Guide

Reopening? D&I Considerations and Insights

SERAMOUNT

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The world has changed dramatically over the past several months. The global pandemic has, in many ways, hit our reset button. We have lost a lot, the impacts of which we will likely see for a long time. However, we have learned many lessons as well, and our proven ability to be agile and adaptive can enable us to move forward in new and innovative ways.

As we move toward re-opening the economy and our workplaces, our role as Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) champions will be critical in **ensuring workplace re-entry plans are equitable and inclusive** for all constituents. Whether it is contemplating business decisions that may impact our employees and customers, or reevaluating and reframing existing processes and systems in the context of a new, more flexible work environment, diversity, equity and inclusion will play a key role. The decisions we make will have implications on our diversity and inclusion strategy moving forward.

There is much to consider

- How do we ensure we are creating equity in who we bring back to the workforce?

- Will there be long-term implications on diverse talent as a result of both the new work environment or the decisions we are making? For example, will women and people of color suffer disproportionate setbacks in career advancement?

- What are the concerns and needs of our employees? Do they vary among different populations?

- What safety measures need to be taken? Are there any considerations or accommodations needed for those disproportionately impacted?

- What have we learned from this experience that we can carry forward?

- Do we need to consider retraining our work-force as they return to a different workplace?

- How will we upskill and/or reskill our employees and retool our work processes?

- Do managers require additional training to support their teams?

These are just a handful of the questions business leaders will need to address as we return to work post COVID-19. Many have diversity, equity and inclusion implications related to safety, bias and ensuring a sensitive response to address the needs of employee groups most at risk. Organizations will need to weigh decisions to reopen through the lens of equity, diversity and through the voice of their employees.

Underrepresented employee groups have been disproportionately affected socio-economically by the pandemic. Women, people with disabilities, older generations and people of color have encountered higher rates of unemployment and salary cuts as well as higher rates of health risk. For employees working from home, women and people with caregiving responsibilities are experiencing higher rates of negative impact. In a recent survey by Working Mother Research Institute, 81% of women felt that virtually working from home has negatively impacted them primarily due to:

- **55%** anxiety and stress due to current uncertainty in personal life

- **36%** family pressures (such as eldercare, other extended family, etc)

- **27%** job security

Deciding Who Comes Back: Equity Considerations

As business leaders and local governments begin to make decisions about workplaces opening, leaders are faced with the challenge of deciding who to bring back to the physical workplace, whether it be an office, manufacturing floor or storefront. In addition, many companies have furloughed a large portion

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of their workforce and will need to consider how, where and when to phase back these employees, if at all. Some employees have financial stressors and perhaps need to come back to work, however, they could be unduly exposed to health risks by doing so. Some employees may want to come back to an office setting for visibility and productivity purposes but may have competing childcare or eldercare responsibilities.

Here are some return-to-work factors to consider

• **Socio-economic.** What are the financial and socio-economic implications of your decisions? What can your organization do to mitigate inequities?

• **Representation.** Are you measuring the demographic make-up of your 'reopening' staff to ensure equity?

• **Individual health and wellness impacts.** Do some employees require special support or accommodations? Is mental health or isolation a factor? What can your organization do to address these issues?

• **Caregiving responsibilities.** What supports are necessary to accommodate employees who may no longer have access to childcare, eldercare or disability care when they return to work?

• **Essential skill sets.** With a reduced/staggered staff, what skills are required? Can you train and educate to enable proper coverage and ensure populations are not disparately impacted by lack of experience or skills?

• **Jobs re-imagined.** Is there an opportunity to restructure or create new roles and responsibilities to meet business needs while creating new opportunities that did not exist before?

Your employee resource groups (ERGs) can be an important asset as these decisions are being planned. They can provide input to the leadership team about unique return-to-work implications for specific employee groups, can help with options, messaging, and can tap into their employee networks to better understand concerns and fears.

Work Schedule Options

● **4/10 schedule.** Employees are on a '4 days on the job', followed by '10 work days off the job' schedule. This follows the CDC data that says symptoms typically show days 4-7 and is beneficial to be followed by a 10 day quarantine.

