

Planning for a Marathon While Running the Sprint

Making Strategic Decisions as Companies Rush to Return to Work

May 2020

Background

In the last two weeks, many economies and companies have partially opened after weeks of being shut down due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Leaders in all companies are having to make key decisions that strike the right balance between employee health and financial sustainability. While their current focus is on ensuring a safe return to work, we suggest leaders should also consider longer term perspectives.

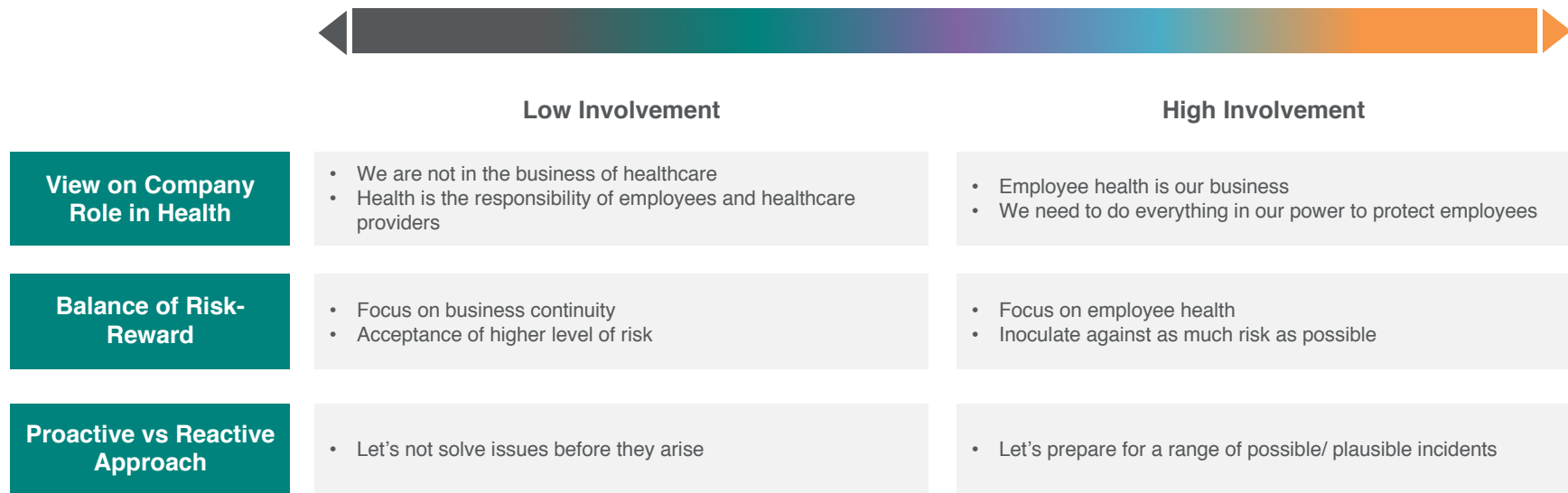
We propose looking at this through 4 different lenses:

1. What is the company's role in employee health and risk management? This is a **philosophical** view.
2. How will you re-open workplaces? This is a **mechanical** view.
3. How will you respond if virus-related incidents recur? This is a **response-readiness** view.
4. How will you sustain the effort for 6, 12, 18 months or longer? This is a **resilience** view.

Ensuring a safe return to work (the mechanical view) is absolutely critical, but it is not the only thing you need to think about.

1. Philosophical View: What is the Company's Role in Employee Health and Risk Management?

While there is no option regarding statutory employee protection requirements, employers have to make active choices about non-statutory areas. We find that the actual choices made stem from different worldviews around the company's role in employee health. These are shown below on a spectrum from hands-off "low involvement" to hands-on "high involvement".



These worldviews drive downstream decisions and actions around the how you reopen (mechanical view) and how you respond to incidents (response-readiness view). The role for HR and other planners is to make sure leaders are aware of their worldview, and how that will drive downstream actions. Absent this awareness, it is easy to get caught in a torrent of tactical issues around masks, plexiglass dividers, contact tracing and the like, without having a consistent theme.

