The Future of Work and Benefits *After COVID-19*

EMPYREAN

INTRODUCTION

As cities and businesses navigate reopening efforts, employers and employees are adjusting to the many impacts of today's global pandemic on everyday life. Here, we examine several ways in which COVID-19 has changed how and where work gets done, and how these effects may shape the future of work in a post-pandemic world.

Increased Demand for Remote Work and Job Flexibility

Remote work capabilities are a defining factor among companies that were best prepared to handle the sudden emergence of COVID-19. Today, the ability to work from home is no longer just an employee perk; it is fast becoming an employee expectation, and has also proven to be an essential element of a strong business continuity plan.

Prior to the pandemic, there had been a 91% increase in the number of employees working remotely since 2009.[1] **Now, an estimated 66% of employees are working from home[2] – and both employers and employees are beginning to recognize the benefits of working outside of the traditional office space.**

Working from home saves employees time and money by eliminating the costs associated with a typical work day, including the daily commute. Companies with a large remote employee population can also save on facility expenses, as well as widen access to top talent outside of a company's immediate vicinity.

While working from home was certainly gaining popularity before the current pandemic, COVID-19 has pushed employers to embrace remote work at a pace that some HR leaders did not expect for at least another decade. Today, both employees and employers are recognizing that working in the usual office setting may not be necessary or *even as productive* as once thought.

Some organizations have struggled to overcome concerns about productivity and professionalism while allowing employees to work outside of the office. These concerns are understandable, but employees can actually be *more* productive when working from home under the right conditions.[3]

For many people, the flexibility afforded by working from home will be difficult to relinquish after this pandemic has passed. **Moving forward, business leaders can expect job flexibility and remote work capabilities to remain a significant draw for talent** – especially now that employees have experienced the benefits of remote work for themselves.

As working from home becomes more mainstream, HR teams must focus on building a strong communications strategy, remote-friendly culture, and the right vendor partnerships to support employees' needs across their widely dispersed workforce.

## *Secure and Mobile Technology for Business Continuity*

The organizations that have experienced the most success during the COVID-19 pandemic are those that maintained a modern mobility strategy as a key focus of their technology infrastructure. Social distancing measures and lockdowns have made it difficult (and in some cases, unsafe) for employees to travel and work in the office as usual. Now it is crucial that employees have access to the secure technology solutions necessary to ensure productivity, collaboration, and data security across their entire team – regardless of location.

Unfortunately, not all businesses were prepared for such a sudden shift in their daily operations. **For instance, a key aspect of a strong mobility strategy is 100% laptop deployment – paired with access to a secure virtual private network (VPN).**

One important limitation on mobility is that traditional offices have typically relied on static desktop computers for employee use. While laptop computers often require a larger investment than desktop machines, they also ensure that employees have the hardware and software necessary to work while away from the office. After the COVID-19 pandemic, we can expect companies to focus more heavily on optimizing their technology infrastructure to support more robust mobility strategies and business continuity plans, including the switch to mobile hardware.

While organizations adjust to sudden changes in operations, this is also an important time to evaluate the preparedness of your key vendors. It is imperative that your essential business providers – such as your benefits administration and enrollment partner – were properly prepared *prior* to the emergence COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure you and your employees continue to experience uninterrupted, high-quality benefits service.
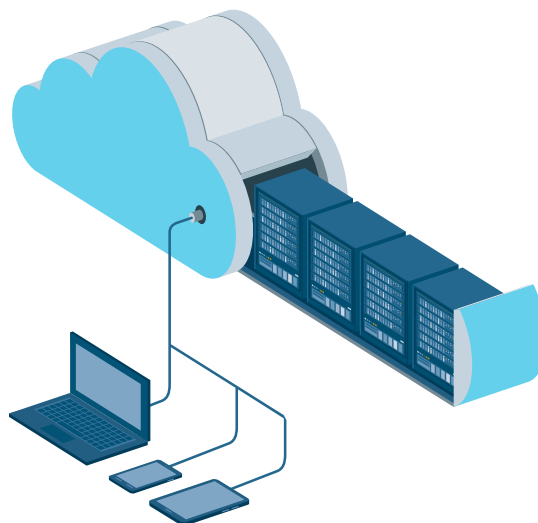
Reimagining of the Traditional Office

From restaurants to retail environments, COVID-19 has demanded a serious reconsideration of how we structure our everyday lives and spaces, and the office environment is no exception. **As companies consider welcoming workers back to their facilities, they must also be prepared to make changes in accordance with the latest health and safety standards.**

For example, open-plan offices have gained popularity over the years, and as many as 70% of offices now utilize this layout.[4] Without barriers like cubicle walls, however, open workspaces can make infection control more difficult to manage. Converting an existing workspace away from an open design can be a challenge, but adding privacy features like walls or partitions may actually pay off in terms of increased productivity.[5]

"Hoteling" is another approach to space utilization that we are likely to see more of in the post-COVID-19 workspace. With hoteling, employees are not assigned a permanent desk. Instead, they are free to utilize any available workstation to suit their needs and schedule. The hoteling concept allows facility managers to make the most of their space without the need to increase their office footprint (provided the proper sanitizing measures are in place).

One particularly important task when planning your office reopening is determining which employees actually *need* to be in the office, and which employees can continue working remotely. As companies leverage staggered office schedules and more employees opt to permanently work from home, the hotel desk concept may be a good fit for businesses looking to manage facility costs alongside financial impacts and opportunities.

Renewed Focus on Holistic Employee Wellbeing

Along with health concerns, COVID-19 has also caused significant financial stress for many people and their families. In the past, however, financial wellness initiatives have often been harder to define than other aspects of benefit programs – especially as employers navigate the wide range of program options and employee needs regarding their financial health.

Moving forward, we can expect financial wellness to become a key area of focus for proactive benefit teams looking to ease anxieties brought about by the economic effects of the pandemic. Companies may look to offer more comprehensive programs, resources, and decision support tools that offer clear guidance to help employees reach their unique savings and budgeting goals.

Additionally, although your workforce may enjoy a greater sense of flexibility while working remotely, there is also a heightened opportunity for employee burnout as a result of such changes. Today, employees are having to mentally shift their concept of work-life balance all the while working *from* home.

Without the defined boundaries of the office environment or their daily commute, employees may find it hard to fully "unplug" after their work day is over. With many employees expected to remain remote after the pandemic passes, addressing the risks of employee burnout is an important task that HR teams must be ready to tackle sooner rather than later.

Employees' mental health will remain an important priority as the impacts of the pandemic continue to disrupt everyday life. Building awareness of your mental health resources and benefits – such as wellness programs and employee assistance programs (EAP) – will be a particularly crucial task to help support your employees through this transition.

Your benefits administration provider should be aligned with your benefits strategy throughout this unique period (including accommodating any additional focus on employees' financial, mental, and overall wellbeing) and be ready to communicate and adjust to any changes as necessary to best support your employees.

CONCLUSION

In just a short time, COVID-19 has had a profound and long-lasting impact on the way work gets done. While there is much uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, there are also valuable opportunities for organizations to evaluate the status quo, optimize their operations, and stay adaptive.

HR leaders are at the forefront of many of these changes, and are helping to guide employees throughout this challenging period. **As businesses look to the future, reliable partnerships and the right technology will become even more critical to ensuring your business is prepared to tackle whatever comes next – *no matter what.***

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