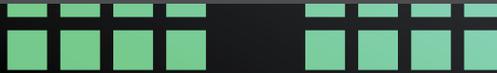# Operationalize Your Return-To-Work Strategy: The Technology You Need

A Return-To-Work Series Report

by Jeff Becker
October 7, 2020

Why Read This Report

As local government organizations begin to lift shelter-in-place orders, businesses are finalizing plans to reopen workspaces. But many business leaders remain unsure if the safeguards they implement will be enough to minimize the impact of COVID-19 on their employees and overall business continuity. CIOs and chief HR officers should use this report to create an adaptable return-to-work strategy that incorporates the people, processes, and technologies they need to not only return to work but also return to growth.

Key Takeaways

Understand Employee Perceptions Of Returning To The Workplace During COVID-19
Employees are afraid to return to work, but they trust their companies' plans to manage risk during the pandemic. Employees expect to return to workspaces with new safeguards in place.

Implement A Return-To-Work Strategy That Protects Employees' Health
Check-in apps, diagnostic testing partners, and onsite contact-tracing solutions will directly impact the mitigation of COVID-19 transmission in the workplace.

Operationalize Your Return-To-Work Strategy: The Technology You Need

A Return-To-Work Series Report

by Jeff Becker
with Daniel Hong, Enza Iannopollo, Ian Jacobs, Paul-Julien Giraud, and Peter Harrison
October 7, 2020

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Operationalize Your Return-To-Work Strategy: Plan And Execute Effectively

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Employees Fear Returning To Work, But They Trust Their Companies

Before returning employees to workplaces, firms must plan, prepare, pilot, adjust and scale, and monitor, as we describe in the Forrester report Operationalize Your Return-To-Work Strategy: Plan And Execute Effectively. COVID-19 case counts continue to surge in many regions across the globe, and employees face prolonged uncertainty about when — and how — they'll be able to safely return to the workplace. Forrester's PandemicEX survey reveals the employee experience of 1,513 US employed online adults; we fielded it in waves at one-month intervals between early March and early May 2020. We also fielded PandemicEX surveys to employed online adults in Europe and Australia. Forrester found that:
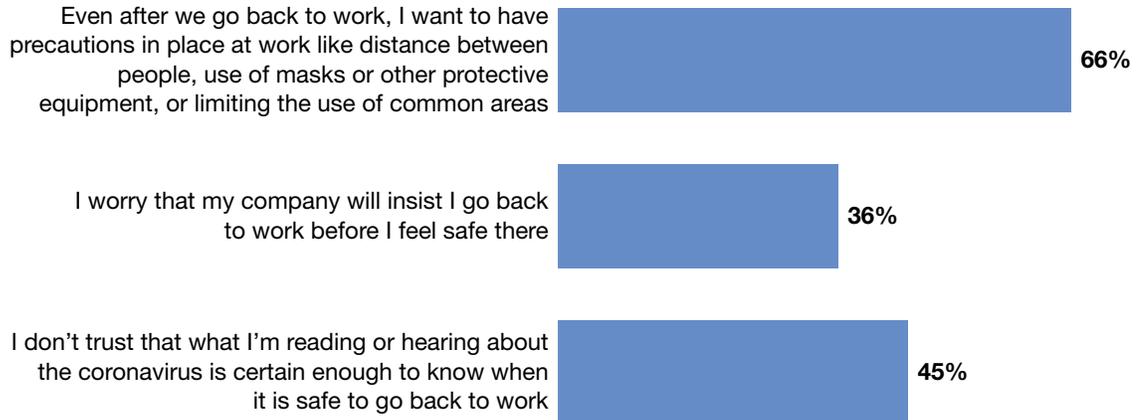
› **Workers are adapting to the new normal, and many are afraid to return to work.** In Q1 2020, 59% of French employed online adults and 50% of Australian employed online adults said they were afraid to go to work.[1] Fear and concern are still high, although the overall trend suggests that the fear has peaked and is even subsiding. In Q2 2020, 63% of US employed online adults said they were afraid of the spread of COVID-19, and 47% said they were afraid to go to work.[2]

