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Coronavirus will disrupt your workforce: Here are 10 ways to mitigate the business impact

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The outbreak of COVID-19 is forcing businesses around the world to rethink their approaches to workforce management, benefits, remote work and more. We have identified some of the key potential disruptions in order to help business leaders stay ahead of the outbreak and support their employees in this time of crisis.

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Introduction

While human coronaviruses were first discovered in the 1960s, the recent outbreak of the novel virus (SARS-CoV-2) causing Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) has sown panic throughout many communities in the world. Because of the novelty of the virus and the disease, health organizations are having to work overtime to develop testing and treatments while quelling the spread of misinformation.

It's also having a growing impact on society and on businesses. There are signs people are beginning to change their personal routines in an effort to avoid infection, and businesses are struggling with disrupted supply chains, altered market demand and having to implement new remote working policies. For business leaders and professionals, here are 10 ways 451 Research predicts that COVID-19 could affect your business and how you can mitigate those challenges.

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The outbreak and growing threat of COVID-19 has significant implications for government and society, for business leaders needing to minimize the risk of employee infection, job disruption, reputational and compliance risks and productivity loss. A comprehensive approach will include updates to workforce management, HR processes, planning, tooling and more to guarantee your employees feel safe and supported with the tools they need to get work done.

1. Internal communication

When it comes to serious viral outbreaks like COVID-19, misinformation is always a major challenge. To keep employees up to date on the latest information and any changes to corporate policy, be sure to implement regular, consistent communication. This may include reinforcing existing policies, communicating changes to those policies or implementing entirely new policies and procedures. Corporate communications teams should pre-emptively identify trigger points that may necessitate later changes in policy too. A good practice could be to form a cross-functional COVID-19 committee with a direct line to the CEO that takes on the role of communicating and making changes to or implementing new company policies, aggregating that information, distributing it and being available to troubleshoot and clarify those policies when questions inevitably arise.

If you are using an intranet or employee portal, be sure to create a page or site dedicated to internal and external COVID-19 communication as well. As much of your communication as possible should be as flat as possible to minimize the risk of confusion and remove the burden on team managers as it moves down the chain of command. Additionally, it's important not to overlook bidirectional communication as well – employees and partners may have concerns or observations and need a clear channel through which they can communicate them to leadership – that could involve open commentary on the company intranet around information that is posted but could also include helplines and anonymous email addresses. Corporate communications professionals should also consider the exposure to reputational risk from badly thought-out policies and any resulting discontent from employees that could go public.

2. Travel and expense policy

One of the most obvious places to start is with your organization's travel and expense policy, and the expected behaviors that come with it. Consider implementing a suspension of non-essential travel or distributing organization-wide communication about the updated travel expectations in light of the outbreak. Employees will likely have questions about refunding travel expenses or how restrictions could affect expense reports, so be sure to involve the finance and expense management departments in your communications.

3. Remote work

One of the biggest professional questions that has emerged following the outbreak of COVID-19 is its potential impact on the prevalence of remote work opportunities. The problem is that many organizations do not widely support remote working, and hence don't have policies in place or a corporate structure to support it. Our 451 Research's *VotE: Workforce Productivity & Collaboration, Employee Lifecycle* survey shows that the top challenge in candidate recruitment is 'candidates expect flexible working arrangements we don't offer.'

Company leaders must work with HR, IT and LOB leaders to build out a framework for supporting remote work and determine methods to support collaboration, clear communication and the measuring and tracking productivity of those working remotely. This includes a detailed look at the ethical implications of work tracking through corporate devices as well as a potential increased investment in workforce management tools to more accurately schedule and track the time of your part-time and contract workers.

4. Tool quality

When looking at your approach to remote work, start with the policies and procedures you have in place. If those are in good working order, be sure to work with your IT and LOB heads to make sure they can facilitate a good employee experience for those working from home as well. This includes tools that support remote access, external and internal collaboration, streamlined approvals and effective communication.

For starters, businesses can look to vendors offering free collaboration features, which are usually available only on advanced plans, to serve as a temporary measure until a full solution can be deployed. It's also a good practice for your buying center to take a look at potential plan capabilities in light of license renewal to determine if your organization is making full use of the existing tools you have in place and if the right users have the license or access levels they need. If you do plan on extending licenses of existing tools to new users, be sure there is proper documentation and training in place to get them up to speed quickly.

If you plan to look at new tools, it is worth it for IT to have a discussion with LOBs to make sure the right adoption needs are met in terms of user groups and feature sets. IT should also plan for additional support in troubleshooting for the new tools and users while also renewing its communication of security policies. The latter is paramount as more data becomes more mobile and more work is happening off-site. Flexible work must be supported in a manner that's in line with security guidelines to minimize the risk of a breach.

