COVID-19 Handbooks

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Introduction

Our new normal. Three words that have been lobbed out to the universe most of 2020, and the meaning keeps changing as the pandemic wears on. How businesses are embracing today’s work-life has dramatically changed in the last year. From working from home (WFH) to adding employee policies specific to COVID-19, to focusing more than ever on employees’ well-being, it’s safe to say most employers have found themselves scrambling to define their new normal.

Some organizations have been adapting and evolving their policies while others are holding out hope that the pandemic’s modifications to their business are a temporary shift and things can go back to the way they were.

Through a brief survey, MRA asked companies about their current policies regarding COVID-19, what is being planned for the future, and their biggest challenges right now.

Prevalence of Remote Work

Ninety percent of employers offer remote work to some or all employees. This is a dramatic shift compared to a survey MRA conducted in 2013 that indicated only 52 percent of Midwest employers offered working from home as an alternative work arrangement. In our 2019/2020 National Policies and Benefits Survey, just 33 percent of employers across the U.S. allowed it. MRA’s most recent Hot Topic Survey shows the following results on remote work options.

**Organizations Allowing Remote Work**

- **11%** Yes, for all employees
- **22%** Yes, for a majority of employees
- **57%** Yes, for some employees
- **2%** No, but are considering a remote work plan
- **8%** No, remote work is not offered to any employee

Nearly one in five employers indicated they are extending remote work into 2021. It is predicted that employers currently providing remote work arrangements in some form may continue to do so as a permanent shift in their policies, post-pandemic. In fact, 19 percent of employers are assessing their long-term approach to remote work.

**Bringing Employees Back to the Workplace**

- Remote workers will continue working remote through the end of 2020
- Remote workers are rotating time in the office
- Remote workers will continue working remote through mid-year 2021
- Remote workers will continue working remote through the end of 2020
- Remote workers will continue working remote as needed
- All employees are already back in the office
- Remote workers will continue working remote through the end of 2021
- Other
Prevalence of Remote Work

Employers quickly adopted technology in 2020 to accommodate remote work to help keep employees safe and healthy. Employers are now taking a strategic approach to reinventing their workforce and considering a permanent organizational shift to remote work. Employers have experienced the following benefits of remote work:

- Increased productivity
- Flexibility to attract and retain top talent
- Cost savings by reducing office space
- Increased employee engagement

Not surprisingly, those who are not able to work remotely due to their job requirements fall into the Production & Maintenance categories. While the shift to remote work has resulted in fewer employees working in the same building, those that remain onsite could be showing signs of jealousy from not having the same flexible opportunities. Organizations will need to evaluate how employees are feeling and address concerns.

Remote Work By Employee Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employee Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial/Supervisory</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office/Technical/Service</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production &amp; Maintenance</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodations when medically necessary only</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Multiple answers can total more than 100%.

Business Levels Hold Off Layoffs

It is noteworthy that 42 percent of respondents did not implement layoffs this year, a sign that many employers are maintaining or even exceeding pre-COVID business levels. For those employers who were faced with layoffs, 13 percent have ended employment by 90 days if employees were not recalled and 12 percent of employers ended employment at the six month mark.

Twenty percent of respondents indicated they keep employees on layoff indefinitely. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act (WARN) both define temporary layoffs as being recalled within six months. If employees are not recalled within this timeframe, there is a greater chance the layoff will become permanent. Employers taking this approach may want to seek legal counsel to understand the impact and risks of indefinite layoffs on matters such as participation in employer group health plans and other insured benefits, COBRA notices, and violations of the WARN Act.

Policy on Temporary Layoff/Furlough

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We end employment if not recalled after 30 days</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We end employment if not recalled after 90 days</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We end employment if not recalled after 6 months</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We keep employees on temporary layoff indefinitely</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Applicable/Did not have layoffs</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sick Leave and Absences

Employers are accommodating workers by providing paid benefits such as those offered under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act or FFCRA (76 percent) while another 23 percent of employers are providing paid sick leave benefits beyond what is required. Additionally, 65 percent of employers are allowing for employees to continue working and earning their wages, by accommodating remote work arrangements. While another 61 percent of employers are being lenient with attendance policies.

