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Pop-Up Webinar: Key Takeaways

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When we think about COVID and office re-entry, we think a lot about the physical workspace. But I have not heard a lot of discussion about employee sentiment. I am curious to understand how your organizations are managing employee communications about health and safety and whether this is impacting the timing of your re-entry.

- I would say that the No. 1 issue not only for our organization but also all our clients is employee safety. It is interesting that there was a period of time when people were fighting over how quickly they could re-open but now those companies are taking a very soft approach and really trying to understand the readiness of their workforce for coming back. Companies are gearing up for re-entry, but few are mandating that everyone come back.
- I would concur with that. We have done an employee survey, and there is a lot of concern about safety once re-entry happens. For the bulk of our workforce, we put September 15 as a potential date for returning to the office. We must figure out what social distancing in the workplace means for the next 18 months or until a vaccine is produced. Some of our employees have continued to go into the office, and they have seen the stepped-up cleaning that we have been doing. Those employees have a different perception about workplace safety than those employees who have been working remotely and have not seen this cleaning. We hear from employee surveys that people are worried we will not clean the space. But there is a difference between the cleaning we are doing now vs. the cleaning that was done by the landlord before COVID. It is a real world of uncertainty right now, and hard to figure out the right communications to make the employee base feel safe to come back. And on top of that you have government regulations about maximum allowed capacity to consider. All this is new territory for me. This is the most uncertainty I have ever had in my career in terms of how to plan office space for the next year.
- You could go to the nth degree to clean that space and yet there will be many individuals who will be uncomfortable unless they are doing the cleaning themselves! Many will want to have access to wipes and will want to do some cleaning themselves. These are the same people who are constantly wiping down everything in the gym.
- The safety part of all this is a very personal issue.
- You can run the risk of over-cleaning the environment – trying to make it too clean. And some of the cleaning products out there are not beneficial to humans. It is important to use appropriate cleaning products.
- For our employees coming back in the earlier phases, before substantial re-entry, we are doing a kit containing a few face masks, hand sanitizer, wipes and so on to help give them an added

comfort level. That is something we are doing for everyone in the office today, which is close to 10 percent of our general office population. What we have not gotten back to is what we do for everyone else, those who are essentially working remotely now. What is the hurdle of the comfort factor needed to get the masses back? That is a question that will not be answered in the next couple of months. I have a call later today to talk about potentially allowing up to 20 percent of the workforce to volunteer to work at home more permanently.

- If we think there have been fights in the grocery stores after interacting with other people for five minutes, just wait until you get big numbers back in the office. Some will think they are fine and at no health risk, while others will be anxious. You will have a lot of people that are together for an extended period and feeling very uncomfortable about that. We have jokingly said to our clients that they should give everyone yellow cards and red cards like they do in soccer. Someone leans over your desk or crosses a line, and you flash a red card. Right now, who do you tell – without creating some major issues – when somebody you work with all day is doing something that is really bothering you? We must come up with creative, innovative ways to allow employees to express their angst and anxiety. Either HR will be going crazy dealing with all this, or they will go to the other extreme, say nothing about it, and there will be all this simmering animosity.
- We are in financial services, and thus considered critical. We have some people in the office now. We are telling people that they must wear masks now, but they have not had to wear them for the last 60 days. Some do not want to wear them, and the guy next to them will want to know why his neighbor is not wearing a mask.
- We conduct employee surveys and have weekly communications from all levels. We are delaying returning to work, with no mandate for anyone to return to work, to mitigate any health and safety risks to our employees.
- I think it is more important than ever that we as managers and leaders, listen and demonstrate empathy. We have begun repopulating many of our offices across the globe and are getting regular feedback from our employees.
- We are putting together a checklist. There are many good checklists out there. We want the checklist to be all-encompassing for the sake of our clients, but the toughest part is that for people with large, diverse, global portfolios, they face myriad local health regulations that vary from town to town, let alone country to country. I am very concerned that anyone who tries to put together a standard welcome kit or guidelines will find that it does not apply everywhere. I see this as a big source of confusion and maybe liability. It is a concern of ours.