● **A/B schedule.** Some employers are considering staggered shift rotations in order to limit the total number of employees at the workplace at any one time.

● **Voluntary.** In this situation, employees may feel that their decisions will have performance management or advancement repercussions. Ensure you clearly communicate expectations and policies around employee decisions.

DEI implications of remote working

With a majority of leaders now working remotely, executives have become acutely aware of both the benefits and challenges that accompany virtual work. Whether your organization has remained open, or if you are planning to slowly open back up, or are remaining virtual, the global pandemic has increased focus and attention on flexibility. However, as businesses contemplate virtual work, it is important to recognize that flexible options are not always equitable. For example, lower wage earners may not be able to benefit from the option to work remotely, and proper work spaces, technology or tools may not be available.

In the past, working from home was viewed skeptically as assumptions were made that virtual employees were slacking or working less. In fact, remote workers are reported to be working harder and longer than average. At the same time, there is an increased pressure on working mothers and caregivers who are now handling a multitude of responsibilities and distractions simultaneously. At a

recent Chief Diversity Officer Circle meeting hosted by Diversity Best Practices and Culture@Work, participants identified employee burnout as one of the top concerns for HR and leadership. Organizations will need to develop equitable options and solutions to help mitigate challenges of caregiving, both for employees returning to work and those staying remote. Some organizations are considering monetary reimbursement for home healthcare options.

BEST PRACTICE

#FirstRespondersFirst has brought together Thrive Global, Harvard School of Public Health, CAA, and Bright Horizons to open special child care hubs to meet the needs of first responders. Bright Horizons child care hubs operate with special COVID-19 protocols in place, including limited capacity and small group sizes, enhanced teacher:child ratios, and intensive hygiene and cleaning practices. The centers are staffed with experienced Bright Horizons early educators. Care is available for infants and children up to 12-years old, and is free to first responders.

In a virtual work world, visibility and advancement inequities may be exacerbated.

The post-pandemic workplace is still being determined. However, it is clear that it will be more digital than before. In the emerging virtual work environment, there are new challenges that may lead to disparate impact on women and people of color. For example, research has shown that women and people of color have not had equitable access to key decision makers, nor have they had equal opportunities for visibility and advancement. Relationship capital and sponsorship, particularly for women of color, already significantly lags men.

In a virtual work environment, opportunities for relationship building, networking and sponsorship

outreach may be harder or even diminished, especially where there isn't as strong of a push for accountability and/or natural connection. Decisions once made in offices in full visibility may now be made more privately on-line across IM, text, or calls, with little to no visibility to others. This will make it more difficult to ascertain the extent to which women and underrepresented talent are or are not being included.

On a recent Working Mother call with several C-suite women, their ***biggest concern was their increased barriers and lack of ability to effectively network*** with board directors and clients for visibility and productive impact in a virtual environment. According to boston.com news, women say that video calls make it harder for them to get in a word during meetings dominated by men.

Organizations will need to weigh whether or not working from home or other work decisions will have long-term implications on the careers of employees, particularly historically marginalized employees. Developing mitigating solutions will be important to consider in our new operating environment.

- Consider increasing opportunities for executives and decision makers to host video calls with talent.

- Develop new virtual sponsorship circle programs.

- Institutionalize virtual meeting guidelines to ensure all voices are heard.

- Review client or critical assignments to ensure equity and to broaden opportunities. For example, now that geography, travel, and locations are not barriers, is there opportunity to widen the pool?

- Evaluate talent development plans and re-assess. Develop diverse talent development plans if you haven't already.

Tip: Social contracts are an important tool to help establish work expectations and boundaries. For example, identifying negotiable and non-negotiable parameters such as "off limit" hours to enable breaks and balance, or ensuring certain meetings are via video to maximize personal connectivity and provide opportunity to develop and maintain social capital, can be empowering.

Re-evaluate performance management processes to ensure fairness and equity.

In a year where work and performance have been thrown into turmoil, organizations will need to reframe their performance assessments and talent process in new ways to ensure fairness and equity. Some things to consider include

- Will your managers be able to effectively assess performance virtually?

- How will reduced work hours and changed productivity levels be measured and evaluated?

