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Digital

Open for business: What employers need to know and do to bring employees back to work

Preparing for the "new normal" work environment

What does "return to work" even mean? What does it look like for people whose personal and professional lives have been disrupted? Perhaps the only thing we know is that it won't look like the pre-COVID-19 world.

When employees return to work—whether it's in a corporate office, a warehouse, a hotel, or a restaurant—it's natural for personal health to top the list of their concerns. Taking care of yourself and caring about others is a deeply human tendency. But in many circumstances, people act on that tendency by taking steps of their own. Prior to COVID-19, personal health and safety may not have been a primary concern for most employees. In returning to work in this new normal, however, personal health and safety is a clear and present concern, and employees are expecting employers, who control the physical environment, to deliver on those expectations. As a consequence, delivering on these expectations will be a critical hurdle for the return to work. But it won't be easy.

How well do people trust businesses to do what's necessary to keep them safe? When asked which sources they trust to let people know when it is safe to resume normal activities, businesses ranked second to last at 4 percent, whereas health professionals led the way at 50 percent.[1] That's why it is more important now than before for organizations to engage their employees in meaningful ways to enhance the trust people will place in them. Organizations should provide timely, relevant communication and engagement vehicles that provide personal content in a transparent way. They must be clear about the precautions they are taking to protect the safety of their employees and customers.

These are broad principles—there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Companies need to be flexible as they work with different employee roles, personal needs, and business demands.

With all of these complexities, what are companies to do?

We took the data from our [safety and cleanliness study](#)[2] and focused on the 3,000 employees it surveyed, with jobs ranging from headquarters to warehouses to customer-facing roles. Among this group of employees, three patterns stood out as they think about returning to work:

1. Employees are predominantly inclined toward working remotely.

2. They desire frequent and relevant communication, specifically around the precautions taken for their health.

3. They want agency to access information, make decisions for themselves, and engage in a digital experience.

We surveyed employees who:

Work with customers
(e.g. flight attendants, guest services, sales representative)

Work near customers
(e.g. housekeeping, airline lounge representative)

Work away from customers, but around many other employees
(e.g. call center, factory warehouse, kitchen staff)

Work at corporate
(e.g. headquarters)

Source: Deloitte Safety and Cleanliness Survey, Deloitte Consulting LLP, 2020.

Remote by choice

Across industries and types of roles, employees surveyed were clear that they felt a strong preference to work from home. However, that preference may not arise because of the work environment or job type. For some people, it's about necessity. They might need to stay home due to familial sickness, childcare needs, or other changed family circumstances. The trouble is, many of the employees surveyed who said they prefer to work from home don't have jobs that would support that option—for example, housekeepers or servers. If the need for them to work from home outweighs the reality of their current jobs, employees in these situations might seek new jobs with more flexible employers or transition to more flexible jobs.

A preference for **remote work**

81%
**with kids want
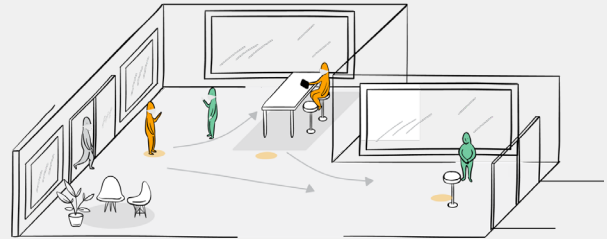to work from home**

vs.

74%
**without kids want
to work from home**

77%
of employees surveyed said if given the choice
to work from home, **even if you knew your employer
took precautions, they would prefer to work from home**

Source: Deloitte Safety and Cleanliness Survey, Deloitte Consulting LLP, 2020.

One-third of Americans have tried new digital technologies to engage with each other and organizations since the pandemic started.[1] With new technologies emerging, they're trying to regain the sense of humanity that was "lost" when we all suddenly began working in isolation from one another. How can companies create this sense of humanity and community as people return to work, whether they do so virtually, locally, or in some combined way?

As the world adapts to this "new normal", employers need to consider new ways they can allow employees to work remotely, possibly even in roles that traditionally have been in-person.

Wanting the impossible
While remote is desired, it would mean that traditional jobs are shifting to new ways of working

82%
of hotel housekeeping / cleaning crew employees surveyed said that they **would prefer to work from home if given the choice,** even if they knew that their employer took precautions

90%
of airline lounge representatives said the same,
as did **78% of servers, bartenders, and hosts**

Source: Deloitte Safety and Cleanliness Survey, Deloitte Consulting LLP, 2020.

