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5 ways COVID-19 will change the future of work

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There's no question that COVID-19 has impacted the world of work in deep, disruptive ways.

As we pass the peak (fingers crossed) of this pandemic wave, the world will relax social distancing standards and – you guessed it – begin to consider a full "return to work."

How much has the world of work changed as we embraced social distancing and found our own version of "shelter at home?"

The most popular hot take goes something like this:

> **It's all going to change! Once people have worked from home for this long, they're never coming back to the office!"**

Of course, great HR pros know the truth always lies somewhere in the middle. If I could short the stock of every expert who has made the above proclamation in the COVID-19 lockdown era, I would.

That being said, the world of work for white collar professionals IS likely to change based on what we've learned. But offices aren't going away. Your company's approach to what work is and how it gets done is simply going to evolve.

In many industries, the trend has long been leaning towards more remote work for professional grade team members. While some companies have taken the full plunge, many have barely dipped a toe in the true "remote workforce" organizational design.

The most likely outcome for work in a post-COVID world?

Companies with large, white collar workforces are likely to ask the following questions after we're through this crisis:

What did we learn about our people's ability to work 100% remote?

What are the advantages to making those adjustments – for our business results as well as our ability to attract top talent?

What adjustments do we want to make to our previous assumptions about using remote workers?

What do we need to do to operationalize the new definition of how work gets done at our company?

Of course, this change won't happen naturally at a lot of your organizations. That's why you downloaded this white paper. Whether you're a HR pro, line leader or manager with a progressive, forward-looking approach, maximizing what we learned about work during COVID-19 at your organization is going to take you being the advocate and linchpin for change.

With that in mind, let's dig into the impact of the pandemic on the workplace and how smart HR pros and leaders are preparing for the "new normal" post COVID-19.

1

Employee expectations for remote work have evolved as a result of COVID-19

When you force people to work remotely 100% of the time for one to two months, they learn a lot about themselves and it's not always what you expect. That's why the proclamations of "it's changed forever, everyone will be remote!" are tone deaf.

Great HR pros understand the human experience is much more segmented and nuanced. During the great COVID lockdown, unique reflections across your employee base included (but were not limited to) the following:

- "I'm going crazy, I have to get back to the office and into my routine."

- "This is awesome, I wonder if I could go 100% remote?"

- "You know what would be sweet? Doing more remote than I had before the COVID lockdown, but still going into the office on a regular basis."

Translation: One size does not fit all when it comes to what employees want related to remote work in a post-COVID world. What we know for sure is that your employees have experienced 100% remote work and **their preferences have likely changed.**

The variation in changes to remote work preferences puts an incredible spotlight on your talent acquisition and retention efforts. To thrive in recruiting and retention in a post-COVID world, you'll need to be increasingly flexible related to customizing remote work arrangements on an employee-by-employee (and candidate-by-candidate) basis.

2 The ideal manager of people profile shifts in a post COVID-19 world

Did someone mention flexibility? For years, HR has pounded "treating everyone equally" into the consciousness of our managers of people. While equal treatment is still important, the changing world of work post-COVID will redefine what equal means across teams at your company.

The core competencies driving manager success will remain the same post-COVID (effective communication, goal setting, ability to coach, inclusiveness, etc.), but these skills will increasingly be deployed across a variety of environments – often at the same time.

Agility across your managers of people will become key. In the new world of work, your managers of people will not only deal with more remote employees, but the combinations of work arrangements across their team will multiply and cause additional complexities they hadn't encountered previously.

Engagement across remote workers has always been an issue, and the post-COVID workplace will bring even more challenges. The managers of people who will thrive in the post-COVID world will be the ones who not only stay connected with remote employees, but the ones who drive collaboration, understanding and empathy across their teams, even when they aren't present – regardless of where someone works or how many remote days they choose or are granted.

3 Investments in digital learning and development, goal setting, coaching and performance tools will generate strong returns in the post-pandemic world

Lenin once said that "There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen".

