

# **Thinking about returning to the office? The answer is in your data.**

Risk managers and HR professionals should rely on the aggregate data to determine when and how to return to the office. Magnifying glass and analytics from employee surveys to contact tracing to cash flow and customer retention, leaders need to be nimble and evaluate a barrage of data. It's a full-time job figuring out the office's "new normal."

Human resources professionals across the globe are grappling with the pandemic and often carrying the burden of determining when and how to open workplaces and allow employees to return. One thing is clear: Every office will be unique. Each country's approach will likely be different, every company will be different and every person will have their own challenges. It's difficult to pass judgment on any organization's or company's approach to their return or decision to reopen.

This is a case by case, individual process for all of us. But as the situation evolves, its paramount organizations be agile and flexible--and let data be the guiding light, especially on how and when workers return to the office.

Seize the data overflow

Coronavirus has opened a floodgate of data. From employee surveys to contact tracing to cash flow and customer retention, leaders need to be nimble and evaluate a barrage of data. This data helps senior leadership make authentic decisions in the best interest of employees and the business.

Measuring COVID-19 cases, threat levels and workforce health are chief among the data your company should be acquiring. This includes tracking shelter-in-place orders for each office location, the number of local COVID-19 cases and COVID-19 self-reporting numbers for each office, including employees who are exhibiting symptoms and/or who have been exposed to someone known to have the virus.

Store the data in a central location to ensure your finger is on the pulse of where employees are and how to proceed. You'll find many answers there.

But there are troves of other data to proactively measure and integrate. This includes employee sentiment by surveying employees in segmented, specific groups; tracking employees' abilities to work effectively and your organization's ability to respond to customer requests; and determining your suppliers' abilities to provide services for your organization during the pandemic.

Combine this deluge of data to determine each office's workforce health score, COVID-19 threat levels and office continuity — and only then can you transparently and wholly understand employee effectiveness and health.

Where does contact tracing fit into my ongoing strategy?

Contact tracing has quickly become a staple in today's conversation about the return to work. However, Pew Research found 60% of Americans do not believe government contact tracing apps would be effective. Another 48% indicated it would be unacceptable for the government to track cell phone data to curtail coronavirus spread.

Contact tracing alone won't be helpful. But combined with other data, it can be an effective risk mitigation strategy.

Contact tracing should be company-specific, not large-scale and anonymized. For example, if your organization implemented contact tracing for employees, and an employee indicated through an in-house procedure their sick time or self-disclosed infection, the data could be used to risk score all other employees at that office based on the tracing of the presumed sick employee.

Contact tracing is only one piece of your overall data strategy, and it must be paired with local and other health data to determine an office's overall risk score. Risk managers and human resources professionals should rely on the aggregate data to determine when and how to return to the office – not individual data sets.

Don't create a false sense of security--rely on science and data

Some approaches to workplace safety can potentially increase risk by pushing a false sense of security for the workforce. Offices today are especially a concern because many have open configurations, and they are notably smaller than they were decades ago. The average office space per worker is about 180 square feet in American cities, according to Axios.

Some companies have discussed installing plexiglass dividers in an open-office setting to mitigate the coronavirus spread. Ask yourself if science backs up this investment and how realistic or productive it is to build a workplace that forces employees to operate six feet from another.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has shared guidelines on office reopening. They include providing frequent and thorough hand washing and access to hand sanitizer, encouraging workers to stay home if they are sick, providing tissues and trash cans and considering flexible scheduling and remote work.

The office is only part of the challenge, however. Many HR leaders are asking how employees get to the office safely as public transportation continues to be a top-of-mind concern. A recent study of New York City's subway system raises serious concerns about public transit's role in spreading the virus.

If working in the office is highly restrictive, and getting to the office is a significant challenge, is working from home still the better option for productivity?

Another factor to consider is employee sentiment. Establish a mechanism for collecting consistent employee feedback on how they commute to the office, their workplace productivity and how they are navigating the complex, challenging pandemic. This is especially important right now, but it will be even more critical when your employees return to the office.

This is not a one and done strategy. Let data and employee sentiment guide you and be agile and malleable to where it leads. Plus, building a data foundation now will forge a path to follow should another outbreak erupt.

Anything you do as a company should be well communicated, controlled and informed by local members of your staff. In a survey by Galvanize, 63% of respondents said management comprised their coronavirus task forces, but a top-down only approach is not the way to go in times like these. If your organization has multiple locations, your geographic-specific return-to-work plans must be based on the needs of those teams.

The answer for when to go back to the office is in the data and in collaboration between decision-makers and employees. More than ever,

companies need to unite and rely on available science, data and on-the-ground leadership to steer the ship.

By Keith Cerny