› **Workers are confident that their employers have plans to manage risk.** In the first month of the pandemic, CIOs and chief HR officers quickly dusted off their response plans — or improvised effectively. Employees' confidence that their companies had a plan for how to manage the risk associated with the coronavirus stood at 67% in the US (April 1 to April 3, 2020), 61% in the UK (March 2020), 47% in France (March 2020), and 67% in Australia (March 25 to March 27, 2020).[3] Now that employer plans must adapt to the prolonged lockdown and restrictions that are likely to persist, confidence appears to be waning. It's dropped to 61% in the US; although this is a small drop, it's statistically significant.[4]

› **Most workers want to see precautions in place when it's time to return to work.** Only 36% of US employed online adults are worried that they'll be compelled to return to work before they're ready; almost half (49%) of those in the UK, 34% in Germany, and 29% in Italy share such fears.[5] This is still unacceptably high from an employee experience perspective. A likely contributor to that anxiety? Forty-five percent of US employed online adults aren't sure that they can trust the information they're receiving about how safe it is to return to work. And when it's time, 66% expect to see precautions in place, such as mask requirements and limited use of common areas (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 Two-Thirds Of US Employees Want To See Precautions In Place When They Return To The Workplace

"How much do you agree with the following statements about having employees and customers go back to work?"
(4 or 5 on a scale of 1 [strongly disagree] to 5 [strongly agree])

Even after we go back to work, I want to have precautions in place at work like distance between people, use of masks or other protective equipment, or limiting the use of common areas — **66%**

I worry that my company will insist I go back to work before I feel safe there — **36%**

I don't trust that what I'm reading or hearing about the coronavirus is certain enough to know when it is safe to go back to work — **45%**

Base: 533 US employed online adults
Source: Forrester's Q2 2020 US PandemicEX Survey 2 (April 29 to May 1, 2020)

Support Your Return To Work With Clinically Effective Technology

Healthcare organizations have spent the past decade building solutions that engage the population at home and across multiple care settings to monitor symptoms and measurably reduce the spread of infectious disease. Employers are now deploying similar solutions, optimized for the enterprise, in pursuit of the same outcome (see Figure 2). Employers are investing in healthcare technology that will:

› **Start at home with remote screening solutions.** Employers are implementing solutions that allow workers and visitors to complete symptom and risk-screening assessments remotely to guide workplace access decisions. In their simplest forms, apps generate a "go" or "no go" decision and a QR code that employees can present upon entry to the workplace. Currently, these tools fail to consistently flag sick workers, and employers shouldn't rely on them to secure the workplace by themselves.[6]

More preferable solutions are available from companies like Collective Health, CVS Health, and Verily that combine symptom-screening results with local COVID-19 prevalence and as-needed coordination of diagnostic testing to increase screening accuracy.[7] In San Francisco, UrbanSitter — a gig-economy babysitting platform — is leveraging this type of solution to screen its on-demand babysitter workforce during the pandemic.[8]

› **Filter out risk at the workplace entrance with onsite screening.** While virtual screening tools are important to help keep sick employees home, for many employers, the last line of defense is screening workers on arrival to the workplace. Companies now use thermal imaging cameras, check-in kiosks, and onsite clinicians to facilitate employee screening on arrival. Emerging research has found that fever isn't the leading indicator of COVID-19, so employers need a partner that can focus screening on the right symptoms as they evolve.[9]

Amazon leverages onsite symptom and temperature screening for its warehouse workforce prior to authorizing workers to badge into its facilities.[10] Along with remote screening solutions, many employer health clinic vendors are currently offering onsite screening services, such as Healthstat and Medcor, to extend their value by coordinating access to COVID-19 diagnostic testing as needed. Princeton University has announced plans to establish routine onsite testing for students and faculty returning to campus.[11]

