# Return to the Workplace:
# Six Top Concerns for Employers

*By: Daniel Ilnicky*

Anyone else tired of hearing the term "returning to normal"? Safe to say, we can't pinpoint a time pre-COVID and pick up where we left off. Instead, we will be creating a new workplace, loaded with variations, accommodations and efficiencies.

In a recent webinar I cohosted, more than 200 employers weighed in on evolving human resource and safety issues. Six top areas of concern emerged, shared by a cross-section of industries. While not all have clear-cut solutions, they belong on every return-to-work agenda.

## Social Norms

I was out taking a walk the other day and met up with one of my neighbors whom I hadn't seen in a while. As he reached out his hand to say hi, I was like whoa — what are you doing? Where have you been for the last year … did you learn nothing? We had a good laugh, but it's a new reality. The practice of hand shaking, maintaining extended personal spaces and overall distancing are all up for debate.

Remember the days of being in a conference room with only 15 chairs — yet 20 people were packed into this already tight space? Will we be doing that again? Will we continue to share workspaces, work zones and equipment? Have we become more comfortable with the ability to conduct meetings virtually, and is this a reasonable practice and viable option moving forward? Think about these social norms and have some open discussions about expectations, adjustments and preferred interaction strategies.

## Practices in Place

Many organizations implemented certain protocols and procedures, such as temperature taking, testing, personal protective equipment (PPE), face coverings and social distancing. Employers must now determine what stays in place and what they might roll back.

As more of the U.S. population is vaccinated, how do we know about our own workforce? Keep in mind, as an employer, you can ask colleagues if they have been vaccinated for COVID-19. Even if that is simply a pulse on a general percentage of those in your business operation, the data will be helpful.

Going a step further, will your company be considering, implementing or encouraging a healthy workplace policy? What does that mean? Look at it from every angle. If an employee has a cold or the flu or needs to care for a sick child, can he or she still be productive and work remotely versus coming into the building and potentially infecting others? How will you enforce that?

Finally, think about cleaning protocols. Should employees continue with housekeeping tasks, such as wiping down door knobs, microwaves and refrigerator handles? Will there be common use equipment? These are all things to consider in the context of state, Centers for Disease Control and National Institutes of Health guidelines.

## Internal Resources

As we consider resources, many of you may have gone through the process of determining critical roles and functions that need to exist internally at your place of business.

Then there are those positions that could become hybrid or even remote. These decisions have some pros and cons. Think about workforce availability. If you don't need someone to be in a close geographic area to fill a position, you open an entire pool of new potential employees.

You also may have gone through the process of performing certain tasks or functions differently, maybe even learning how to reduce duplication, identify inefficiencies and streamline certain tasks. We would be kidding ourselves if we don't admit that we are thinking about real estate costs and utilization of workspace.

As we look at colleagues returning to the workplace, consider the need for retraining. This could be a review of company policies as well as acclimation to equipment, processes and other onsite needs to ensure a safe and healthful work environment. For those remaining remote, check if there are additional resources or practices that need to be reviewed. Processes or systems may need to change because of identified efficiencies or overall streamlining.

## Humanistic Issues

Has anyone experienced any challenges with managing a remote workforce? We need to acknowledge some humanistic issues. Have you heard comments along

the lines of: "What the …? I must report in here every day, and then there are others who get to be at home watching TV and doing all their errands?"

There can be a solid feeling of alienation between the onsite and remote worker. What we have seen is a serious need for understanding what all our colleagues are experiencing. We hear so much about the work-life balance and the continuous ebb and flow of at-home schooling or daycare. These things are changing, becoming a less dominant part of the discussion. Nonetheless, let's look at how are we planning to weigh these issues going forward.

We need to promote socialization and schedule connection times. Have remote and in-person colleagues connect directly through one-on-one virtual meetings and see each other in group or department meetings.

In this way, we will show each other that all workers are being productive and committed to handling the tasks they are assigned.