When we go back to meeting in person, how will we deal with this?

- Some will want to avoid contact. Others will be comfortable with fist bumps. Maybe we need colored lanyards to indicate how much contact you are comfortable with. It is about making people feel safe.
- There are a lot of unwritten rules that people do not necessarily know. For instance, at a soda machine or an ice machine, if you take the cup you drink from and push that up against the ice dispenser, you are basically putting your mouth on that. It is something that many people do not think about, but the person who does think about that will be very concerned when they see something like that happen.
- We removed our ice machines for this reason.
- Everyone will be coming back with a heightened sense of anxiety. We will have to give each other a lot of latitude to make suggestions, but some employees could take offense to that. These protocols in the workplace will be important. We often talk with our clients about change management, and the hardest behaviors to change are the ones you take for granted.
- I will tell you about a personal situation, an incident which came up with daughters coming over for Father's Day. One gives a hug, another does not. And it is tough to throw on a mask for Father's Day. Sometimes awkward situations come up, and people – especially younger ones who have less risk – are just less aware of normal courtesies of social interaction. We must figure

out a way to get the word out on all this. The only suggestion I have would be to let people vocalize these situations in a public forum. But you cannot have public shaming. If we could do something like this, maybe HR will have less work to do.

- I am with a financial services company, and I have an HR background. At the risk of being controversial, I will comment. We experienced this when we moved to open offices. People would complain to HR and say 'Hey, my neighbor is talking too loud, they pace around too much.' But we chose to shift this back to the individual. We said, 'Go over and talk to them. Don't call HR every time you see something you do not like.' For COVID-19 and the current situation, we plan to have 8 x 10 posters that are intended to be visual. They are general reminders of ways to be respectful, such as wearing PPE. We will put these reminders up in the pantry area and cafeteria area. We do not yet have associates back in the office, and we will not have them back until some point in 2021.
- Maybe awkward is the 'new normal.'

Just thinking ahead into the future, down the road, when we have a vaccine and we have this situation solved, there will be people who will have PTSD-type situations. Even though they know everything is safe and secure, psychologically they will have germaphobia, and an underlying fear of people because COVID-19 happened. There is a possibility of another COVID in the future. Is there something we can do to help these people and give them some psychological support to help alleviate this? Or will their situation, their reaction, be more permanent?

- We have done a tremendous amount of research on neurodiversity. These neurodiverse people tend to be hypersensitive to stimulation. That neurodivergent experience they have every single day now applies to a much broader base of the population because so many people have that heightened sensitivity. The first thing is to understand what these sensitivities are. Next, to create environments where these people can find the right setting. It might be issues with noise or with visual distraction. Of course, moving forward everyone will be sensitive to touch. We are leveraging a lot of that information that we already know and have.

I find this interesting. Like a lot of companies, we have been successful in a remote work environment because we have a history of doing it. But as our employee base turns over, with new people coming in, how do you create that sense of place and community to help bring people into your culture and get the training when people are spending less time in the office? We usually do a big intern class, but we skipped it this year. Does anyone have thoughts on all this?

- We do have new associates coming in here in Atlanta. We are bringing them in, maintaining social distancing, but forcing the interaction. It cannot happen if it does not happen.

Will WFH become the new normal?

- We had a major department make the declaration that WFH is the primary posture. The workplace will still be there, for gatherings, 'team days', other critical interactions (within risk) and critical processes. Yes, the office environment changes, no more assigned seating, more for gathering and interaction as appropriate. We also supplement the experience with hub-spoke solutions, or 'coworking' (corporate) solutions in the suburbs as an option. I agree that WFH for some people really stinks.
- I do not think WFH is going to be the new normal; it is not sustainable. The hub-and-spoke office model is the need of the hour and will be the reality. With WFH, days are becoming longer with no limit to working hours, leading to multiple health issues. Electronic communication has its impacts. Not everyone can be productive working remotely because not everyone's home environment is conducive to a relaxed working atmosphere. Not everyone has good internet service.
- We need and deserve a great office environment to be creative, collaborative, and productive – otherwise major corporations would not have built such smart office spaces for their employees.

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