



COVID-19

Practical workforce strategies
that put your people first



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In moments of uncertainty and concern, it’s not only about *what* leaders of organizations do but equally *how* they do it that matters.

COVID-19 is taking the world by surprise, causing a great deal of uncertainty and raising issues that require thoughtful, people-first responses. This newly identified coronavirus was first seen in Wuhan in central China in late December 2019. As we enter March 2020, the virus now has a global reach on all continents except Antarctica. As the virus spreads, communities, ecosystems, and supply chains are being impacted far beyond China.

In January 2020, ahead of the Lunar New Year and as health concerns were still growing, Deloitte conducted a survey in China of human capital policies and practices. The survey drew over 1,000 responses from enterprises operating in China, including a cross-section of private, foreign, and state-owned enterprises as well as not-for-profit organizations.¹

¹<https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/Risk/gx-hr-policies-research-report-under-the-new-coronavirus-outbreak-in-china-en-200129.pdf>

The survey shows that from the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, the immediate focus of employers has been on ensuring the health and safety of their employees:

- Ninety percent of the employers believe it is an urgent requirement to provide their employees with remote and flexible work option.
- Energy, resources, and industrial companies encounter the biggest constraints in offering flexible working and remote solutions, and have focused on providing epidemic protection—they have been ensuring sanitation, personal protective equipment, and safety of the workplace environment.
- More than half of government and public service entities are focusing on addressing employees' psychological stress.

Authorities internationally are taking decisive action to respond to this emerging public health threat, which has caused the business community to consider the adequacy of its own preparedness measures.

It's important to remember we have faced crises like this in the past and will face them again in the future. We need to be prepared, rational, and even altruistic in response. If there is disruption, there will also be recovery, so how we act in a time of crisis can also inform our long-term impact.



Responding to the immediate challenge: a framework to view the impact on your people

Given the importance of people to every organization, companies need to plan to respond to employee needs during the unfolding challenge. It's helpful to think about this as three deeply connected dimensions of an organization: *work* (the what), *workforce* (the who), and *workplace* (the where).

Drawing on lessons learned in prior crises, such as SARS, we offer the following practices and strategies for consideration. These are the moments that matter, and how you rally your team will be key.

The work



- 1. Establish a business response and continuity office.** Immediately establish a cross-functional team to develop a coordinated response effort. Many organizations prepared pandemic plans for the outbreak of H1N1 in 2009. The current outbreak is a prompt to ensure that plans are up to date and fit for purpose. If not already included in your pandemic plans, determine meaningful organizational activation and deactivation triggers, and review continuity procedures to better understand your critical staff, functions, and operational hubs. Daily stand-ups of this cross-functional team can help guide your executives on where to focus their efforts, and be the integrated pulse for your employees, customers, vendors, and partners. This crisis will pass, but you will need the continuity team to re-activate in the future for similar situations.
- 2. Confirm critical roles and backup plans.** Prepare temporary succession plans for key executive positions and critical roles in your business. As COVID-19 has spread globally, there is an increased risk that key people will be temporarily unavailable due to quarantine or illness. In the event of illness, your board and management team need to have clear leadership alternatives. There should be short-term and long-term plans for operating the company—this includes scenario planning, both for revised decision rights and accountabilities, and your escalation paths for urgent decisions.
- 3. Evaluate the actual work of your company and how it might be changed.** Identify what work requires on-site attendance. Many companies are shifting face-to-face meetings to teleconferences to reduce the risk of virus transmission. A combination of technologies (e.g., remote access, cyber), practices and policies, safeguards, and training all need to be in place to support a wide remote-work deployment. For work that cannot be made remote, evaluate what safeguards can be put in place, such as revised cleaning protocols or personal protective equipment.
- 4. Understand what work is mission-critical and what can be deferred or deprioritized.** Help your teams understand where their focus needs to be. Allow them to focus on the most important tasks and empower teams to be creative in how they deliver non-essential work in ways that minimize unnecessary risk or exposure. Demonstrate a willingness to listen to ensure your teams feel safe speaking up against conducting work that puts their health, or the health of others, at risk.

The workforce



- 5. Show up for your people—set the tone at the top.** How leaders behave during critical moments leaves a lasting mark on corporate culture. While panic and overreaction is not helpful, neither is complacency nor giving the impression that leaders are downplaying the situation. Proactivity, consistency in message, and modelling behaviours as the situation evolves is paramount. In a period of unknowns and a vague timeline, your people are looking to you for direction and confidence. Remember to think of the future as well. If there is disruption, there will also be recovery.
- 6. Develop a plan for your whole workforce.** Don't forget that your workforce is not just your employees. It is not uncommon for employers to overlook their contract and vendor workforce or ineffectively engage other partners, such as unions. Identify all critical contributors to your business and ensure they're included in your plans to keep your entire workforce safe. Unionized employers should collaborate with their union leadership to address concerns. As applicable, occupational health and safety partners should be engaged.
- 7. Define your communication strategy and make it visible.** Your team expects accurate, authoritative information. They also need transparency—trying to conceal risk can potentially create more. The most important players in your communications plan are your front-line managers, so outline communication plans with your leaders so they know what to expect, and what their role is.
- 8. Educate employees about COVID-19 symptoms and prevention.** In our opinion, caring for your people is the first priority. Your company should strengthen safety education, establish self-protection guidelines, and increase awareness of risk prevention. Consult with occupational health partners about evidence-based supports for prevention of infection in the workplace. Human Resources (HR) can identify your most at-risk employees and prepare them for alternative work arrangements.
- 9. Establish employee support procedures.** Consider a dedicated hotline for inquiries from employees. It's important for employees to have a voice, and for you to have a channel to truly understand what is happening with your employees. Consider bringing in medical experts to facilitate question and answer sessions with your teams to understand the facts of how to stay aware and safe during this time. Lean on information from credible sources such as the World Health Organization and Health Canada to inform procedures.
- 10. Develop workforce/labour plans, and conduct scenario analysis.** Think ahead to how this situation could play out, including the recovery period. Leaders should consider in advance how to restart disrupted business operations amid ongoing epidemic prevention and control measures. Keep in mind that quarantines and travel restrictions could mean the time to ramp back up to full capacity may be longer—and more complicated—than after a planned shutdown. For example, restarting operations requires an additional level of labour planning to consider staffing levels, sanitation regimens, visitor and contractor policies, and personal protective equipment needs. For operations restarting with lower staffing levels, a supplemental focus on product quality may be required.