› **Respond to confirmed cases with effective contact tracing.** Many public health agencies are woefully unprepared to facilitate contact tracing.[12] Employers must fill this gap by establishing programs to identify and notify employees who have been in close proximity to coworkers with COVID-19 — and test and isolate affected employees.[13] Resources and classes on the essentials of enterprise contact tracing are emerging.[14] Kaiser Permanente's return-to-work plan includes workplace contact tracing to isolate individual incidents and prevent clusters that could lead to significant, unchecked workplace transmission.[15]

Manual contact-tracing solutions from vendors like Salesforce are ideal for employers that can assign a team of FTEs to investigate employee exposure. Automated contact-tracing vendors leverage Wi-Fi, GPS, or Bluetooth to automate contact investigation and suit large employers. Some, like Proxxi, differentiate with real-time social distancing alerts that add value in low-density workspaces but cause alert fatigue in high-density ones. Others, like Esri, differentiate with high-contact heat maps that are ideal for high-density workspaces.

The path to protecting employee safety in a pandemic return-to-work scenario

Start at home with remote workforce screening
Remote workforce-screening platforms introduce symptom-screening tools that employees use at home to guide day-to-day authorization to work in the office, case management solutions to support occupational health teams, and dashboards for business leaders.

Process	Considerations	Cost/ implementation	Vendors
Remote workforce screening	Employers should look for vendors that offer customizable, highly secure, and HIPAA-compliant COVID-19 screening programs that adhere to regional privacy laws, support necessary languages, and integrate with existing authentication and building access systems. Employers should consider the value of vendors that can facilitate diagnostic testing as needed.	• Industry average is $8.50 PEPM, plus pass-through costs of $75 to $100 each for diagnostic tests if leveraged. • Plan for a two-week implementation.	Accolade, Appian, Collective Health, IBM Watson, Pegasystems, PwC, SafetyTek, Salesforce, ServiceNow, Verily
Workforce management command center	Employers should look for workforce management vendors that integrate with symptom checkers; track reported employee health status and visitor requests; support customized workflows, such as visitor request management and occupational health recontact tasks; and provide reporting tools to support real-time staffing decisions.	• Industry average is $5 to $10 PEPM. • Plan for a two-week implementation (longer if more complex integrations are necessary).	Appian, IBM Watson, Pegasystems, PwC, Salesforce, ServiceNow

FIGURE 2 The People, Processes, And Technologies That Support A Safe Return To Work (Cont.)

Filter out risk at the entrance with onsite screening

Fever-screening, smart camera, and onsite clinic vendors are implementing safeguards at the point of entry to the workplace.

Process	Considerations	Cost/ implementation	Vendors
Thermal imaging cameras and smart cameras	Evaluate fever-screening technology based on cost, accuracy, availability, per-hour throughput, and integration with symptom-checker solutions. Smart cameras offer added protections, including real-time workplace headcount, PPE noncompliance alerts, and social distance noncompliance heat mapping. Evaluate these vendors based on device compatibility, video management system integrations, and cost.	• Industry average is $7,500 for complete thermal imaging solutions, $1,000 for smart cameras, and $1,400/month for smart camera software. • Plan for a four-week implementation.	AT&T, FLIR, Motorola Solutions, Smartvid.io
Onsite clinics	Evaluate onsite clinic vendors based on cost, required contract length, flexibility in staffing arrangements, access to diagnostic testing services, support for at-home symptom checking, and overall clinical and mental health support.	• Industry average is $105/hour for clinical staff, plus pass-through costs of $75 to $100 each for diagnostic tests if leveraged. • Plan for a six-week implementation.	Cleveland Clinic, CVS Health, Healthstat, Interactive Health, Medcor, Premise Health

FIGURE 2 The People, Processes, And Technologies That Support A Safe Return To Work (Cont.)

Respond to confirmed cases with contact tracing

An emerging market of contact-tracing vendors are offering solutions that create logs of recent contacts to support employers that need to notify and quarantine staff in response to confirmed COVID-19 cases.

