Perspectives: Navigating Your Post COVID-19 Workplace

Going back to work for most people is going to feel a lot different than when they left. The changes may seem surreal, with people wearing masks, separated by partitions and avoiding physical contact. There will be no more handshakes, fist bumps or hugs. Many coworkers will still be at home as operations ramp up in phases. Although policies and technology are more important than ever during COVID-19, we must remember that people are essential to any back-to-work plan.

We can be certain the global COVID-19 pandemic will change the workplace forever. The good news is that we have an opportunity to make the office even better than it was before. Here are some people-focused tips.

1. **Focus on employee mental health**. COVID-19 is bringing into sharp focus the importance of maintaining the mental health of the workforce. A recent JAMA study predicts increased anxiety and depression, substance use, loneliness and domestic violence. Employers can't hope their employees aren't affected or will be able to manage everything on their own. Introduce initiatives that focus on mental and physical well-being.

2. **Build trust through transparency**. The primary factor in employee engagement is the sense that their organization cares for them. Be proactive and engage in a people-first approach to change. Share plans that are still under development whenever possible. Identify change advocates at every level and empower them to help others. Engage early and over-communicate, especially when it comes to meeting the expectations of people and how the organization can help. Remember that many employees are facing new stressors both at home and at work. Most large employers offer employee assistance programs that can assist with personal and wellness issues.

3. **Rebuild workplace morale**. Successful businesses thrive on motivated workforces, so it is important you rebuild morale. Acknowledge employee concerns and treat announcements regarding the new environment with sensitivity. Some effective tactics include promoting achievements, encouraging cross-functional collaboration and sharing positive visions of the future. Remote team-building events such as games and town halls can be effective too.
4. **Optimize current experience.** When they cannot be together physically, maximize connections between coworkers by delivering work, as well as services, community and culture remotely. This investment will boost engagement and continue to benefit your organization well into the future.
5. **Determine who needs to come back and how to group them.** Helping employees work together effectively should guide decisions about who returns to the office and where you locate them in the facility. Since it is likely people will return in stages, there must be a way to decide who will be in the building at the same time. Assessments and surveys can be valuable to gather perspectives on teams and interdependencies
6. **Reconsider telework and physical space.** Take advantage of this opportunity to embrace transformation. Remote work can be an effective element of a blended workplace strategy Ultimately, this can make the workforce stronger and even improve recruiting because you can hire talent that is located anywhere.
7. **Prepare policies and processes.** Begin with the expectation that constant cleaning will be necessary. Engage in a dialog with maintenance and building owners to ensure that all resources are cleaned appropriately. It is likely you will need to purchase personal protective equipment including gloves, masks, hand sanitizer and other supplies.
8. **"De-densify".** This is a new word we must all embrace. It could mean changing desk usage to keep an empty seat between occupants. It may be necessary to implement desk-sharing. Other steps could include instituting clean desks for sanitation, making traffic in narrow corridors one-way and limiting areas of assembly within the office.
9. **Pay attention to restrooms and pantries.** Chances are that changes must be made to usage, maintenance and equipment to limit potential exposure by decreasing the number of people who are sharing spaces and surfaces. There is now an even greater need to embrace the long-term trends toward smart buildings (which enable touchless operation), well buildings (for fresh air and daylight) and space booking and clean desk policies (which enable flexibility and efficient utilization).
10. **Focus on outputs versus face time.** In a post-COVID-19 world, employees should be measured by what gets done and the value of work, instead of the time to get it done. Motivating employees to perform will require providing clear metrics, measurement and modeling focused on organizational priorities and goals rather than tasks. Organizations must remove stigma and support employees' needs to make time for self-care–including exercise, meals and family time.