



10 Lessons for managing your staff in the COVID-19 era

Most business owners and managers know by now that when stay-at-home orders are lifted in their region or country, it will be far from business as usual. The workplace may look a lot different for the foreseeable future as health and safety protocols are implemented. And the transition to remote work could be a lasting one for businesses that realize their employees can be just as productive working at home.

So, how do you manage your employees when everything's constantly changing? More importantly, what can you do now to prepare for the weeks and months ahead?

How Robert Half can help

As a global specialized staffing firm, Robert Half has unique insight because we work with companies of all sizes on their staffing, recruitment and workforce planning efforts. Here are 10 lessons learned in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and how you can apply each in your organization.

LESSON 1: REOPENING REQUIRES SIGNIFICANT CHANGES, INCLUDING HOW PEOPLE WORK AND MANAGE OTHERS

The threshold decision for employers as some governments lift stay-at-home restrictions is when exactly to reopen. There are risks for businesses that rush the process. If your company hasn't taken the time to establish well-communicated protocols and an employee or visitor gets sick at your business location and experiences life-threatening outcomes, you could encounter legal issues and threats to your reputation. You must also consider staff morale. Will employees feel like you are not thoughtfully balancing business needs with their health and safety if you reopen too early? All companies considering reopening should take a measured and carefully planned approach.

When you do reopen your business, it won't be just a matter of unlocking the doors and letting everyone back in, of course. You'll need a strategic plan that encompasses governmental guidelines as well as some of your own that you consider crucial to safeguarding the health of your employees, visitors, customers and vendors.



The Belgium government has outlined a number of recommendations:

- Continue to encourage telework.
- Have teams return to work in phases.
- Establish alternating days or extra shifts that reduce the number of employees in a facility at a given time, allowing them to maintain distance from one another while maintaining a full on-site workweek.
- Close common areas where personnel are likely to congregate and interact.
- Install high-efficiency air filters in office buildings to increase ventilation in the work environment.
- Install physical barriers, such as clear plastic shields between cubicles.
- Enforce social distancing protocols.
- Minimize nonessential travel and adhere to government guidelines regarding isolation following travel.
- Encourage employees to wear cloth face coverings, when it's not possible to keep social distance of 1,5 meter.
- Promote personal hygiene in the work environment (e.g., supply tissues, no-touch trash cans, hand soap, hand wipes containing at least 60% alcohol and disinfectants).

Each employer must evaluate exactly which protocols are appropriate for their business and should monitor updates to guidelines issued by local government.

While the protocols that companies implement will vary according to their type of business, you should also consider practices such as these:

- Hand sanitizer placed at the building entrance and throughout the office
- New rules of etiquette (no handshakes or hugs)
- More thorough cleaning and sanitation of the office
- Reduced elevator capacity
- Guidelines for the use of common space, such as lunch and break rooms
- Guidelines for the sharing of food and food-delivery services
- Fewer in-person group meetings and training sessions
- Limiting conference room capacity for those meetings that do take place
- Personal transportation (car, bike, foot) in lieu of public transit
- Modifying in-office hours for employees to avoid peak commute/building entrance times
- Easy access to the company's employee assistance program (EAP) provider for employees dealing with anxiety

Your strategic plan for reopening should include a plan for your people, as people. At all businesses, these protocols are going to change the way people interact. Things we used to take for granted — mingling in the break room, having hallway conversations, stopping by someone’s desk to chat and attending in-person meetings — will be curtailed, at least for now. These changes have implications for how people will work and manage others going forward.

Think about the actual experience of coming back and how you can make that as positive as possible for your employees. Address the emotional state of your team. Being unsure what to expect while also being worried about their health can be overwhelming. Be very clear about the steps the company is taking to ensure their well-being, reassuring employees that their health is the company’s top priority. Consider a message from leadership welcoming people back on the first day of reopening. But don’t stop there: Transparent, continual communication is essential.



LESSON 2: REMOTE WORK IS NOT GOING AWAY

As governments imposed stay-at-home restrictions, working from home quickly became a business necessity. But even as businesses reopen, not everyone will return to the office. In fact, one legacy of the pandemic could be fewer people working at physical office locations.

Despite earlier concerns about productivity, many managers now understand that remote work can be quite effective. In some cases, workers can be even more productive working away from a central location.

