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return to the workplace

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COVID-19: Return to the workplace

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we work and these changes are permeating far beyond the peak of the contagion. Just as the pandemic is unfolding in stages, the return to pre-COVID-19 economic levels will happen in stages. At this time of disruption, companies may find themselves alternating between three distinct phases depending on the course of the pandemic – respond, return and reinvent.

The three R's: a framework for recovery

Respond → **Return** → **Reinvent**
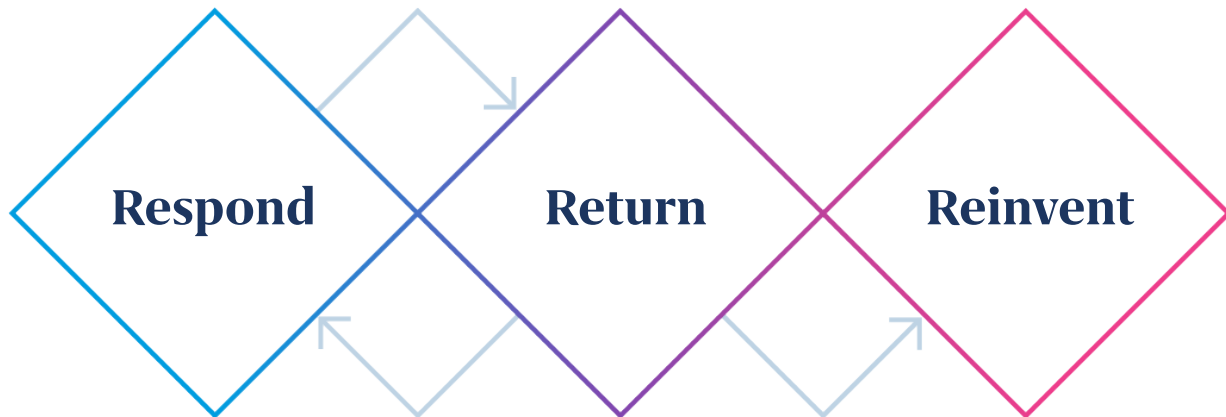
As parts of the globe emerge from the peak transmission phase of the virus, many companies coming back from stay-at-home orders will quickly learn that return to the workplace does not equal return to normal. No one knows what the new normal will look like, but we can learn a great deal from employers of essential workers that have been working hard to keep their people safe onsite.

You need a plan – Who is returning to the workplace, when and how?

Once you have a handle on the respond phase, it is time to think about your plans for the "return" phase. You will want to balance empathy – preserving your employees' health and well-being and supporting their financial wellness – with economics. You should build out scenario plans based on physical distancing measures continuing for at least the next few months, if not longer. Evaluate business impacts, cash flow requirements, and cost-saving tactics you will need to consider under each scenario. Determine which employees must perform their job at the workplace. As you establish whom, how and when your employees should return to the workplace, work through how to recall employees

and what alternative working arrangements to deploy to minimize potential exposure. In addition, think about what you can do to ensure your employees are productive, physically well and mentally strong. Most importantly, they need to know that they are returning to safe workplaces.

Prepare your workplace and your employees

When determining how many employees to return to the workplace initially, ask why anybody should be there. Not all jobs should come back and not all workers want to come back. As you plan to return certain job functions to the physical workplace, take the opportunity to evaluate which roles can thrive in a remote-first environment. This will help you determine which employees are essential to have on-site and the minimum level of staffing you will need at the workplace.

Importantly, all employees will need to know they are returning to a safe workplace. In a recent Mercer survey, nearly half (45%) of responding employers with essential workers have had issues with employees not coming to work because they are afraid of getting sick.[1]

Developing a comprehensive plan to keep employees safe at work is your top priority. Follow the lead of your state and local officials, and remember just because you may be "allowed" to reopen the workplace, does not mean you should do so immediately. Before reopening, having a plan in place is critical, and you will likely need to plan for a phased reopening.