The worldviews may also depend on company size and financial strength. Larger companies and those with a resilient balance sheet might tend to be more "high involvement" – simply because they can afford to! But how they got to the worldview is somewhat irrelevant ... the only thing that matters is what is the worldview, and how it influences decisions.

Almost by definition, every leader believes that his or her worldview is the right one. Unfortunately, we are seeing evidence that this has become a political issue in boardrooms and C-suites. Getting consensus among executives and framing a "company POV" versus an "individual leader POV" is essential.

2. Mechanical View: How Will You Reopen Workplaces?

The two ends of the spectrum are “Aggressive” (driven by speed) and “Conservative” (driven by risk avoidance). These roughly correspond to the “low involvement” and “high involvement” philosophies outlined above.

		
	Aggressive Reopening: Speed is Primary	Conservative Reopening: Risk Avoidance is Primary
Attendance	Unless you're sick or have been exposed, you should come back to work	Work from home if possible; Substantial protections in place & liability review conducted before reopening; Start with fraction of employees; Stratified by health risk* and need to be in the office
Shifts/ Schedules	Resume regular shifts and schedules, though with case-by-case flexibility	Adjust shifts and schedules to reduce density; Encourage personal transportation; Intersperse work shifts with “cleaning/ disinfecting shifts”
Physical Distancing & Protections	- Masks and gloves not required (though employees may bring their own); Sanitizers available in common areas - Workplaces not modified, though seating density may be reduced	- Masks & gloves provided and mandatory in high-density areas; Sanitizer available at each worksite - Certain shared areas closed (e.g. gyms) and physical barriers, distancing indicators & touchless options installed in others
Cleaning & Disinfecting	Enhanced cleaning and disinfecting schedule, especially around high-density, high-contact zones	Major increase in cleaning/ disinfecting, using hospital-grade equipment and processes; “Cleaning shifts” added; Air flow/ ventilation modified
Onsite Health	No onsite health professionals; Honor system for reporting symptoms	- Mandatory health risk questionnaires & symptom reporting - Mandatory temperature checks at entry & exit - Health professional available on site; Onsite clinic in large sites
HR Policies	Review sick leave and pay continuity policies	Update/ create new policies around sick leave, attendance, health risks, data privacy, pay continuity and location tracking
Roles Created or Enhanced	No specific roles created (Operations leaders, managers and HR expected to handle situations)	- Create new roles**: “Health captains”, onsite healthcare providers; External surveillance leads; Incident response teams - Devolve more responsibilities to local/ worksite leaders and local HR
Communications & Training	Communications about workplace precautions (hand washing, distancing, symptom reporting)	Comprehensive two-way communications around behavior change & business impact; Frequent pulse checks; Manager training & toolkits for communication and handling COVID-related situations; Special “re-onboarding” provided to all employees
Technology & Tracking	Use existing enterprise tools (HRIS, time recording, email, existing portals)	Explore specialized tools (sensors, apps) for proximity detection, health information, local surveillance, symptom reporting and contact tracing; Review privacy implications in each jurisdiction

*Risk may include personal factors such as age, pregnancy and underlying health factors

**Most of these should be part-time roles for existing staff (especially Operations leads & HR) versus full-time or new hires

3. Response-Readiness View: How Will You Respond if Virus-Related Incidents Recur?

If you reopen any site where employees will work in relatively close proximity, is possible that someone will get the virus from work. The impact on employee health and on your business, and the extent of your liability, may depend on how well you prepare.

