Preparing for Next Challenge: Delay in Return of Workforce

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We've all seen the articles outlining tips to help workers stay productive, engaged, and healthy during the global coronavirus pandemic. And there is the cache of articles outlining strategies to simultaneously perform your job responsibilities while caring for an infant, entertaining a toddler, and educating your school-aged child (check out these Resources curated by me and the SIOP Learning Resources for Practitioners committee). And, we are curiously reading articles that vulnerably express parental guilt, voice the benefits of gratitude and a positive mindset, and share the hope that work-life integration will be easier or, at least, better appreciated when we return to some sense of normalcy.

However, we need to prepare ourselves now for the likelihood that working parents will be forced to maintain this work-life integration longer than anyone would have expected. Some will have no choice but to continue working from home because their child is considered too vulnerable in terms of age (infant) or health to reenter childcare. But, there also those parents dealing with the steady stream of states (or districts) deciding to keep schools closed through the remainder of the school year. And, although many working parents are no stranger to alternate care during periods of no school (i.e., spring break, summer break, weather closures), school-age childcare options are likely to be very limited. And, it is important to recognize many parents will face challenges in securing childcare simply due to the probable shortage in childcare options.

Many childcare providers fall into the small business arena, and even for those that aren't, they still typically operate on small profit margins. Initially, providers likely tried to weather this storm (e.g., giving staff two-weeks leave with pay, reducing staff, seeking rent or mortgage relief). However, many providers have now laid off their staff and are trying to figure out how to make their reserves last as long as possible, with the majority of those funds going towards facility rent or mortgage. But those reserves and any small business relief grants obtained will sustain them for only so long. For more information about the challenges faced by daycare providers refer to this Hechinger Report.

So, it is quite conceivable to think that many childcare facilities will not reopen their doors after public officials give the green light for businesses and workers to reemerge from social distancing. There will be fierce competition for openings in those childcare

facilities that do reopen, with long wait lists and potential tuition hikes. What does this mean for working parents? Well, obviously, some will still need to work remotely while they secure new childcare arrangements.

I'm not sharing this concern because I like to be an alarmist, a nay-sayer, and Debbie Downer. Rather, I want to initiate a conversation that gets business leaders thinking. Agile organizations are in the best position to survive crises, including this global pandemic. New research shows that to be agile, organizations should focus first on becoming stable. And, one of the essential steps for building stability is for an organization to pre-plan its recovery.

As such, I encourage leaders to start thinking about how this potential challenge will affect some, if not most, of their workforce. Obviously, businesses need to consider how this situation may affect operations, sustainability, and growth to generate contingency plans, policies and procedures, and communications. But, before doing so, there are several considerations to explore to understand and mitigate potential risks.

1. **Gather and Analyze Necessary Data**

   What **data analytics** are viable for understanding the potential impact this situation has on employees and the company?
   a. How many staff are likely to be impacted by lack of childcare/school once we are able to return to the office?
   b. Do inequities exist among those employees facing this situation and those that do not?
   c. What business units and/or jobs will be most impacted?
   d. Are employees of impacted jobs already performing their duties from home?

2. **Evaluate and Leverage Existing Resources**

   What corporate **policies and procedures** are already in place that adequately and fairly address this concern or that can be leveraged for creating new ones specific to this global COVID-19 health crisis?
   a. What has been the employee reaction to existing policies and procedures?

b. Have they been clearly and consistently applied across employees?
c. What gaps exist that are specific to this situation?
d. What risks are associated with the existing, updated, or newly created policies and procedures?

3. **Develop a Communication Plan**

What **communications** will be most beneficial to the company, both in the short- and long-term, given the specific context?
a. How does the potential impact on the organization drive the communication strategy (i.e., who receives communications and when)?
b. What communications are competitors delivering (or expected to deliver) to their leadership, employees, customers, stakeholders, and the general public?
c. What message will most likely resonate with employees, both those unable to return to the office upon notice and those indirectly impacted by this situation (i.e., coworkers or managers of those directly impacted by childcare challenges)?
d. What risks are associated with various communication strategies and messaging?
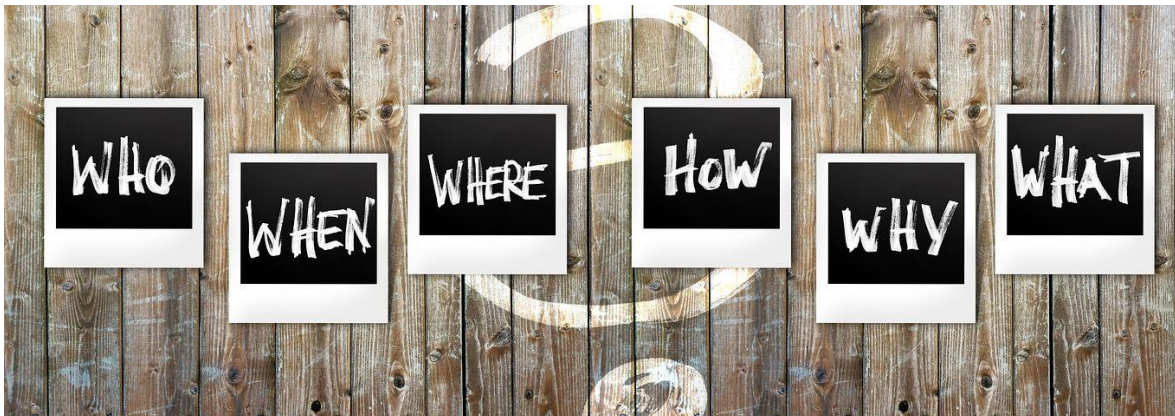
Unfortunately, no one has a crystal ball with the answers to these difficult questions. Assimilation and interpretation of corporate data on talent, engagement, performance, culture, processes, and strategic objectives is required to inform the decisions that best minimizes risks to the company as well as employees. It will be important to initiate this evaluation quickly to generate and implement a well-informed strategy as opposed to being in reactionary mode.

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Note about the author:

Kimberly Adams, PhD is an Industrial-Organizational (I-O) psychologist and Senior HR Consultant who applies her expertise in human behavior, measurement, and evaluation to develop and implement evidence-based solutions for organizational problems. Her consulting experience spans across a variety of areas, including recruitment, talent assessment and management, learning and development, performance measurement, quality of work life, structure of work and human factors, leadership and organizational development. She has helped clients:

- Determine barriers to company growth and employee productivity
- Measure and evaluate workplace performance and job satisfaction
- Assess needs and design effective training programs
- Evaluate effectiveness of training programs or workplace protocols
- Optimize work processes
- Promote diversity, inclusion, and quality of life for employees
- Help companies select, promote, and retain the best candidates

Fierce business competition means it more important than ever for companies to operate strategically and efficiently. To build sustainability, companies must recruit and retain top talent, invest in leadership and talent development, and build an inclusive culture to support innovation and growth. This focus has created a demand for I-O psychology practitioners with an understanding of human behavior in the workplace to support successful business operations.

She recently started LeadPath Solutions, LLC to expand her consulting and coaching work. Check out her LinkedIn profile at www.linkedin.com/in/kimberly-acree-adams. To learn how she can help you address your current challenges, contact her at kadams@leadpathsolutions.com.