In the meantime, be sure to understand and recognize the difference between psychological safety, which is feeling comfortable enough to bring up and discuss things without the fear of a negative reaction, and psychological health, which is how a person is doing and how they are holding up to everything. Both are critical.

## Personnel Issues

Let's face it, everyone has been through a lot. Regardless of how your business maintained operations during the pandemic, people respond very differently. When we separate physical work locations and personal spaces, for instance, we compartmentalize more effectively. While a home office may present some advantages at first appearance, they may not all actually be desirable. In-person does show us that we do better with socialization skills. We have all heard enough about Zoom fatigue and all the

stressors of not being able to separate home from work because it's all in the same place.

Also keep in mind there is a difference between being tired and being fatigued. Prolonged fatigue leads to increased accidents, heart disease and other medical issues. It also impacts a person's overall well-being.

Lastly, let's not forget about issues with home office ergonomics. Now we have an additional worksite we need to address.

## Productivity

By now companies should have figured out how they plan to measure productivity with the remote team. Establishing times of operation and availability, along with setting expectations and accountability, is a prerequisite.

Use tools like Microsoft Teams, for example, once described to me as, "I can virtually walk down to someone's work-

station and initiate a conversation by starting a Teams meeting session where I can look at them and have a discussion." Each colleague has the responsibility to remain productive, accessible and open to all methods of collaboration.

During the past year, we did allow some pandemic leniency, such as kids running around in the background or a cat walking across the keyboard. As we migrate back to a new normal, we are also

lowering the tolerance for those interruptions and even presence. An element of "more professional" is becoming the expectation.

What we are also seeing are the hours that were previously spent on commute now becoming "working hours." If you would have been walking "out of or in the door" at a certain time, then now you can be online and available for work at those times instead. It equates with those who still have commute time.

As our country continues to reopen workplaces, we need to remain proactive and prepare, thinking ahead to how we may need to handle another event and respond quickly and efficiently, keeping productivity levels high. ∎

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## In Tough Times, Injured Workers Require More Mental-Health Supports

are reducing the money they set aside for mental-health treatments just as demand is spiking. Other states, desperate for space to treat patients contagious with COVID-1,9 have shuttered or taken over behavioral health facilities.

While the outlook for treatment access remains worrisome, some mental health professionals hope the societal inequities and shortcomings highlighted by the crisis will lead to further innovations in delivering care, such as using telemedicine to reach far-flung patients. The need is great. More than half of counties in the U.S. don't have a psychiatrist, and nearly two-thirds have a shortage of mental-health providers.

There are other potential benefits for injured workers that could grow out of a broader need across society for mental-health interventions. One is a further breakdown in the stigma that too often

surrounds mental illness. A worker already straining under physical maladies related to an injury can then suffer a cruel secondary blow — one tied to the shame that struggles with anxiety, depression and stress can render. If more people recognize how commonplace mental-health trials are, then perhaps more workers will ask for help. Similarly, perhaps more workers will understand how physical pain, social isolation, financial worries and other everyday concerns can conspire to throw up sizable barriers to mental well being.

Ultimately, it's clear that in most cases injured workers require a menu of supports that will enable them to see their health restored and allow them to return to work. Only by viewing the whole person can case managers and providers hope to help injured workers achieve the best-possible outcomes. Part of this task involves reviewing the mental-health difficulties that an injured worker might be facing as part of the fallout from an injury. Once an obstacle is identified, it's imperative to turn, in a timely fashion, to a network of accomplished providers to help the injured worker vanquish these mental-health complications and return to health, to productivity and to the job. ∎

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## The Workplace of the Future

platform employment, which directly connects the provider with the customer. Multiple states, including California, are reviewing these work arrangements to decide if these workers are employees in the legal sense and, as such, entitled to the safety nets federal laws provide. California ultimately voted that they were not, but the work arrangements have safety and health implications, according to Howard. What are the risks