Getting Ready to Fast-Track Hiring After the Pandemic

COVID-19 has effectively brought the economy to a grinding halt. 42 states (as well as Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C.) plus counties, towns, or jurisdictions in three other states (Wyoming, Utah, and Oklahoma) have issued a stay-at-home order. These restrictions, intended to "flatten the curve" of COVID-19 infections, have produced the side effect of leaving businesses across industry sectors unable to operate. The companies that depend most fully on in-person operations or customer interactions—retail, hospitality, tourism, construction—have been hit the hardest. Still, there is no doubt that the pandemic is affecting every business and individual.

Huge job losses and unemployment filings have resulted. Eventually, the curve will trend downwards, whether as a result of social distancing efforts or because a vaccine has been discovered. When that happens, the employers poised to accelerate out of the pandemic and the recession that it has caused will recruit top job candidates, innovate for a brand-new era, and grow prosperously as the economy recovers from this unprecedented challenge.

In this white paper, we will explain the steps that employers can take right now to prepare to fast-track hiring and growth after the pandemic has run its course.

Knowing what to expect

Rebuilding the economy will take time. On April 28, the United States officially crossed the one-million mark for cases of the novel coronavirus—nearly a third of the three million confirmed cases worldwide. According to the Brookings Institution, the United States economic output is forecast to "contract at an annualized rate of 20-30 percent in the second quarter of 2020," which is three times worse than the worst quarter of 2008. This recession will be, in economic impact, worse than the one that is still fresh in most consumers' minds.

Now you know.

The good news is that event-driven bear markets (market declines caused by external factors, such as war, natural disaster, or pandemic) tend to recover faster than market-driven declines. Past bear markets caused by "exogenous" events recovered to previous levels within 15 months, according to MarketWatch.

The pandemic adds uncertainty: writing for the *MIT Technology Review*, editor-in-chief Gordon Lichfield suggested that things will never be entirely the same as they were before COVID-19. "To stop coronavirus," he wrote, "we will need to radically change almost everything we do: how we work, exercise, socialize, shop, manage our health, educate our kids, take care of our family members." Some of those changes, necessitated by social distancing and the need to flatten the curve, could prove to be permanent.

It is hard to predict when a coronavirus cure may be available. The typical timeline for developing and testing a vaccine for a virus or disease is 6-10 years, according to Politico. During the 2002-2003 outbreak of SARS, a virus similar to COVID-19, a vaccine was ready for testing in humans after about 20 months of development. Scientists around the globe are working to shorten that timeline, with at least 62 vaccines currently in the works according to the World Health Organization. Even with these expansive efforts, most experts point to a 12-18-month timeline being the most optimistic projection for when a vaccine might be ready.

Amid all this uncertainty, employers must plan for everything. Focusing on the here and now—and the challenges of operating a business during COVID-19—is vital. However, so is planning for what comes after. Keeping an eye on the future is a must for employers of all kinds.

Why you need to start planning now

Lichfield claimed that this period of quarantine and social distancing will send shockwaves into our futures, but even if things will not entirely return to normal, there is evidence to suggest that they will soon be more normal than they have been since mid-March. State governors across the nation are sharing their plans for lifting stay-at-home restrictions and getting back to work. Even if the pandemic does not truly "end" for a year or more—as has been suggested by publications such as *Scientific American*—shelter-in-place orders may end sooner.

As restrictions lift, employers need to have plans in place for getting back to work. Necessary steps may include:

- **Hiring back staff that was laid off.** Many employers have had to furlough staff to make it through the lean times of COVID-19. While some of these workers may have gone on to get jobs with other companies, employers would be wise to communicate with their teams about their plans for rehiring staff. By bringing back workers you already know and trust, you can reduce how much new hiring you will need to perform.

- **Adjusting to lower levels of business than they had before the pandemic.** Employers should be ready for this pandemic to last for a year or longer. The process of returning to work—and the ramp-up back to full traffic and productivity—could be a long, slow, and steady process. Prepare for business to be slow for a little while.

- **Planning for socially-distant workplaces.** Even if governors start lifting shelter-in-place orders, that doesn't mean that the value of social distancing for preventing the spread of COVID-19 goes away.

Diagnosis and death numbers for the coronavirus are still climbing every day. Keeping workers socially distant from one another is essential for providing a safe workplace, but it could mean making considerable design and layout changes in offices, restaurants, retail stores, and other businesses. If you run a customer-facing business, you need to think about social distancing for them as well.

- **Adopting personal protective equipment (PPE).** Masks and gloves may be the norm at workplaces for a while, particularly public-facing businesses. In Michigan, for instance, Governor Gretchen Whitmer has mandated by executive order that all employers in the state provide face coverings for their employees. At least seven states have issued orders requiring all citizens to wear masks when they go out in public. Masks are going to be the norm for the foreseeable future, and businesses need to be aware of these requirements before making plans to get back to work.

- **Being vigilant with marketing.** The assumption before the pandemic was that a business would be open unless otherwise indicated. Now, things have reversed, with customers assuming that every business is closed unless they hear otherwise. If your organization is gearing up to open, let your customers know that you are back up and running. Tell them about your business hours and whether they are different from what they used to be. Tell them about the steps that you are taking to ensure safety. Provide a range of options that they can use to support your business, including through online touchpoints. Being vigilant about marketing and communication at this time will help you to stay visible and keep your business on the minds of customers and clients.

- **Offering employees a phased or flexible return-to-work arrangement.** Particularly for offices in which working remotely is possible, maintaining a distributed workforce (rather than bringing everyone back into the office at once) may be a strong choice. This approach is especially appealing for employees with kids. 43 states have closed schools for the remainder of the year, which means that parents in most parts of the country are trying to figure out how they are going to care for their children and keep them busy until school resumes. Many daycares are closed as well. Giving employees with kids more flexibility in their return to work will make it easier for them to juggle their many responsibilities.

