How to get your office ready for the return post COVID-19

Recently, the IRS started returning 10,000 employees to do mission-critical work. Unfortunately, for many business leaders, their mission critical work is making money to survive. Truly, it can't come soon enough. Others fear for the safety of their workers and will proceed very cautiously. Though opinions on timing vary widely, the question remains—is your office ready for the return post COVID-19?

Now that we have adjusted to the WFH routine of conference calls, tuning out distractions and swapping PJ's for sweats, the time has come to start planning the return to the office.

As with any change in the business environment, there will be costs and opportunities. You may need to adjust work schedules and provide hygiene safety procedures and supplies. But while the office is still empty, take advantage of a rare opportunity to make changes that will permanently improve efficiency, collaboration and revenue generation.

With planning and proactive preparation, the return can be smooth. Yes, uncertainty still reigns. But having a plan will help workers return not only feeling safe, but confident in the future of the organization and working at full speed for customers.

The Office is About to Change

When employees return to the office for work, those spaces may appear quite different. Among the changes planned at some large organizations, plexiglass partitions, one-way walkways, thermal cameras to check temperatures, staggered desks and sectioned-off offices stand out as the most visible to employees.

Worried about safety, some plan to institute health questions and apps to track employee movement and interactions around the office. However, not every company has the resources to drastically reconfigure their office space and people. Those who can, may continue WFH policies to counter the push for over-the-top employee surveillance and morning health checks.

Long-term, WFH will affect the shape of cities, traffic, commercial real estate, and corporate culture. For example, high-rise buildings present real problems for employees trying to maintain social distancing. Just getting people to the 40th floor two or three at a time in the elevators could take much longer.

The Human Component

As WFH policies continue, the cross-section of organization personnel is likely to change, impacting company cultures, hiring practices and profits. Workers who demonstrate consistent WFH performance, exhibit self-starter behaviors and know how to plan and execute may be preferred going forward over those who find it hard to remain motivated at home.

With new ideas more in demand, a more diverse workforce might prove to be the ideal. As a bit of a silver lining, the new WFH normal, allows organizations to recruit from a much larger pool. Unfortunately, employees who lack remote communication skills or otherwise fail to thrive may be the first to go at organizations that need to trim down.

WFH policies save money for some organizations and offer other advantages such as improved productivity. They see that employees who no longer commute have more time to devote to work. On the other hand, retention could be more difficult. And some in management find on-line managing more challenging.

Address COVID-19 Stress and Anxiety

According to the CDC, the COVID-19 outbreak may be stressful for people, stating that it may cause "overwhelming fear and anxiety and strong emotions in adults and children" depending on their personal makeup. Therefore, company leadership should expect this to be true for some, perhaps many, of their employees.

HR experts say that the best thing leaders can do to help employees manage stress and anxiety during COVID-19 is to communicate. Thus, you should clearly inform employees of their options and who to contact when they have questions about benefits, working from home, paid leave policies, or other assistance programs the organization offers.

Be sure to address their most pressing questions and fears, including:

- Policies relating to workplace safety and hygiene
- Layoffs and furloughs
- Paid and unpaid leave policies
- Personal ways to manage anxiety and stress
- Accessing health care benefits

Although it may seem obvious, remind your employees to take advantage of their health care benefits, including mental health. If your company offers an Employee Assistant Program (EAP), make sure that workers know how to access it. Anonymous and free for employees, EAPs reduce the social stigma and cost that might otherwise come with seeking mental health counseling.

Also consider that many people who contract minor sniffles previously tended to come into the office because their symptoms were mild or managed by over the counter medicines. With the concern over hygiene and COVID-19, even the sniffles can create stress and anxiety in other employees.

Organizations should look to relax their policies with respect to employees working from home when they are not feeling 100%. Eliminate the need for doctors' notes and enforced expectations. For example, you could offer sick leave when employees can't work and sick WFH when they feel under the weather but are capable of contributing.