- How will employees be fairly assessed? For example, if employees decide to not go into work will there be negative repercussions? If interaction is limited, how will employees be assessed?

- Will employees feel they have to disclose a health concern to justify the ability to stay home? Will this reflect on their reputation/performance appraisal?

- Do new performance objectives need to be created? For example, do sales commission plans need changing?

- Will managers need to rely more heavily on certain competencies or skills such as empathy, engagement, or remote management?

Organizations may want to consider offering training for managers on effective performance management practices, providing feedback virtually, and talent assessments in the new workplace. *It will be equally important to reevaluate your criteria for assessing managers' performance.* For example, what actions did they take to support furloughed employees? How did they engage employees during the crisis? What kind of online training or other technical support did they provide their teams?

Some Universities and Colleges are allowing for pass/fail options and waiving test requirements for admissions in order to help level the playing field of inequities in a time of turbulence. Should businesses consider a similar methodology for setting objectives and assessing job performance?

Whatever your organization's decisions, clear and transparent communication of expectations, new processes and revised systems are essential. Take the time needed to prepare comprehensive communication plans to ensure managers and employees are clear on new performance management assessment processes and guidelines.

Reassessing processes and systems

Working Mother's recent Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) Circle virtual session, found approximately 65 percent of organizations are planning on opening on a limited basis in the next few months, with an additional 18 percent reporting plans to reopen by the end of the year. The same percent of CDOs were not comfortable returning to work. However, 61 percent felt that their organizations were prepared or preparing well.

The Working Mother Research Institute survey found safety and health as the top concerns. Respondents reported that in order to feel comfortable returning to work they

- prefer reassurance from local government or health experts that it's safe to return to work;

- need communication from employers ensuring that they are taking maximum precautions to provide for the safety of their employees; and

- expect employers to provide PPE daily (e.g. masks, gloves) hand sanitizer stations, temperature checks, guidelines and policies to ensure safety precautions.

It's important to note, that for some communities, such as Blacks/African Americans, Native Americans and Hispanics, and those with pre-existing health conditions, anxiety levels may be even higher. COVID-19 has impacted these communities with significantly higher fatalities. According to the AMP Research Lab, the COVID-19 mortality rate for Black Americans is 2.4 times higher than the rate for White Americans. In New York City, one of the nation's COVID-19 hotspots, more than a third of people who have died from the disease are from the Hispanic community. Hispanic unemployment sits at nearly 19 percent, higher than any other demographic.

According to Indian Health Services, there are more than 3,607 confirmed cases of the coronavirus among Native American tribes.

For employees with caregiving (eldercare, disability or childcare) responsibilities, stress levels will also likely continue to increase as they struggle with balancing new challenges, such as lack of daycare options or fear of exposing the more vulnerable. Stress and anxiety are high and may impact LGBTQ, people with disabilities, senior citizens and generation Z who are already more vulnerable to factors of isolation and mental health issues.

It will be important to review your health and wellness benefits and programs to consider expanded services where needed and possible. Here are some examples of things to consider.

- Reconstruct floor plans/desks to allow for social distancing, clearly mark guidelines

- Redesign break spaces, wellness rooms or community gathering spaces (for example, manage numbers and spacing, close entirely)

- Provide hand sanitizing stations on every floor, at all entry points

- Provide new process for building entry including contactless access, timed intervals/spacing

- Plan to conduct contactless temperature checks at building entrances

- Provide PPE pick up stations at building entrances (contactless, one at a time. Regarding masks, consider needs of employees with hearing impairments)

- Review building and facilities policies and guidelines to ensure limited exposure (for example, elevator and stairway access)

- Review and redefine policies and guidelines for in person interactions

- Reconsider and address lunch/food services and kitchen/pantry access rules (for example. provide complimentary pre-packaged meals, no bring from home meals, eat at desks)

- Recommend alternative options to address mass transit and commuting

- Create two way communication channels to address concerns (EAP, health and safety hotline)

- For employees staying at home, working virtually, is there equal access to the necessary technology? Are there ways in which to minimize or equalize visual disparities at home when using video?