- **Remembering that these changes and measures are temporary.** Planning for an indefinite period of business slowdown is difficult, as is figuring out a way to return to work without breaking social distancing recommendations. What is vital to remember is that the current status quo is not permanent. Instead, these changes and restrictions are necessary for easing the economy back into operation safely to rebuild until the pandemic and the fear that surrounds it are things of the past.

Planning for this initial return-to-work phase should not occur in a vacuum. You should strategize the next steps for your business based on where you want to be in six months, 12 months, 18 months, and two years. Your business needs to be ready to scale and grow as worries over COVID-19 wane and people feel safe enough to go back out into the world. Planning for that endpoint starts now.

How to ensure your business gets its choice of candidates

Many employers are in survival mode right now, which means that they aren't in a position to hire. Across most sectors, businesses have been forced to lay off some or all employees. In the past five weeks, 26.5 million Americans have filed for unemployment; the highest level of unemployment following the 2008 financial crisis was

15.3 million. The "real unemployment rate" is over 20 percent, a level that hasn't been recorded since the Great Depression.

If your business *can* hire, consider doing so now. A lot of people are looking for jobs, which provides an opportunity for you to hire highly qualified people who want to work. If your business cannot hire, lay the groundwork for post-pandemic hiring. Here are five things to consider while you are waiting for your business to hire and onboard new staff again:

Remote work. Remote work has been on the upswing for years. According to statistics from an early 2020 FlexJobs study (compiled before the pandemic hit), there had been a 44 percent growth in remote work over the past five years and a 91 percent growth in the past decade. Those numbers have ballooned dramatically since the beginning of the U.S. outbreak.

Businesses and industries that were previously reluctant to dive into the remote work and work-from-home trend are now doing so out of necessity. For proof, consider usage statistics for Zoom, the video conferencing software that many organizations are now relying on to enable at-a-distance meetings with their teams. In December 2019, Zoom was tracking about 10 million meeting participants each day. In April 2020, that number was up above 300 million.

Rather than jettisoning this experience after the pandemic to return fully to in-person operations, consider keeping remote work a part of your business model for the long term. Doing so could expand your candidate pool to include people from a much wider geographic range and attract professionals who typically prefer freelance or gig work because of the flexibility.

Benefits and perks. Now is a good time to examine the benefits and perks that your business is offering to employees. Will all those benefits still make sense after the pandemic? Perks such as workplace gyms or in-office meals might not be as appealing under social distancing. Consider ramping up your focus on employee health insurance and offering flexible scheduling or unrestricted sick days.

Try to be fair. Don't take advantage of the pandemic. Some employers might be tempted to offer lower salaries and fewer benefits as they ramp up their hiring. With unemployment hovering close to 20 percent, candidates will be desperate for work and perhaps more willing to take mediocre job offers. This strategy might pay off in the short term by buying your business quality work for cheap, but in the long run, it will negatively impact company culture, employee morale, recruitment, retention, and word-of-mouth about your business.

Hire remotely. The coronavirus could change how we hire forever. Consider remote hiring as a means of enabling social distancing, saving your company (and your candidates) on travel expenses, and supporting hiring even if your team is still working from home when the time comes to recruit.

Deploy an employee referral program. Many employers were emphasizing or implementing referral programs before the pandemic as unemployment rates hit near-record lows and qualified candidates became harder to find. Keep those programs going. Everyone on your team knows someone who is out of a job. Listening to these referrals can show that you value employee input as you build a team of people who already know each other and work well together, and it will reduce how hard you need to work to find qualified people to fill open positions.

These strategies may seem simple, but they have the potential to make a significant difference for your business—and not just in the immediate aftermath of COVID-19. Strong employee-centered perks, employee referral

programs, and the other strategies cited here aren't temporary emergency measures but rather smart practices that are worth adopting at any point.

Why you need to ramp up your background checks

Another smart practice that your business can adopt—or revamp—is a strong, nuanced background check policy. Vetting your workers thoroughly is always critical, no matter when you are filling a position and who you are hiring. Screening will remain vital over the coming year given the economic situation that COVID-19 has created.

With so many people desperate to get a job, job seekers may be willing to do or say anything to get hired. This trend could lead to increases in lies on resumes, attempts to hide criminal history, or performative interviews that don't provide a dependable sense of how someone will behave on the job. Some candidates may even apply for jobs with false names to pass background checks.

Thorough background checks incorporating criminal history searches, alias and address tracing, resume verifications, and reference checks can help catch lies, spot red flags, and prevent bad hires. At backgroundchecks.com, we provide all the above and much more. Contact us today if you need help developing a robust candidate screening plan for your business.

Conclusion

Not long ago, we were living in one of the most prosperous economies in United States history. In September 2019, the unemployment rate hit 3.5 percent—a 50-year low. Today, we're living through a deadly virus and an economic collapse unlike anything that the country has seen since the days of the Great Depression.

As uncertainties abound, planning is vital for businesses. The organizations that will not only survive this pandemic but thrive in its aftermath are the ones that are most responsive to change. Innovating and adopting new practices to continue operating during COVID-19 have been the focus so far, but soon, employers will need to train their eyes on the next stage: reopening, rebuilding, and repairing.

With COVID-19 behind us, businesses will be scrambling to hire new people and scale their operations back up to full speed. By preparing for that era right now, you can implement your plans faster and more effectively when the time comes—and reap all the benefits that preparedness entails.

Now you know.