Timing the Return

Organizations that have been less successful with WFH technology or management are likely to ask employees to come back sooner than others. Although stay at home orders are beginning to lapse, companies that are making it work with good employee WFH performance have plenty of incentives to continue the policy longer.

No one is sure how the pandemic will evolve. Thus, many companies, especially in technology, have already extended WFH until fall or later. Indeed, extending WFH policies helps employees plan their childcare and summer activities. It also gives companies time to re-configure open-office plans into safer arrangements.

What to do to get the office ready for the return?

Assuming things go well, and we can start sifting people back into the factory or office, what will you be implementing to make the work environment safer? And what steps will you take to keep employees feeling safe about their return? Aside from wearing gloves and masks and working from home when possible, what will you do?

The email sent by the IRS requires recalled employees to report to work with their own protective gear. Although you may be seeking to procure personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks and gloves, like the IRS, you may come up short and be forced to require employees to bring their own when they report to work.

Many companies are offering products and solutions to help. For example, an indoor geo location company offers to help protect your workforce and implement contact tracing. Another offers strict safety and cleaning procedures to keep the office safe as employees return.

Establish Standard Safety Procedures

The return to work: Companies turn to tech to prevent spread of Covid-19

As employees return to the office, companies are weighing a mix of wearable sensors, video monitors and automatic temperature scanners to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

An important place to start is to assign responsibility and establish standard operating procedures for ongoing hygiene and safety. Make the people you assign responsible for carrying out government recommended procedures like handwashing stations and procuring supplies such as facemasks and hand sanitizer.

Depending on your location, standard safety procedures may include:

- **Employee Health Checks** – Daily front-door temperature checks and screening for symptoms to ensure that returning employees are fit to work.

- **Ongoing Workplace Cleaning** - A regular schedule and records of cleaning and disinfection at intervals recommended by the CDC or your local government.

- **Sourcing Necessary Hygiene Products** - Act now to ensure that your office has a dependable supply of hand sanitizer, face masks and other items that might be required.

- **Adjusted Schedules** – Consider a compassionate approach with measures such as allowing employees to continue to work remotely or to use public transportation during non-peak hours.

- **Regular Communication** - Increase employee awareness of government safety requirements, CDC health recommendations and mandatory safety steps.

Productivity Improvements to make the office ready for the return

The quiet period before the return is the ideal time to update your IT infrastructure and make other changes to enhance productivity. During Hurricane Sandy we made improvements to our space so that when staff returned, we were better off than before the great flood.

Those efforts included rack work and cable cleanup. We put in a conference room, rearranged the office layout and more. So, review your list of ideas and future projects to identify the best ones under the circumstances to improve operations.

Consider the following improvements:

- Migrate to the cloud with Microsoft 365 for remote work
- Conference room and conferencing tools like Microsoft Teams Certified phones
- Cameras for desktop stations (people have been using their laptop cameras)
- Headsets to enable walking around on calls
- Redesign of office space to optimize for safety and smaller initial staff
- In-office security cameras
- Desktop Plexiglass barriers
- Voice-activated light switches
- Remote worker performance monitoring software

When it comes to making IT improvements under trying circumstances, our staff of experts is ready to assist. We founded this company weeks before 9/11. Quickly, we adapted to be in the business of helping our customers survive and prosper during difficult times.

Post COVID-19 Revenue Enhancing Changes

Most importantly, consider what your customers will need in the post-COVID-19 world and how you can provide it. Before your return, talk to a lot of customers to get ideas and suggestions on how you can modify your offerings to better fit their needs. Also consider what new products and services you can provide.

Change creates opportunity. Be ready and positioned to fill the gaps.

eMazzanti is ready to innovate. We are dedicated to helping you make your office ready for the return to increase your revenues as quickly as possible.

If you have a situation or problem you need to solve, our team has the experience and the knowledge to help—be it in the office or at point of sale where it must be rolled out to multiple retail locations. Tell us your pain points and we'll help you figure it out. We're in this together.