Continued remote work is advantageous for both companies and employees. Employers may see lower costs for real estate (rent for office space), operations (water, electricity), fixed assets (office furniture), office supplies and commuter subsidies.

For employees, recent Robert Half surveys in the BeNeLux show that remote work has been a welcome change:

79%
say they’d like to work remotely
more following the pandemic

53%
say they’ve realized their
job is doable from home

53%
feel their work-life balance has
improved due to lack of a commute

24%
feel more comfortable
with technology



LESSON 3: THE EXPANSION OF REMOTE WORK WILL REQUIRE NEW WAYS OF MANAGING PEOPLE

Just as they did when the first stay-at-home orders were issued, your team will have new needs, new concerns and new expectations of you as you reopen.

Many managers have gained experience directing a virtual team in past years. But the challenges are different in an era when a higher percentage of employees will continue to work remotely, even after businesses reopen.

Tips for managing a workforce that's split between in-office and remote workers



Acknowledge the new normal. This is a time like no other, and its effect on workers will be lasting. Don't stop expressing your appreciation for everything your team is doing to keep in good spirits and contribute to the company's bottom line. After all, it's your strong and dedicated teams that are ultimately going to get your business through this crisis.



Help teams stay connected. During video calls, update off-site staff on key takeaways from meetings held at the office that could impact their projects. Another idea could be to simply continue to make all meetings virtual.



Don't stop remote nonwork conversations. One way employees in some businesses are keeping their spirits up is by having short chats with each other, like previously done when everyone was in the office — including checking in to see how people are handling the pandemic, whether they are working in the office or working from home. These conversations are still important to keep everyone connected, even when you reopen.



Pay attention to behavior. Don't overlook that some remote workers may start to feel left out. Out of sight shouldn't mean out of mind. Look for signs that remote workers aren't performing at their best, such as missed deadlines, lack of communication or decreasing interest in their assignments.



Be a technology champion. Your workers' tech tools will continue to be vital during this crisis. As their manager, you can be a great expeditor when the inevitable problems crop up. Learn as much as you can about data-sharing and collaboration apps and how they work, or assign someone else within the organization this responsibility. Don't leave your team with an 800 number or a website for IT customer service as their only resource for solving tech problems.

LESSON 4: YOU'LL NEED TO BECOME AN EXPERT COMMUNICATOR

When employees began to work remotely, a huge challenge for managers was keeping the team together, albeit virtually. It still is. As people begin to return to the office and some remain at home, your dynamic team needs a steady stream of reliable information — and reassurance.

During this transitional time, there is no such thing as too much communication. Some managers are better communicators than others. But keeping your employees informed and supported is essential when teams are dispersed.

Quick tips for communicating with mixed in-person/remote teams

- Communicate as much as two to three times more frequently than you would in person.
- Use video — it can forge a stronger connection than audio-only calls, as people see colleagues talking, strategizing, smiling and laughing.
- Be as transparent as possible when sharing the latest company information.
- Keep calls on time and limit call cancellations — this lets staff know the importance you place on ongoing communication, both formal and casual.



LESSON 5: DISTANCING AND OTHER RESTRICTIONS AT WORK MEAN MORALE WILL NEED A PICK-ME-UP

Communication is essential not only on a business level but also on a human one. Even when some members of your team are able to return to the office, it will not be like any office environment they've ever experienced. Social distancing requirements will mean new rules around the size of meetings or the number of people in common areas (kitchen, break room), more separation between desks and more physical barriers (cubicle walls).

Our research across the BeNeLux shows how workers visualize changes they'll make:

69%

are rethinking shaking hands with business contacts

62%

plan to schedule fewer in-person meetings

63%

are rethinking attending in-person business events

61%

are weighing the necessity of business travel



Just as they do while staff are working remotely, managers must stimulate good office morale when employees return. Maintain your efforts to be:

- Compassionate
- Empathetic
- Resilient
- Supportive
- Inclusive
- Calm
- Approachable
- Authentic
- Accommodating

Keeping morale high also means seeing this period as an opportunity to rally your workforce and strengthen the company for the future. In emails or group video calls:



Explain how the senior management team is working to stabilize and rebuild the business.



Make it very clear that the company's mission and values continue to guide the organization.



Share any wins the team is having serving customers during these challenging times.



