

Lessons from employers who stepped up to the plate in 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic threw challenge after challenge at businesses of all sizes this past year. And while no employers welcomed the disruption, effective leaders confronted new realities head-on rather than trying to wish them away.

During this unprecedented time in history, we learn from one another. To that end, here's a look at five crucial issues the pandemic catapulted into the limelight and how individual organizations responded.

Flexibility

A 9 to 5 physical workplace quickly became impossible for most companies to maintain due to safety concerns and employees needing to handle personal situations at home. Employers learned that survival depended on embracing change.

"We were faced with the situation where we had a stark choice — either everyone worked from home or the business closed," says James Crawford, co-founder and CEO of [DealDrop](#). "We knew that in order to survive we needed help from our workforce, and in return, if they wanted a job, they needed help from us. Right from the beginning, we had to work this out with everyone's input; we were in unknown territory."

Crawford states that the key to success was flexibility. "We had to accept that the parents in our employ now faced child care issues on top of all the other problems we suddenly were all presented with. With the workforce now scattered, there was no need for everyone to be on duty at the same time. Flexible rosters were worked out for those that required them, allowing them to continue on the same total working hours as previously. Some duties did have to be re-allocated to those on regular shifts, but no complaints were received about this and alternative duties were exchanged."

Some leaders learned that flexibility could be a permanent improvement to their operations rather than just a stopgap.

"Almost immediately the company realized that the pandemic was not going anywhere," says Greg Kuchcik, vice president of HR at [Zeeto](#). "Zeeto constantly asked for feedback and when the dust settled decided that it would not force employees back to the office . . . ever. This led many to move out of state and buy a house. Whether it was a cheaper cost of living, new atmosphere, or to be closer to family, this was a great change for employees. The company also allowed employees to work from anywhere in the world as long as they met a minimum amount of time in an agreed-upon time zone. Employees get the job done, and everyone is happy. This was no easy task for HR, Legal, and Accounting both financially and infrastructurally, but Zeeto decided that being flexible for employees was worth the overall cost and time."

Mental health

The pandemic took a heavy toll on how people felt. Uncertainty led to anxiety. Daily struggles contributed to

depression. Remote work and lack of socialization brought on loneliness. Observant leaders noticed these things and took action.

“When the pandemic started, I realized that I needed to prioritize people’s wellbeing. The biggest question was what kind of support do people need,” says Nick Chernets, CEO of [DataForSEO](#). “Since the pandemic introduced a lot of stress, I decided to provide therapists and coaches to everyone in the company. Employees could have one session per week and discuss their challenges and fears with a professional. The goal was to reduce the stress and allow people to have 1:1 contact with experts specialized in providing emotional support. The results were amazing, and I noticed people becoming more relaxed and satisfied over time.”

Many companies discovered that additional time off during these trying times was a great way to show support for struggling employees.

“Our company has implemented paid no-questions-asked vacation and time-off policies to allow employees to recover from high levels of stress and anxiety, engage in self-care, and spend time with family and friends,” says Jay Soni, marketing director of [Yorkshire Fabric Shop](#). “We did this to make sure that employees feel supported and cared for as they work hard in rural and isolated locations while also caring for their families and dealing with significant physical and mental health issues. As employees handle this unprecedented health crisis, this ensures seamless flexibility and convenience.”

Physical safety

Hand sanitizing stations, disinfecting wipes, and spaced-apart furniture became the norm when on-site workplaces reopened. As the vaccine became available, some companies expanded extra effort to encourage getting the shot.

Sylvie Coleman, head of marketing for [Family Destinations Guide](#), notes that some of her organization’s employees were afraid to go out to clinics or hospitals for the vaccine. Thus, the company “decided to bring the vaccine in their homes instead” by partnering with a clinic offering in-house vaccination to employees and their families. “This way, they will feel at ease not just for themselves but also for their families even when they’re back at the office working,” Coleman says.

David Wurst, owner and CEO of [WebCitz](#), supports providing extra paid time off so employees do not have to utilize current vacation or sick days to be vaccinated.

“Given the incidence of side effects, particularly after the second dosage of the vaccines, offering a little extra PTO to recover is a wise gesture to support employee immunization,” Wurst says.

Security

The chaos of the world left many employees feeling vulnerable. People could not help but ponder questions like “What impact will the pandemic have on my job and my finances?” and “What happens if I get sick?”. Employers learned that directing attention and resources to these issues often proved more important in the long run than focusing on short-term numbers.

When COVID-19 led [Colorado River & Trail Expeditions](#) to cancel many of its rafting trips in 2020, the company paid all of its crew for the time they were planning to work. Co-owner Walker Mackay notes that while the business lost a large amount of money that year, “we realized how important it was to our business future to take care of the mental well-being and physical well-being of our guests and crew.” Now, the company is reaping the rewards of that action.

“With the availability of vaccines and a better knowledge of what to expect, we have modified our COVID-19

response,” Mackay says. “The summer of 2021 was our biggest year financially ever. The rafting industry had a shortage of guides in 2021, but all of our guides came back and worked extra hard. They were appreciative of how well we took care of them in 2020.”

Abe Breuer, CEO and owner of [VIP to Go](#) and [John to Go](#), recounts how his company took a similar action in the best interest of its workers. Learning how uninsured employees worried greatly about what would happen if they got COVID, the company adopted a comprehensive health care program for every employee.

“Rolling out this healthcare plan was a huge expense, and it took considerable back and forth in upper management and consultations with health insurance experts,” Breuer says. “At the end of the day, we decided that our employees are our family, and if the bottom line won’t look as rosy as we’d hoped this year, we would weather it. The main thing was that our employees’ single, biggest concern of the year no longer be a concern for them. We weren’t really looking for ‘payback,’ but we’ve definitely been paid back in terms of renewed devotion and loyalty.”

Community

Finally, many organizations felt a need to help not only their own workers but others in the neighborhood. They learned doing what they could felt awesome during this time when so many other things were beyond their control.

“As a disease cleanup company, we were in a unique position during the pandemic to give back to our local community by providing free COVID-19 disinfection services to local businesses in the downtown business district,” says Kevin Geick, a manager at [Bio Recovery](#). “The intention was not to generate business from this as we were already flush with work due to the virus, but news of this did spread around to businesses throughout the community providing positive publicity for our brand as well.”

Don’t know how your business could contribute? Remember, everyone eats.

“To boost small business support during the epidemic, we are reimbursing employees who purchase lunch and coffee from local small businesses using our company's expense reimbursement program,” says Tanner Arnold, president and CEO of [Revelation Machinery](#).

Gestures of all types and sizes matter during these unprecedented times. For if we’ve all learned one thing, it is that we need to conquer this challenge together.