CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) RETURNING THE WORKFORCE TO THE OFFICE

Douglas J Miller, SPHR, SHRM-SCP
HR Focus Point
April 20, 2020

As COVID-19 began to take a grip on the world, around mid-March, workplaces began to shut down and employees were instructed to work from home. And while employees worked from home, not only did they do their best to engage, remain motivated, and show strength for their families--they were bombarded with bad news week after week. Some were inflicted with the virus themselves or knew someone who was directly impacted. Some saw their colleagues, friends, and family lose their jobs. The stock market and 401(k) investments began to lose significant value. Those who traveled and attended remote meetings or conferences saw abrupt cancellations. Some were ordered to stay at home, where 'home' was unsafe and stresses caused these homesteads to be increasingly volatile. Some witnessed their political leaders fail them. Some saw their customers evaporate and heard their companies are in financial trouble. Some simply don't know how healthy their companies are as they look to the future.

Life moving forward is uncertain. We've adapted somewhat to our sequestered home lives. We have learned to schedule trips to the grocery store. Many of us collect our sanitation kits before venturing out--we are getting used to grabbing our masks, gloves and hand sanitizer. We wipe down our carts. We do our best to keep our distance from others.

This virus has tested all of us in many different ways both organizationally and personally.

As municipalities contemplate when to ease stay-at-home orders, it is time for organizations to consider what a return to the workplace looks like. Remember, whenever we expect people to return to work--lives have been impacted, routines have been turned upside down, anxiety exists, nervousness abounds. Contemplating the return of staff to the workplace should be deliberate, thoughtful, and done with compassion, dignity and respect.

There likely will be many factors that will take time for governments to sort out. The factors that may impact workplaces include:

- large scale COVID and antibody testing requirements;
- contact tracing;
- social distancing requirements;
- common area restrictions;
- capacity limitations; and
- mask wearing

Every organization is different, but here are a few points to consider -

1. Remember - easing people back is not only for the economy and organizational health. We first should consider how we do it while caring for our workforce and doing our best to ease any anxiety. Some may not only be anxious, but they may be scared.
   - There are several legal matters to consider before 'strong-arming' employees to return to work such as ADA, OSH Act, NLRA, and FFCRA, to name a few.
2. Emphasize the availability of employee assistance programs, behavioral health benefits, etc.
3. Acknowledge support for employees as the world deliberately works to get back to some semblance of normalcy, but recognize this will be a process (a logistical process as well as an emotional process).
4. Continue to allow for heightened work-from-home flexibility for a period of time, say 3-6 months.
   - Keep in mind, some schools will remain closed for some time...thus impacting working parents.
   - Some employees may feel unsafe for a while especially if their commute involves taking public transportation.
5. Before anyone returns to work - consider asking returning employees to complete a survey.
   - The survey may include such questions as: Have you been exposed to someone with COVID-19 within the last two weeks? Have you had any of the following symptoms within the last two weeks - elevated temperature, loss of taste, loss of smell, dry cough, shortness of breath, etc.
6. Have the workplace cleaned before returning staff. The office is likely dusty and stuffy after being shuttered for many weeks. Also, food may have been left behind--so pantries and refrigerators should be cleaned with expired food discarded.
7. Consider how the workplace layout impacts the ability to social distance and make adjustments where feasible.
8. As stay-at-home orders ease, consider opening the workplace in waves.
   - Communities may still require people to continue social distancing, so returning employees in waves may make sense. Do you ask for directors to return first? How about operational functions (HR, IT, Finance, etc.)?
   - Another possibility may be to have different sets of employees come in on certain days potentially based on desk numbers. You can number all the desks and have even numbers come in on Mondays and Wednesdays while odd desk numbers come in on Tuesdays and Thursdays...and Fridays is still a work-from-home day. This arrangement will likely allow for social distancing.
   - Experiment, engage, adjust, and communicate along the way.
9. Train your managers on how to be connected leaders, how to handle anxiety in the workplace, working with a diverse set of employees, to be empathetic, to be agile, to rally the troops around a common set of goals, etc. We're certainly in this together.
10. Even without specific directives from the government, consider putting in place temporary workplace policies.
    - These may include:
      - Wearing masks when social distancing is not possible (and, if available, employers can provide masks for their employees and visiting guests).
      - Meetings of five or more should require all to dial in.
      - During any unscheduled absences, an explanation is required which appears to be permissible during a pandemic as not being a disability-related inquiry (and a temporary policy that any medical-related absences require a doctor's note or if someone is sent home due to presenting symptoms).
11. Consider temperature checks or temperature scanning.

- Currently, it appears it is admissible for employers to undertake temperature checks for individuals entering the office as a means to help prevent infections from entering the workplace; however, organizations will want to consider the emotional impact of doing so.
- A less invasive approach would be implementing a thermal-camera protocol, perhaps a better solution for high traffic larger workplaces.

12. Increase frequency of office cleaning and have plenty of soap and disinfectant wipes available.
13. Consider revising work-from-home policies.
    - This may be for a later conversation as things take time to get back to a balanced environment. The future discussion involves questions such as what roles can effectively work from home, what is the company culture, what is the management capabilities, what employee behavioral components add to success while working from home, etc.
    - In the meantime, show increased flexibility over a stated period of time.
14. Revisit leave of absence legal changes including the temporary rule under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act.
15. Organizations should demonstrate they have taken reasonable steps to protect their employees in a thoughtful and deliberate manner and work to align decisions to the recommendations of the applicable country's Center for Disease Control and Prevention.
16. Remember to care for one another.

There is a lot to think about. In the end, don't take returning people to the workplace lightly. Remember, you are returning people, not just resources. Recognize diversity--everyone has been and will continue to be impacted differently...some in very profound ways and others less so. Be kind. Be supportive. Be generous.

About HR Focus Point® (www.HRFocusPoint.com) -
HR Focus Point offers leadership development programs, Human Resources expertise and consulting services. We are a catalyst to move organizations forward by being a strategic driver, engaging with businesses on multiple levels, and increasing leadership capabilities. Our signature speaking engagement centers around the concept of **Everything Pins to Leadership**® with multiple off-shoot training programs to effectively develop leaders in an increasingly complex world.

At one time or another, business leaders determine they need to focus on the realities of today. There are a host of challenges continuously facing leaders. **HR Focus Point** is here to help focus on a defined business strategy and how to achieve success whether that's achieving the tactical side of HR, bringing a strategic approach to HR, or to ultimately increase an organization's leadership capacity.

To discuss how Returning the Workforce to the Office impacts your business - send us an email: marketing@hrfocuspoint.com.