WORKPLACE STRATEGIES FOR THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

Navigating the "Next Normal" and Accelerating Business Success After COVID-19

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Introduction

When will we ever get back to normal? That's the question nearly everyone has been asking since March of 2020, when the COVID-19 crisis changed nearly everything. Over the past year, people have adapted to sheltering in place, masking up, social distancing, and staying in touch with family members and friends screen-to-screen. To keep businesses operating during the pandemic, employers have adapted to remote work, virtual meetings, uncertainty, and the toll of loss, grief, and fear on employees. Gradually, most business professionals have come to accept working from home, collaborating through virtual platforms, and COVID restrictions as the "new normal." As the COVID infection and death rates steadily decline—thanks largely to the widespread availability of vaccines—organizations are developing plans to reopen their office buildings. That means managers and workers will quickly have to adapt to the "next normal."

What skills will business professionals rely on to ease the process of adapting to the "next normal" while maintaining motivation, supporting effective teamwork, and improving results? In March of 2021, American Management Association (AMA) conducted a survey, *Workplace Strategies for the Road to Recovery*, to help managers find the answers they need to confidently navigate the changes ahead. Participants, comprised of 300 AMA Members and other AMA customers geographically distributed throughout the United States, were asked about their current and anticipated work setting, their organization's plans to return to a physical office, and the capabilities they considered absolutely vital to rebounding from the pandemic and ensuring the future success of their team and their company.

Most organizations *do* have a post-pandemic return-to-work plan. In its recent C*OVID-19 Return to Work* survey, AMA asked members and seminar participants nationwide whether their company had a roadmap in place to "reopen" once stay-at-home orders were suspended. Nearly 64% of participants responded yes, while just under 16% answered no. Close to 21% of participants, however, were unsure. Participants were also asked a critical question: *How will your organization adjust to ongoing COVID-19 health concerns once employees return to your workplace?* They were offered a variety of options and asked to select all that apply. Of the in-office strategies to be implemented in the near future, three stood out as the most common, based on participants' responses:
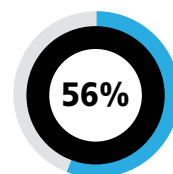
How will your organization adjust to ongoing COVID-19 health concerns once employees return to your workplace?
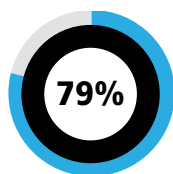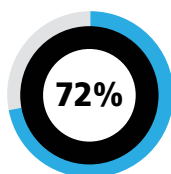
79%	**72%**	**56%**
Social distancing	Masks at work	Partial staffing

The recent CDC announcement that fully-vaccinated individuals do not need to wear a mask in most situations, including when gathering with a large group indoors, is a positive step towards reconnecting families, revitalizing communities, and rekindling optimism. However, as many business leaders and analysts have observed, it's likely to add complications to already challenging office re-openings. Should employers remain committed to enforcing mask mandates and social distancing protocols? Will employees with lingering COVID fatigue comply? Practically, ethically, and legally speaking, how will organizations identify and deal with employees who have either not yet been vaccinated or do not plan to get the vaccine? These are among the myriad questions facing senior leaders, middle managers, and frontline workers alike during the approaching months of transition.

As the *COVID-19 Return to Work* survey results also indicate, many organizations will be forced to shift, and fast, from crisis management and survival mode. When asked which issue their leadership has been more focused on during the pandemic, a decisive majority—67% of participants—selected *minimizing business and health risks to the organization*, while less than 20% chose the forward-thinking alternative: *proactively making changes to the organization to remain competitive*. The remaining responses were divided between other (9%) and not sure (5%).

Remote Work Is Here to Stay

Working from home has been on the rise since the early 2000s, both in terms of its adoption rate by companies and sheer employee numbers, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics. One long-term and widespread business outcome of the pandemic is certain: Working remotely is not simply a trend that will fade away after COVID-19 restrictions end.

Prior to COVID, 73% of participants worked in an office full-time. At the time of the survey early this spring, 56% of participants had shifted to working remotely full-time.
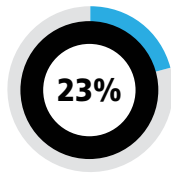
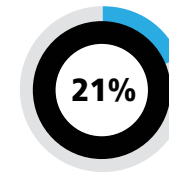## What will your work setting be in July 2021? In response to this critical question:
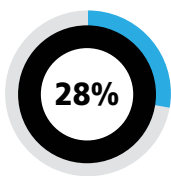
28% were uncertain about their future work setting
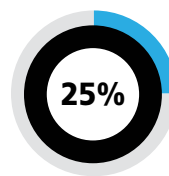
25% will be working remotely part-time and in-office part-time

