

COVID-19

Returning to the Workplace

Six Key Questions Every Employer Should be Prepared to Answer

As governments continue to lift safety restrictions and pave the way for workplace re-openings, questions are swirling among employees and employers alike about what the future will hold. The good news is that employers are taking these next steps from a relatively strong position of employee trust. Research fielded by FTI Consulting in April 2020 found that 61 percent of employees have greater trust in their employer than they did prior to the pandemic¹. This trust was hard earned. Most companies have demonstrated a strong commitment to employee safety and wellness throughout the pandemic and, in many cases, sacrificed profits to do so.

As we enter this next phase, however, the answers will not always be as clear. Finding the right balance between confidence and a willingness to iterate and learn together will be critical. The following communications Dos and Do Nots are intended to help employers anticipate – and prepare for – the questions that are likely top-of-mind for their teams as they take their next steps toward recovery:

1. What new policies are in place to keep me safe?

DO

Communicate decisions about return-to-work policies as decisions are made and well before employees are asked to return to work. The final set of policies should set expectations for attendance onsite, hand washing and other personal safety precautions; workspace sanitation; social distancing; travel; and visits to customer/client sites, as applicable. Best-in-class communications will also acknowledge the other variables affecting employees' personal budgets such as the continued availability of onsite benefits (e.g., food and beverage, child care and gyms) as well as allowed reimbursements for personal protective equipment, daily commutes outside the public transportation system, childcare while schools and day

cares are still closed, and other needs directly linked to COVID-19. Remember that differences in roles, income brackets, health, family circumstances and other variables may cause policies to be felt inconsistently across your organization and be proactive in addressing related concerns.

DO NOT

Pretend to have all the answers or convey inflexibility. The reality is that we are all navigating this crisis together and will need to remain nimble as circumstances shift and new prevention, testing and treatment protocols are developed. Share what you know but acknowledge that policies and protocols will evolve over time. Welcome feedback and new ideas through a dedicated email address or digital feedback form, virtual office hours, pulse surveys or other channels.

¹ FTI Consulting fielded this survey among 1,012 American adults (age 18+) from May 12th – 14th, 2020. Full results can be found [here](#).

2. Will the new policies work to keep us safe? What is being done to ensure compliance?

DO

Demonstrate your commitment to a safe work environment with clearly posted policies, visual reminders of appropriate social distancing and reiterations of your company's expectations every time teams gather for meetings. Create a sense of shared ownership and accountability by understanding what will motivate your teams to be compliant (e.g., concern for each other, a commitment to your customers, a steady income) and developing communications that speak directly to those interests.

DO NOT

Assume that early adoption of new policies is the same as a sustained shift in behaviors. All of us will be required to define a new normal and decide one day at a time what risks are worth taking. For many, returning to shared workspace is already a compromise relative to the safety measures taken earlier in the year and, as more days pass without incident, people are likely to take additional risks in pursuit of greater normalcy. Your employees must be continually reminded of the policies – and why they are important – in new and creative ways (think: 20-second song lyrics posted wherever hand washing occurs, create your own safety meme contests, or safety reminder videos from the kids in our lives). Done well, these reminders can also help to create unity across the organization and add levity to any day.

3. What if I don not feel safe coming back? Can I continue to work from home?

DO

Equip managers to clearly set expectations for their teams and communicate what additional flexibility or support may be available in specific circumstances (e.g., help with childcare, transportation costs, or a more gradual transition for high-risk populations). Encourage leaders to truly listen to those employees who express concerns or request additional flexibility to understand underlying issues while also ensuring policies are applied equitably across the organization.

DO NOT

Allow a desire to help employees in the near-term lead to longer-term hardships for the business. If employees must be onsite to perform their roles, the key is to apply policies consistently. Many companies are allowing employees to remain home during a transitional period, but the time is often required to be taken as unpaid leave and, at some point, most employees in these roles will be required to return to keep their positions. Conversely, work-from-home infrastructures have proven successful for many companies, and some are now announcing more permanent work-from-home opportunities. This additional flexibility may become a recruiting advantage over time, but it also could come with sacrifices in productivity, cross-team collaboration, creativity and personal relationships that foster a sense of loyalty. At a minimum, flexible work arrangements should be linked to continued individual performance and productivity

benchmarks. Many companies will also want to test flexible work arrangements via more formalized pilot programs that make continued iteration and adjustments easier to achieve without perceptions of going back on promises made.

4. What happens if I come back, and a colleague gets COVID-19 – or if there is a second wave of illness nationwide?

DO

Be sure clear procedures are in place for collecting information about a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19, sharing the appropriate details with employees who may have been in contact with the infected individual (while also protecting personal information, as required), and initiating further location closings, if necessary. Reassure employees they will be informed – and appropriate sanitation and quarantine protocols will be implemented – should cases in their workspace or geography put them at risk.

DO NOT

Miss this opportunity to add or improve communications channels to ensure you are able to effectively reach employees should locations be forced to close again. Most employees were understanding of gaps in information during this first closure period as few people would have ever expected closures of this magnitude – but they are not likely to be as understanding if their employer is again forced into a communications blackout. Launch a mobile app, enable remote-access email and/or create a mechanism for employees to opt-in to receive emails or texts directed to their accounts to enable greater connectivity moving forward.

5. How is our company really doing? Is my job secure?

DO

Maintain regular reporting of operational and financial results – and potentially add new touchpoints or metrics – to help employees understand the current situation and, just as important, how they can contribute to the company's plans for recovery. Remember that employees are reading daily about well-known companies filing for bankruptcy, as well as the broader issues retail, hospitality, transportation, energy and other sectors of the economy are facing. The absence of reliable information creates fear, opens opportunities for competitors to create their own versions of the truth and may lead to the loss of key talent.

DO NOT

Allow your desire to quickly stabilize the organization result in overly positive interpretations of the data. Reports of poor performance should absolutely be balanced with information about how the company expects to move forward – and you do not have to share everything you know. You will, however, be in a much better position to implement any turnaround plans that may become necessary if you are honest about the challenges you are facing. Credibility, once lost, is very difficult to rebuild.

6. Will my performance metrics be adjusted this year?

DO

Help employees understand how promotions, merit-based compensation increases and other incentive plans will be affected – or at least guide them with information about when and how these decisions will be made. Acknowledging these concerns, even if you do not have all the answers, helps to reinforce that you are committed to your employees, are sensitive to how they have been affected and have their best interests at heart.

DO NOT

Make promises you cannot keep or allow it to become all about money. With unemployment rates at historic highs, there will be limited opportunities for employees in most industries to make a move in the near term. This gives employers an opportunity to reinforce intangibles such as a unified mission or purpose employees believe in, a safe and collegial work environment, continued investment in learning and development, and/or longer-term career advancement opportunities. These elements of the total employee value proposition often inspire employees to stay in a role, even if there is a near-term hit in financial incentives.

Most important of all: Employer credibility is key. As employees return to the workplace, we are asking them to fundamentally change how they work, how they interact with co-workers and, in many respects, how they live their day-to-day lives. We know it needs to be a lasting change. We also know the specific policies and procedures will inevitably evolve over time. No company will get this next stage 100 percent right. However, if your teams see you trying and continue to believe you will always be honest with them, they will be more likely to follow you wherever this journey may lead.

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About FTI Consulting

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