

What Will Reopening Workplaces Look Like?

Companies' and workers' priorities have changed during the coronavirus pandemic

By Dinah Wisenberg Brin

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When U.S. mayors and governors eventually lift the social distancing orders they imposed to curb the coronavirus outbreak, reopening businesses likely won't be as simple as switching on the lights and welcoming employees back to their desks.

HR experts expect employers and employees to experience a new work world initially, and perhaps long term, rather than business as usual once the lethal pandemic abates.

Boeing, for example, will slowly restart production of aircraft (<https://q13fox.com/2020/04/16/back-to-work-for-27000-boeing-commercial-airplanes-workers-starting-next-week/>) in Seattle on Monday, after having shut down its operations March 25. Workers will return in phases and will find new face masks, handwashing stations and wellness checks.

Not only will organizations need to consider measures to ensure the health and safety of their returning workforces—phased-in returns to the workplace and physical distancing, for instance—they also may encounter greater employee demand for flexible hours, remote-work arrangements and generous paid sick leave as part of the new normal.

"I think we're walking into a completely different world with a different set of rules," said Chester Lantin, SHRM-CP, HR director at Chicago marketing agency Walker Sands.

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Reopening May Start and Then Stop

Business leaders told President Donald Trump, who recently announced phased-in, less-restrictive social distancing guidelines (<https://apnews.com/420a38ec14101eab70e07be367ee6422>), that they want to see extensive testing and more available personal protective equipment (https://apnews.com/83080cc7017c7bad433d33511cc67d3d?mkt_tok=eyJpLjoiWXBmFIURXdZVEZoWm1RNCIsInQiOiJYT09INEs0RTInVjVDeEViSmFXMEdMNVM5a0VuUGhMUW5adkpkMkx0TVVwQzNhWIRyN1B0dDh2UDNsRDB5OUdPOE1rckdDemN3bzRnVk0zQjNHh2s2NFliU256ZmNqVlpsSRkhZWtL0U5UGthK2J2UlpCUVnVbTByakNaEVc5Q2dVln0%3D) before allowing people to go back to work.

Large swaths of the U.S. economy remain fully or partially shut down or are operating remotely as the country struggles to contain the virus, which has claimed more than 30,000 lives domestically. At the same time, employers are starting to think about moves they might take to re-establish a regular work life, including rotating schedules, virus screening, cleaning and providing protective equipment.

"We're still in the respond stage of the crisis, so the return-to-work discussions right now are really about who essentially needs to come back," said Mary Ann Sardone, Georgia-based partner and U.S. talent solutions leader at consulting firm Mercer. "And the term 'essential' has a lot of different definitions, depending on the state you're in and your industry."

Mercer is developing a "respond, return, reinvention" model, she said, "because we don't think companies are going to come back exactly the way they left."

And the firm expects the return to be long. "We think it's going to be lumpy, and we think it's going to go on a while," said Sardone, noting that some employers may question the need for workers to be back onsite.

"I could see that return drag on for six months plus, at least," she said. "The return will come in waves and phases, and I think there will be a real examination about what needs to return and when."

Forecasters expect the outbreak and restrictions to mitigate them to persist for months or longer, with potential subsequent waves of waning and resurgence, until a vaccine or effective treatment becomes widely available.

Neel Kashkari (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-neel-kashkari-on-face-the-nation-april-12-2020/>), president and CEO of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, suggested that government and businesses may need to focus on coronavirus response for 18 months, even though the economy can't remain shut down for that long.

"I'm focusing on 18 months because we're looking around the world. As [lawmakers] relax the economic controls, the virus flares back up again. And that makes intuitive sense because so many people have the disease, but they don't show any symptoms. So you don't know who's spreading the disease and who isn't," Kashkari said in a televised interview.

"So we could have these waves of flare-ups, controls, flare-ups and controls until we actually get a therapy or a vaccine. I think we should all be focusing on an 18-month strategy for our health care system and our economy. If it ends up being shorter than that, that's great. We should prepare for the worst-case scenario," he said.

