



COVID-19 and Deciding Who Continues Working from Home

By Kathy Gurchiek

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More employers are considering extending work-from-home (WFH) options for employees through the fall, the end of the year or longer as coronavirus cases continue to surge in parts of the country.

But how does an employer or supervisor decide who may continue working remotely and who should be at the organization's physical site?

Employers should put employee health and safety first and monitor federal and regional health guidelines, said Kara Hamilton, chief people and culture officer of software platform Smartsheet in Bellevue, Wash.

"It's also vitally important to allow for personal choice, whenever possible," she said. "The pandemic is impacting every individual differently, so offering ways to meet employees at their comfort level—for example, by providing the continued ability to work from home—provides meaningful support amidst the uncertainty."

Feedback

SHRM MEMBER-EXCLUSIVE RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Remote Work (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/Remote-Work.aspx)

Smartsheet is evaluating who should be among its first round of returnees based on the need for in-office equipment, Hamilton said, and is preparing its workplaces for the new norms of the office environment.

Employees' roles and employee feedback were main factors in deciding who at Young Living Essential Oils works from home.

The Lehi, Utah-based company decided to allow more than 1,200 of its 2,460 headquarters employees to work remotely through 2020. Essential workers—some research and lab employees, farm staff, and distribution center workers—continue to work onsite. The company's WFH decision came after conducting a series of employee surveys.

[*SHRM members-only HR form: COVID-19 Employee Return-to-Work Survey* (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/pages/coronavirus-covid-19-employee-return-to-work-survey.aspx)]

"We want to make sure this is collaborative and based on facts and data for our workforce," said Aubrey Bates, the company's vice president of people. To help employees continue to feel connected, she added, the company provides everyone with the same communication platform so they can participate in virtual events such as happy hours and fitness sessions. There are opportunities for

virtual face time so that "water cooler conversations" do not disappear.

"As people leaders, it's our responsibility to help our employees navigate the uncertainty by providing the best information and guidance we can while keeping our team members safe and continuing to move the business forward," Bates said.

Empower Departments

Working from home also aligns with the CEO's passion for work/life balance, she added.

More than half (56 percent) of Young Living's employees say they are better able to balance their work/life schedules when they work from home. Nearly one-fourth are not working the typical 8 a.m.-5 p.m. schedule to accommodate caregiving responsibilities. Others report that they can better meet the demands of their regions because they can adapt their hours to different time zones.

The company found those working from home were more productive—IT teams saw a 25 percent increase in productivity and sales teams had a 13 percent increase, Bates said. Additionally, the call center has experienced the lowest attrition rate in three years.

Because the company was seeing better connectivity, more productivity and better "employee connection" during a time of great uncertainty, she added, it made sense to allow some employees to continue working from home.

The chief operating officer sends biweekly updates to the entire company asking for employee feedback on how the company can support its workers during the pandemic.

"We've empowered departments throughout the company to create guidelines for their teams to support their specific communication and work-schedule needs," Bates said. Young Living expects to develop a hybrid approach to work that may allow employees to decide between working in the office or at home or to choose which option they would prefer to use most of the time.

Bates chairs a cross-functional WFH task force aimed at creating a long-term strategy for remote work. The task force solicits employee input and assesses leadership's needs for successfully managing people working remotely. It also allocates resources, such as providing reimbursements for office setup, and determines proper IT gear to send home for employees' use while working.

The increase in remote work also helps Young Living meet its sustainability goals. The company estimates that from March 2020 to the end of the year, employees will have eliminated more than 3 million pounds of carbon emissions by not commuting.

Listen to Employees

Most organizations approach WFH decisions from a corporate perspective by considering whose job necessitates them to be physically onsite, said Andi Britt, London-based senior partner for talent and transformation at IBM. Industries such as hospitality and transportation must have employees at the workplace.

"But for those who don't necessarily rely on a physical presence, there's going to be this tension between the critical workers [you] need to bring in, the aspirations of the workforce and then there's the physical constraint of the workplace. How many people can you bring in safely with 1- or 2-meter distancing and continue working effectively?"

Perceptions of fairness may also come into play, he said.

"For many years, HR has seen equality and fairness as the primary goal, and they've achieved this by standardization. The current pandemic has thrown that up in the air ... because the circumstances of our employees are so different in this pandemic."

A new college graduate may want to be in the office to build a network and escape his or her small flat, Britt said. At the same time, the parent of a young child may need to provide care at home, or a senior manager who has a dedicated office space at home may be "perfectly happy" working remotely.

"The challenge for HR is to what extent can your employees set their own working patterns, their working hours and their working location," Britt said. "A broader issue is the extent to which you can trust your employees to get the job done versus feeling you have to track your employees to make sure they get their work done."

Using employee input, his company created an eight-point pledge from leadership to those working from home (<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/i-pledge-support-my-fellow-ibmers-working-from-home-during-krishna/>). Among other things, it grants employees the option of turning off the video during conference calls.

Some employees may request WFH as a reasonable accommodation (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/legal-and-compliance/employment-law/Pages/coronavirus-how-to-accommodate-at-risk-workers.aspx?_ga=2.32155830.968508648.1594046859-1296205769.1578683579) if coming onsite puts them at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19.

"Employers must take action if an employee's health will be jeopardized upon returning to the workplace," said Robert Teachout, SHRM-SCP, in a news release. He is legal editor at XperTHR, an employment compliance resource based in New Providence, N.J. Accommodating such a request could include telework, he said.

In May, Broadridge Financial Solutions in Lake Success, N.Y., decided that none of its associates working remotely would return to the office before Jan. 1, 2021, and created a task force to plan the future reopening, said Julie Taylor (https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__www.linkedin.com_in_julie-2Dtaylor-2D9545951&d=DwMGaQ&c=nQOnw6HHAeKBNxj23OXhOw&r=gvj5KjCPOOPLjJmVh70qn1EovLmvMSHSio7GSGPNDn4&m=LITjSYM-vj0j76654ujkgBZWaEsh7r0kueKy6tgVnQ&s=aMp4e6rOmMGER8R4rgqoKksQ5q3hxP2Ay7zHSYeMVAc&e=), corporate vice president and CHRO.

"The team is evaluating a host of topics ranging from timing, safety, technology, client engagement and real estate, as well as how we will embrace a remote working model—all while focusing on keeping our associates informed and engaged," she said

Deciding who continues to work from home cannot be solely an HR-led decision, IBM's Britt said. He advised HR leaders to ask employees to weigh in.

"Saying 'What would you like?' is an important consideration."

More information:

Return to Work Resource Page (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/Return-to-Work.aspx)

How to Handle More Work-from-Home Requests (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/employment-law/pages/coronavirus-influx-wfh-requests.aspx)

Many Professionals Dread Returning to the Office (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/employee-relations/Pages/professionals-afraid-covid.aspx)

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