

HEALTH

What's Your Company's Emergency Remote-Work Plan?

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This week, the coronavirus (or Covid-19) took a more serious turn in the U.S. with warnings that it could very well impact how, when, and where we work:

“Disruption to everyday life may be severe,” Dr. Nancy Messonnier, director of the CDC’s National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, cautioned at a news conference Tuesday. “Schools could be closed, mass public gatherings suspended, and businesses forced to have employees work remotely.”

The global spread of the virus may be a moment that reveals whether employers are ready to respond rapidly to unexpected workplace changes. Business travel could decrease or come to a full stop. More employees may need to work outside of local “business hours” and use video conferencing to operate across time zones. And, if it gets bad enough, many could indeed be asked, or request, to work remotely.

Are organizations ready? Chances are probably not. But even for those open to rethinking how the work would get done, are they ready for the inevitable post-crisis question: “Why don’t we do this all the time?”

How do you prepare your organization to not only flexibly respond to this potential disruption, but also to use it as an opportunity to reimagine work broadly? Here are five steps to get started:

Acknowledge the possibility that all or part of your workforce may need to work remotely.

Hoping and praying it doesn’t happen, or simply ignoring it, is not a strategy. Neither is handing everyone a laptop and saying “Go work someplace else” on the day they expand wide-scale quarantines. Plan as if the only way to remain operational will be for as many employees as possible to work remotely. Gather a cross-functional team together *now* that includes business-line leaders, IT, HR, communications, and facilities to start to plan for different scenarios and optimize execution, should circumstances require a rapid response.

Map out jobs and tasks that could be affected.

Note which roles and duties: 1) Can be done, even partially, without a physical presence in the workplace, 2) Cannot be done, even somewhat, outside of the physical office, and 3) Not sure.

Challenge any potentially inaccurate default assumptions about specific jobs you may have thought couldn’t be done remotely. And for those in the “not sure” column, be willing to experiment. For example, for years, I’ve been told, “Administrative assistants can’t work flexibly.” And, for years, I’ve worked with teams of administrative assistants to prove that

is not true. Yes, certain tasks they complete require physical presence, but those can be planned for. The majority of their tasks can happen effectively outside of the traditional model of work *and* benefit the business.

Audit available IT hardware and software, and close any gaps in access and adoption.

Assess the comfort level with specific applications, such as video conferencing and other collaboration/communication platforms. Where you find gaps, provide training and opportunities for practice before people need to use them. Real-time mastery is not optimal and is inefficient. Identify devices owned by the organization that people could use and clarify acceptable “bring your own” phone and laptop options. Determine if there are any data-security issues to consider and how best to address them beforehand.

Set up a communications protocol in advance.

This communications plan needs to outline: how to reach everybody (e.g., all contact information in one place, primary communication channels clarified — email, IM, Slack, etc.); how employees are expected to respond to customers; and how and when teams will coordinate and meet.

Identify ways to measure performance that could inform broader change.

After the flexible response period is over, this data will allow you to reflect on what worked, what didn't, and why. The data will also prepare you in advance to answer the inevitable question once the crisis has passed, “Why don't we do this all the time?” Depending upon the outcomes, you may decide to continue certain aspects of the flexible response permanently. For example, perhaps you cut business travel by 25% and substitute video conferencing. You determine afterward that about 80% of those meetings were equally as effective virtually. Therefore, a 20% decrease in business travel will continue, but this time as part of the organization's sustainability strategy to cut carbon emissions.

Global health emergencies, like Covid-19, are scary, disruptive, and confusing for everyone. And if you plan and nothing happens? Then, at minimum, you have an organized, flexible work disaster response ready the next time there's a challenge

to operational continuity, which chances are, there will be.

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