

## Challenges of Returning to Work Amid an Ongoing Pandemic



*By Ajay Kaul, managing partner at [AgreeYa Solutions](#)*

Many questions have presented themselves as the workforce prepares to return to the office in 2021. Key areas of discussion include how employers can best manage the situation, how to keep employees safe and how technology can help. As we prepare for another big transition, here are a few things to keep in mind when planning to return to work amid an ongoing pandemic.

### **Employers take the lead**

Employers will have to spearhead the return-to-work effort. They'll need to develop a plan that educates employees about preventative measures and communicates often to inspire confidence and loyalty. As part of their protocols, employers will likely want to meet employees at the door and include daily status questionnaires to enable contactless health assessments, as well as using contactless thermometers to perform temperature screenings. All cleanliness supplies including hand sanitizer, soap and office cleaning supplies should be readily available and provided by management. Employers should also provide PPE to employees when needed, including masks, face shields and gloves. Additionally, having instant modes of communication, like Microsoft Teams that enable chat, audio and video calls, easily available to employees allows them to deal with issues quickly and encourages bonding and engagement.

One of the biggest complexities that employers will have to tackle when planning the return to work is managing schedules. Employers should stay flexible when it comes to bringing employees back to the office, embracing rotations and hybrid schedules. Creating different branches or groups may work well for some offices and ensure

that social distancing can be maintained. Managers will need to recognize that employees' needs have changed during this period, and that as the spread of the virus ebbs and flows, they may need to return to remote work or modify their hybrid schedule. There are now applications in the market that facilitate the tracking and monitoring of COVID within the workplace, allow employees to return to physical offices safely in small groups and enable daily ticketing of who comes into work on specific days.

## **Employee safety and alleviating fears**

Employee safety is the most important part of returning your workforce to the office, and many employees may have concerns. Current employees and potential recruits will be hesitant to return to work or accept new job offers in a physical office setting. It's up to management to create a comprehensive plan, but also up to employees to take an active role. It's vital that employees adhere to safety guidelines such as mask and PPE requirements, cleanliness standards and social distancing. Additionally, employees will need insurance that covers COVID vaccinations, treatment, etc., as well as leave policies in place for those who contract the virus. Employee dedication will be a key component of a successful return to work situation. Employees will need to be cautious both in and out of the workplace, eliminating or reducing the use of public transportation if possible, as well as avoiding any gatherings, particularly within the office premises.

To alleviate fears, management should initiate transformative conversations, which use a two-way listening strategy that enhances trust, reduces threat levels and vulnerabilities employees are feeling and helps improve social connection. Crisis communication apps and intranet portals are a prime example of tools that can be used by HR to help foster communication and collaboration by delivering real-time tips, updates and announcements to employees. By recognizing this is a stressful time, management can provide enrichment tools to help employees navigate the situation. Management may provide guidance on building resilience skills, fostering a strong mindset that focuses on helping employees identify stress and providing methods to regain their composure and return to a more resourceful state. This could be part of an overall well-being program that addresses employee health and mental wellness needs. Management will also need to enable employee development and growth amid this challenging time, as building a career is still a priority for most employees.

## **Technology tools that make it easier**

Technology can be a fantastic tool to facilitate employee safety as we prepare to return to work. Companies will want to begin by determining if any processes or procedures can be automated. Robotic process automation (RPA) or chatbot technology is a great way to offload repetitive tasks and will help employees social distance. While RPA and cloud technology have already been adopted at breakneck speeds, workplace management may also want to institute technology solutions that help administrators monitor real-time movement in and out of the office. This will allow for a strong contact tracing program if the need arises.

Robust cloud infrastructure and support will be paramount as we embark on hybrid work schedules and ease back into office life, allowing employees to transition from work-from-home and work-from-office lifestyles quickly and easily. A special attention should be paid to collaboration and productivity tools that democratize and allow end-to-end automation of complex and resource intensive tasks. For instance, low- and no-code solutions are enabling business to take control of their work, by allowing employees with minimal IT dependence to simplify, automate and revamp business process with ease and efficiency. Work needs to continue at a regular pace, while also addressing the challenges of the work-from-office return, and these technology solutions can do some of the heavy lifting.

## **Meeting the challenge presented by COVID-19**

Technology tools will provide major support as they facilitate social distancing, contact tracing and offload repetitive tasks. They are redefining the modern workplace, analyzing what can and cannot be done remotely to make strategic shifts that lead to positive employee sentiment and customer experience. Productivity tools that facilitate collaboration via shared documents, virtual meeting and video conferences will still be prominent and

needed. Employers and employees will need to work together and find the right solutions to address return-to-office challenges.

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### **About the Author**



*Ajay Kaul is a visionary leader and a trendsetter. As managing partner of [AgreeYa Solutions](#), he has been instrumental in leading the company through solid growth and international expansion for the past 20 years. Kaul has three decades of experience in building powerful and innovative solutions for businesses across various industries and verticals. His expertise and knowledge expand across enterprise sales management, marketing and strategy, global delivery, and mergers and acquisitions.*