We just experienced the greatest digital transformation in work history in four weeks. To be clear, we've been talking about this transformation for decades. It's easy to call this revolution a success, check it off our "to-do" list and move on.

Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Just because your company did a bunch of team meetings and happy hours over Zoom doesn't mean you're completely transformed.

True change requires a plan.

To operationalize the new definition of how work gets done at your company in the post-COVID world, you're going to need the following:

A current map of the tools you use in your people processes, including learning and development, goal setting, coaching and performance management.

Real analysis related to how your current tools and processes can be used by a distributed/remote workforce. Adoption is key. If the tools are hard to use, you should seek out new solutions.

Once you have the right solution, initial training, ongoing training and yes – more training – is required to maximize the probability that the tools are used.

Real digital transformation isn't a Zoom call. It's a manager and employee combo using talent management tools to support their 1:1 meeting, regardless of location. It's an employee using learning and development tools from their kitchen table because they're hungry to grow.

Make the right digital investments to ensure your distributed teams are engaged. In a post-COVID world, true transformation is all about adoption of the tools that connect individuals regardless of location, driving engagement and retention.
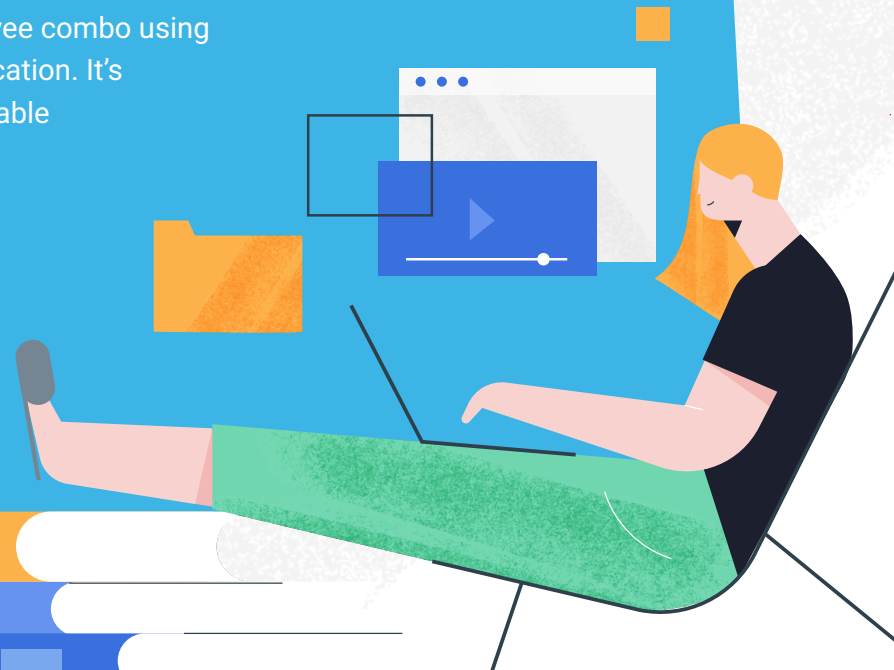
4 COVID-19 will shift line items in your P&L related to your people practices

There's never been a better time for HR pros to show their impact to the P&L than the post-COVID world. Your leadership team will be in survival mode, even after people return to the office. That's why thinking about the future of work at your company – and what it means financially – can and should be something you own as an HR pro. Let's take one example – the fact that most in your organization (leaders and employees) are going to be more open to remote work. Follow the money, and you'll quickly realize that more remote work can lead to reductions in the office space you need.

Here's a roadmap of how you could turn increased remote work into a positive financial recommendation related to real estate and leases at your company:

1. **Get the number of white-collar professional FTEs at any location in your company.** For the sake of this exercise, we're going to use 200 FTEs.

2. **Get lease info – the amount of rent you pay to a landlord to support those FTEs with office space.** For our exercise, we'll use this calculator and arrive at the math that the right amount of space for 200 white collar workers is 50,000 square feet (250 sf/employee).

