

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY:
The Expanded Role of Employee
Relations Post-COVID-19



When COVID-19 roiled the globe earlier this year, businesses were forced to overhaul the way they operated overnight. Enterprises large and small, across every sector, suddenly found themselves in reactive mode, as they attempted to keep business running smoothly and employees healthy, while complying with state and federal orders—all without a playbook.

As employers across the country scrambled to set up home offices, establish new modes of communication and reinvent operating models, the professional, physical and emotional well-being of employees were a top concern.

Were they equipped with the technology and tools they needed? Did they have the support and guidance from their leaders to enable them to continue to do their jobs as well as (if not better than) before? Were they staying healthy and safe? How were they holding up emotionally, given the forced shelter-in-place?

And, it wasn't just the remote workforce that needed attention. Essential businesses with in-person staff, such as retail, had a different series of considerations to contend with.

Were employees mentally, physically and emotionally prepared to work the front lines? Did they have the right protective equipment to keep them safe? What protocols were in place for those who were fearful of coming to work? Were they adequately trained on the new safety measures?

Regardless of the business or industry, every employee has been affected by COVID-19, some more profoundly than others. With so many unknowns—and an ongoing news narrative heightening anxiety—the way employees were handled, nurtured and guided fell to Employee Relations teams. They were—and still are—the heartbeat of the entire operation.



Shedding new light on employee relations

While the pandemic-driven workplace shift was taking place, another trend continued to build: the elevation of the Employee Relations professional—or rather, the elevated perception of the role of the ER professional.

Employee Relations, like compliance, has had a bit of an image issue. You are the ones putting up restrictions that tell employees what's okay and what's not. You can be perceived as “policing” employee behavior, and you are the ones acting when they don't abide by the rules. At least, in employee eyes, that was your role. Those perceptions have been changing for the better for some time—and the pandemic has accelerated the progress.

Companies found themselves in uncharted waters without a precedent to guide the way or policies to inform critical decisions. Employee Relations took on a leadership role and guided the transition, ensuring that employees were properly equipped, cared for and supported.

As a result, employees began to see you, their ER partners, as strategic enablers of personal, professional and business success.

As we begin our journey back to what we're all told will be a "new normal," business leaders and employees will be looking to you to guide the way—to set new expectations, establish new norms and ensure employee wellbeing in all new ways. Build on the positive momentum, as you demonstrate your undeniable value as both a strategic leader for the organization and an ally for your employees.



The workplace will not look the same

While there are many unknowns, there is one thing we know for sure: the workplace, as we knew it, is gone. What will this "new normal" in the workplace look like? While there's much we still don't know, there are a few relative certainties that we can hang our hats on.

First, many of those businesses that shifted to the remote workplace during the pandemic will continue in that mode moving forward, at least to some degree. Second, we can expect stricter protocols for ensuring a safe work environment.

As you begin planning for the road to the future, here are some considerations to factor in:



Work from home

- ❓ Is your business conducive to a remote workplace on a more permanent basis?
- ❓ If so, is that something you'd like to continue? What will that look like?
One hundred percent? 50/50?
- ❓ Just those who express an interest in staying home or perhaps those who are most at-risk?

As you consider each of these questions, weigh the risks and rewards of each to inform and solidify your work-from-home policy.



Workplace safety

- ? If you do plan to bring any portion of your workforce back into a physical office space, how will you ensure their safety?
- ? Will you stagger their days on-site?
- ? How will you reconfigure your workspaces to ensure social distancing?
- ? If you're in a retail setting, do you have the proper personal protective equipment (PPE) to protect employees from the regular flow of in-person customers?
- ? What are your guiding principles around temperature checks, cleaning practices and antibody testing?

Sure, the health and welfare of our employees have always been a priority. But this crisis served as a stark reminder to all of us that there really is nothing more important than preserving the well-being of human lives.

Managing illness: The unpredictable and highly contagious nature of coronavirus has changed how the world manages disease and illness. Today, people are more aware of the potentially perilous consequences of showing up to work sick—or even mildly under the weather. Gone are the days of “powering through” the workday despite a sore throat and the sniffles.

