Executive Summary

Where can companies focus their efforts to return employees safely, effectively and energetically? Each organization will have a unique set of questions and challenges. But so far we’ve seen distinct groups of issues companies are thinking about, which span from strategy to tactics. Building a sustainable path to return will depend on spending time on both.

Nine essentials for returning to a new normal

Return safely

Navigate a dynamic environment and ready the workplace
The pandemic is a fast-moving challenge. Workplace readiness plans that are iterative, flexible and adaptable — and which continually audit safety within or outside the worksite — will prove invaluable. Companies successfully navigating moving goalposts are considering:

- Dynamic pandemic tools that enable decision-making linked to predictive transmission rates and modelling of organizational actions and outcomes on business continuity.
- Plans that emphasize the health and safety of employees and their families, including return-to-work playbooks. For example, over half of companies are staggering the return to work by splitting employees into shifts as part of physical preparations.
- Return-to-the-workplace toolkits to answer questions such as: how to stay on top of local, state, and/or national requirements; mapping the employee journey from public transportation to elevator doors and breakrooms; and quantifying the longer-term impact.

Re-examine remote, flexible and blended working
Not all jobs should come back to the workplace; equally, not all work-from-home arrangements will outlive COVID-19. If organizations are looking at blended working models (with some remote workers, some on-site and most flexing between the two), what will their approaches look like?

- Flexible work arrangements are an essential part of the employee experience: 64% of employees say it’s important for company culture to encourage flexibility.
- Potential cost savings, job evaluation, and a rethink of the purpose of the workplace are all informing what a company’s flex, remote or blended work approach will look like.
- For some companies this is the first step in relooking at their entire talent ecosystem and seeing where it makes sense to locate talent pools in the future and how best to rethink everything from business travel to expatriate policies.

Delegate non-core activities to focus on priorities
Many organizations want to get back to growing their core businesses. Faced with the complexity of navigating a new economic order, they are finding value by outsourcing non-core activities.

- Outsourcing responsibility for retirement plans, or even the chief investment officer role, frees up HR to focus their attention where it’s most needed.
- With pension investment teams unable to visit investment managers, subscriptions to digital and self-service third-party platforms provide critical research, data and analytics.
- Larger firms are also seeking expert support for risk auditing and management services and even outsourcing of pandemic crises management role.
- Multinationals increasingly recognize how global benefits management can coordinate medical and risk protection benefits.

Return to stability

Clarity priorities and realign around “the new minimum”

As companies move beyond initial cost deferrals, cost reductions, and preserving as many jobs as possible, “personalization for impact” is the mantra guiding the new environment:

- Investments in “nice to have” programs and processes may be dropped to unwind costs or in favor of flexible programs.
- The need to be competitive will be replaced by an imperative to sustain the workforce for survival and growth as companies look at how to rebalance investments and update C-level incentives.
- If furloughs or potential layoffs remain a reality, organizations may need to explore alternatives, such as outplacement services or temporary talent sharing.

Focus on cost containment and zero-based design

The pandemic has underscored the adaptability of most people and organizations. Hence companies are adopting a “zero-basing” approach to organizational design as a starting principle and using this pause to reset.

- Even before the pandemic, 99% of companies said they planned to embark on a transformation in 2020. Which people, business units or departments best fit the transformation strategy?
- How should the size, shape and skill set of the organization change and what are the implications?
- Which employees should be prioritized to return or incentivized to stay?
- How can workforce analytics guide “reset” decision making?

Use transformation as an optimization strategy

With organizations pressed to do more with less, a focus on transforming HR can help speed the transformation of the workforce. What type of organization do you need to become to attract and retain the talent you need, especially when employees’ sustainability concerns are higher than ever? Companies are considering ways to:

- Define the new normal for critical HR processes, such as talent development, training and compensation.
- Strategically invest / divest to maximize value and deliver business resilience.
- Change hiring, rewards and/or organizational structures to reflect shifts in value.
- Accelerate the digital journey.

Return to energy

Support the workforce: mentally, physically and financially

The mental return to the workplace matters: employees want to be heard, yet only two in five companies have conducted internal surveys, interviews or focus groups to understand their thinking.

- Organizations are experimenting with microsites, videos, leadership cascades, training sessions, pulse surveys and virtual focus groups.
- Healthcare delivery will be transformed by the necessary rise in digital and telemedicine options. Employers will look to refresh their offerings with cost-effective digital solutions as employees prioritize health and safety.
- Employees will be facing financial hardship. Addressing job security concerns, understanding retirement plan participant responses (impact on contributions, distributions, loans and investments), and offering more financial wellness options will be paramount.

Reconfirm the organization’s purpose and value

Companies ahead of the curve are taking the opportunity to reconfirm their value proposition and align benefits to values. Thirty-nine percent of firms say they will review restoring employee care and engagement in the next three to six months. Businesses are considering:

- Digital transformation, both to enable the optimization of the total rewards spend but also to communicate and deliver benefits in a remote working environment.
- Access to virtual care and behavioral and mental health support as well as legal assistance and debt counseling.
- Access to online learning and reskilling opportunities.
- How they might consider sustainability goals and how reconfirming their purpose and values will differentiate them.

Design an energizing employee experience

The next 12 to 18 months will be a rollercoaster. Employees will require energy and confidence to survive and thrive — whether back in the workplace or still at home.

- Which employee experiences will unleash energy? And how are those experiences different in a remote-first or blended work culture?
- What career framework and mobility program changes will best support employee development and organizational success?
- How can organizations ensure progress on D&I and pay equity isn’t lost? Pay equity doesn’t need to be a cost burden; adjusting the salaries of overpaid or underpaid employees has become an option in the current climate.
- How does HR need to evolve to deliver on target interactions associated with the newly designed employee experience?

Working virtually or on-site, in new departments or redesigned businesses, means a new shape of work will emerge. This will require readiness, reassurance, resilience and — critically — balancing economics and empathy in all people decisions.

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