

How to Return to Work, Retain Your Best Talent

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As my clients begin to bring their employees back to work after required COVID lockdowns, they are choosing a variety of strategies. Additionally, through my network of contacts across the Twin Cities business community, I am aware of a couple of other approaches. There may be additional issues as organizations decide how to respond to the Biden Administration's vaccine mandate, but this is unclear as I write this.

Current reality. What is clear from the data points I have gathered is that there is no single approach that all companies will utilize over the next month or so as remote employees return to their work physical location. Here is the range of approaches, from least to most restrictive:

- Employees who choose to do so may return to work and must wear a mask upon entering the building but may remove it when in meetings or at their workspace. A few days a week, they can continue to work at home.
- Employees who choose to do so may return to their physical workspaces and must wear a mask and social distance in meetings. The others may continue to work remotely.
- All employees must return to their physical workspaces and wear a mask/social distance, and they are encouraged to get a vaccine.
- All employees must return to their physical workspaces, be vaccinated, and wear a mask/social distance in the office.

From what I have read and heard about organizations outside my client list, there are no additional options that other States and companies are utilizing as their employees return to work. For example, there may still be organizations requiring their employees to continue to work from home exclusively, with no return-to-work plan in place. Consequently, to the best of my knowledge, these four options are being employed across the U.S. as companies bring people back into their physical buildings.

The big question. The concern of most employees seems to be how they will make this transition back to work. That's the biggest question on most of their minds—how will I make this reverse change successfully? It's actually the same concern, but the opposite of what they faced in March of 2020.

Last year, these same people found themselves suddenly at home sharing a single office with a spouse and trying to handle children who were home from schools that had shut down. This was a major physical conversion and huge psychological shift for most of them. They were forced to learn how to use Zoom or Team technology and find a space in their homes where the background was suitable for a business meeting. For most people, this happened with little or no notice as States mandated shutdowns.

The big problem. In situations where your best talent feel like they are not allowed to problem solve their own solutions, they tend to look at the marketplace and find a more suitable employer. And, since employers are using one of the approaches we just identified, these talented individuals can easily find a

different employer that is approaching this question more in line with their personal thinking and values.

A suggested solution. Having heard multiple stories already concerning the level of stress people are experiencing regarding possible vaccine requirements and the new mandates to return to work physically, and knowing that, for many, the choice they must make is a difficult one, I have a suggestion for organizations that are working their way through this question:

Don't use a 'one size fits all' solution that might force your best talent to look elsewhere. Choose an approach that allows some individual freedom of choice so that your top performers can feel good about staying.

In the four current reality examples I just noted, the "all employees must return to their physical workspaces, be vaccinated, and wear a mask/social distance" is the one that seems to be causing the most angst. Why? Because there exists mixed messaging on the efficacy of masks, strong opinions about how these experimental biological agents (vaccines) are made, confusion about why there are breakthrough variants of COVID infection even with a vaccine, and the relatively low level of death from this corona virus. These factors make thinking individuals wonder what is best for them and their families.

As a parallel example, I'm also aware that many parents are enrolling their children in private schools that do not advocate the more rigid mask/vaccine rules of public schools, because they want to determine what is best for their children, not be told what is best.

The bottom line. Choose thoughtfully how your organization brings its talent back to work. Rather than a top-down decision, why not hold meetings in which this is discussed openly? Decide which approach meets your State's guidelines and addresses the needs of most of your employees, especially your best talent that you need to retain.