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Top Risks To Consider Before We Return To Work



Chloe Demrovsky Senior Contributor ⓘ ⊕

Leadership Strategy

I write about risk and resilience both personal and professional.



Managing organizations hybrid remote/in-person organizations will be complex GETTY

I've been having interesting conversations with members of the risk and resilience community on managing return-to-work issues as we start to plan for the end of the Covid-19 crisis. While we now know that much work can be done from home, few leaders want to stay fully remote. According to [PwC](#), three days per week in the office is emerging as the optimal setup. To get there safely, here are some risks to consider:

To require or not require vaccination?

A variety of approaches are being considered to meet the unique needs of every sector when it comes to vaccinations. According to [Gartner](#), a majority of organizations are now stating that they will encourage but not require vaccination, which may be the simplest approach. Some companies, such as [Dollar General](#), are offering incentive payments to compensate employees who get vaccinated outside of work hours for their time. Returning to the primary workplace isn't the only concern, but also whether vaccinations will be required to restart other business activities. For example, the resumption of business travel—and whether vaccines will be required in order for individuals to be cleared to travel on behalf of the company—will need to be determined.

Whether requiring or encouraging vaccines for employees, liability issues must be considered since vaccination programs are covered by a variety of regulations, including workers' compensation statutes. Employers also may face Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) issues around prioritization. Privacy considerations also will pose a real challenge to any company seeking to collect vaccination status information. And the logistics of offering onsite vaccinations programs as an employee benefit are complicated. If offered, it would be better to contract this out to specialists.

Managing people first

Gartner's survey also reports that more than half of respondents believe that less than 50% of their employees will want to return to the workplace. That means a hybrid workforce is here to stay, bringing with it a new dynamic that may not be fully understood.

I've been managing a hybrid remote/in-person company for my entire career, and it poses unique challenges to culture that are different from fully remote conditions. For example, those who get regular in-office face time with the boss often gain unfair advantages over those who don't, so training and awareness for all managers is essential to overcome this bias. Prioritizing building relationships with remote employees and holding in-person meetings and events with everyone at least once or twice a year are just a few fundamental tactics. Regular check ins around the mental health impact of work conditions, the distractions offered by technology, and systematic analysis to ensure that remote work policies aren't undermining your diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) strategies are essential.

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Now that the pandemic remote work experiment has proven that organizations can be run remotely thanks to technology, our reliance on this technology and our willingness to test out new forms of it will continue to accelerate. The relationship between humans and technology is not seamless. It ranges from the funny such as the attorney who blundered into a [Zoom cat filter](#) at an inappropriate time to more troubling concerns like employees

clicking on malware. As we shift toward remote for the future of work, the technology that we rely on will present a host of new risks.

The marriage of the business strategy and technology functions will not always be smooth and the relationship needs to be built thoughtfully, rather than haphazardly as it has been by necessity over the last year. Business leaders typically enjoy some risk-taking and are more comfortable taking calculated risks to maximize future gains. Technology leaders typically seek to mitigate or avoid risk where possible, although the inherent offensive cyber advantage has forced some of these leaders to reframe their approach.

Fundamentally, the leaders of these strategic areas have different mindsets and will need to figure out how to bridge them. Coupling of these two strategies will cause friction and misunderstanding within organizations unless work is done to overcome gaps in understanding and culture. This needs to be resolved in order for hybrid remote/in-person work environments to function properly.

The return-to-work process will be complicated, but that doesn't mean that there won't also be significant benefits. Risks need to be properly analyzed and addressed up front. That's why risk management needs to be a key part of the strategic discussion as we envision the future of work.

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Chloe Demrovsky

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