How to Support Your Returning Workforce

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The landscape of the modern workplace was, and continues to be, drastically restructured by the COVID-19 virus. Millions of workers were laid off or furloughed across the country, and many low-wage workers (including teachers) now earn more money from unemployment than they did on the job. For employers, recalling the workforce in the most ethical way—the way that most benefits companies and employees alike, while minimizing COVID-19 exposure—is a complicated conversation.

For one thing, the pandemic has revealed how much of the workforce can reasonably and successfully operate from home. For many employees, working from home has become convenient and appealing. Plus, this crisis is far from over, and as long as it is present, the risk of contracting COVID-19 will be, too.

Some companies have offered wage increases, such as Amazon's $2 an hour hazard pay and $500 one-time bonus, or Kroger's $2 an hour "hero bonus." Arguably, those benefits were withdrawn too soon. In response to criticism, Kroger added a $400 one-time bonus for full-time associates and a $200 bonus for part-time associates. Still, many feel that hazard pay should last as long as the danger of contamination remains.

So what has to happen to encourage employees to return to work?

Providing COVID-19 benefits is a win for business.

Providing specialized COVID-19 benefits to the returning labor force is more than a humanitarian plan of action—it's an astute business move. Investing in your company's workforce will improve retention, productivity, and morale for a number of reasons. Poor communication and lack of employee investment can cost a company drastically (in some cases, as high as 10s of millions of dollars). On the flip side, companies that invest in their employees see improved productivity and innovation.

As with every crisis, COVID-19 offers an opportunity for companies to step up in a big way. Millennial and Gen Z workers are looking for companies that stand up for social and civil rights, especially within recent months. These workers are quick to leave companies they feel are careless or frivolous when it comes to the wellbeing of their staff.

"Ensuring a safe and fair workplace is also a racial and gender justice issue," according to a bulletin released by the National Partnership for Women & Families (NPWF) and the National Employment Law Project (NELP). "Workers, customers, and communities will remember companies that met the challenge of this moment and invested in their workers."

The COVID-19 pandemic intersects with the social justice values of the emerging workforce in a number of ways. The virus economically impacted Black, Latinx, Native American, and immigrant communities disproportionately. Black women especially are less likely to be afforded remote work opportunities, and more likely to be diagnosed with Coronavirus as a result. This is an opportunity for companies to prove that they have the backs of some of their most marginalized workers.

What benefits should you provide?

So, what benefits will provide your workforce with the support they need to stay healthy while manning the front-lines of your industry? We'll discuss some of the most important options below.

Premium pay for frontline workers. No event in history has highlighted how much society relies upon our front-line service workers, daycare workers, warehouse workers, and healthcare workers. Employees who may have been undervalued for working minimum wage jobs in the past are now dubbed "essential workers" and risk their lives day in and day out to carry on their essential roles.

While the Senate has toyed with the idea of hazard pay assistance, which would provide frontline workers with an additional $13 an hour, these workers are struggling to get by in the meantime. When essential workers can't afford their expenses, their work suffers, and the company suffers in turn.

Workers who take on risk of exposure or other health hazards should receive a premium pay. In their set of guidelines, the NPWF and NELP suggest companies provide frontline workers a wage increase of 25 percent to 50 percent.

At least 80 hours paid sick time. More than a quarter of private-sector employees don't earn any paid sick days. Even those who do earn paid sick days often don't earn enough to take off the 14-day quarantine period or to recover from a coronavirus infection. For those who accrue sick days, they may not have the necessary amount available.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (and its amendment, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security –or CARES–act) was created to assure all workers are covered with baseline benefits. The act requires most employers with

less than 500 employees provide paid sick time and paid leave for childcare needs. The NPW and NELP recommend extending these benefits to any employees who may not be covered.

In their guidelines brief, the NPWF and the NELP recommend emergency expansions of paid sick time and paid family and medical leave. Specifically 80 hours of paid sick time, immediately available for use to cover any COVID-19 related emergency including quarantine when experiencing symptoms or seeking testing to provide care to a loved one, to self-quarantine due to possible infection, or because they were advised to shelter in place due to location, risk, or other relevant factors.

Keep in mind these 80 hours are a *minimum* and would only cover one period of self-isolation.

Increased flexibility. There are two important facets to flexibility during these post-COVID-19 times. You might be able to guess the first one: let as many employees work remotely as possible.

It's understandable that some jobs can't be done remotely until easily pilotable robots are fiscally responsible, but the virus has made clear that many jobs *can* be done from home. There are a number of ways this can benefit your staff.

- Around 43 percent of full-time workers say they would prefer to work from home even after the crisis is over. A third say they would take remote employment over a pay raise.
- While the crisis continues, the ability to work from home (even part-time) will reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.
- Employees will save an average $4,000 per year on transportation costs, coffee, lunches, and wardrobe.

But remote work isn’t just for your employees. It’s good for you, too. Consider:

Because of the personal and emotional strain the virus has put on workers, it’s also smart to allow scheduling flexibility for both hourly and salaried workers. They should be able to modify the start and end of their shifts easily, trade work and sick days when necessary, and take shorter or more condensed weeks at short notice. This will assure they’re able to keep their home commitments, and in turn, stay healthy enough to keep their work commitments. If it’s possible, explore a formal work-sharing program.

Reasonable accommodations for at-risk and pregnant workers. It’s important to recognize that some of your employees may be more at-risk than others due to health conditions or pregnancy. Many pregnant employees (who face increased immune and respiratory risk) have begun suing their employers for discrimination in cases where they were not allowed to stay home.

It’s important to engage in an active dialogue with your high-risk employees and offer them as many options as you can. You should never deny your high-risk employees the opportunity to work, but you should look for ways to make accommodations based on their needs.

Empathy will get us through.

By implementing a diverse range of these benefits, you can support your staff during this unprecedented time while simultaneously reinforcing your empathetic and forward-thinking employment strategies.

If you have other questions or concerns, check out the Department of Labor’s Coronavirus Resource page, the CDC’s guidelines for businesses and employers, and Spectrum Health’s Employer Guide.

Most of all, remember to maintain an open line of communication with your employees. By staying in touch with their needs, concerns, and complaints you'll be able to provide innovative, hands-on support to keep your staff thriving. If we band together and are empathetic to one another's needs, we'll all be able to get through this and come out stronger on the other side.

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