportunities on their own history and that of their art. We can increase the audience and patronage across borders and create exchanges between the artist and the audience. We can even include audiences speaking different languages with technology aiding in the translation of chats and conversation. The impediments we faced in 2020 are becoming opportunities to expand this beautiful organization and art. It is not a substitute or replacement but a whole new channel and opportunity.

As a digital leader for Northern Trust, I attended a virtual conference recently that included both break out rooms and virtual networking queues between the event presentations. I met not only more people than at a live conference but also a more diverse set of experts I might not otherwise have had the chance to meet. People who are uncomfortable approaching someone they don't know at a conference suddenly have a great way to expand their network and knowledge.

So, the future of work, in every aspect, – business, finance, art – is being reinvented and in many ways with the removal of physical space and walls we can reimagine and expand over what we do today.

## What changes will leaders need to make to be successful in this environment?

It is so important now more than ever to have healthy ecosystems – be it your technology ecosystem, your people ecosystem, the structure of your organization. I don't think we will see everyone back in the office full time. A good percentage of employees will likely work remote go forward – some companies, like yours Anne, already have all remote employees. It will be important that leaders understand how to build trust, transparency, collaboration and provide a clear vision and strategy that inspires the organization. I am a firm believer that we will all fail or succeed together so it is in our absolute best interest to find a way to ensure that remote or in office, all employees feel part of an inclusive and trusted environment working towards common goals.

## What impacts will the workplace of the future have on DEI?

The best ideas and solutions come from diverse and inclusive teams. Different perspectives bring diversity of thought, approach and ideation – the recipe for best outcomes. With the removal of

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traditional office walls and virtual doors opening globally I see tremendous opportunity to ensure we have diverse, inclusive, and talented teams that can work anytime and from anywhere in the world. It creates an opportunity to hire more broadly. I think ultimately, it will change how we live. I also believe remote work will force a focus on the quality and timeliness of our deliverables and this will naturally shine a light on talent enabling advancement, recognition, and growth.

## **What priority shifts have you, or are you making to ensure operational excellence in the workplace of the future?**

In my area of focus whether it is the digital employee experience or a digital dance event, it is all about enablement. How do you enable work or art to be done or consumed now that everyone is virtual – employees, performers, audiences? Strategic thinking and time management are more important than ever – and alignment. What are the top 3 things that will bring the most value and how do we, the team, get those done? What can we stop doing? How are we best organized to be most effective and impactful? At Northern Trust our product, UX and research teams quickly aligned to rationalize and streamline our employee digital solutions and in doing so create a more intuitive remote work experience in a tough global regulatory environment. Our objective is to be flexible but focused on delivering value. With so many demands to be met, it is as important to know what NOT to do or what to STOP as it is to know what to accelerate. You can't be afraid to make decisions or to fail fast – always learning, always moving forward with the lesson. I will reiterate trust and healthy ecosystems. We are in it together.

## **What is the one question you wish people would ask you, but don't? What would your answer be?**

Everyone asks, "Do you want to go back into the office?" or "Do you want to work from home?" instead of "Where do you want to work?" I love the idea that many of us can actually work truly from anywhere. What a fun idea to think about a future that includes days in office, days at home and days in your other home abroad or in your other favorite place. I have been online shopping for an apartment in Zaragoza, Spain where I grew up – I have found the perfect place that fits my budget! It is liberating to ditch the tired objective of work-life balance and instead think that the future of work could enable a life well lived, spent working from the places you love the most and visiting the office when it makes sense.



Susan Cummings is Sr. Vice President, Head of Digital Workplace Product Management at Northern Trust Corporation. She has over 20 years experience in the financial services industry focusing on product management, process improvement and problem solving, employee collaboration and engagement, ecommerce, online banking services and payments.

Susan earned a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts and a minor in Business Administration from Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana. She was born and raised in Spain and is fluent in Spanish. (DELE Superior Instituto Cervantes)