Acknowledging that all jobs cannot be done remotely (yet), employers should understand the current needs of their

HUMANITY TODAY BUILDS TRUST FOR TOMORROW

Some companies that scored highly on the humanity scale in our Trust survey are implementing workspace redesigns to improve the experience and well-being of their in-person workforces. Our research tells us that employees are 1.8 times more likely to believe they have a career at their organization when they believe they recognize their humanity. Going forward, future ways of working will need to be similarly rethought in order to continue providing a humane talent experience that builds trust.

Source: Deloitte Trust Survey, Deloitte Consulting LLP, 2020.

employees and offer support such as information on local health services and childcare facilities, mental wellness guidance and coaching, and potential other roles within the organization that may be suited for more remote work. Employers' actions and choices show their loyalty and dedication to employees, which may have long-term impacts on employees' ability to trust their employers.[3]

Key takeaways: This unique time gives employers an opportunity to test the boundaries and capabilities of remote work. There is potential to meet your current workforce where they already are—remote—and also position your company to participate more richly in a more global, gig workforce in the future. Understand and empathize with your employees' preference to work from home and work with them to accommodate these needs. Remember, we're in a dynamic environment and sentiment is rapidly changing. Check in regularly. Their needs may change quickly, and the nature of their roles may change to match.

Read receipt

Relevant communications and engagement are more important now than ever. Not surprisingly, our survey found communication was a big part of what employees told us they needed in order to feel comfortable again in a work environment. What does this look like? There is no standardized template for all employees, but you shouldn't need one: You're human, so are they, and that's the type of connection people want to feel. In a time when people are dispersed and personally disrupted, they crave specific elements of communication: depth of content, consistent frequency, a sense of empathy, and honest transparency about actions you've taken. These elements are central to

building trust for employees. As we learned from our Deloitte HX TrustID™ survey, transparency is a key element in trust and high scores on transparency lead to higher employee motivation.[3]

As employees return to work, health is likely on the top of their minds. For example, if they're offsite right now, how do they know the environment they'll be reentering is safe? What are you doing to protect them? Right now, many companies are not sharing information with their employees on the health and wellness of others—but we heard loud and clear that information about sickness status, or whether there has been an incident, is something employees want

Aspects of **employer health and wellness communication** desired by workforce to feel comfortable

	All employees	Work with customers *(e.g. guest services)*	Work near customers *(e.g. housekeeping)*	Work away from customers, but around many other employees *(e.g. factory, warehouse, call center)*	Work at corporate *(e.g. headquarters)*
Frequency *(e.g. daily, weekly)*	24%	**27%**	**20%**	**18%**	**19%**
Content *(e.g. cleaning procedures, policy)*	18%	**18%**	**21%**	**18%**	13%
Empathy *(e.g. messaging from senior leaders, individual outreach)*	16%	15%	16%	**19%**	**19%**
Quality *(e.g. depth of information)*	11%	11%	13%	15%	12%
Transparency *(e.g. view into everything the company is doing)*	16%	14%	17%	11%	**25%**
None of these	8%	8%	6%	10%	6%
Did not receive any communication	8%	8%	6%	10%	6%

Source: Deloitte Safety and Cleanliness Survey, Deloitte Consulting LLP, 2020.

Bold indicates top two percentages per column

to know. When asked, 51 percent of employees surveyed said daily communication about health status of employees and visitors in the building was very important to them and 29 percent said it was somewhat important.[2] Transparency about actions taken was as important as well: 78 percent of employees surveyed said that receiving a daily report of cleaning activities was very or somewhat important to them.[2]

This level of frequency and transparency helps employees feel secure when they enter and exit work. So why aren't we seeing it? Getting this right is a challenge that employers need to conquer. They need to act in a genuine manner that balances a desire for transparency with a respect for personal privacy. It's not just about the communication itself: The tone and message that is being sent with it matters too, as does the sense of engagement the employee receives from it.

Empower me

Technology has always been an important part of business. What's new about it now? At the onset of COVID-19, employees across the world dove into technology to create a sense of connection in their personal lives, to get their work done, and to access information. As employees return to work, they want to feel the same ability to control what they know and see all the precautions their employers are taking to promote their safety. It's not enough to hear about it; they want to see the results themselves, in real-time. Again, trust is fractured. People are collecting new data points for themselves when it comes to rebuilding trust, and they are using technology to do it.

Percent of workforce that want **all employees** to go through a temperature check upon entry

	Work with customers (e.g. guest services)	Work near customers (e.g. housekeeping)	Work away from customers, but around many other employees (e.g. factory, warehouse, call center)	Work at corporate (e.g. headquarters)
76% of employees feel that having all employees go through a temperature check upon entry into workplace is somewhat or very important for them to feel comfortable	**79%**	70%	67%	70%

Percent of workforce that want **all customers** to go through a temperature check upon entry

	Work with customers (e.g. guest services)	Work near customers (e.g. housekeeping)	Work away from customers, but around many other employees (e.g. factory, warehouse, call center)	Work at corporate (e.g. headquarters)
73% of employees feel that customers going through a temperature check is somewhat or very important for them to feel comfortable	**76%**	69%	60%	**76%**

Source: Deloitte Safety and Cleanliness Survey, Deloitte Consulting LLP, 2020.

