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The Back-to-Work Playbook

It's Being Written by Manufacturers

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Coronavirus Pandemic
Manufacturing

Take-Aways

- Companies responding to the COVID-19 pandemic go through three stages: "React, Respond and Return."
- The "Return" phase – when companies grapple with protocols for bringing employees back to work – offers opportunities to redefine work for the future.
- Every region and locality is on a different recovery schedule; some have months to go. In others, people are getting back to work.
- The challenge is how to work safely since the virus remains a menace.

Recommendation

Business owners in the United States, like many worldwide, shuttered retail outlets in response to the COVID-19 crisis, shifted employees to remote work, and restructured to support worker safety and productivity. Now, some companies are reopening. Human resources expert and consultant Josh Bersin offers insight into the safety protocol mind-set, along with examples from manufacturers already up and running. Business may never go back to the old normal, but you may now have the perfect opportunity for transformation.

Summary

Companies responding to the COVID-19 pandemic go through three stages: "React, Respond and Return."

At the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, many firms closed their public-facing outlets and sent workers home. They distinguished between essential and non-essential employees and implemented processes to keep track of data related to the impact of the pandemic. In the "React" phase, human resources and information technology departments had to coordinate to support staffers who were new to working at home. Companies assembled task forces to lead the response and establish regular communication.

Leaders had to set up policies for remote workers and provide equipment for their home offices. Firms reshaped their budgets in light of the pandemic. The CEO – acting also as Chief Empathy Officer – worked to be a model of the company's purpose and to show optimism about the future. Many businesses shifted to a remote workforce and, for the most part, managed the transition successfully.

In the "Respond" phase, companies rolled out remote training and support systems and pursued policies for regular check-ins with employees – both one-on-one and in teams. The ways companies supported workers' well-being included providing access to mental health services, funds for childcare, support for education and safety tips regarding COVID-19.

"A massive increase in communications, listening, and well-being programs…has been a welcome transition: these were all programs underway in companies, and suddenly they became urgent overnight."

Businesses now also need to update vacation and leave plans, as well as their processes for hiring, promotion and performance evaluation. Companies also are busy identifying, trying to access and allocating government support funds.

The "Return" phase – when companies grapple with protocols for bringing employees back to work – offers opportunities to redefine work for the future.

Pandemic safety measures forced businesses to change. Restaurants now deliver meals. Entertainment providers and other businesses are migrating online, like banks now advising customers via the internet.

Manufacturers are retooling factories and offices for social distancing. Customers want low-touch offerings, which companies are figuring out how to supply.

> *"Every company I talk with is adding service, online access, and much deeper empathy to their products and offerings. So part of 'sending people back to work' is deciding 'what jobs do we need now...'"*

For example, one bank in Canada sent most of its branch employees home. But, then the needs of its customers in smaller cities became so intense that it deployed branch employees as "virtual call center agents." Over the weeks, as customers asked for financial advice more and more frequently, the bank realized it was filling a new demand in these communities and developed a consulting service.

One manufacturer of cancer diagnostics equipment found that its service representatives suddenly were spending a lot of time in high-risk hospitals and had to become COVID-19 experts. The European luxury retailer LVH shut down its stores, and moved its sales online, so it retrained workers to handle e-commerce.

Every region and locality is on a different recovery schedule; some still have months to go, but in others people are getting back to work.

Ford and GM teamed up to manufacture ventilators following COVID-19 safety protocols. Pharmaceutical manufacturers such as Novartis and Sanofi are running at full capacity. Aston Martin and Jaguar Land Rover plan to reopen. More and more manufacturers are returning to production.

> *"Most companies are making [coming back to work] optional because the 'fear of return' is still high. The ultimate answer is to build a new set of protocols and safety practices, just as oil companies and utilities do in nuclear power plants."*

The Lear Corporation, for example, developed a *Safe Work Playbook* with supplemental guides to help companies think through safety protocols, including how to screen returning workers, the best procedures for testing and quarantine, estimating the need for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and providing for sanitation and social distancing. To protect workers, you may need to stagger shifts and set limits on how many people can be in a room at the same time.

The challenge is how to work safely since the virus remains a menace.

If your employees are reluctant to return to on-site work, what options will you give them? How will you educate your workforce to avoid stigmatizing employees who get sick? In the United States, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) offers businesses many coronavirus-related resources. Your company may want to assign a "crisis" task force to consider the new apps and sensors coming onto the market that you can use to trace contacts or monitor social distancing.

Many workers who moved to home offices may be able to continue to work remotely, a trend that will reduce office space costs. Those who come back to the workplace will be nervous. Companies need to build trust by instituting safety measures. Leaders must rethink and re-design every process – from the

manufacturing floor to check-in, meals and break times. Empower "local site managers" to create processes for each location and expect to tweak them constantly. All departments must work in unity to roll out the new procedures. To the good, however, this is an opportunity to redesign work for the future.

About the Author

Human resources expert **Josh Bersin** is founder and president of Bersin & Associates, an industry research firm and consultancy. He also wrote *The Blended Learning Book, The High-Impact Learning Organization* and *High Impact Talent Management.*

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