



Navigating the Industry Workplace During COVID-19-Renegotiating Proximity

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The COVID-19 pandemic prompted significant employment shifts worldwide. Millions of workers experienced sudden and unexpected job loss, while millions more struggled to adapt to the isolation of working remotely. In addition to risking their health, essential workers faced the psychological burden of distancing from others, wearing protective gear, fearing personal exposure, and the trauma of treating the critically sick and dying with few resources. Although COVID-19's impact varies, a large majority of workers have and will likely experience drastic changes and potential consequences to their financial, emotional, and professional lives, especially as new variants of the virus emerge.

The Financial Pandemic

The financial consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy and job market are significant. According to the World Bank (2020), global growth weakened by almost 5% in 2020, representing the largest economic crisis since the Great Depression. At the start of the pandemic consumer spending drastically declined, predominantly in recreation and retail. By April 2020, people stopped eating in restaurants and going to malls, museums, and movie theaters. By December, the airlines canceled almost 15 million flights. According to Richter (2020) due to the pandemic and resultant shutdowns 114 million people lost their jobs. Lost working hours totaled the equivalent of 255 million full-time jobs and \$3.7 trillion in lost wages. As a consequence of job loss one in four adults couldn't pay their bills, one third had to access savings or retirement accounts, and one in six borrowed from family or for the first time, received food from a food bank. The financial consequences of the pandemic evoked an increase in mental health conditions among the general public and in the workplace.

The Psychological Pandemic

Mental health issues are a national epidemic. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2020), pre-pandemic one in five Americans, or 47.6 million people, suffered from at least one mental health condition. Since the onset of COVID-19, the number of adults reporting anxiety or depression from pandemic stress increased from 36.4% to 41.5%, and individuals reporting untreated mental health issues increased from

9.2 to 11.7%. Social distancing, shutdowns, fear of contracting the virus, and long periods of quarantine and isolation were primary in evoking feelings of depression and anxiety among the general public.

Pappa et al. (2020) noted that the workplace represents an especially vulnerable target for developing mental health issues. The COVID-19 pandemic heightened employee job stress, increasing the prevalence of symptomology in the workplace and degrading the psychological condition at work. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (2020) reported an increase in employee post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, sleep disturbance, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation due to pandemic stress. Essential workers who encounter a greater risk of contracting the virus reported greater symptoms of anxiety and depression (42% vs. 30%), substance abuse (25% vs. 11%), and suicidal thoughts (22% vs. 8%) compared to non-essential workers during the pandemic.

Career Disruption

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), in addition to the rise in mental illness the pandemic created career disruption for a vast number of people, particularly for four subsets of workers: essential workers struggling to protect themselves and their families from contracting the virus, healthcare workers coping with post-traumatic stress disorder, remote workers adapting to working and communicating virtually, and unemployed or underemployed workers seeking career development and job search support. This disruption prompted approximately five million people to voluntarily leave the workforce since the pandemic began. It is unclear whether their decision to leave is permanent or temporary, but employers struggle to retain existing employees and to hire workers to fill vacant positions. Instead of looking for new jobs immediately, a vast number of people are postponing re-entry into the workforce and contemplating their next career move. Compensation, work-life balance, few growth opportunities and lack of training most fueled workers' motivation to leave their jobs.

Despite vast unemployment and vacant job openings, the pandemic prompted new job creation. According to Mauer (2020), the pandemic shocked the labor market and initiated new jobs requiring new skill sets. The public health crises prompted new jobs necessary to mitigate the virus and increase the general

public's confidence. Because COVID-19 has changed how people think about work, and how companies safeguard their employees and customers, more companies focus on safety and stricter health protocols prompting new jobs in cleaning and sanitization, health monitoring, decontamination, contact tracing, and space re-configuration to modify workplace layouts for social distancing. While the demand for these jobs has steadily increased and may be expected to grow, many will disappear after more people are vaccinated and the virus becomes less threatening. It is important for leaders to be able to assist these workers to reskill as their jobs become obsolete.

Advice for Leaders

Post pandemic, workforce planning and strategy will change, and leaders should begin to prepare. Because people are voluntarily leaving their jobs, leaders should focus their effort and attention on building workplace support systems that encourage people to actively engage and thrive. Typically, organizations invest effort during the hiring process to select applicants who are a good cultural fit with skills that match job requirements. Few, if any, organizations assess fit over time. Follmer et al. (2018) noted that employees' perceptions of fit change especially during transitions such as job change, change in leadership, process changes, etc., and often terminate their positions as a result of these changes. The COVID-19 pandemic has provoked various workplace changes, motivating employees to re-assess their fit and future with their organizations.