Top 3 Benefits Provided to Employees Who Didn’t Qualify or Were Exempt From FFCRA Leave

- **22%** We mirrored benefits provided under FFCRA even though not required
- **20%** We provided 1-3 additional paid week(s)
- **15%** We provided unlimited paid time off as long as substantiated with medical paperwork
Sick Leave and Absences – A Wait and See Approach

Generally, the FFCRA legislation applied to employers with fewer than 500 employees, therefore many employers were not mandated by law to provide paid time off, however it was encouraging to see that many of these employers did. The most generous benefit—unlimited paid time off—was adopted by 15 percent of employers, followed by 22 percent of employers who mirrored the benefits provided by the FFCRA even though not required. Another common approach identified was providing a flat amount of additional PTO, such as 2 weeks, as reported by 15 percent of respondents.

Top 5 Strategies Implemented to Support Sick/Exposed Employees

We are providing FFCRA leave, as applicable, until it expires, 76%.
We are encouraging remote work, 65%.
COVID-related absences are excused from our attendance policy, 61%.
We are providing flexible unpaid medical leaves, 27%.
We are providing additional paid sick leave benefits, 23%.

Note: Multiple answers can total more than 100 percent.

These efforts have created both a safe and healthy work environment, while also supporting employees’ well-being from a mental health and financial standpoint.

However, 61 percent indicated they will not be extending paid leave into 2021.

The Impact of Vaccine Availability

Employers are taking the safety and health of employees seriously as 63 percent of employers are following CDC guidelines and encouraging remote meetings instead of traveling for face-to-face meetings. The status of a COVID-19 vaccine appears to have minimal influence on employers’ approach to business travel.

Employers have played an important role this year in minimizing the spread of COVID-19 by implementing numerous strategies to create a safe and healthy workplace. Providing onsite COVID-19 vaccine clinics in 2021, when available, will be another strategy employers could consider to help minimize and control the spread of COVID-19. Employers should partner with local health departments and occupational health clinics to explore options for onsite clinics, as employees appreciate the convenience of being able to receive the vaccine at their place of employment. Since 48 percent of respondents offer onsite flu clinics to help minimize the spread of the seasonal flu, employees may be looking to their employer to provide similar options when it comes to the COVID-19 vaccine.

Organization Approach to Vaccines

We offer onsite flu vaccine clinics, 48%.
We plan to offer onsite COVID-19 vaccine clinics when available, 15%.
We offer reimbursement to get a flu vaccine if not covered by insurance, 13%.
We do not offer employer provided flu vaccines, 8%.
We are exploring whether we can mandate the COVID-19 vaccine in the future, 5%.
We mandate the flu vaccine, 1%.
Other, 6%.
We currently do not have an organizational approach to vaccines, 35%.

Note: Multiple answers can total more than 100 percent.
Company Celebrations Look Different This Year

It comes as no surprise that only 5 percent of respondents are hosting an in-person holiday party this holiday season. Forty-three percent of responses indicated that no party or other recognition is being considered.

Plans for Organization Holiday Party

- **43%** We have no plans for a holiday party
- **15%** We are giving gift cards to employees in lieu of a holiday party
- **13%** We are giving a gift or gift basket to employees in lieu of a holiday party
- **8%** We will have a virtual holiday party
- **5%** We will have an in-person holiday party
- **4%** We are giving a bonus to employees in lieu of a holiday party
- **6%** Other
- **6%** Undecided/Not Sure

Despite doing away with the holiday party, employers are getting creative to help celebrate and reward employees during this challenging time. Many employers (32 percent) are giving bonuses, gift cards or gift baskets in lieu of a holiday party. Other creative responses received included:

- Holding 10 days of Christmas and giving gifts daily
- Additional paid time off benefits
- Charitable donation of $100 for each employee, to the charity of choice
- Hosting a “12 days of Christmas Giveaway”
- Hosting a Drive Thru Party
- Over a week, we will celebrate with games, raffles and prizes

Recognition can still occur in different ways at any time of the year to show employees how valued they are. Take a look at MRA’s guide on Engagement Activities During a Pandemic to inspire some ideas!

