

Communication: A Vital Tool for Managing the Post-COVID-19 Workplace

A midwestern utility quickly transitioned 1,500 employees to remote work. “We didn’t think it could be done—until we had to do it,” said the utility’s human resources manager.

Across the U.S., thousands of employers have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by moving millions of employees to remote work. For most of these employees, this is the first time they’ve worked away from their traditional workplace.

At some point, “Safer at Home” or similar orders will be curtailed, and employers must decide how, when or even *if* their employees will return to work. Unlike the initial orders, employers will have more time and flexibility in making these decisions.

While financial pressures are forcing businesses to recover as quickly as possible, it is also important they take a balanced and measured approach when making decisions. To do so successfully, it’s crucial for employers to communicate extensively with their employees.



The benefits of communication

Communication is vital to keeping employees engaged, easing their concerns and motivating them to re-connect. Start having these conversations now. Let people know that this is a work in progress and that you don’t have all the answers yet; that’s what you’re working toward.

Even before state governments announce changes, reach out to your employees and let them know you are working on plans, and you welcome their questions and input. This is important for building trust with your workforce and leadership teams.

Here are a few guidelines:

- **Listen (and then listen some more).** Employees need to feel heard, especially during and after a crisis. Listen to them with an open mind, and don’t feel like you need all the answers or that you must fix all their problems. Employees will feel more secure when they know their employers respect them enough to listen.
- **Be honest.** Be as open as you can about the positive and negative aspects of the business. Integrity builds trust. Let employees know what’s happening rather than letting the “rumor mill” speak for you.

- **Admit what you don't know.** Be confident in your actions but realize you can't control everything. If you don't know something, say so. Let others know what you're doing to get information and how it will be communicated.
- **Be transparent.** Sometimes plans change or a situation doesn't work as planned. Admit that it wasn't the preferred outcome and provide information regarding the next steps.

Additional strategies to ease the transition

People's ability to return to work will be challenged by practical and logistical factors, such as childcare availability, financial hardships, changes to living situations or transportation. Also, many people are likely to be fearful and anxious about returning to the workplace. Do not make arbitrary, blanket policies; instead, try to allow for as much flexibility as you can while recognizing the needs of the business.

People are also likely to have various reactions about returning to the workplace. Many may have realized that working remotely is not for them. They miss the social aspects of seeing co-workers on a regular basis. They may wish to return to work before the organization is prepared for them to do so. This can be addressed by assessing whether specific jobs can be done on-site or remotely. The more critical the worksite is to job performance, the higher priority that employee has for returning to work.

Many people might seem unusually anxious or frightened at the prospect of returning to the workplace. However, these are normal reactions to an unprecedented, traumatic situation. For example, when people return from quarantine, it's common for them to show signs of detachment, isolation, hopelessness, depression, agitation or other symptoms of acute stress. In fact, behavioral health organizations across the world are reporting increased levels of stress, depression and anxiety-related symptoms. Despite all assurances of safety, some individuals may decide they simply cannot return to their previous worksite.

It's normal for people to be afraid. While employers may not want to push employees too hard, they need to set expectations regarding workers' roles and how management will provide support. One-on-one conversations will be vital to accomplishing this. Actively listen to employees' concerns and provide factual, concrete information about what the organization is doing to promote their well-being. For example:

- Many organizations phase in their employees' return to allow for continued social distancing. Involve your employees as much as possible in scheduling time in the workplace. This can provide them with a sense of control instead of feeling that something is being forced on them.
- Have direct, honest conversations with your employees about their concerns. Help them identify issues by listening intently to whether they need information, support or additional opportunities to re-connect with co-workers. Once concerns are identified, offer information or plans to address them.
- Ask employees to share what they miss about the workplace and what they're looking forward to.
- Provide reasonable and accurate assurances about what the company is doing to ensure employees' physical health. This may include how the company is cleaning and disinfecting work areas, replacing air

filters or purchasing and providing hand sanitizer, face masks, etc. If possible, you can also provide temperature checks and wellness screenings.

- Given the magnitude of this crisis, it is possible that some members of your workforce may not have survived the pandemic. Employees may appreciate the opportunity to acknowledge these losses and may want personal assistance. Managers can contact the EAP to arrange for on-site grief counseling and remind employees to contact the EAP for more individual support.
- Acknowledge your own stress and worry and remind employees that their EAP can help address any ongoing mental or emotional concerns. It can also be a source of information and assistance with family care. In some cases, it can also be a resource for financial or legal help.

There is no doubt that workplaces will be changed by this crisis. The EAP can be a great source of support and guidance in navigating these transitions: managers can consult with the EAP about individual conversations with anxious employees or get ideas for how to conduct regular back-to-work check-ins with their teams. It's helpful to remember that we are all in this together. Finding opportunities to support each other can make our future workplace better for all of us. Please contact your account manager for assistance.