Explain how the firm's core beliefs provide the foundation for the changes and hard decisions the business has made and is making.

Through it all, remind your employees of the emphasis the company is placing on their health and safety.

LESSON 6: YOUR ABILITY TO PRIORITIZE TASKS AND REASSIGN STAFF RESOURCES WILL BE KEY

The pandemic has taught employers the importance of being agile. As your business begins to improve and you need to hire new staff or reinstate temporary unemployed employees, you'll need to be better than ever at managing a mix of resources.

You'll be directing the projects of people working both in an office and at home. Prepare for rearranging staff resources and reprioritizing projects yet again if stay-at-home orders are reissued. You'll also have to be very good at maintaining a dynamic blend of full-time and interim staff to address changing conditions.

LESSON 7: YOUR TEAM WILL NEED NEW SOFT SKILLS

As rapidly as conditions continue to change, your employees will need polished soft skills more than ever. The ability to think creatively, be flexible, be resilient, and help rally and motivate colleagues and teams, for example, are crucial as businesses reopen and must operate under very different conditions.

The good news is that team members working remotely have been perfecting many of these attributes since government restrictions began. Verbal and writing skills have improved, for example, as workers have had to turn to email and video platforms to respond to each and every business request or morning greeting. Workers have also enhanced their teamwork and time management. All of these abilities will continue to be put to the test.

Qualities you'll want your team and any new hires to have

- Flexibility and adaptability
- Willingness to pitch in anywhere needed
- Comfort with tackling multiple roles
- Resilience
- Creativity to solve shifting challenges
- Eagerness to learn new technologies



LESSON 8: YOU'LL HAVE ACCESS TO MORE TOP TALENT THAN EVER BEFORE

In just a couple of months, the supply of talent has shifted dramatically. Millions of people across the world have lost their jobs because of business conditions, not performance. With so many unemployed, the quality of the available labor pool is very high.

Also, managers who are now more open to hiring remote workers have more recruiting choices because they have, in effect, lifted geographic barriers. You can engage candidates from across the globe as easily as those living near your office. This provides an opportunity for companies to hire people with valuable skills for immediate needs — as well as for new needs when business picks up later.

If you're reluctant to hire full-time staff until you're more confident the economy will continue to improve, you can instead tap into the high-quality temporary and contractor pool to meet demand.



LESSON 9: YOU'LL NEED HELP HIRING

Although a high-quality labor pool is emerging due to rising unemployment, the sheer number of applicants means that locating and bringing on board the best of the best is going to be increasingly tough. For every attractive job posting, there will likely be a sky-high stack of resumes to sort through.

And the rest of the hiring process won't get any easier either: Once you've vetted resumes, you're looking at a series of initial phone interviews, video interviews for your top choices, skills testing, reference checks and other steps. Plus, all this comes at a time when you're slammed with juggling the staff management and technological challenges of guiding a remote team — and just trying to keep your business in business.

A specialized staffing firm like Robert Half can help you navigate this process. We have a pool of highly skilled candidates whose skills and experience have been evaluated, and we are able to handle the time-consuming details of the hiring process for you. We can also advise you on the fair market rate for salaries in the current business environment.

LESSON 10: YOUR RETENTION PROGRAMS WILL BE PUT TO THE TEST

As a recovery takes hold, now-lean businesses will be going into hiring mode again. Make sure your best people aren't on their target list.

As more companies realize that many formerly in-office positions can be handled just as well by employees working remotely, candidates will not be limited to just the jobs in their immediate area. The whole world, in theory, is now open to them.