23% will be working remotely full-time

21% will be working in-office full-time

In a related question about whether their organization plans to return to a physical office full-time:

Just under **40%** affirmed that their business is considering going back into a physical office full-time

25% reported that their company does not plan to bring employees back into a physical office full-time

35% were not sure

For both employers and employees, remote work has considerable benefits. Along with reductions in real estate, rental, and facility maintenance costs, organizations gain the ability to attract, hire, and maximize talent from all over the country, if not the world. Beyond eliminating the time and money spent on commuting, employees typically enjoy increased flexibility and greater work-life balance. Yet, remote work can also create significant challenges for business leaders and managers in areas from teamwork and brainstorming to mentoring, and from performance evaluation to data security. To keep talented people, minimize communication problems, strengthen camaraderie, and increase productivity, many organizations are embracing a hybrid of remote and on-site work.

Regardless of their organization's preferred workplace setting and workforce approach, business leaders and managers are increasingly recognizing the importance of fostering strong relationships with and among employees, as well as keeping their team members engaged.

KEY FINDING 1:
Strong and authentic relationships are vital to ongoing business success.

When asked to rank several capabilities critical to thriving in the post-pandemic workplace, participants overwhelmingly placed top priority on *building and maintaining strong relationships* (#1-ranking). During a year marked by isolation and anxiety, compassion emerged as a hallmark of effective leadership, teamwork, and customer interactions, whether virtual or in-person. Strong relationships also reinforce a vital sense of trust and belonging in times of radical, unsettling change. Rounding out the most critical strategies were *improving virtual communication skills* (#2-ranking) and *managing and motivating a remote or hybrid team* (#3-ranking).

#1 Ranking:
building and maintaining strong relationships

#2 Ranking:
improving virtual communication skills

#3 Ranking:
managing and motivating a remote or hybrid team

KEY FINDING 2:
Improving employee engagement is essential to business recovery.

When asked to assess the strategies needed to secure an organization's future health, participants considered *improving employee engagement to maintain focus* a matter of high importance, tying for #1 ranking with *establishing leadership best practices to meet the challenges of the pandemic.* When lack of engagement creeps in, employees lose their motivation, which typically takes a toll on performance and productivity. No organization can afford a disengaged workforce, especially while struggling to rebound from the COVID-19 crisis.

#1 Ranking (tie):
employee engagement

#1 Ranking (tie):
leadership best practices

KEY FINDING 3:
Innovation is more important than ever.

To rebuild their business, regain their market share, and thrive after the pandemic, companies need to stand out from their competitors, both locally and globally. To gain competitive advantage, innovation is essential. But for innovation to matter, it has to be meaningful and responsive to customers. When asked about the elements factoring into their organization's recovery and growth strategy, participants ranked *innovating products and/or services to meet customer needs* at the top of their list (#1-ranking), followed by *investing in talent development* (#2-ranking).

#1 Ranking:
innovating products and/or services

#2 Ranking:
investing in talent development

Implications of Findings

As business professionals begin to anticipate the "next normal," much remains uncertain. For many companies, return-to-office plans are still a work in progress, depending on changes in CDC guidelines and the needs of their employees. To aggravate matters, many organizations lack a formal process for addressing people's concerns and easing their adjustment to an in-office routine after they've spent months getting comfortable with working from home—or anywhere they choose. In AMA'S *COVID-19 Return to Work* survey, participants were asked whether their organization would be conducting training to acclimate people back into office environments. Less than one-third (31%) responded in the affirmative, and slightly over half (51%) answered not sure.

Despite the pervasive lack of certainty about the future, business professionals are demonstrating remarkable resilience and determination to succeed. As AMA's survey results indicate, most employees are open to making the most of a long-term remote or hybrid work arrangement. What's more, managers and individual contributors overwhelmingly recognize the importance of strong personal relationships, high engagement, and responsive innovation to business success.

Conclusion

As businesses strive to adapt to the "next normal" and thrive, leaders at all levels need to stay on top of emerging trends and take charge of developing the critical skills to support their organization, their team, and their own career advancement. AMA understands the needs of today's managers and offers resources and courses to help, delivered in a variety of formats, including face-to-face, in-person and live online. Prior to the pandemic, nearly 75% of AMA's *Workplace Strategies for the Road to Recovery* survey participants preferred face-to-face, in-person training over online or web-based training. For more than half of the participants (54%), their training format preference has not changed since the pandemic.

Learning proven best practices to build a cohesive, inclusive, and productive group of people can ease the complications and frustrations of managing a hybrid team. Becoming adept at communicating virtually, up, down, and across the organization, can ensure that important messages get heard and acted on. And in the coming months, just about everyone could use some expert insights and practical guidance on building agility and managing through uncertainty.

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