Biggest Challenges Facing Employers – Spoiler Alert: Well-Being Tops the List

The biggest concerns for employers right now center around employee well-being, continued flexibility and accommodations with work schedules, time away from work due to COVID-19 illness or exposure, keeping remote arrangements engaging, continued uncertainty with pandemic relief, and staffing challenges.

When it comes to emotional, mental, and physical well-being, employees need the support of their employers now more than ever.

Many employers are increasing employee communications, promoting the Employer Assistance Program (EAP) benefit, conducting pulse surveys to gauge engagement and utilizing workplace wellness programs to support overall employee well-being during the pandemic.

Employers can help promote work/life balance by encouraging employees to take a break from work, even if just a day or two to extend the weekend. Employers can also establish boundaries for remote workers by setting the expectation that employees should not check and/or respond email after a certain time, such as 6:00 pm. Leaders can lead by example by doing the same, which will help their overall well-being since many are reporting feeling burned out and anxious from being “constantly on.”
COVID-19 Handbooks

Conclusion

How has your organization weathered the COVID-19 storm when it comes to policies that support both your employees and your business?

Some companies are continuing with the policies and handbooks they have had in place for years. Others are temporarily or permanently adapting their policies and strategies with COVID-19 at the front of their minds.

Given our current state of affairs, it is a great time to take a look at your company’s handbook and key policies and give them a review if you haven’t yet this year. While the pandemic will eventually subside and that elusive new normal will be something we can finally recognize, chances are some operational standards will have changed permanently. Consider your organization’s next steps to stay current, compliant, and competitive in 2021 and beyond.

Industry Type

- **47%** Manufacturing
- **26%** Non-Manufacturing
- **10%** Nonprofit
- **8%** Financial Activities*

* Banking, Finance/Financial Services, etc.

- **4%** Healthcare
- **2%** Education
- **4%** Other**

* Construction (14 mentions), Utilities (5 mentions)

Size of Organization

- **22%** Fewer than 50 employees
- **68%** 50 to 500 employees
- **5%** 501 to 1,000 employees
- **1%** More than 2,500 employees
- **3%** 1,001 to 2,500 employees

Employee Handbooks & Policies

Why Choose MRA Handbook Services?

As COVID-19 continues longer than we all expected, policies that were meant to be temporary vs. permanent are still relevant with no changes on the horizon. Additionally, as remote work arrangements remain in place, states are now expecting out-of-state employers to comply with their state-specific regulations. Previously, employers who were only concerned with regulations for their physical locations, now may need to update handbooks from a multi-state perspective.

With litigation on the rise, your handbook is a key communication tool that can help protect and defend your business against lawsuits and claims such as discrimination, harassment, wrongful termination, and more.

Addressing critical member needs, MRA continues to provide the latest policies and share best practice guides on:

- Contagious diseases and pandemics
- Telecommuting
- Workplace safety
- IT security
- Business continuity
- COVID-related addendums
- Custom policies

Annual Handbook Reviews Are Recommended

Now is the perfect time to review on your handbook! MRA can provide policies, guides, and resources to help you update your employee handbook your own, or take advantage of our handbook services, and we’ll create or update your handbook for you. We can assist with:

- Core handbooks
- State addendums
- COVID-related addendums
- Custom policies

Set your organization up for success now and in the future.

Click [here](#) for more information.
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MRA Surveys

Since 1901, MRA produces high quality, trusted surveys that help provide confidence and offer data-driven decisions. Our team of professionals with expertise in survey design, statistical analysis, compensation, and market research provide accuracy and insights that help your organization succeed.

Policies, Benefits, & Trends Data

Staying current on policies, benefits and trends can be daunting. We offer a variety of surveys to help you keep current and compliant.

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We offer compensation data for over 1,000 unique jobs—providing you with accurate data for all areas within your organization.

Business Insight & Intelligence

What would you like to ask your customers or employees today? We can help provide answers to your most desired questions about your business.

Hot Topic Team

Who We Are

Zach Day
Director, Surveys, Custom Research & Analytics

Lynell Meeth
Director, Member Content

Brittany Rittershaus
Surveys & Graphics Specialist

Sue Piette
Writer