3. **Calculate your current cost.** We'll use an average of $24 per square foot for office space in Atlanta, which means the annual cost for 50,000 feet is $1,200,000 (note this is an effective per square foot rate after rebates, free rent and T&I).

4. **Now you – the HR/Talent Pro – make a recommendation to your leadership team.** If your company was almost 100% work in the office, you make the recommendation that you're going to drop the number of days worked in the office by your workforce by 40% (moving from 5 days a week in the office to 3). If you already had some remote days, do your own math but make the cuts significant related to average time in the office per employee.

5. **Calculate the savings and make your recommendation.** Now do the math to enhance the impact of your recommendation. If your annual cost for rent is $1,200,000 and you propose to drop days in the office by 40%, offering remote work as a recruiting advantage is also a financial advantage that could deliver up to $480,000 in savings.

Some of you will point to the fact you have a longterm lease, or your company owns the real estate in question. That's what subleases are for. You might also point out some companies may seek to revamp and reinvent their workspace configurations to provide more social distance at work.

You're right on all accounts. Whether you can realize 100% of the space reductions as expense savings remains to be seen. It might be 60% if you choose to revamp your office space plan in response to health concerns. Regardless, commercial real estate is a tough business post-COVID. Just ask WeWork.

5

Employee communication and employer branding strategy rise in importance post COVID-19

We're coming off of one of the biggest economic expansions in history. Things were good, then the pandemic hit. Unemployment ramped up and people were asked to shelter in place for the good of humanity. In any return to work post-pandemic, people will seek stability and safety.

Enter your employee communications and employer branding strategy. If you never considered marketing part of your job in HR, now is a good time to revisit that thinking. Your leadership team can have a great post-COVID business plan and approach to health and wellness as people return to work, but if you can't get the right message out to your employee base, fear, doubt and uncertainty will ensue.

Simply put, those who communicate best will win in the post-COVID world.

If you're looking around for the expert related to employee communications and employer branding as an HR pro, guess what? It's probably you. Put on your marketing hat and don't forget the following:

More remote work across your organization makes a sense of connectedness and belonging even more important. More remote work removes place as a proxy to connect and belong. Overcommunicate to your remote workforce and share stories as much as possible via appropriate channels.

The right employer brand strategy influences current employees as well as external candidates. Even with high unemployment, don't get comfortable. You need to invest in your employer brand to effectively recruit in 2020 and beyond. The good news? Crafted the right way and focused on storytelling, your employer brand resources can be multi-purposed to connect your existing employees with each other – across all locations.

Coming off a pandemic, employee communication and employer brand is incredibly important. HR needs to have some communications/ marketing chops and look more like a media company post-COVID.

The world of work will change due to the lockdown we experienced via COVID-19. It just won't go 100% remote, and the digital transformation of work has only begun.

Of course, this list of the ways work has changed as a result of COVID-19 is just a start. We'd be remiss if we didn't point out that temperature scanners, new age doors, modified restroom plans and more office tweaks will likely be making their way to your inbox soon.

HR pros who recognize these trends and focus development and effort accordingly will win in the post-COVID world. There's never been a better time to have impact on the business in the world of HR.

Stay agile, my HR friends.

About the Author

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Kris is the CHRO for Kinetix, a national RPO firm for growth companies, and the founder of the popular HR blogs Fistful of Talent and The HR Capitalist. He's a VP of HR type who has led HR practices in Fortune 500s and venture capital-held startups. He believes the key to great business results is to get great people, then do cool stuff to maximize their motivation, performance and effectiveness. If you need a more professional rundown, here are the stats: 3 degrees. One marriage. An SPHR that's been re-certified twice. 2,000+ hires. 1,000+ fires. A taste for grunge music originating from Seattle. Two turntables. One microphone.

Kris has written over 80 feature columns at Workforce Management magazine, and hits the road as a speaker and gives the world what it needs – pop culture references linked to Human Capital street smarts. For the Saba blog, Kris writes about career management and the steps you can take to achieve your career goals. For a full rundown of his portfolio (which includes podcasts a leadership training series and more, please visit KrisDunn.com.

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