Create a safe, flexible workplace

Setting your employees up for success during the COVID-19 pandemic
Happy, healthy, and engaged employees. That’s what all human resource leaders like you want.

But hopes that the pandemic would soon fade away – and life as we once knew it would return – have been dimmed by the sudden surge in cases of COVID-19 and its variants across the U.S.
56% of U.S. adults with employer-sponsored health benefits said that whether or not they like their health coverage was a key factor in deciding to stay at their current job.”¹
What’s good for employees is good for business

So, how do you protect and support the health of your workforce, but still meet the goals of your business?

It all starts with prioritizing a safe, supportive work environment. One that gives your employees the flexibility to work remotely, in the office, or a hybrid of both. One that sets your employees, your business, and yourself up for success.

Things like mental health and wellness, virtual care, and access to rapid testing and vaccines are more important now than ever.

No matter what, your employees will have high expectations from their health care – and their workplace leaders – to help protect them, their families, and their communities.

The good news is that by providing truly integrated health care and coverage for your employees – and a safe, flexible workplace – you can feel good knowing you’re increasing their overall safety and job satisfaction.

When your employees feel secure and valued, they’re more engaged, invested, and productive. All of this adds up to happier employees overall, which means less absenteeism, turnover, and retention. It’s a win-win-win for you, your team, and your company.
The purpose of this playbook

This abridged playbook is meant to offer human resource executives like you useful tips, strategies, and “plays” on how to develop a safe, flexible workplace. To be sure, continue to follow guidance from local, state, and federal health officials. So your employees know you’ve got them covered.

We’ll also share insights on how virtual visits and mental health and wellness programs can support your employees’ overall well-being. Ultimately, this playbook was designed to help your employees, your families, and your communities stay healthy, productive, and engaged.

Table of contents

Make your employee’s safety your #1 priority 6

Follow 10 workplace safety measures 8

Support mental health and emotional well-being 11

Encourage virtual care to ease anxiety 15

Modify HR policies and benefit plans to assist employees 18
Physical health

Modify workplace safety plans, communicate policies, and stay up to date with critical information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), as well as your local, state, and national guidelines.

Make sure your health care partner knows and can advise on the most current COVID-19 testing protocols, disability and leave management, and employee screenings.

Mental and emotional health

Identify and address the impact of stress and anxiety on the mental and emotional health of your workforce and how you can best support them.

Social health

Learn about your workforce’s specific social and economic needs, and what they need to support their families, and their communities.
Evolve workplace safety plans

Knowing that COVID-19 and its variants are on the rise, it’s more important than ever to stay up to date on your local and state health guidelines. In addition to following the recommendations of your local health officials, here are some tips to help ensure workforce safety:

- Tailor your safety plan to your workplace, including a hazard assessment
- Have one point of contact in case of emergencies
- Mitigate risks of transmission using employee sanitation, environmental sanitation, and containment strategies
- Monitor CDC and OSHA guidance
- Communicate frequently and consistently
Prioritizing the safety and well-being of your employees will help them thrive, even during uncertain times. Follow these 10 steps to ensure a safe, flexible workplace:

1. **Provide masks.** Require and enforce proper use.
2. **Update your safety response plan** with an infectious disease preparedness and hazard assessment.
3. **Limit the number of people** allowed in communal spaces at one time.
4. **Replace communal items** – coffee pots and water coolers – with single-serve items.
5. **Promote frequent handwashing** and provide hand sanitizer.
6. **Provide space between workstations** – at least 2 arm lengths between each person. Consider markings on the ground to show a safe distance. Use physical barriers as appropriate.
7. **Retrain your teams** on sickness identification and contact tracing protocols in case someone is infected, and alert other employees to possible exposure.
8. **Provide personal protective equipment** in your workplace.
9. **Create a communication plan** reinforcing the expectations of on-site employees. List steps to take if someone shows signs of sickness. Align health and safety messages with your partner unions for best results.
10. **Refer to agencies and community organizations that offer emergency financial assistance.**
Assign a health team for those who have been exposed

The American Disability Association (ADA) agrees that it's smart to assign a health coordinator and/or team with defined roles and responsibilities for preparedness and response planning. This health coordinator or team should also have some expertise in Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) laws. This way, your employees know who to reach out to when needed.

In addition, you'll want to have a plan in place that employees can easily understand and refer to just in case they cannot reach someone on your health team.
Share the positive outcomes of getting vaccinated

As COVID-19 and its variants continue to spread, it’s important to remind employees that the current COVID-19 vaccines help protect against these new strains. As the HR representative, you are in a unique position to help because you are a trusted source of information.

Begin by showing how you and other leaders in the workplace are participating:

1. **Share pictures and positive stories from those who have already received the vaccine and why they made their decision.**

2. **Open a dialogue with employees to better understand their willingness to get vaccinated and identify barriers that can be addressed.**

3. **Use a culturally and socially sensitive communication approach and provide information about the vaccines to employees and their family members.**

Lastly, make it easy for your employees to get vaccinated. Provide flex time or time off for employees and their families to get vaccinated and to manage side effects. All of this will do wonders to ease their stress about getting vaccinated.
Since COVID-19 first came on the scene, we’ve all been impacted emotionally, mentally, and physically. Now with the resurgence of the pandemic and misinformation about vaccines, reentering the workplace even part-time can add to your employees’ anxiety.