State and Local Guidance

State and local authorities will determine when workplaces may reopen, and the requirements under which employers may bring people back to the workplace. Some common workplace requirements implemented by state governors are:

- Physical distancing – An effective method of slowing the spread of COVID-19. Since the virus spreads largely from person to person, it is important to maintain a distance of six feet or more.[2]

- Provide masks – The CDC recommends cloth face coverings to slow the spread of COVID-19.[3] Employers should check with local authorities for mandates specific to their workplace.[4]

- Capacity restrictions – Several states are implementing capacity restrictions for businesses that reopen, for example limiting the number of people within restaurants, office buildings and retail settings.[5]

- Cleaning and disinfecting guidelines – The CDC has posted considerations for employers.[6] Look for state specific guidelines as well.

State and local mandates will continue to change, so employers must monitor and adjust protocols as necessary. For multi-site employers, this will be a complex exercise.

Workplace Safety

Be intentional in your planning. Consider how your employees will flow through your facilities to perform their work, and also how customers will interact in your space. This will help you determine the physical modifications to make before employees return. Our survey found that while nearly all employers of essential workers have made changes to ensure employees keep the proper distance from coworkers and customers, more than one in three (30%) say they have had problems doing so.[7] There is no one distancing solution that will work in all situations, so employers will need a plan that best suits their specific workplace and staffing needs.

2 CDC
3 per the CDC
4 https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/no-20217-continuing-temporary-suspension-and-modification-laws-relating-disaster-emergency
5 https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-issues-executive-order-relating-to-the-expanded-reopening-of-services
6 https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html
7 https://taap.mercer.com/covid19results, Global Survey #4, United States

Overcoming the physical distancing challenge may require alternative working arrangements to reduce the number of employees in a workplace at a given time. According to Mercer's survey, 63% of respondents planning for return to work are considering "staggered returns" with measures like having employees whose last names start with A-M working on certain days and N-Z working other days. Other employers (44%) say they will create smaller work groups in order to limit the mixing of employees and groups at the workplace.[8]

Many have speculated that keeping non-essential workers "virtual" will be a popular and effective way for employers to ensure physical distance and safety. While 38% say that employees will continue to work virtually in the short-term and return to onsite working when deemed safe, only 8% say they will continue to allow most employees to continue to work virtually as much as possible, regardless of physical distancing rules. However, 76% of employers state that they will review their remote working policies during the next three to six months.[9]

Essential employers are also implementing testing and assessment strategies to identify infected employees. While 43% of respondents with essential workers say they have conducted COVID-19 screenings and assessments, only about one-third (35%) of the respondents planning for return to work expect to take such measures, most commonly with temperature screenings (26%) and/or by administering a symptom questionnaire (20%). Although antibody testing is receiving heightened attention, just 4% of all respondents say they are planning to conduct serology screening for antibodies. Just 3% say they will screen for the presence of the virus.[9]

Employers that share building space with other businesses will need to work together to determine how to keep employees and visitors safe. How will shared spaces be modified and cleaned? Will on-site screenings/assessments be required for entry into the building? Be prepared to incorporate protocols and processes dictated by other organizations.

Remember, the decisions you make in the midst of a pandemic do not have to be permanent. In fact, some of them should not be permanent. However, you will find yourself looking at your workplaces, employees and the work they perform through a new lens and you may be surprised at the number of improvements you will want to make permanent.

Key questions to ask:
- What job functions are essential for working onsite?
- How can we successfully accomplish physical distancing within our workplace?
- What additional cleaning procedures do we need to adopt?[10] Do we have the supplies?
- Will we implement workplace testing or health assessments?
- How will we respond to employees who do not feel safe coming back to the workplace?
- How will we safely accommodate workplace visitors (customers, vendors, non-employees, etc.)?
- How can we prepare workers for what to expect when they return?
- How can we train our managers and employees regarding our return protocol and new operational policies, such as those regarding social distancing?

Support your people

All of these safety changes will require a large amount of training and communication. Clearly articulate how you are making your decisions, whose guidance you follow (e.g. CDC, WHO) and reinforce you are following their latest recommendations. Be transparent about the state of your business and what is next. Commit to setting expectations and telling your employees what the return process will look like, what is going to happen, how things will be different, and how they will need to act differently when they return.