Morgan Stanley (<https://www.politico.com/newsletters/playbook/2020/04/13/a-silver-of-good-news-for-trump-488880>) reportedly drew a timeline (https://pbs.twimg.com/media/EVbE9_FXgAYHGhb?format=jpg&name=large) for getting the country back to work that includes a projection for the first segment of employees returning in June and the second in midsummer, and schools reopening this fall, followed by a potential second infection wave starting in November. This timeline sees the potential for widespread vaccination in March 2021.

Workers' Priorities Have Changed

When employees return to the workplace, HR consultants predict that many will have shifted priorities after a long stretch of remote work and sheltering in place with their families.

"We're all in this petri dish. We're all in this experiment that's been happening around us, and many of us have wanted more flexibility by our bosses, by our employers, and for many reasons haven't been afforded it," Boston-area HR consultant Tom O'Connor, SHRM-SCP, said.

"I think that people are going to not only demand more flexibility, but they're going to have a proven business case for it," he said, adding that anecdotal accounts suggest individual productivity has increased as employees work from home.

Employers hurting financially after the shutdown might find that keeping employees working from home can help cut costs, O'Connor noted. "As this goes on it's going to be a blueprint ... of how businesses might operate in the future."

Schedules and Work Areas Shift

Lantin said he's been thinking about the issues HR may face once employees start coming back to the office, including the possibility that some workers won't be comfortable taking public transportation or being in the office.

His employer, Walker Sands, which has an open work environment, already was "remote-work friendly," he said, and he anticipates that some employees will seek to keep working from home.

"I could see us writing a ton of new policies" related to remote work, commuting and workspace, Lantin said. Although no one's expressed specific concerns yet, he's been considering the possibility of "hoteling," in which no one has a permanent desk, to help keep workers a safe distance from each other.

Mercer, which has been talking to clients and surveying employers

([https://app.keysurvey.com/reportmodule/REPORT2/report/1479157/41188346/857806faa7b734af8f960cdaaeb43587?](https://app.keysurvey.com/reportmodule/REPORT2/report/1479157/41188346/857806faa7b734af8f960cdaaeb43587?Dir=&Enc_Dir=8129ead7&av=lxnIBAm77ac%3D&afterVoting=6ed597adacce&msg=b69a8d67569063f9c374d5de6672aa83)

Dir=&Enc_Dir=8129ead7&av=lxnIBAm77ac%3D&afterVoting=6ed597adacce&msg=b69a8d67569063f9c374d5de6672aa83) around the world, has started to hear about rotating schedules, splitting teams and staggering the workforce so firms don't concentrate workers in one place.

"I think there's going to be a lot of experimentation with that, depending on the industry," said Sardone. Some employers with essential workers onsite are incorporating split shifts so workers aren't all in the same place at the same time, she said. But that can be difficult to manage.

"Longer term, there's going to be a lot more questioning around where to work and the hours of working," said Sardone. "We have this massive experiment to show us what is possible."

Pay Practices Change, Too

Meanwhile, retailers, fast-food companies, manufacturers and other employers unaccustomed to having workers exposed to serious illness may need to provide hazard or premium pay during the high-risk period, Sardone said, adding that some already are doing so. "This is unfolding day by day."

The return phase can be complex, with schools and day cares closed and children at home, Sardone noted. Employees may need more paid-sick and family leave.

"I think more time with family at home is going to change the dynamic about the role that work plays in [an employee's] life," she said.

Time to Create Policies and Guidelines

Automotive-seating manufacturer Lear Corp. recently published the "Safe Work Playbook (<https://lear.com/safeworkplaybook>)," a guide for safe practices at work during the pandemic, including steps for cleaning and disinfecting equipment, staggering shifts and lunch breaks, setting up a pandemic response team, establishing onsite health screening, and creating protocols for isolating employees who come to work sick.

The 51-page guidebook, which includes information based on recommendations from the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, aims to help organizations navigate the new normal, said Lear President and CEO Ray Scott. "This has been a difficult time for everyone, and re-establishing a workplace where employees feel comfortable performing their jobs safely is a multifaceted challenge."

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