To encourage retention and reduce turnover, employers should focus on keeping employees engaged. Offering individualized, custom packages employees could not find elsewhere increases fit, reinforces the employee's value to the organization, and encourages retention. Examples of individualized packages include customizing work schedules to meet employees' individual needs, offering cafeteria-style benefit plans, paying employees for performance, and offering increased learning and development. According to Spar and Dye (2018), employees value learning opportunities to enable career growth and development. To increase enthusiasm about staying with the organization, companies can offer employees stretch assignments and specialized training, and communicate transparently about career growth and compensation.

To meet the demand to fill vacant roles, employers should not postpone identifying the skills and talents required to fill these positions. Follmer et al. (2018) noted when managing turnover, companies often backfill positions with the same skills. Since COVID-19 has changed the skill requirements for many jobs, employers must conduct thorough job analyses to determine new skill requirements and encourage new skill development through reskilling and upskilling.

Many organizations have transitioned to virtual or hybrid work environments where employees can work either 100% remotely or both virtually and onsite. This new workplace model has prompted a novel freedom for employees to choose where and how they work, increasing the number of distributed teams. For organizations to successfully adapt to this new model they must become virtually competent.

In addition to implementing technology to enable virtual work, leaders must be able to effectively manage, evaluate and train employees remotely. Face time in the office is no longer the sole criteria for evaluating employee work (Follmer et al., 2018). Pappa et al. (2020) noted that to address mental health concerns, organizational leaders must address the “psychological pandemic” and provide mental health resources especially for high-risk groups and for individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions particularly vulnerable to pandemic stress. Possible interventions to moderate the pandemic’s effect on workers’ mental health include improving workplace infrastructures, implementing anti-contagion practices such as providing masks and protective gear, offering counseling services, and implementing safety and resilience training programs especially for individuals in leadership and management positions

Advice for Employees

Although the labor market has improved since the start of the pandemic, job seekers will experience competition due to the influx of candidates seeking new jobs. According to Julia Pollak, a labor economist at ZipRecruiter, highly trained and experienced applicants will be competing with recent college graduates for the

same jobs, creating an extremely competitive job market. People who have lost their jobs or will be re-entering the workforce after an absence might consider the following:

Resume Refresh

Employees who lost jobs due to coronavirus should tailor their resumes to the job they want. Since large companies use applicant tracking systems to scan for keywords, candidates should carefully read the job description and edit their resumes to match. Candidates should include in their resumes significant projects and accomplishments achieved before a COVID-19 related layoff to highlight their achievements and skills. Since many companies have transitioned to virtual work, it is important for job applicants to learn communication tools – such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams – and add these skills to their resumes.

Virtual Networking

Networking is **the most effective way to find meaningful employment and to attain job satisfaction and career success**. According to Wanberg et al. (2019), 70% of jobs are never published, and 85% of people find jobs through networking. Many unpublished jobs are either created for existing employees or for people recruiters met through networking. Every online conference, zoom meeting, online lecture, remote meeting, or event provides the chance to meet people, increase credibility, and expand relationships. People who network and build relationships during the pandemic will likely be in a better position to find a job when companies begin hiring. Joining professional online groups on Facebook and LinkedIn, and actively posting and commenting in the threads is an effective way to increase visibility, make contacts, and learn about job opportunities.

Conduct Research

The global pandemic provides an opportunity for job seekers to observe different company cultures and business strengths. Researching different companies and how organizational leaders are managing the crisis and treating employees is one way to decide if the company is an appropriate fit. Prospective applicants should take time to conduct online research about organizations of interest. How long the company has been in business,

how the company's products or services have changed especially during the pandemic, and the name and reputation of the CEO are just a few key areas of research to pursue.

Prepare for Virtual Interviews

Since job interviews usually occur in person it is important to develop virtual interviewing skills. Before the interview, it is crucial to test technology including internet connection and verify that the camera and microphone are working. Proper preparation is the foundation for a successful virtual interview from ensuring working technology to conducting research before the meeting.

Improve Remote Work Skills

Since transitioning to remote work, some companies have realized the benefits and have made the transition to a remote work environment permanent. New hires who ultimately will be office-based may begin their jobs working virtually. It is important that candidates demonstrate technical competence and the ability to work virtually on their resumes. Managing dispersed teams or working from home in the past are important competencies that demonstrate this ability.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way business operates and how employees work, and it has disrupted many individuals' personal, financial, and work lives. Yet, during this unprecedented time organizations and employees can adapt by embracing new skills and developing new behaviors. Businesses can use the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to reshape hiring practices and to recruit and retain top talent and employees. Job seekers can use this time to reflect on their next career move. There is no doubt the future of work has changed, perhaps with positive outcomes.

About the Author

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