Do not wait until plans are finalized to begin communicating. Start now and tell employees that the situation is fluid so you will be adjusting and refining your plans as you go. Setting up tools like microsites, videos, leadership cascades, even pulse surveys and digital focus groups are important components of your plan.

8 https://taap.mercer.com/covid19results, Global Survey #4, United States
9 https://taap.mercer.com/covid19results, Global Survey #4, United States
10 https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html

Once you determine who should return, and you have communicated your plan, you must consider whether those employees have a safe method to commute to work. If the only option is crowded public transportation, evaluate the safety measures local transportation officials are taking. This may be a reason to extend remote working, even if local authorities are allowing people to return to the physical workplace. In addition, reduced transportation schedules or capacity restrictions may require flexible working arrangements, including adjusted start and end times.

You should also take into account employees who are caring for elderly relatives, infected family members, or children at home due to daycare and school closings. Many schools and summer camps have closed for the remainder of the year, making it difficult for some employees to return to the workplace. These accommodations may also necessitate flexible working arrangements or additional benefits to support caregivers.

Keep in mind that the virus is still active, and employees may become ill, or may have family members who become ill and require care. Paid leave policies are a critical element in supporting your people, and minimizing the spread of communicable diseases in the workplace.[11]

Key questions to ask:

- What communication methods will be utilized – recognizing the need for agility in response to rapidly changing circumstances?

- Do your current paid leave practices support a strict policy to stay at home if someone is sick with COVID-19 symptoms?

- Will premium pay be provided for onsite workers – recognizing risks in the environment or curtailing potential staffing shortages due to employees not wanting to return to work?

- Will potential imbalances need to be addressed between employees' regular earnings and the earnings of those who will remain on furlough with enhanced unemployment benefits?

- How will you accommodate employees caring for elderly family members or a family member with an underlying health condition?

- How will you accommodate employees caring for children who do not have childcare due to daycare, school, or summer camp closures?

- What expanded benefits, such as childcare or commuting assistance, will be made available to support employees who return to the workplace?

- How will workers who continue remote working be supported?

11 https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/1/19-0743_article

Strengthen your enterprise resilience

The success of your return process will hinge on your ability to monitor and intervene when needed. You will need to monitor national, state, and local developments and enact new mandates and recommendations. You will also need to keep an eye on your workflows and worker productivity. Most importantly, you will want to collect feedback from your employees. Consider providing continuous feedback mechanisms for employees to share actionable comments regarding concerns, productivity, or health risks. These tools, coupled with transparent empathetic communication practices can foster trust and strengthen an employer's culture, which can pay dividends far beyond the current crisis.

Key questions to ask:

- What criteria will be used to determine if safety is being maintained?

- How will ongoing employee health be monitored?

- How will the organization respond if there is a resurgence of the disease in a geography or population?

- How and when will monitoring and intervention be communicated to key stakeholders?

- How will the needs and perceptions of the workforce be monitored?

- What tools will be used for listening to employees on the front lines to identify issues or challenges that need to be addressed?

The opportunity for reinvention

As US businesses reopen, be prepared for customer demand to be soft. Many businesses will be cash constrained and everyone will be aggressively fighting for market share. On the brighter side, compared to prior recessions, today's companies have more tools to tackle these challenges. There are significant opportunities available to us if we remain thoughtful and proactively agile. Remember it is far easier to make changes when the world around you is already shifting.

It is time to promote the digital front door to health

This pandemic has significantly accelerated the adoption of technology[12], including novel applications in the delivery of health care in a virtual setting. While telemedicine has been around for many years, utilization has lagged. Among large employers (500+ employees) with programs in use in 2019 an average of 9% of eligible employees had at least one telemedicine visit.[13] With the emergence of COVID-19, and the response from the healthcare system to minimize in-person care in favor of virtual options, there have been huge spikes in utilization.[14] This massive increase in the uptake of virtual services combined with expanding vendor capabilities, regulatory advancements, and increasing outside investment represent a significant opportunity for employers to consider the role virtual care plays within their healthcare benefits.[15,16] Consumers are demonstrating a willingness to embrace different modalities of care and employers should be exploring ways to offer them. For many years, telemedicine has been an add-on service, somewhat of an afterthought, but the current environment brings ripe opportunity thanks to incredible investment in the space, enhanced technology improving the user experience, and overall willingness by both consumers and medical providers to use these services.

