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COVID-19 and The Return to Work

As the return to workplaces builds pace, employees will demand clear plans that ensure their safety. **David Hobbs** examines the challenges ahead for businesses as lockdown eases



If there is one thing that recent government announcements have shown, it is the absolute necessity for clarity when disseminating information during a crisis. Businesses are facing this challenge as they seek to navigate a successful course through the COVID-19 pandemic, while keeping their workforces informed, onside and healthy.

Tough decisions lie ahead as the lockdown eases and people are encouraged to return to their workplaces. How businesses manage their employees during this transition, including acknowledging mental health and wellbeing concerns, will be under close scrutiny.

Aoife Forde, Senior Relationship Manager at Criticaleye, says leaders and HR teams are facing a rapidly evolving situation as the pandemic moves from the initial crisis and lockdowns are eased.

“All the focus has naturally been on the immediate issues, but now businesses must spend some time thinking about this second phase,” **Aoife** says.

“There is a big task here for HRDs to help senior teams lead in these new circumstances. Some CEOs connect quite intuitively, both individually and collectively with their teams on a regular basis, while others need a bit of a nudge.”

David Guise, former Group HRD at Marks & Spencer, says that the authenticity of organisations and their leaders is going to be examined over the coming months.

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“We’ve often heard companies say that their most important asset is their people. That idea is really being tested in this crisis as people will be asking, ‘did they really mean that?’.

“If you did mean it, you’d better protect that asset to win in the longer term. Employees should then trust you to take the right actions; they’ll recognise the authenticity of your leadership, and they’ll accept that tough decisions may lie ahead.”

Trevor Hoyle, SVP for Ground Operations Europe at FedEx Express, says that managing a global workforce split between those at home and those on site has required regular

and effective communication from leaders, which will be equally crucial moving into the next phase.

“It’s all about the daily drumbeat of communication: being clear about what we’re doing and why we’re doing it, to create that understanding with the workforce. We’ve made sure we have a narrative and a rationale behind everything we do, as well as the things we’re not doing.”

David says that the coming months will require careful leadership as the world returns to work at different speeds and stages.

“There are so many questions to be asked – Who is physically returning and how do we manage their safety? Travelling to or being at work might be a huge challenge, so are they physically needed? Who’s staying at home, even though they might want to go back in? – planning all this is going to be critical, while keeping connected with customers, suppliers and investors at the same time.”

Trevor says that the fast-moving nature of the crisis means mistakes may be made, but organisations should not be paralysed by fear of failure, and rather be improvement focused.

“This is such an evolving situation, that what may be a good decision today could look like a bad one tomorrow. However, the worst thing we can do is to not do anything.

“It’s good to reflect on what we may have done differently and learn from that, but when events happen at pace, keeping your focus >



on what's important, like safety and service, and moving forward is the most important thing."

Barbara Harvey, Managing Director at Accenture Research and UK Mental Health Sponsor for Accenture, says businesses should recognise that the strain on employees' mental wellbeing is constantly shifting and may increase as people begin to return to a workplace that feels very different from the one they left.

"There is no book on this. We're dealing with something completely unprecedented in our lifetimes. We are all learning as we go."

Barbara adds that many employees are fearful or anxious about returning to work, so creating a culture of learning, trust and openness around mental health is an urgent priority and will help pave the way to helping people feel safe. Mental health needs to remain high on the executive agenda.

"People may have sat at home for four or five months and suddenly there are other people all around them. You can anticipate that while the return will be exciting and happy for some, others may find it overwhelming. We need to be aware of the risk of some experiencing panic attacks, PTSD, anxiety, and even individuals being unable to walk through the door on the first day.

"We have to start creating the education now to help people open up on mental health, so that as we plan for that return to work employees have some idea about what to expect, how to prepare,

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how to cope, how to manage colleagues and how to lead in the new environment,” **Barbara** says.

There is a growing consensus that working life will not return to what it was. The phrase ‘new normal’ is being heard more frequently, suggesting that further uncomfortable times lie ahead. However, **Susanna Dinnage**, former Global President at Animal Planet, acknowledges many may welcome the new world.

“Embracing change is important. It’s here to stay and we shouldn’t fear it,” she says. “Many people might not want their life to go back to how it was pre-COVID, so think about how

your working practices will have to – and maybe should – change. The future is exciting and new opportunities will emerge.”

Nick Challoner, President for Life Sciences at Croda International, is also adapting. “It’s not about rolling back, it’s about anticipating the future,” he says.

“We’re planning for further ahead and asking what markets we should consider, and what social norms and cultural adaptations will we need to make to be a successful business in the future. Understand that things are going to be different and build your plans around that.” ■

Featuring Commentary From:



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