

PUBLICATION

Reassuring Your Virtual Workforce Through 2020

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You've probably heard the old axiom that employees are a company's most valuable asset. That statement bears some truth – a 2018 report by the Work Institute estimates that employers paid \$600 billion in turnover costs. With employers facing budget challenges due to the pandemic and many employers moving to a remote workforce, employee loyalty is critical. Employees who work remotely do not have the benefit of daily interaction and engagement with management and colleagues. They may not feel "connected," which could certainly impact their effectiveness, engagement, and loyalty. The following questions are key considerations when creating a plan to continue to weather the pandemic (and whatever else 2020 may throw at us) with a loyal and engaged workforce.

1. Should You Adapt Your Wellness Program?

It's no surprise that the pandemic and the safety measures instituted to curb it (e.g. social distancing, teleworking, masks) have stressed many individuals' mental health. An [August 2020 report](#) by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) found that 41 percent of respondents reported symptoms of at least anxiety and depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. These mental health stressors may be especially pronounced for employees of color who are coping with the greater impact of COVID-19 on communities of color as well as racial justice issues in the country. In fact, in the CDC report, nearly 11 percent of respondents said they had suicidal thoughts in the month prior to the survey, and some of the greatest clusters were among Black and Latino people.

You may already have an employee wellness or assistance program to support employees dealing with mental health issues. Now is the time to consider whether you can adapt that program in an increasingly virtual world. One option may be offering counseling services or a Zoom session with a mental health professional. A study by the Business Group on Health and Fidelity found that about 69 percent of employers are offering virtual therapy benefits. If you're not already investing in these programs, this is the time to think about doing so.

2. Can You Provide Targeted Support Based on Generational Differences?

A [2018 report](#) from the Pew Research Center noted that Millennials, at that time, made up more than one in three American labor force participants. At the same time, the Department of Labor estimates that between 2016 and 2026, the number of workers age 65 and older will rise by 57.6 percent. The workforce will continue to be multigenerational.

Employers must learn how to engage and support employees from various generations in a remote work environment. Most importantly, employers must understand the various fears and concerns that are primary to each generation. For example, Millennials may be less concerned with moving to a totally remote workplace than other generations, even post COVID-19. Some Baby Boomers and Traditionalists, however, may have more difficulty working remotely especially for long stretches of time, which could lead to less productivity and engagement if they feel out of place and unsupported. Employers should work diligently to ensure that their remote workforces have the ongoing training and support (technical or otherwise) necessary to not only work remotely but to be productive and efficient in those efforts. Addressing employee concerns may require adjusting duties, roles, and functions or other changes. Communication and transparency regarding company

adjustments during the COVID-19 pandemic are key for employers to support all generations of their workforces.

3. Can You Continue to Provide Training and Professional Development Opportunities?

The challenges of 2020 are fertile ground for life and career setbacks. For instance, we know that Black and women attorneys were hit hardest by the Great Recession. The National Association for Law Placement (NALP) found that overall representation of women and minority lawyers in law firms declined between 2009 and 2010 and that the percentage of Black women working as associates in 2019 still remained below the 2009 level. In today's climate, we're facing unprecedented economic and social justice issues. A [recent survey](#) by the Center for American Progress found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Millennial mothers are nearly three times more likely than Millennial fathers to report being unable to work due to a school or childcare closure.

One way to ensure that your employees stay on track for career progression, particularly if they are already working remotely, is to offer virtual professional development opportunities. In fact, a [2019 Work Institute study](#) found that, for 22 percent of employees, lack of career development opportunity was a leading cause of attrition. Even if you can't provide your own professional development programs, consider compiling and sharing information for outside learning resources that your employees can reference.

4. What Can You Do to Show Empathy?

The bottom line is people will work hard for people they like and respect. In 2014, OC Tanner published the results of a [ten-year study](#) which found that 79 percent of employees who left their jobs cited lack of appreciation as their main reason for leaving. During a time when many employees are facing caregiving responsibilities, financial stress, and potential health concerns, employers must demonstrate empathy.

Employers can show empathy by listening to employees to understand the concerns they are facing. If possible, employers should consider having managers schedule regular one-on-one check-ins with employees. Employers should also make sure that employees are aware of all the benefits available to them. Employees simply may not know that an employer provides virtual therapy or virtual professional development opportunities in the midst of such turbulent times. To that end, employers can also cultivate a sense of empathy by being transparent about the company's goals and plan of action.

While we don't know when the COVID-19 pandemic will end, we know that we will eventually make it through this ordeal. Investing in your employees now will save you cost and energy when we finally turn the COVID corner.