IS TECHNOLOGY USED YET?
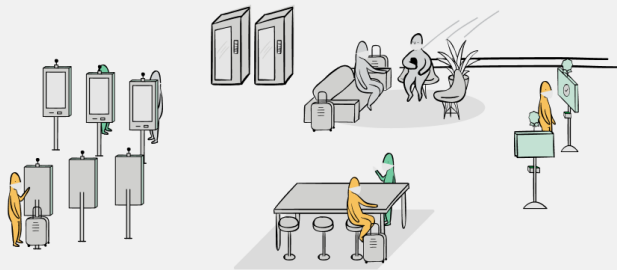
The use of technology at Heathrow Airport is an example of one way to help make informed decisions. As travelers come in from restricted countries, they can opt into a private service that allows them to take and return COVID-19 results in 24 hours.[4] How can we use this technology example in other areas to help employees return to work?

Technology supports what employees want: transparency, reliability and self-service. One way to use technology onsite is with temperature checks.

Temperature checks are a precaution people desire greatly across all industries and roles. That makes sense; as people expand their circles, their risk of exposure to COVID-19 becomes greater. They're concerned about the risk to themselves and their loved ones, and they want safeguards like temperature checks to help them make informed, science and technology-based decisions about the safety of those around them in their work environments.

But this is about more than just a static point in an onsite temperature check. That alone doesn't solve the issue. Employees want holistic access and control when they are offsite as well, so they can feel reassured throughout their journey through the day. More than half of employees surveyed said that they would be very or somewhat likely to provide personal information for a tracking app that provides their health status to others with whom they have recently been in contact.[2] Using a reliable platform that allows employees access on their own time makes them feel empowered. As an employer, developing and adapting your

capabilities to provide a reliable platform gives you a chance to demonstrate that your organization has the means and the will to provide access to important health information. Our Trust research shows that employees are 2.2 times more likely to go above and beyond what is expected of them when they believe their employer is capable of meeting their expectations.[3]

> **Key takeaways:** Identify what efforts will help make employees feel most at ease, conduct a capability assessment of what exists versus what would be net new, and invest in some of those efforts to alleviate stress and anxiety. This could range from something small like temperature checks to a centralized database that stores employee health data—while continuing to meet data privacy standards. One example is [Deloitte's MyPath™ to Work](#) platform.[5]

Making it real

The world will continue to evolve and change, as will employee expectations. It is important that companies understand their employees' needs and show dedication to bringing them back safely. After all, customers also care about the way employees are treated. 82 percent of customers surveyed say measures to ensure safety and well-being of a companies employees "must be in place" or would "make them more likely to visit".[2] This effort can take many forms, but the initial experiences to rebuild trust will go a long way toward defining an enduring, post-COVID-19 relationship between employer and employee.

1. **Communicate early and often.** There is no such thing as too much communication. Ongoing communication that provides relevant and wanted information will increase the trust between employer and employee. Employees need to know that employers will keep them in the loop—always.

2. **Empower employee agency of information.** Use available technology to give your employees access to information, key processes, and tools to make situational decisions. Having that sense of control can help put them at ease. Operationalizing the right safety and health measurements supports your

employees' concerns for their health, communicates your empathy for their personal situation, and encourages their personal agency to make the best decision as return-to-work options evolve.

3. **See the trees, not the forest.** Employers should actively listen to different employee groups and recognize how the personas they may have had in the past have become different and potentially more complex. Employees are living a new reality full of complexities that may be hard to spot at first, or ever. No matter how solid the work relationship, the organizations they work for may not be privileged to see everything they're dealing with. We are seeing a diverse set of preferences from all employee groups, and the smaller groups are not going to remain silent—employers must listen and act. Using the HX Values Compass can help identify what matters most to employees.[6]

4. **Speak to our shared humanity.** Understand that this worldwide health and economic disruption has affected almost everyone personally and professionally. Apply empathy in policymaking and communications to make humanity a part of every message and signal. As you ask them to return to work, let your employees understand that you see them and their personal struggles. Encourage them as we transition from COVID-19 to post COVID-19 to whatever the next disruption is.

The crisis we're in the middle of is the one that's top of mind right now, but it won't last forever. What can last long after its over is your employees' sense of how you treated them during this time.

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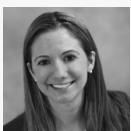Human Capital
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Endnotes

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