5. Workload balancing

As your organization begins to shift and evolve to support new work models and paradigms, you must consider the extra strain this places on leadership. On the IT side, leaders will have to manage and troubleshoot remote access to important business applications and systems and may face challenges with new tool deployments. HR, on the other hand, will have to manage challenges associated with sick time, quarantined employees, potentially new recruitment needs and a more unsettled workforce. What about sales leaders facing headwinds from the economic downturn and with reps who maybe can't travel? What about project management and planning functions needing to adapt to a different business rhythm, market conditions and internal resources? Legal teams having to potentially deal with force majeure – does disruption to contractual obligations increase the likelihood of litigation? Supply chain and operations leaders will also have to think on their feet with this crisis. All business functions will have significantly dynamic conditions to contend with. Is there a way you can better support your leaders? Do they have the tools they need?

6. Compliance

While already critical, compliance becomes a much bigger issue in the wake of an outbreak such as COVID-19. With certain government organizations recommending quarantine for potential cases, HR and other leaders must be clear about the labor law implications for forced quarantine. Additionally, many companies asking employees to self-report symptoms run the risk of violating employee privacy, HIPPA, ADA and other regulations. It's best to involve legal as early as possible and keep them up to date on any news or changes.

Other situations to plan for include discrimination, job loss and potential retaliation of disgruntled employees or managers. Disclosure and business ethics should also remain at the forefront of your approach to compliance in this time, with a reaffirmation of company policy and a clear policy for disclosures. Payroll compliance should remain a focus as well because there are potentially significant issues around quarantine or remote working, making it difficult to track sick time vs. hours logged, or for hourly workers not getting the hours of work they were promised.

7. Benefits and PTO policies

The emergence of an illness like COVID-19 could mean that many of your employees would be away from work for an extended period. As such, companies should consider their current benefits policies around issues such as paid sick leave or flex time. Also, especially for those employing a large number of hourly workers, you should think through options for short-term disability because those workers depend on physically going to work to get paid. These options, while costly, can help maintain capacity in the workforce for when conditions change, improve the employee experience and have the potential to improve short- and long-term retention with the company.

8. Recruitment

If large numbers of your employees do have to go on long-term sick leave, managers may need to consider recruiting part-time resources to fill in the gaps. According to our 451 Research VoTE: Workforce Productivity & Collaboration, Employee Lifecycle survey, the top three ways to improve your ability to find new candidates is to work with recruiters to find candidates more proactively, automate job posts across multiple job boards and more easily identify qualified internal candidates. Look for new technology that streamlines the recruitment process but also helps to identify passive candidates who may not be on the market yet.

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As a domino effect, onboarding will also need to be improved; our 451 Research data shows that 36% of employees take six months or more to add value in their role and 5% take 12 months or more. For these short-term employees to properly fill in the productivity gaps, they must be able to add value quickly. This will also affect workforce management because companies that are familiar only with traditional full-time employees will need scheduling and time-tracking tools for other employee types as well.

Leaders must take steps to understand the existing skill sets of those unaffected by the outbreak and determine if they can be shifted around internally to mitigate the need for external recruitment. There is also an opportunity here to invest in rapidly upskilling existing employees, which will be a worthy investment no matter how long the crisis lasts.

9. Planning

When it comes to a developing public health crisis like COVID-19, the information available and necessary responses companies should take are changing rapidly. This showcases the need for investments in a more agile, contextual and connected approach to planning – tools that can serve a company long after the crisis has ended. This approach requires more involvement from departmental leaders in a continuous planning model that allows for plans to be altered and edited as new information comes to light. This also requires deeper integration of departmental data with the planning tools and processes so department heads can get the most relevant information possible, while helping to draw connecting lines between their department and others.

Specifically, we would encourage companies to investigate scenario and simulation modeling capabilities commonly found in organizational planning and analytics tools. Scenario modeling can help companies plan for the shifting workforce dynamics we expect will be a response to the growth of COVID-19. However, this also requires more thinking about employee skills inventorying and how the organization can leverage employees outside of their core role if necessary. Certain modern planning tools can help facilitate this need.

10. Employee autonomy

At a high level, crises like the outbreak of COVID-19 highlight the increasing need for more employee autonomy because employees may need to self-isolate or work remotely away from their manager and teammates. However, it could also help boost employee engagement as an investment in development. When asked how their organization could improve in relation to its focus on personal and professional development of employees, our 451 Research Vote: Workforce Productivity & Collaboration, Employee Engagement survey respondents listed more opportunities to learn new skills, opportunities to gain experience in other parts of the organization and providing employees more autonomy to work the way they want as their top three responses. However, any investments in autonomy must be done in parallel to the requisite investments in governance and compliance as well to make sure employee autonomy in execution supports the overall corporate strategy.