New considerations must be made when it comes to managing workplace illness moving forward. Not only will you need to set expectations of employees when they fall ill, but you'll also need a way to monitor and uncover trends that might point to an emerging issue.

What's more, how can you ensure employees aren't taking advantage of the added leeway when it comes to calling out sick? You might consider implementing a documentation process or software solution that tracks when employees aren't feeling well, how often they call out sick, and even how their performance is affected.

Employee comfort level: There's no question that employees, in general, are more anxious today than they were several months ago. Some may not be comfortable returning to the physical office. Others may be less willing to travel than before.

How will you balance business needs vs. your employees' comfort level? For example, you may reconsider the necessity of what was once considered typical, frequent business travel in favor of remote conferencing, when possible.

Consider, as well, the trade-off between travel for face to face interaction versus the benefits of greatly reduced T&E budgets and, most importantly, employee well-being.

Timing: When you open your office or storefront doors will be largely dictated by the circumstances surrounding both the physical space itself and employees. You'll want to consider city and state ordinances, guidance from local health authorities, local infection rates, and even public transportation availability.

The reopening of schools may also factor into your plans, depending on how many members of your team are still in the throes of home-schooling their children.

The new post-COVID-19 reality will require businesses to think through things that were simply unimaginable only months ago. Tried and true risk assessment strategies of the past may no longer be valid, replaced by reprioritized criteria and outside-the-box solutions.



Discrimination considerations have just gotten trickier

Before, the law clearly established parameters that safeguarded against discrimination practices. COVID-19 has upended even that.

For example, we've all been told that the elderly and those with underlying conditions are most vulnerable to the disease. This presents interesting questions. How can the workplace community reconcile age discrimination with ensuring the safety of older employees?

How will those with high blood pressure or diabetes, for example, be protected without an unlawful inquiry into their medical records? Will proof of antibodies be required to return to a physical place of work? Is that even legal?

And, once a vaccine is available, will employees be mandated to present proof of vaccination, especially when, historically, such mandates (e.g., measles vaccination) have been controversial and often unenforceable?

Let's not overlook the new gender considerations before us. The trend seems to be pointing to a more widespread return to the workplace before daycares and schools fully open up. This means fewer options for childcare—which traditionally affects women more than men. Working mothers may be forced to take a step back as they manage this temporary reality with their children.

Laws don't yet exist to address many of these specific considerations. It's all so new, and the world is still trying to catch its breath. With so many shades of gray surrounding the issues of discrimination

and safety, documentation will be more critical than ever before. Should someone later challenge you on specific actions you took today, your documentation will serve as proof of your well-intentioned decisions based on what a reasonable person would have done at that time (e.g., you believed a specific situation would have put an employee at risk).

The rules are changing every day, compounded by shifting and unclear guideposts. The why will matter.



Recommendations for the transition back to the new normal

While much remains unclear about what the road back to the post-pandemic workplace will entail, you can start taking actions today to put your business on solid ground for the weeks, months and years to come.

Update your policies: As we've established, multiple considerations must be addressed to regain some semblance of normalcy at work. You'll need updated policies to guide employees at a time when so much has changed.

The existing employee manual, the bible of the pre-pandemic ER world, may no longer apply—at least, not in its entirety. By updating your policies, you will set the new roadmap for employees and their leaders to follow on the path to renewed success.

Reinstitute performance reviews: While in react-and-survive mode, many businesses put a temporary hold on performance reviews and coaching. The goal was to keep things running as smoothly as possible, given the significant upheaval. As we begin to emerge on the other side of the crisis, survival is not enough. Now, businesses need to switch gears and move into thrive mode—which requires a renewed focus on employee performance, evaluating your employees to ensure they're not becoming complacent amid the chaos of recent months.

Establish new metrics for success: As you reinstitute employee performance reviews, you may need to reevaluate your metrics for success. Do they still apply? What are the new metrics for success for the employee who was expected to travel 30% of the time but is no longer comfortable with air travel?