As the bedrock of your organization, you can help your leadership team anticipate a rise in mental health symptoms that may arise from returning to work. Empathy and flexibility help to create a psychologically healthy workforce where employees feel safe, respected, and empowered.

“90% of employers report the COVID-19 crisis is affecting the behavioral health and productivity of their workforce.”²
Here are some helpful insights into three common worker profiles:

- **Essential workers, first responders, and health care workers** have high levels of stress and may experience burnout, stress, and even post-traumatic stress.

- **Virtual workers** are still managing the recent adjustment and anxiety of transitioning back to a shared physical workspace.

- **Furloughed or laid-off workers** are facing emotional and financial stress and uncertainty.
Lead with empathy to support employees facing grief and loss

Your employees and their families may be dealing with grief and loss during this time. It may be due to the loss of a loved one, grief over political animosities or racial disparities—or even a sense of loss for their identity and personal freedom.

In fact, many employees continue to face disruptions to their support systems and strained relationships due to differences of opinion over politics, vaccines, and more. Financial stress can add to employees’ stress, especially when family members and close friends lose their jobs.

Sadly, for those grieving lost loved ones, practices such as funerals and shivas may not be possible due to physical distancing requirements—further impacting the grieving and healing process.

“7 out of 10 employees have said the pandemic is the most stressful time of their professional career.”³
Instill emotional healing and resilience in your people

This has been a challenging time for all of us. To better support your team members, keep in mind that anxiety, depression, and stress are all common reactions to grief, loss, and chaos.

To help instill emotional healing and resilience in your people, provide leadership teams and managers with these 5 tips:

1. **Consider** a trauma-informed approach to help your employees feel safe, supported, and empowered.

2. **Recognize** that trauma exists at all levels, both for individuals and as an organization.

3. **Be vulnerable** and lead by example: executive leadership, managers, and HR staff can foster an environment of well-being by sharing their mental health struggles and acknowledging their own grief and loss.

4. **Empower** employees to be open about their needs and encourage them to utilize available support resources, such as the EAP (Employee Assistance Program).

5. **Help** employees feel safe and protected as they seek support for mental health conditions, substance use disorders, and more.

Plus, you can lean on your health care partner to offer self-care tools, EAP, and clinical resources, mental health, or the unique stressors of your workplace.
Virtual care is in higher demand than ever. It’s convenient. It’s safe. And it’s 24/7.

That’s why it’s important to have a health care partner that can deliver high-quality virtual care – that’s both affordable and convenient. Especially now when many of your employees may be fearful of going into a health care facility or taking public transportation where they might be exposed to COVID-19 and its variants.

How your employees benefit:

- Clinical advice
- Video visits
- A mobile app
- E-visit
- Online chat
- Phone appointments

- Email
- Online self-care
- Online physical therapy
- Remote patient monitoring
- Prescriptions by mail

Overall, virtual care helps treat common ailments and reduces stress, keeping your employees healthier and more engaged on the job. It also helps ensure that your employees aren’t delaying vital care – like managing chronic conditions or getting the preventive care they need – as soon as they need it.
Virtual care is available to anyone, anywhere. It also helps break down socioeconomic and equity barriers by:

- **Lowering care costs** and increasing engagement
- **Offering more timely care** to people who have a higher risk of poor health outcomes
- **Helping members** avoid the expensive, unnecessary emergency room and urgent care visits
- **Ensuring continuity of care** without the need for in-person appointments
- **Helping to address preexisting medical conditions** in the **most vulnerable populations**
- **Providing affordable care options** to patients of color, who are less likely to have access to health care, and less likely to seek needed care

When used as part of a fully integrated system of care, virtual care benefits everyone equally.
“Each in-person appointment your employees don’t need saves you an average of $137 in direct costs and 2 hours of work time.”

4
PLAY FIVE: Modify HR policies and benefit plans to assist employees

During this time of unpredictability, HR leaders like you can play a vital role in supporting the needs of your employees. So be sure to address and modify HR policies, safety measures, and benefit plans to be more relevant in today’s workplace.
While these modifications may be temporary or reflect a longer-term shift, they’ll definitely be appreciated — and could likely build overall company morale. No matter what, being flexible and supportive will increase the mental and emotional well-being of your workforce, so they can get some much-needed peace of mind.

As the pandemic continues to surprise us, be sure to communicate any updates in your HR policies, safety measures, and health care benefits — clearly and frequently.

The more open and honest you are at this time, the more appreciative your employees will be. After all, healthier employees mean healthier businesses.

**HR policies and protocols to consider modifying:**

- Time and attendance
- Work hours
- Bereavement
- HIPAA/privacy
- Work accommodations related to ADA
- Hiring/rehiring policies
- Severance
- Workplace safety
- Travel
- Telecommute/work from home
- Company equipment use policy

**Health and employee benefits to consider updating:**

- Medical/Dental
- FSA and dependent care FSA plans
- 401(k)/pension plans
- Disability
- Life
- Voluntary
It’s all about choosing the right partner

At the end of the day, your employees are your company’s greatest asset. Keeping them engaged, healthy, and productive all starts with creating a safe, flexible workplace and choosing the right health care partner that can help ease their minds.

A partner that offers truly integrated care and coverage with innovative tools, preventive, specialty, and virtual care not only protects the health of your workforce, but also the overall health of your organization.

For more resources on how to better support your employees during this time, please visit https://business.kaiserpermanente.org/insights/covid-19.

Interested in learning more?

Contact us