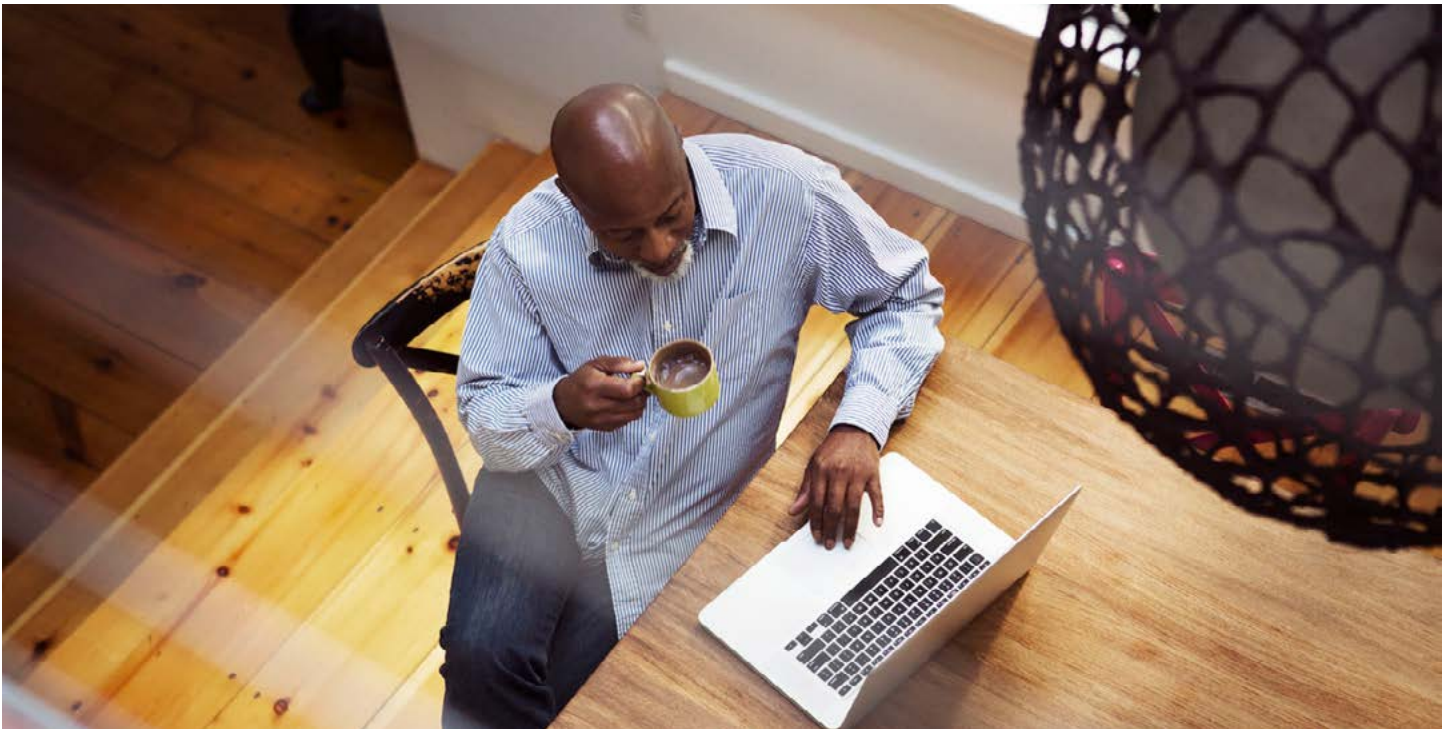
Four tips for motivating your team to stay

Pay your top performers well. Even in times of relatively high unemployment, if you aren't meeting or exceeding what other companies are paying for similar work, you risk losing your most valued employees.

Focus on employee wellness. Help people get through this time emotionally. Consider wellness webinars for your team on topics such as coping with uncertainty, living through change, stress management and mind-body relaxation.

Be flexible. Allow a wide degree of latitude in working hours and deadlines. This will allow people to arrange their lives as the pandemic continues to erect barriers even to everyday tasks and services they once took for granted.

Reinforce the importance of their work. Office perks like all-you-can-eat snacks, cool collaboration spaces and on-site gyms mean much less now. What many members of your team will want most during this time is work that is meaningful and reassurance that their contributions are valued. Make it clear that they are critical to the firm's rebound and are supported by the company's leadership — whether they are remote or in the office.



Closing thoughts

Ultimately, the entire function of the office could change as a result of lessons we are learning while dealing with COVID-19. The central workplace could even become the secondary workplace and the primary one the home, a reversal of the way things have been. In that scenario, your employees may only come to the office for important meetings with executives, vendors and others.

For now, the main concern for business owners and managers is reopening. The timeline and scope for the workforce to come back to the office will vary dramatically from company to company. Every business and individual will return at a time that they deem appropriate and safe. Perhaps the best gift you can give your employees in the coming weeks and months is to make it plain you don't expect them to return until they are ready. That will boost their morale as well as their loyalty.

For more hiring and management resources, visit roberthalf.be/en/blog.

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