

How COVID has Changed Healthcare HR and the Workforce

2020 has done more than impact the delivery of healthcare to patients. It has drastically changed how healthcare employees find jobs, protect themselves, balance work-life duties, and care for anyone and everyone who is sick.

COVID-19 has also forced profound changes for healthcare human resources professionals as they strategize and execute the core functions of successful HR programs.

Because of new demands on the healthcare professionals who provide care, the future of healthcare HR must stay focused on three guiding principles: Invest in people; make talent retention and acquisition a top priority; and create a new future based on the reality that things will not return any time soon to a pre-pandemic normal.

HR professionals must be guided by clear frameworks to support ongoing change and to ensure the uninterrupted delivery of safe, high-quality healthcare.

What do employees need and when do they need it?

Start by asking questions about the newfound focus on an employee-first workplace. What types of benefits and policies will support employees as satisfied healthcare professionals, individuals, and family members?

Benefits that make a real difference for employees include additional paid time off, more generous PTO rollover policies, and extended leaves of absence, especially for those who become ill/quarantined or have childcare or eldercare responsibilities at home. Giving them the time they need to recover or care for their loved ones, while assuring them their jobs will be waiting for them, demonstrates that employees are valued.

For staff who worry about their own (and their families') health and safety, consider additional healthcare perks or expansion of benefits to part-time or per-diem workers, regardless of whether employees choose or qualify for company-provided healthcare coverage. Benefits can reduce barriers to access by including no-copay telehealth visits for all employees, company-provided flu vaccine programs or vouchers, and funding augmented emotional/mental health counseling services beyond the core benefits plan to address stress, anxiety and burnout. For employees who travel to patients' homes or other facilities as part of their daily routine, free roadside assistance can help ease any concerns about being stranded.

Support employees by letting them know their workplace is being protected too. Infection control managers can strengthen employee confidence with the knowledge that someone is regularly monitoring their colleagues' health, quarantine status, and ever-changing guidelines for healthcare professionals. The benefit can be achieved whether organizations fund new infection control manager positions or expand the responsibilities and reporting capabilities of existing managers.

Refocus talent acquisition

Rethink talent retention and acquisition by viewing both activities from the employees' perspective, and then pivoting traditional activities to meet their needs.

For recruiting and hiring activities, continue the shift to virtual platforms for job fairs, screening interviews, onboarding activities, and new-employee training and other activities. Doing so reassures candidates of the employers' commitment to safety while still providing helpful tools to support their success.

Provide additional training to existing employees so they feel informed and confident as they face new challenges, technologies, care protocols and safety guidelines.

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Also rethink how work is done from the employees' perspective. Does everyone have to remain in the office, clinic, lab or care setting? Is work-at-home a possibility for additional roles? Is job-sharing an option for employees who want to continue working but on a limited schedule because of family responsibilities?

Creativity and flexibility can relieve employees' new and ongoing worries—while simultaneously proving to them that their employer is aware of their challenges and willing to provide new solutions.

Expect and reward change for the near- and long-term future

This pandemic became a global wake-up call; change related to COVID-19 will continue to emerge in both predictable and unexpected ways.

HR professionals, as much as possible, must always need to be ready to address change, whether we lead it or whether it evolves as a result of our employees' decisions and broader industry shifts. Some employees may leave; others will re-dedicate themselves to a challenging, satisfying healthcare career. Employees and job candidates alike will need ongoing communication and tangible reassurances that their careers remain safe and rewarding. The job of all leaders—not just those in HR—is to help employees succeed so that the organization can continue to provide care.

What's ahead? Some paths forward are already clear. Others will remain fluid, and so must our responses and solutions. This year has reinforced HR's core mission of focusing attention where it matters most: on our employees, so they can do their jobs effectively, continue to pursue their passions, and support healthcare delivery that is safe, trusted and professionally satisfying.

Diane Psaras, *Modern Healthcare*, Nov. 20, 2020 issue

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