Process	Considerations	Cost/ implementation	Vendors
Automated contact tracing (smartphones and wearables)	Wearable and smartphone-based solutions automatically generate and maintain contact logs — and some alert users when two employees come within six feet of one another — which increases social distance awareness. Others leverage wayfinding beacons to identify problematic, high-contact hot spots. Employers should evaluate centralized versus decentralized data storage models, cost, employee sentiment, and long-term solution value when considering an automated approach.	• Industry average for hardware is $120 per device for wearables and $3 to $4 per square foot for wayfinding. • Ongoing support is $2.50 PEPM. • Plan for a two-to four-week implementation.	Capita, Esri, Estimote, Instant-Trace, Nesa, Proxfinity, Proxxi, PwC, ServiceNow, Zebra Technologies
Manual contact tracing (case management and outsourced contact tracing)	Manual contact-tracing vendors facilitate the process of interviewing recently diagnosed employees to identify coworkers who need to be notified and then manage anonymous notification workflows. Employers should consider cost, minimum contract length, integration with existing HR solutions, and integration with workforce management command center solutions.	• Industry average of $90K/year. • Plan for a two-week implementation (longer if more complex integrations are necessary).	Accolade (contact tracing as a service), Appian, IBM Watson, Pegasystems, Salesforce

Recommendations

Test, Trace, And Isolate To Safeguard Your Employees

Workplace safety hinges first and foremost on establishing a bidirectional return-to-work plan based on inputs from local public health officials and internal employee experience (EX) surveys.[16] However, employers need more than just a good plan to bring their workforces back safely. Healthcare technology and services providers are creating a market to support the transition back to work. Comprehensive symptom screening, risk-based diagnostic testing, and contact-tracing strategies are the key solutions that CIOs and chief HR officers need to create a safer workplace. Employers must begin establishing their return-to-work vendor partnerships today. Create a research team to:

› **Determine your workplace healthcare technology and service needs.** Employers should consider local COVID-19 prevalence and their own workplace density when determining which technology solutions make sense. Low-density workplaces operating in low-risk regions can safely return to work with a remote symptom-screening solution, a partner that can coordinate as-needed testing, and a manual contact-tracing strategy.

As conditions diverge from this optimal scenario, employers must add additional safeguards. Low-density workplaces that face increasing local case counts should focus additional spend on maximizing social distancing compliance through wearables or smart camera analytics, while high-density workplaces should focus on increased testing and an automated contact-tracing solution.

› **Select vendors with local implementations and relevant industry references.** The regulatory limitations on using healthcare technology in the workplace vary by country, and employers will find more value working with vendors that have experience supporting clients in their own regions. Similarly, many contact-tracing solution vendors, like Proxxi and Esri, have deep experience implementing their solutions within certain industries — they're best suited to helping businesses in those industries realize long-term value from their investments.

› **Use healthcare expertise to improve EX and reduce operating costs over time.** Businesses that embrace the mantra *every company is now a healthcare company* will quickly find that their newfound healthcare expertise can pay dividends. After the pandemic, businesses should turn their health and wellness acumen toward reimagining the design of health benefits. For many employers, shifting to self-funded benefits models can provide immediate tax savings and ongoing medical cost savings. Employers can leverage many of the same workplace wellness strategies — as well as the healthcare technology and service providers that supported them through the pandemic — to drive cost savings on medical benefits in the future.

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Supplemental Material

Companies Interviewed For This Report

We would like to thank the individuals from the following companies who generously gave their time during the research for this report.

IBM Watson

Medcor

Interactive Health

Premise Health

Endnotes

[1] Source: Forrester's Q1 2020 European PandemicEX Survey and Forrester's Q1 2020 Australian PandemicEX Survey.

[2] Source: Forrester's Q2 2020 US PandemicEX Survey 2 (April 29 to May 1, 2020).

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[15] Source: "COVID-19 Return to Work Playbook," Kaiser Permanente Business (https://business.kaiserpermanente.org/thrive/resource-center/covid-19-return-to-work-playbook).

[16] See the Forrester report "Operationalize Your Return-To-Work Strategy: Plan And Execute Effectively."

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