- 11. Create strategies for a temporary labour reduction. Be ready for a slowdown.** The need for your current workforce may temporarily be disrupted, and you'll need to decide how to handle this. In the past, we have seen employers manage labour excesses through the use of leave balances or offering (or forcing) additional unpaid leave in times of cash flow crisis. If staffing reductions or lay-offs are necessary, be aware that employers can run the risk of receiving claims of constructive dismissal, and applicable government employment standards dictate when temporary layoffs become permanent and employees are eligible for severance pay. In addition, employers also need to be mindful of the possibility of triggering mass termination provisions in their employment standards. And, remember: at this point, we don't know how long this disruption will last. Reducing staff prematurely may have long-term negative implications.
- 12. Prepare plans for site disruption and re-activation.** In the event an entity has to close its doors for non-critical workers for a period, determine a communications plan about how you'll communicate with all workers, including contractors and vendor partners. Have a clear playbook for how to initiate a closure and how to reroute operations and employees to other locations within your network. Moreover, finalize a checklist to determine when employees can return to work once the all clear is given.
- 13. Develop clear protocols and obligations for employees who are at risk.** All employers need to have clear protocols to ensure their people know they must self-report in the cases of high-risk travel or close contact with high-risk individuals. Economically vulnerable employees may be reluctant to self-report due to potential income loss. While we would all rather provide incentives for reporting, there may be a need to be clear about consequences for employees who are at risk and not reporting. If possible, employers should look for ways to bridge income loss. In addition, it's worth establishing guidelines for when employees are clear to return to work.
- 14. Review leave policies.** Review sick leave policies and procedures, including paid sick-leave programs, statutory leave, and eligibility criteria for medical leaves of absence, such as doctors' notes. Consider whether eligibility criteria should be temporarily changed in this period; aim to strike the right balance between protecting sick leave from abuse and protecting the general workforce from potential infection.
- 15. Prepare for increased absenteeism and work refusal.** Absenteeism will increase as health-screening protocols are enforced and employees who may be showing symptoms remain at home. School closures, travel restrictions, and personal concerns will all contribute. You also need to be ready for an increased number of work refusals, and how best to manage these situations.
- 16. Review anti-discrimination policy and practices.** Discrimination based on a person's ethnicity has no place in an outbreak plan. While recent travel to high-risk jurisdictions or close contact with recent travellers is appropriate criteria to distinguish between workers, ethnicity is not. Make sure your employees know the difference. When employees are re-integrating into the workplace post-quarantine, take steps to ensure they do not suffer discrimination.

The workplace



- 17. Prepare your worksite for containment and contamination.** Companies should ensure the safety of working environments by thoroughly cleaning and disinfecting workplaces. In the event that an employee is suspected of being infected with COVID-19, a clear process must be in place for removing that employee from the facility, and for proper treatment of the facility. The Occupational Safety and Health Organization (OSHA) in the United States has stated that COVID-19 is a recordable illness and therefore requires that the appropriate paperwork be filed, whether the employee was infected during travel for business or at a company site.
- 18. Update travel and meeting protocols.** For organizations with high travel needs, especially to international destinations, assessing the impact of the epidemic on travel is necessary as travel has been linked to the transmission of COVID-19. Organizations should actively monitor the latest travel guidance from Health Canada, review their travel policies, and be prepared to track and communicate with travellers. Another consideration is the possibility of your people being stranded away from their home locations as travel restrictions are considered or enacted, and the degree to which you discourage personal international travel.
- 19. Review your social media policy and guidelines.** Make sure your social media policy is properly defined for this crisis. It should provide clear guidelines with regard to how employees can talk about your business and the impacts of COVID-19 on operations and employee health and safety. Provide employees with an internal channel to report what they are seeing and feeling within the organization to ensure direct communication as much as possible as an alternative to social media. At the same time, a good social-media monitoring and sensing program may help you identify emerging issues that are affecting your customers, markets, and production regions.
- 20. Consider the sources of ‘news’ and information in the workplace.** Misinformation in the media has created particular challenges for organizations responding to this outbreak. Employers must take it upon themselves to be the source of accurate, timely, and appropriate information for their workforce. Consider creating your own news channel in the workplace, appropriately filtered and based on credible sources.



Moments that matter:
how you lead will leave a legacy
over the longer term

Put your people first in a time of crisis. A clear strategy and plan focused on your people is essential to effectively lead your workforce in uncertain times. Even for companies that have not yet been adversely affected, we recommend management teams actively evaluate their strategies for addressing workforce impacts and risks, and develop appropriate actions under various scenarios.

COVID-19 may fundamentally challenge your culture, how you distribute work and deploy your workforce, and how you engage your people. In the longer term, this situation may present an opportunity to think about how you elevate communications, create a more resilient workforce, and build more focus on health and well-being.

At the end of the day, we're all human, and every one of us may be directly impacted by COVID-19. Now is the time for leaders to lead for the safety and welfare of their people.

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