

HR NEWS



Change Management



Employers Must Take the Long View on Rebuilding the Workforce Following COVID-19

By Nicholas Wyman, MBA

Since the onset of COVID-19, everyone in the workforce has been forced to adapt to changes at an unprecedented rate. Organizations raced to ensure they could continue operating and delivering services virtually, particularly in vital public markets like education and health care.

Employers and their human resources departments continue to face new and difficult decisions every day. While the economic impact on private sector businesses has been widely reported, the public sector has also been hit hard. Pew reported in mid-June that since March, when many institutions began closing, some 1.5 million education and government jobs had been lost. Overall, the public sector saw its highest jobless rate in nearly 20 years.

It is imperative to approach the ongoing crisis with honesty, directness and a long-range view on workforce development and employee engagement and retention. Because we will recover, but we will need new and adapted skills to complete the recovery.

Major Changes Arrived Quickly and Will Not Stop Soon

No one knows how long the threat of COVID-19 will last, but it is clear that this crisis will significantly alter our working methods and patterns. Lasting changes have already occurred.

Telecommuting and remote working became the norm for millions of people practically overnight. The transition was particularly abrupt for many who had no prior experience working with tools like Zoom or Slack. Still, professionals such as health care

providers and counselors shifted rapidly to telehealth platforms to continue safely providing important services.

Work processes and systems will continue evolving to meet needs of organizations and employees in the new model of distributed work. In particular, we can expect to see additional investments by businesses and government in digital infrastructure and online capabilities.

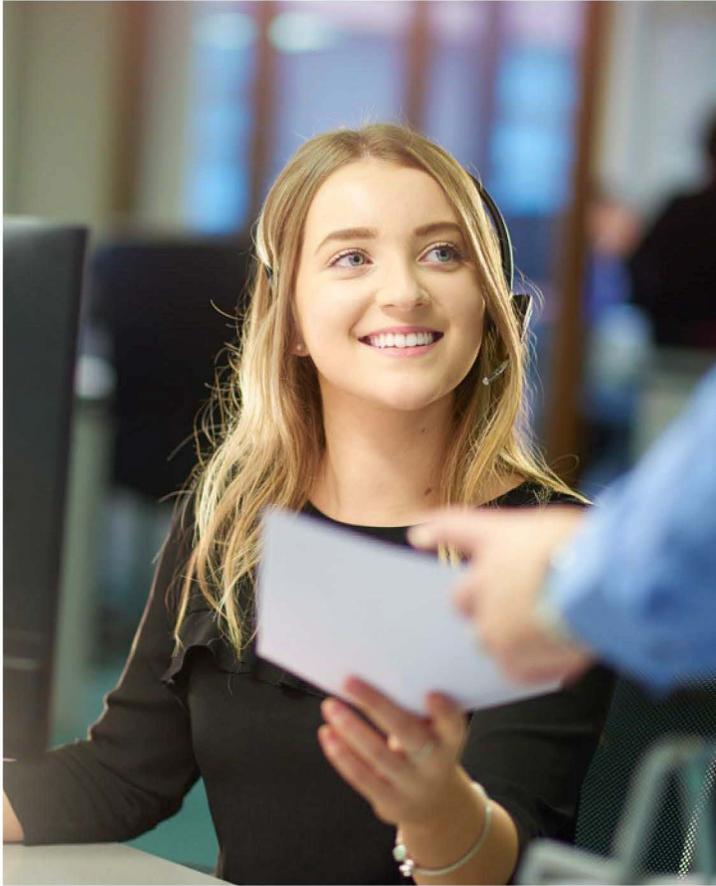
Employers and managers should look for opportunities to innovate and build skills across the workforce. Now is the time to implement and assess how online platforms can improve operations. If optimal platforms are not already being used, employers should create accounts and set up organizationwide tutorials.

Training Employees on Technology Is a Must

Going forward, organization must develop operating processes and systems to withstand all disasters, not just pandemics. Even the normal pace of economic transformation demands revamping and adapting skills.

New technology is eliminating jobs that demand only repetitive tasks. That same technology is creating jobs that involve maintaining, managing and developing the new technology. In other words, people who can work with technology are in demand.

Right now, though, many employers simply want to maintain their workforces. Dwindling revenues and slashed budgets for



paying workers make achieving that simple goal difficult. If at all possible, employers should avoid mass layoffs and keep employees on payroll because this is their best insurance for sustainability.

If shutting down or decreasing hours of operations again becomes necessary, and working from home is not feasible, employers should try to fill staff members' time with skills development. Offering incentives can boost participation, but providing learning and development opportunities has been shown to be a powerful tool for engaging and retaining employees. Doing this can also boost morale.

More than ever, workers need technical skills; they need to know how to run the programs and advanced technologies that increasingly make up the modern workplace. But there's more to it than that.

Modern workers need to be tinkerers and problem-solvers. They need to know how to ask questions, when and how to get help, how to work in teams and how to communicate effectively with both machines and their coworkers. And, as the COVID-19 crisis has reminded us, they need to be flexible, to adapt and to continuously learn new skills.

Employers and HR managers who take a long-range view will use every tool at their disposal to help current and future staff develop these skills. Organizations with remote workers should explore

massive open online courses (MOOCs), Khan Academy, Udemy, Skillshare or Google Digital Garage to find free online classes, some of which offer certification.

Establish or Expand Apprenticeships to Build for the Future

One lasting impact of the pandemic will likely be a change in expectations regarding the role for government in the economy. We can expect governments at all levels to reorient their thinking about the scope of services, particularly when it comes to disease prevention and maintaining social infrastructure. As services expand, training and employing more people for public sector jobs will become necessary.

Agencies should consider investing in their own futures and the future of America by continuing to fund and sponsor apprenticeships throughout these challenging times. Serving an apprenticeship is a proven way to skill up and prepare for a public sector career in health care, public safety, infrastructure, cybersecurity or law enforcement, to name a few areas. Now is the time to invest in individuals who want to fill these essential roles and to strategically plan for workforce needs as localities and the economy recover.

Many employers have also found that apprenticeship programs increase employee loyalty, engagement and productivity for both the apprentices and their mentors. And some organizations are successfully using apprenticeships to diversify their workforce, which has produced positive effects for the employer and the community.

Now is the right time to start an apprenticeship program. The federal government recently set aside millions of dollars in grants for such initiatives through the U.S. Department of Labor's Closing the Skills Gap program, and funds are available to local and state governments, as well as private employers and nonprofits.

The coming weeks and months could be the best window of opportunity this decade to bring in talented people through apprenticeships. This period also presents a prime opportunity for organizations to integrate skills-building and professional development initiatives to ensure they have a more robust, better-prepared workforce.

Nicholas Wyman, MBA, is a future work expert and speaker, the president of the [Institute for Workplace Skills and Innovation](#), and the author of [Job U](#). Wyman has studied at Harvard Business School and the Kennedy School of Government, and he was awarded a Churchill Fellowship. He is [on LinkedIn](#). —