

What will the workplace look like after the pandemic?

In the midst of the deadliest pandemic to hit the United States since the Spanish Flu of 1918, we live very much in the present. No one knows yet how many will become infected with the coronavirus that causes COVID-19, or how many will die. We cannot tell what the future holds.

However, there surely will be lasting impacts, on our personal lives, on society and on our workplaces. Already, there are hints of how post-COVID-19 work may look.

Telework is here to stay

A vast, worldwide experiment in telework seems to be working. According to a recent survey of more than 1,500 organizations by the WorldatWork nonprofit, telecommuting has increased a whopping 415% in just weeks. According to those who responded to the survey, only about 13% of employees worked remotely before March. That's now up to 67%, a reflection of how many states have mandated the closing of nonessential businesses and the voluntary decision by numerous employers to prevent infection by having work performed away from the office.

How many of those employees will continue to work from home after the pandemic ends is, of course, unknown. But managers might consider this the perfect time to see if mass teleworking can be a successful model.

Seek ways to track productivity. Analyze potential cost savings. That way, you will know whether it's both possible and desirable for more of your employees to telecommute. Employees who never had a chance to telework before may ask to continue doing so.

Collaboration lives online

Employers thrust into the world of remote work are also trying out new ways to meet and collaborate virtually. Meeting and teamwork platforms such as Zoom, Google Hangouts Meet, Microsoft Teams and Slack are being tested under difficult circumstances. Despite inevitable tech glitches, they seem to be working reasonably well.

According to the WorldatWork survey, almost 90% of organizations are continuing or establishing regular team meetings and encouraging the use of online collaboration tools. That trend is likely to continue even as business returns to whatever eventually passes for normal. With the economy likely to open up gradually in stages in different parts of the country, employees will probably remain leery of large-group gatherings.

From the dark clouds of social distancing may emerge a silver lining: fewer face-to-face meetings.

Workers are gaining leverage

In the aftermath of the Black Death in the Middle Ages, workers who survived gained at least a temporary advantage in a labor market characterized by low supply and high demand. Already, we see signs of similar

employee leverage during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Employees holding high-risk positions in the warehousing, delivery, grocery and health care fields are seeing their wages increase as colleagues get sick and demand for labor increases. Forty-six percent of retail workers and 29% of health care and pharmaceutical workers are receiving some form of hazardous-duty pay, according to WorldatWork.

Employers may find it difficult to cut back those wages once the crisis passes.

Focus on health care

Health insurance premiums will rise in 2021 and probably the year after. Insurers didn't factor COVID-19 costs into their 2020 coverage plans, and they will want to recoup unexpected payouts. Higher benefits costs will certainly affect employer bottom lines and the share of premiums employees pay.

In the long run, the pandemic may amplify the call for universal health insurance coverage. It could spur more questioning about why employers are the primary source of health insurance for more than half of adults under age 65—a uniquely American phenomenon.

Already, millions of newly unemployed workers are losing that coverage and scrambling for access through other programs like Affordable Care Act state exchanges and Medicaid. Calls to lower the Medicare eligibility age could take millions more employees off the rolls of employer-provided health insurance plans.

Gathering has been redefined

Currently, all states are operating under official emergency declarations. Most states restrict individual and business behavior to limit coronavirus contagion, including extensive stay-at-home orders and closures of all but nonessential businesses. Businesses and organizations deemed essential face limits on how they operate, with occupancy caps and orders to maintain social distancing.

While the reins will probably loosen as we move toward summer and into fall, the impact of the restrictions may linger. Employees and customers alike may remain reluctant to gather in groups. Businesses like grocery stores, pharmacies and restaurants may have to maintain distancing rules for months or longer, either because state and local governmental action demands it, or because customers and employees do.

Employers can expect to continue having to address and assuage fear for the immediate future, until the immediate crisis has passed and a vaccine or an effective treatment has made the virus recede as a threat.