

Returning to work post-pandemic



With the COVID-19 onslaught and its aftermath companies were forced to reimagine ways of working that left offices and other place of work empty. All businesses have faced one of the serious unprecedented business challenges of our time. In order to keep operations going, companies had been forced to create safe and productive work environments.

It has been more than a year with the new norm and a world that looks way different from the normal we are used to. Most companies will use lessons learnt from the work from home experience to come up with creative ways to decide whether there is a need to have an office going forward. In the time preceding the pandemic many believed that working from an office was necessary and that people were more productive when working in an office than when they would be working from home. Many employers found themselves competing for prime office spaces with the belief that they were winning the war of talent. During the pandemic, many employers have been surprised at how quickly their workforce adapted to technology and other forms of digital collaboration with positive work output. For many employers, the results have been far better than imagined. It is possible that the satisfaction and productivity employers experienced with their workforce working from home was because it was viewed as a temporary solution or is it possible that it was as a result of cutting out on endless office meetings or passage gossip?

Has working from home succeeded or not?

The reality is, there is no straight answer to this question. Every organisational culture is different, and so are the circumstances of every individual employees. Some employees may have enjoyed this new experience; others probably hated it. The same people may have experienced different emotions and levels of enjoying or not enjoying working from home at different times. Virtual collaboration may have worked well in certain instances but a disaster in certain instances.

Many employees were spared commuting time and they used that time effectively. They enjoyed the flexibility and the work life balance brought by working from home.

The office experience will not be the same as it was before the pandemic.

Reimagining work and work places

As businesses are looking ahead to the reopening of the offices management teams are responsible for leading their companies through the fast-paced changes and its challenges. Attitudes towards working from an offices will continuously evolve as many organisations are looking forward to life after the pandemic and assumptions about the role of the office are being raised.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Employers are faced with many different options which will be based on what talent is needed, which roles should be office based or provide more fully remote opportunities among other factors. Even within one organisation, the answer could look different across geographical location, businesses units, and functions, so the exercise of determining what will be needed in the future must be a team exercise from the Board of Directors, Management, Human resources, technology, and the business. Tough choices will definitely have to be made and management effort should be to drive what is best for the business. This big change will also require exceptional change-management skills on how well the new working environment is working over-time. Companies will need to be very flexible in how they reshape the future of work because we are not out of the woods yet the risks of COVID-19 infections is still with us. In some cases some talent is willing to leave their jobs to maintain the flexibility they had rather than return to the office. There may also be a competitive advantage in retaining and attracting talent for those companies offering a hybrid or fully remote work environment. Employees need to broaden their efforts by providing other benefits to support employees during the pandemic, such as access to mental health resources and childcare assistance, etc. If businesses insist that people return to the office against their will, they risk losing talent. If they let employees stay at home, they may have to grapple with maintaining a culture that was established at the office. Either way, management needs to make decisions and deal with the pandemic's toll on the employees.

How to maintain employer branding during and post pandemic

As employers are bringing their employees back to offices, the leadership must ensure that when they return, workplaces are both productive and a safe environment where people can enjoy their work. How the companies bring employees back will have long-lasting implications for the employer branding and employee trust.

In the office of the future, technology will play a central role in enabling employees to return to office buildings and to work safely. Organisations will need to manage which employees can come to the office first, how often the office is cleaned, whether ventilation is sufficient, and if the sitting arrangement allows for enough social distancing. These changes may not only improve how work is done but also lead to savings on rentals, capital costs, facilities operations, and maintenance.

Organisations must get rid of the past old habits and systems that did not abide by covid 19 regulations. A well-planned return to offices can be used to reinvent roles and create a better pool for talent, improve collaboration and productivity. That kind of change will require transformational thinking based on facts. Ultimately, the aim of this transformation will be what many employers have always aspired ,a safe environment, collaborating with colleagues as a team, and achieving the objectives of their organisations.