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OPINION

In the post-pandemic workplace, the 'new' normal is just the 'now' normal

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As the temporary pandemic restrictions start lifting in many areas of the country, it is clear that the world of work is nothing like what it was before. What we thought was the “new” normal has become the “now” normal, subject to repeated mutations and variations. As I reflect on numerous conversations with leaders in client organizations, the anticipated changes in the upcoming months as people return to their workplaces fall into three main areas.

PEOPLE WILL RETURN TO WORK GRADUALLY

Not everyone is coming back to their workplaces right away, and when they do, it's not all at the same time. Some employees, for a variety of reasons, are opting to work out of their homes for longer. And for the ones that are choosing to return, physical distancing is still necessary. So, leaders are planning for a fraction of employees (half or less) to come back to work at a single time. The idea is that by rotating weeks or specific days of the week, people will work at the office some of the time, and out of their homes for the balance. Several of my clients think that this will continue at least to the end of the year, and perhaps even longer.

THERE WILL BE INCREASED REQUESTS TO WORK REMOTELY

Historically, many managers, particularly those with traditional mindsets, have been resistant to their employees working remotely. The basis of their opposition includes arguments like employees will goof off, our customers won't accept it and the technology doesn't permit it, to name just a few. Yet, sixteen weeks of employees working from home has proven otherwise. It is possible to work remotely. We have the technology. Our customers have accepted it, although with some reluctance. And in many cases, employees have reported increased productivity. So, as we move forward, these same managers will now be hard-pressed to deny employees who wish to work from home, especially if it's just one or two days a week.

FACE-TO-FACE PROTOCOLS ARE FOREVER CHANGED

Not every organization has jobs that can function remotely. There are certain products or services that require people to "go to work". You can't fix a refrigerator from afar. If you work in a manufacturing or processing plant, you can't "work at home". The cashier at the grocery store can't check you out remotely. In these industries, while obviously staff will not "work at home," the protocols under which they work will alter significantly. We are seeing it already. Tradespeople are wearing masks and gloves, asking customers to declare their recent interactions and travel, and maintaining physical distance when in the vicinity of customers. Workers at plants are operating at further distances from each other, separated by Plexiglas. Retail stores are sanitizing counters and payment devices after each sale and, wherever possible, encouraging customers to use the self-checkout lanes. It is very likely that these new face-to-face procedures will last well into the foreseeable future.

ACCENTUATE YOUR INTERPERSONAL STRENGTHS

If the "now" normal is constantly changing, it's imperative that you flex and adapt too. Whether it's working with your staff, your supervisor, peers or clients, your continued success will stem from your ability to amplify your interpersonal skills.

- Seek to understand further and deeper. Ask more questions and really listen to the answers. Be more open-minded about creative possibilities than you might have been in the past – even to allowing staff to work from home more often.
- Be more patient. As pandemic restrictions lift, many employees are still dealing with a myriad of personal responsibilities. Wait-times on the telephone are longer, as are lineups at stores. Appointments – medical, trade or personal care – are harder to come by. So assume that everyone is trying their best, and respond with kindness.

- Be more supportive. Show empathy to your co-workers. Look hard for ways to say yes rather than no to your staff. Be flexible in the application of rules and policies.
- Acknowledge and thank more. Even if you already make it a point to do this, kick it up a notch – to your co-workers, your staff and your customers. Showing appreciation and gratitude never goes out of style, and it is needed more now than it ever was.

There is no doubt that exceptional interpersonal skills can set you apart in any working environment. But in the post-pandemic world of work, they've taken on a heightened importance.

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