- ? What about the retail sales associate who can't come within 6 feet of his or her customer?
- ? What does in-person customer service look like in the wake of a highly contagious disease?

As with so many other aspects of how you manage your workforce, your metrics for success, too, will likely change. Take the time to create new KPIs that work for your changing reality.

Evaluate your existing tools: Take a step back and look at the tools and capabilities you currently have in place. Some may have met a need while you were in triage mode, but what about moving forward? Do managers have what they need to manage a remote workforce in the long term? Are they equipped, from a skill set perspective, to deal with the new reality? Are the right documentation protocols and software tools in place to track employee relations matters against the backdrop with so many shades of gray? The tools and processes you had in place pre-COVID-19—or even mid-COVID-19—may no longer apply.



What some companies are doing

Want to know what other companies are doing? A recent survey of the HR Acuity Employee Relations Roundtable, a community of HR and ER leaders from top companies, revealed interesting insights on their return-to-work plans. While all are creating holistic plans that align with local regulations, many differ in their approaches as they plan to manage their workforce post-COVID-19.

Wellness assessments: Many businesses plan to institute temperature checks for employees entering the worksite—either by way of an in-person greeter and a no-contact device, free-standing temperature check devices or disposable forehead thermometer strips. Additional assessment protocols being considered include a written or verbal wellness questionnaire, a self-attestation app and self-disclosure of symptoms.

Office environment: Most companies are planning at least some degree of a return to the physical workplace. Some would like to see the majority of their workforce return, while others will stagger in-office attendance with a continued focus on telework.

In most cases, non-essential common areas will be closed for the time being, while essential common areas, such as restrooms, will be sanitized regularly. Employees will be required to wear face coverings while on site and will also have ample access to hand sanitizer.

Additional workplace accommodation protocols are also being considered to address workers who cannot work on-site, those with health conditions that may excuse them from being required to wear a mask, and more.

When an employee tests positive for COVID-19: All respondents say they'll require immediate disclosure of any employee who tests positive. Most are establishing guidelines around contact tracing, communication out to the broader employee base and the temporary closure and cleaning of the associated workspaces.

In most cases, employees will be required to self-isolate away from the workplace for 14 days from the date of the test and will not be allowed to return until he or she is symptom-free (without medication) for 72 hours. Some will also require documentation confirming proof of health, such as written medical clearance from healthcare providers.



Employee Relations leads the way

The impacts of COVID-19 have been profoundly life-changing. The Employee Relations team has been instrumental in minimizing the damage caused by the pandemic and maintaining order and calm amid chaos. It fell on you to ensure the professional, physical and emotional well-being of your company's most valuable asset—your employees. As the business community emerges from this crisis, new paths must be forged on our collective journey to the “new normal.”

While no one would choose to live through a global pandemic, the truth is, crisis creates opportunity—and that's exactly what every ER professional has been given. Now is the time to ride the wave of trust and leadership that you've established and change the face of the Employee Relations role moving forward.



Learn More: Tools & Best Practices



Download: COVID-19 Best Practices: Return to Office Plans

Get the latest insights and tips on recovery from our Employee Relations Round Table Community.



Download: Building Your COVID-19 Recovery Action Plan: A How-To Guide

Leverage this guide to ensure your organization has the right return to work plan to keep your employees safe.



On-Demand Webinar: Recovery Readiness: Preparing Your Workforce for Reopening

Learn about the latest laws and guidelines as well as tips from Employment Lawyer, David Iselinger and HR Acuity CEO, Deb Muller.



Read: Resilience, Recovery and Reimagining—Perspective on how HR Leaders can Survive and Thrive through the Pandemic

Read our Blog Interview with Nancy Altobello, Former Global Vice Chair of Talent at EY and Deb Muller as they discuss how HR Leaders can lead the recovery through resilience and reimagining.

We are here to help!



We are now offering a **FREE 15-minute Recovery Readiness Strategy Session** where we will share our best practices and help support your business post-pandemic.
Schedule your strategy session today!

Visit the HR Acuity [COVID-19 Resources Hub](#)
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