	Low Response-Readiness	High Response-Readiness
Surveillance & External Coordination	No formal role for surveillance and external coordination (other than statutory reporting)	Clearly identified responsibility for monitoring industry and local pandemic trends, coordinating with and notifying local health authorities, sharing best practices with peer group companies
Scenario Planning	Operationally oriented preparation	- Prepare for a range of scenarios covering potential impact on supply chain, workforce, contractors, customers and partners - Significant involvement of middle management
Response Teams	Existing functional leaders, shift leaders and HR expected to respond	Cross-functional response teams created in advance of any incident; Team meets regularly and reviews scenarios; Understands company's approach & limitations) on triage, notification, contact tracing, facility contingency plans, etc.
Delegated Authority	Handled on an ad-hoc basis; key decisions* go up the chain of command to executive level	Key decisions* delegated to site/ country leaders or local HR, with specific guidance on exceptions, and when executives need to be involved
Policy Communication & Enforcement	Policies and exception processes communicated primarily to managers and HR	Managers and HR provided "super user" training on interpreting and enforcing policies; Escalation processes clarified; Significant investment in ensuring employees understand major policy changes

*Examples may include sending employees home, work stoppage, shift modifications, workplace modifications, site closures, notifications and contact tracing.

4. The Resilience View: How Will You Sustain the Effort 6, 12, 18 Months or Longer?

COVID-19 is not going away any time soon, even though its intensity and impact might vary. The best available science at the moment tells us that this virus will continue driving some level of morbidity & mortality until a vaccine is found and/ or entire communities get a measure of herd immunity. The time frames for this range from 6 months to well over 2 years.

How will you sustain your efforts over this time period? Inevitably, employees and managers will get tired of this "special project" on top of their regular jobs. Executives might be tempted to reduce funding and resources for these response efforts, especially if there are extended periods of time when cases decline. This is where you could be at significant risk.

We suggest a series of steps that can help you build long-term resilience. The bottom line is simple – the earlier you accept that this is not a short-term phenomenon, and start baking this into core business planning and processes, the more successful you'll be as a company.



	At least ...	... And ideally also ...
Deep Conversations with the Board	- Recasting 2020 budgets; Cost reduction actions & revenue pivots - Managing immediate risk; Plans for employee, customer and partner protection	- Approval for major business model changes and alliances to de-risk the business - Geographic diversification (customer, supply chain, workforce)
Scaling a Digital Business Model	- Reducing dependence on physical contact & physical locations - Identify immediate opportunities in digital	Deeper pivot to digital business model using organic and inorganic pathways; Concomitant changes to organizational capabilities (leadership, organization, talent pools) and infrastructure
Revamp Internal Business Processes	- Immediate opportunities for automation and low-touch internal processes - Identify opportunities to divest non-core areas*	Create budget/ resource commitments for process changes; define and track expected outcomes/ benefits and timelines
Keep Workplaces Modular	Ability to adjust workplace configuration and density as needed	Create multiple workplace options, including permanent commitment to work-from-home for certain % of the workforce
Extend Temporary Structures & Policies	Extend some version of the COVID response temporary measures, structures and policies at least through fall/ winter of 2020**	Declare intent to keep them as long as needed; Bake in the cost of new roles, policies and other prophylactic measures into the budget/ cost structure
Invest More in Peer Relationships	Informal peer group sharing locally with similar companies	Formal membership with local chambers of commerce and/ or structured cadence with selected peers
Bolster Key Roles/ Functions	Increase investment (development, compensation and recognition) in site leaders and first-line managers	In addition to site leaders and first-line managers, invest in smaller but high-impact functions like risk management and HR, with a special focus on standing up a strong healthcare capability***
Identify New Leaders	Identify leaders that can handle ambiguity and crisis	Incorporate crisis management in your ongoing leadership development programs

*May include outsourcing certain non-core business processes to providers who can drive higher automation and/ or lower risk

**Coincides with expected time of a possible second wave of COVID, and also possible comorbidities from COVID and seasonal flu

*** Outside of the largest employers, and companies with high-risk operations (mining, E&P, manufacturing etc.) most HR and Risk departments have minimal expertise in key areas such as infectious disease management, triage and epidemiology

Conclusion

Imagine a sprinter running a 100m dash at full tilt. In the middle of that dash, she is told that she needs to start a marathon right when she finishes her sprint. And during the ensuing marathon, she might be asked to break into a series of sprints again.

Business and HR leaders are in the middle of such a sprint – focused on reopening the workplace, keeping employees safe and resuming business activity. They need to finish the sprint strong, but also be advised that there is a marathon coming up.