The CHRO's Role in Planning the Return to Workplace

Gartner for HR

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Overview

As governments start to allow organizations to reopen their physical locations and get back to "normal," leaders will need to collaborate to reopen in a way that promotes health and safety for the workforce and consumer. As HR leaders have started to engage in these conversations, it becomes clear that the challenge of returning to the workplace is not just an operations challenge, it is also a human challenge.

As organizations build their return plans, each organization must answer three key questions: When to return, who returns first and what the return experience will look like. For each question, Gartner has identified several principles to guide decision making. For each principle, the CHRO must advocate for the health and safety of the workforce.

When to return to the workplace

Guiding Principles	CHRO Role in Discussions
Health and safety is a top priority. As workplaces start to reopen, health and safety will be critical. Employees will look to the organization to create and maintain a safe work experience.	Safety measures alone are not enough: **Employees must also understand measures and perceive them as safe.** While real estate leaders will provide for the physical safety and health measures in most organizations, CHROs will often lead efforts to transparently communicate these efforts to employees and design and disseminate training plans
The best organizations will not return until they have a plan for re-exiting the workplace in case of a resurgence of virus cases. Confidence in the return-to-workplace strategy will be predicated on continual evaluation and planning for different workplace scenarios, including reclosure of physical locations if health and safety concerns make it necessary.	CHROs should work with other leaders to **create clear decision rules for when to re-exit.** CHROs should monitor employee sentiment and well-being as one input in these decision rules. HR leaders should **clearly communicate these decision rules to employees**, as well as regular status updates on each threshold the decision rules create.
Employees are (powerful) stakeholders in decisions about returning to the workplace. The decisions about returning to the workplace should be informed by the vision of experience for the new environment. An organization may be "open for business," but if employees cannot or are unwilling to return, there will be no "business as usual."	CHROs should **gather data to assess employee sentiment and comfort about returning to the workplace.** Once employees return to the workplace, HR should continue to monitor employee engagement and comfort, adjusting the reentry plan, if needed. The organization can also use employee feedback to determine whether to implement the re-exit plan if employees start to feel unsafe.

Who returns first

Guiding Principles	CHRO Role in Discussions
Some organizations have already done the work to segment the workforce, giving them a good starting point for how to segment return groups. Organizations that can segment the workforce have already observed who can work remotely — and who can't.	CHROs should consider **which segments of the workforce were able to quickly adjust to work from home and which have maintained productivity** to determine the sequencing of return to work.
Make remote decisions based on the work, not the worker. Organizations often allow remote work as a privilege, but many workers who would not normally work remotely have demonstrated that they can be productive at home.	CHROs should push the executive team to **lead with flexibility**, and consider whether certain workers can remain productive at home. Well-informed guidelines rather than rigid mandates will likely ease stress on employees. Organizations that can maintain productivity with a remote workforce should continue to have workers remain remote, putting the onus on managers to make the case for returning to the workplace.

What the return will look like

Guiding Principles	CHRO Role in Discussions
The employee experience of retuning to the workplace is as much a potential landmine as health and safety. If employees are not — or do not feel — safe and supported, the damage to productivity and engagement will endanger the organization's bottom line.	CHROs must architect a return-to-work experience that maximizes employees' physical and emotional safety while they return to a new workplace experience. **HR leaders will need to create new "employee journey maps" to effectively manage the return to the workplace.** CHROs should focus on identifying and managing the moments that matter most to employees upon reentry into the workplace, such as their first day back and their first team meeting.
The perception of safety is as important a safety itself — the lack of perceived safety will undermine employee confidence in the return-to-workplace plan.	CHROs should lead employee communication efforts, **being as transparent as possible with employees about any changes in risk of transmission.** CHROs may consider a simple communication tool such as a green/yellow/red rating to communicate the risk of exposure to coronavirus at a given facility on a given day.
External factors will have an outsized impact on the employee experience. An organization may be open for business, but the employee experience is broader than what is inside the building. Reduced mass transit availability, reduced (or nonexistent) childcare and continued disruptions in daily life will drain productivity.	CHROs will need to think of the new employee experience as a **more holistic experience beyond just the workplace experience.** Personal and work lives have blurred even more during the pandemic and are likely to continue to blur as employees reenter the workplace. HR leaders can mitigate risks of external factors on the employee experience by inviting employees to provide input on these factors, creating consistent messaging around them and ensuring that managers are equipped to respond to them as they arise.

Related Insights

- [On-Demand Webinar: Build the HR Leader's Return-to-Workplace Playbook](#)

- [The HR Operating Model of the Future](#)

- [Identifying and Managing Moments That Matter to Employees](#)

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