Look for opportunities to engage your ERGs to identify specific insights to unique needs, and to assist you in developing and communicating policies, procedures and guidelines to the workforce. Getting input and feedback from diverse employee groups will help you think through this checklist with a diversity and inclusion lens (e.g. Is there a need to identify those who may have underlying health issues, and if so, how do you do so in a way that protects their privacy?). Keep in mind accommodations for those with special needs, those with underlying health issues or those that may be impacted disparately, such as ADA compliance and HIPAA when reviewing plans. Overall, organizations must focus on reassuring employees that precautions are being taken and support systems will be in place as they open up.

BEST PRACTICE

Lenovo shares their reopening strategy at their Beijing offices in this video. It illustrates how employees enter their workplace every day, how the office space is laid out and how they manage meals as well.

Best practices

EY launched a program called We Care, designed to destigmatize mental health issues, educate employees on the signs of mental illness, and encourage people to seek help if they need it. The company reports calls to EY Assist have increased 32 percent since We Care began

Merck and the **Mayo Clinic** have trained and empowered a cadre of employees as mental health ambassadors and allies to serve as an in-house support system. Doing so helps to ensure you are reaching all employees and some are providing translation services if necessary

Starbucks is offering its 220,000 U.S. employees and their dependents 20 annual therapy sessions through a platform called Lyra and Headspace, a popular meditation app.

Nike has signed with Big Health, a digital therapeutics company, to offer free programming that uses cognitive and behavioral techniques to combat poor sleep and anxiety.

Step up employee engagement.

Surveying employees can offer insights and input for your re-entry plans. As your organization looks to create logistics checklists, ensure you are taking the time to get input from your workforce. Social distancing and remote working can foster feelings of isolation and can also impact productivity negatively if gone unchecked. Taking the time to listen to your employees - and allowing them the opportunity to surface any concerns - will help ensure your response is sensitive and on target.

Tap into the various generations in your workplace to gain insights and ideas on how employee engagement can be re-imagined. For example, Gen Z and millennials have leveraged technology for collaboration and engagement and can offer creative solutions. Older workers can share their perspectives and experiences having survived other types of crisis.

At Working Mother, we have "Friday laugh and lunch", enabling a dedicated time to just connect outside of work and say hello to extended family and pets who are our new "virtual family colleagues". We have also created a slideshow of our individual community service/pay it forward campaign efforts to share among our colleagues and spark like efforts.

ERGs and BRGs can

- Provide a forum and safe space for identifying needs and raising concerns
- Help to monitor the engagement and well-being of their membership and the workforce overall
- Assist in crafting company communications and response messaging
- Ensure key information is disseminated in a culturally sensitive and relevant manner
- Connect with local communities to identify needs and ways the company can assist
- Serve as a hub for translating information and connecting employees and communities with resources

Conclusion

As organizations and businesses look to reopen and consider recovery, there are opportunities to reimagine and redefine the ways we work and operate. We have a unique opportunity to learn from the current situation and create a new, better normal. Despite all the challenges and complexities of change that we are facing, making DE&I a priority now can be a game changer. We can re-envision how we engage for inclusion, how we provide new opportunities for career expansion and progression, and how we ensure equitable access and support to thrive in a new environment.

For more information on Diversity Best Practices Membership or Leveraging Employee Voice Sessions please contact Donnice.Peterson@ diversitybestpractices.com

Additional resources:

HIPAA Rules for Disclosure

Guidance from real estate experts

How to Rebuild and Reimagine Jobs Amid the Coronavirus Crisis (McKinsey)

How to Restart the Economy with a Post-pandemic Workforce (MIT Management Sloan School)

Are You Ready for a Post-COVID-19 World? (Chief Learning Officer)

How To Drive Employee Engagement During (and After) COVID-19 (Namely)

What Will Work-Life Balance Look Like After the Pandemic? (Harvard Business Review)

Coronavirus Layoffs Could Erase Many of Women's Workplace Gains (Catalyst)

How to Make Flexible Work the Way of the Future (Catalyst)

Working From Home is Great for Diversity. Let's Keep it Going. (Fast Company)

Leaders, Do You Have a Clear Vision for the Post-Crisis Future? (Harvard Business Review)

Reopening The World's Workplaces (CBRE Global)