How Companies Are Responding to COVID-19 and Returning to Work

During the peak economic disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 40 million Americans filed unemployment claims. As the novel coronavirus wreaked havoc on every aspect of day-to-day life, countless businesses closed their doors—either temporarily or permanently—and laid off their workers. Many other businesses adapted in the face of the virus, closing their offices but staying operational thanks to their staff's ability to work remotely.

As spring faded into summer, stay-at-home orders lifted, and some states began to reboot their economies. Now, following the biggest remote work experiment in our country's history, we are beginning another experiment: a mass return to work set against the backdrop of the pandemic's ongoing disruptions.

It is an uncertain and unprecedented time for businesses, and one that employers are approaching in different ways. In this white paper, we will examine how employers across multiple industries are handling the return to work and what their strategies could mean for the future of work.

Caution: COVID-19 is not over

The COVID-19 pandemic is not over yet. While it's easy to conflate re-openings and returns to work with the conclusion of this public health crisis, the truth is that the coronavirus is still a threat.

On June 24, the United States recorded 45,557 new COVID-19 diagnoses, breaking a record set in April for the highest number of new cases in a single day. While some states have kept the curve largely flat since reopening (including Michigan, Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania), others have recorded significant spikes (including California, Texas, Arkansas, Florida, Utah, and Arizona).

Now you know.

These spikes have caused some businesses to move backward in their reopening plans. In mid-June, Apple announced that it would be closing 11 Apple Stores in Florida, North and South Carolina, and Arizona where COVID-19 case numbers were surging. Several Florida restaurants, including establishments in Jacksonville Beach and Sarasota, have also closed their doors temporarily to help battle the state's second wave.

These instances outline the importance of a steady, cautious plan for bringing employees back to work, especially for organizations that don't require in-person operations to continue working with purpose and productivity. In many cases, a steady return to work is not only possible but required: some industries are only allowed to resume work at partial capacities, and only if they observe multiple specific requirements.

Michigan's manufacturing sector was allowed to resume business starting on May 11, but with caveats. Michigan auto manufacturers were required to start their return to work at 25 percent capacity, and all manufacturers had to abide by requirements including daily entry screenings for workers (including temperature screenings), staggered start times and mealtimes, and temporary physical barriers between work stations.

Bottom line? Employers need to understand that their workplaces will not look the same as they did before the pandemic. The return to normal is going to be a gradual process, and the companies that approach the process as steadily and responsibly as possible will have the most success.

Work-from-home as a tool for safe reopening

From the beginning, work-from-home technologies have been key in allowing companies to remain operational. By late April, the video chat software company Zoom reported that it had surpassed 300 million daily users—up from just 10 million daily users in December. Virtual meetings via video chat; constant communication through email or messaging apps such as Slack; collaboration and file sharing through Dropbox, Google Docs, and more: these systems and others have played a vital role in keeping teams connected and simulating the functions of an office from a distance.

Will some of these shifts to remote work be permanent? Even before COVID-19, remote work was exhibiting steady growth. On February 13—one month before coronavirus started shutting down the U.S. economy—FlexJobs published the findings from its annual remote work survey. The study found that remote work had grown by 91 percent over the preceding decade, and that nearly three-quarters of workers (74 percent) thought of flexible working arrangements as "the new normal."

Multiple pre-pandemic statistics show that remote work is a vital piece of the puzzle for modern businesses—not the norm, but an option that a very significant percentage of employers were already utilizing. A 2019 study from Condeco Software found that 45 percent of American companies were offering some degree of remote work while a Gallup poll from 2016 said that 43 percent of American workers were working from home "at least some of the time."

These trends weren't just driven by decisions at the employer level. Even before the pandemic, evidence suggested that working from home was of interest to most workers. According to Global Workforce Analytics, 80 percent of employees "want to work from home at least some of the time," and more than a third of employees would be willing to "take a pay cut in exchange for the option." According to Amerisleep, which published a lengthy article

titled "Remote Workers and Rest" at the beginning of the pandemic, 75 percent of teleworkers intend to keep working in that fashion for the duration of their careers.

Many employers are currently considering adapting to a long-term work-from-home model. Leading the way are America's tech sector giants, which have all embraced remote work rather than racing back to the office.

Twitter has made the biggest leap, informing employees in May that employees will be permitted to work from home "forever" if they wish to do so and are "in a role and situation" that enables them to work remotely. Google and Facebook are keeping most of their workers at home through at least the end of the year, and Microsoft and Amazon are remaining remote until October at the earliest. Facebook is "aggressively" hiring remote workers—the company no longer expects to be tied to physical office space.

While these major tech companies have attracted headlines by making announcements about long-term work-from-home policies, they aren't the only companies embracing a future dominated by remote work. In a survey of more than 300 CFOs, nearly three-quarters of respondents indicated that they expect five percent or more of their workforces to transition from full-time office roles to full-time work-from-home roles during and following the pandemic.

Not all companies are in a position to transition their teams to working from home permanently. For the most part, the businesses that have been quick to return to the physical workspace—bars, restaurants, retail stores, and manufacturing operations—have done so because they can't function in the same way (or at all) with a work-from-home model.

