YOU CAN'T STOP: THE TIME TO PLAN FOR OFFICE RE-OPENING IS NOW

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We are all exhausted. Crisis management and business continuity departments have been in a perpetual state of activation for over a month, although it feels like years. Some teams may have hit a slight lull – as IT issues have been resolved and employees have gotten used to working from home. However, someday offices will re-open. Maybe it's optimistic to think it will be soon, but it will eventually happen, and the required planning to get people back to their offices may dwarf the effort of having everyone work from home in the first place.

The planning efforts behind employees returning to the office will involve strategic thinking, detailed tactical work, and the flawless communication of both. Employees are going to be scared and, admittedly, they are going to judge leadership on how well the organization is prepared to protect them. Preparing for 'Day 1' may take weeks. Here are some items to take into consideration.

Strategic Planning for the New Normal

Not only has the world been forever changed from the impact of COVID-19, but your company will never be quite the same either. But how? Top-level leadership must now review the policy changes and process adjustments they were forced make at a moment's notice once the pandemic struck. What would be beneficial to keep? Digital signatures, streamlined approval processes, relaxation of requirements, mail processing, and online payments processing have all changed, just to name a few. Perhaps, this has been an eye-opening event and your company will retain part of your workforce working from home to reduce overhead costs.

Determining how to retain potential efficiencies (and intentionally not returning to antiquated processes) will require thorough analysis to protect your company from fraud or cybersecurity dangers. Crisis management and business continuity teams must understand what the new normal is and what they must plan for. This effort is likely going to take quite some time and it's imperative you start working with your business leaders now.

Determining When to Open

The decision as to when to open each office will likely be a difficult, frightening one. It will be scary to go first. Each company (and location) will need to consider the risk versus reward. When determining if the time is right, here are some of the items that you will need to consider. Bear in mind, if the answer to any of these questions is no, then it simply isn't time to open (yet).

1. Do any of the local, state, and federal government restrictions allow us to open the office?
2. Can employees travel safely from their homes to the office? (consider restrictions, public transportation, etc.)
3. Can you get the supplies that employees will expect us to have such as masks, hand sanitizer, cleaners.?

4. Are enough cleaning crews available? Understand that some cleaning crews may have been laid off and property management/facilities may need to re-hire and train.
5. If applicable, can food services support the office re-opening? For many offices with cafeterias, culinary food prep will take significant planning. Can they get the supplies and food items? Do they have enough staff available to work? Can they adjust to pre-packaged meals for safety reasons?
6. Are business leaders and managers prepared to phase their people back into an office setting? For example, how many people should start the re-population 20%? 30%? 50%? How should you determine which employees should be included in the initial wave? How will that decision be communicated?

Preparing the Office Environment to Re-open

So, once you have a solidified re-open date, teams will have tactical work to do in order to prepare the building so it's ready for employees return. Here are some considerations for preparing the building:

1. Create signage to be displayed in high traffic areas: social distancing, wash hands, etc.
2. Complete the deep clean of the entire office.
3. Make supplies available to employees of key items such as hand sanitizer, masks, disinfectant wipes, etc. (consider all high traffic and touch areas such as elevators, doors, coffee makers, kitchen, etc.)
4. Remove some chairs in conference rooms to support social distancing.
5. Prepare strong message from leadership and support tools and messaging for managers and supervisors.
6. Consider lining up EAP/mental health counselors.
7. Determine the back to office schedule for staff. (30% / 50% / 80%)
8. As appropriate arrange for employee temperature checks before being allowed to enter the office.
9. Address visitor policy: For example, no visitors at first. Once business visitors are appropriate, capture information from each visitor (city of residence, travel to hotspots) and contact information.
10. Identify method to survey staff as situation continues.
11. Communicate protocols for anyone reporting symptoms. Communicate strongly to all employees that if you are not feeling well, do not come into the office. Either take sick days or work from home. This may be a shift in culture for many organizations.
12. Prepare to have to close office at any point.

Prepare the Communication

Even if you have taken all the right steps to protect your employees, miscommunication can easily undo all your hard work. On the flip side, if you only focus on the communication piece and don't take the time to complete all planning efforts, you could lose your employees' trust.

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Taken straight from our collective experience, we have learned that messaging must be clear when bringing people back into offices post-crisis. Your employees will want to hear the following:

1. We are happy to have you back.
2. We want you to feel safe. (Outline all the actions you have taken to protect them.)
3. The company will persevere. (Outline what the future holds to the best of your ability.)

Additional messaging should provide detail-specific information, however focusing on these three key areas is key to gaining and keeping your employees' trust and engagement. A communication tool that employees can utilize to ask questions and offer feedback will be key to overall long-term success. Unfortunately, COVID-19 is an unprecedented crisis with an uncertain end date. It will be hard to tell when and if it is over. However, one day we will be on the other side of this pandemic. We will never be so happy to go back to work, laugh together and eventually even shake hands.

We look forward to the opportunity to guide our clients. Please contact us if you would like to discuss your company's approach to managing this crisis, need support to do so, and/or if you would like to brainstorm next steps.

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