It is time to recognize the value (and potential) of flexible working

The best workplace example of agility during the pandemic is the prevalence of remote working. Prior to COVID-19, an estimated 16% of workers in the US performed their job duties remotely at least part time.[17] According to our Mercer spot survey, 88% of employers implemented flexible working from home policies in response to the pandemic, and 76%

12 https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/07/technology/coronavirus-internet-use.html
13 Mercer's 2018 National Survey of Employer-Sponsored Health Plans
14 Teladoc's usage went up by more than 50% (March 6-13, 2020)
15 https://www.ama-assn.org/practice-management/digital/federal-communications-commission-fcc-releases-its-covid-19-telehealth
16 https://rockhealth.com/reports/amidst-a-record-3-1b-funding-in-q1-2020-digital-health-braces-for-covid-19-impact/?mc_cid=5b51827905&mc_eid=566d9b77e5
17 https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/10/cover-remote-work

of employers plan to revisit their remote working policies within the next 3 to 6 months.[18,19]

Prior to the pandemic, many organizations never contemplated a remote work culture, yet many have found success despite the unique nature of the situation. This is an opportunity for employers to reimagine the employee experience in a remote-first or blended work culture and, in doing so, evaluate and enhance the digital tools available throughout their organization.

Additional support for remote working will also influence how employers plan workforce demand and supply, and will begin to eliminate some of the traditional staffing and hiring barriers that come with physical workplaces. Imagine having a workforce that does not require cubicles, public transit subsidies and cafeterias – what might your organization be able to do with that freed up capital?

As organizations evaluate flexible working practices, employers must acknowledge the need to support employee well-being – across physical, financial, emotional, and social domains. It is not enough simply to send someone home with their laptop and mobile phone. Successful, sustained remote working strategies include resources to ensure that your people stay connected even when physically distant.

It is time to redesign Human Resources

Many of the above are useful considerations that can feed into broader workforce transformation plans and raise the question of how the HR function should be reinvented for the future. Organizations should take this disruptive time to consider questions such as:

- How might the HR organization become more agile and adapt to changing business needs – for example, redeploying talent acquisition teams in the midst of hiring freezes to other priorities such as employee engagement?

- Is your digital footprint enabling you to respond to business needs – such as data analytics for workforce planning and agile communication vehicles?

- Are essential processes – such as sick and paid leave – too cumbersome, and require radical simplification to increase operational effectiveness?

With every crisis there is an opportunity and now may be the time to rethink your HR operating model and ensure you have the right mix of talent within HR to better support the needs of your business.

18 https://app.keysurvey.com/reportmodule/REPORT2/report/41484270/41192130/86f52ca468c76b62750eff8efe9cb5ff?Dir=&EncDir=2d2ecd16&av=lxnIBAm77ac%3D&afterVoting=a7ef19bb394c&m-sig=6e7f611adbf07b9a07c53375c8fa4642

19 https://app.keysurvey.com/reportmodule/REPORT2/report/41488264/41196084/81161cc101fab7845b8cb-499d857e8b9?Dir=&Enc_Dir=60e929fb&av=lxnIBA-m77ac%3D&afterVoting=766b5e62be4f&msig=32162cb48db-989d5d550fdc13ba64dc0

Conclusion

As you prepare to return employees to the workplace, balancing empathy and economics in decision-making will be crucial and will involve tough decisions. You will want to preserve your employees' health and well-being, support their financial wellness, and stay connected to what matters most to your people. Redesigning the employee experience and welcoming new ways of working will mean the difference between mere re-entry and maximum resurgence.

Learn more at the Mercer US COVID-19 Hub and request a consultation, or contact your Mercer Consultant.