In total, Global Workplace Analytics estimates that 56 percent of the U.S. workforce could work from home permanently; the other 44 percent of jobs are not compatible with the work-from-home model. However, COVID-19 has challenged those numbers: a Gallup poll from mid-April found that 62 percent of employed adults were working from home out of concern over COVID-19—higher than the 56 percent supposedly "compatible" with working from home.

The most crucial impact that this pandemic could have on the long-term concept of work is forcing businesses to experiment with remote work models and, in the process, to reassess positions' work-from-home "compatibility" in real-time.

Before the pandemic, working from home wasn't the standard in part because managers were skeptical. Even with appropriate technology and the interest of the employees, managers weren't sure that their employees would stay productive if they were allowed to work away from the atmosphere and supervision of the office. COVID-19 has triggered a work-from-home trial for these managers that could potentially change their minds.

Managers seeing that their employees work well from home could be more open to embracing work-from-home options in the future. Since managers have been working from home themselves, that experience could shift their perception. Global Workplace Analytics has cited research showing that managers who have worked from home themselves are more likely to endorse it for other workers, less likely to worry about lost productivity, less likely to worry about lost collaboration among teams, and more likely to see the perks of working from home (such as getting to spend more time with family).

Perhaps more than health fears, these new perspectives could have a lasting impact on the future of work.

Asking an important question: What do employees want?

While employers will lead the way with their strategies for returning to productivity, employee and job-seeker sentiments will likely shape the future of work. As such, employers must consider how workers are feeling about returning to in-person workplaces.

The first critical consideration to note is that fear over COVID-19 has not subsided. According to a poll conducted by Eagle Hill Consulting, 54 percent of U.S. employees are worried about getting exposed to the novel coronavirus at work. Employers need to be extremely sensitive to these worries and take steps to ensure that they are offering a safe environment for returning workers.

Most organizations are letting safety considerations guide the way toward a return to work. BusinessInsurance.com found that 71 percent of U.S. employers have developed safety policies for bringing their employees back to work. Those plans include everything from health screenings and temperature checks at the door every day to layout tweaks intended to allow for social distancing.

There is a collaborative mentality to the return-to-work process. Businesses are publicly sharing their plans, not just to assure employees and customers but also to offer guidance and inspiration to other companies trying to craft their own return-to-work plans. For instance, Kroger—the world's largest grocery chain and one of the businesses that has been operating at full speed all through COVID—has shared a "blueprint" that other businesses can use to strategize safe in-person operations.

The second vital consideration is that even after some of the fears of COVID-19 exposure start to fade away, workers may have strong feelings about remote work. Now could be an ideal time for businesses to re-evaluate whether having a central office where everyone comes to work every day is necessary.

According to Gallup, 26 percent of people currently working remotely would return to in-person workplaces "once businesses and schools reopen." Another 25 percent of employees want to work from home until coronavirus fears subside entirely (likely not until there is a vaccine) but would still prefer to return to the office once they feel that things are safe again. The remaining 49 percent say that they have no desire to return to the office, whether because they are worried about COVID-19 or because they prefer working from home.

The split is evident in the types of jobs that people are looking for right now. Monster has tracked an uptick in searches for gig and remote jobs but has also noticed an increase in searches for retail jobs, food service jobs, and other positions that demand in-person work.

CarInsurance.com found that the average full-time employee has saved $97 per month in gas money by not having to commute and 19.6 hours of commuting time. However, some workers find there are drawbacks to working from home.

A survey conducted by the employee social networking app Fishbowl indicated that the average person had been working 1-10 more hours per week during COVID due to a less clear divide between "work" time and "home" time. A survey from employee experience management company Qualtrics showed that 54 percent of people feel more stressed working from home during the pandemic than they did working in the office due to factors from loneliness to less communication to less clear expectations from managers. Working from home has been a unique challenge for people with kids, who have needed to juggle childcare, homeschooling, and distractions with the pressures of work.

One possible approach for employers is offering an optional return-to-work policy. That way, they can maintain a safer partial capacity in their workplace simply by letting staff decide for themselves whether they want to come to the office or stay home.

A note on hiring and onboarding

Given the exposure risk of face-to-face contact, many employers are currently taking their hiring processes virtual, including interviews and sometimes even training. According to CNBC, 84 percent of recruiters are adapting to incorporate more remote tactics, from video conferencing to connecting with candidates via text and social media. These transitions create new challenges for hiring managers and candidates: it may be challenging to establish a rapport between an interviewer and a candidate on a Zoom call compared to an in-person interview.

Background checks remain critical—perhaps even more than when it was possible to have an authentic in-person experience with a person before hiring them. Though many courthouses were closed during state stay-at-home orders, they are open and operating once more, which means that most checks won't be impacted by pandemic-related delays in any way.

Conclusion

Only time will tell whether the changes forced by COVID-19 will be permanent for the workplace. Potentially, a vaccine will arrive sooner than we think, the virus will drift off into our history, and we will go back to the predominantly face-to-face work model that we have always known. However, it is also possible that the novel coronavirus will remain a threat, and that the changes it has created in the work environment will last.

For now, companies are taking things one day at a time, trying to chart a successful return-to-work strategy while keeping their employees safe. The good news for employers wondering which next steps to take is that every other workplace is figuring these things out, too—businesses are seeking answers and next steps independently, but together.