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RISK ALERT:

PREPARING FOR WORKPLACE REINTRODUCTION IN THE ERA OF COVID-19

The rapid spread of COVID-19 demanded an abrupt transition of business operations around the world, with large swaths of the economy shifting rapidly to remote work and, in many cases, stopping work completely. In the United States, unemployment is estimated to have reached levels not seen since the Great Depression.[1] Economic stasis is unsustainable; we will need to get back to work. But the question is not only when, but how?

We are starting to see the curve flatten, with increased testing (Germany, Hong Kong, South Korea) and protective sequestration (as in the U.S., where more than 40 states have issued "shelter in place" or "stay at home" orders) showing promise. But we will live with the social and economic implications of this virus for months to come while we build capacity to identify the segments of the population that are immune or inoculated, and until we are confident that the medical system is equipped to manage its lingering effects.

Two things are clear. We will not return to the workplace as it was pre-COVID. And now, with an abundance of patience and compassion, is the time to prepare.

QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR LEADERS:

+ ## WHAT WILL THE TRANSITION BACK TO WORK LOOK LIKE?

The short answer is: it will be different for each community. As we've seen, both the timeline and the severity of the outbreak have varied by location, dependent on factors such as population density and supportive policy. Similarly, as the designation of "essential" and "non-essential" workers underscores, there are varying degrees to which people have to be physically present in order to be effective at their jobs. Many people will likely be hesitant to return and concerned about continued risks to their health and the health of loved ones. Unknowns will persist – the lack of widespread testing and existence of asymptomatic carriers make it impossible to determine who could be infected, and we can't say for sure if recovery confers immunity. Planning for a phased approach will likely be the most realistic option, bringing a variety of complexities.

+ ## HOW WILL YOU DETERMINE WHEN IT IS SAFE AND APPROPRIATE FOR YOUR NON-ESSENTIAL WORKERS TO GO BACK TO THE WORKPLACE?

While we will have some guidance from governments and regional authorities on this topic, it will be important to provide clarity and confidence to your people by defining in advance the criteria by which you will determine when it is prudent to reopen workplaces. Be transparent in your ongoing internal and external communications about how you are considering this critical question as it will have a huge impact on your people and the communities in which they live.

Inputs might include the latest public health data, local infrastructure changes (e.g. reopening of public transportation), prevalence of local testing and availability of community support (e.g. reopening public and private education and childcare) and guidance from public health authorities. With this in mind, you will need to decide whether you slowly reopen workplaces in different locations at different times, or delay until all areas of your operations are deemed safe and can reopen together. When the time comes, visible leadership, frequent communication, enforcement of processes and clear contingency plans will help alleviate anxiety.

+ HOW DO WE SAFELY AND RESPECTFULLY WORK TOGETHER IN THE NEW WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT?

The proximity of people within open floor plan offices, kitchens, retail stores and production lines creates ongoing risks for employees and businesses. Operations and human resources leaders should identify measures they can take now to mitigate future workplace infection, and how best to communicate and foster the needed shifts in norms and environments. Steps to consider include providing and/or requiring use of personal protective equipment (assuming the needs of medical workers are first met), reconfiguring and/or setting up barriers or shields between workspaces, and instituting medical policies (temperature taking, testing, etc.). You will need to make an explicit commitment to ongoing deep cleaning and closing sites where employees test positive in the coming months. Being open doesn't necessarily mean staying open.

+ WHEN AND WHERE WILL WE WORK?

In markets that have already started going back to work, many employee schedules have been adjusted to prevent overcrowding in the workplace, with blue- and white-collar roles alike now working in shifts. Remote work arrangements have opened the door to non-traditional schedules, as people seek to balance the blending of personal and professional commitments. Some of the working styles organizations have adopted as result of COVID-19 may become preferred ways of working in the future. This might include expanding adoption of shift-based work, incentivizing and/or loosening restrictions on telecommuting, adopting a hybrid remote-physical workplace to help reduce crowding and accommodate flexible schedules, and rethinking travel and in-person meetings vs. videoconference or remote meeting technologies.

+ HOW DO WE BUILD CONFIDENCE AND RESILIENCE WHEN VULNERABILITIES AND COMPLEXITIES CONTINUE?

Visible leadership will be more important than ever to provide comfort and direction to returning employees. Start with compassion. As has been true throughout this pandemic, acknowledging and addressing employee concerns remain key to building confidence and trust. Leaders at all levels will need to demonstrate empathy, understanding and patience. In many cases, organizational values will have been tested in unexpected ways, and might need to be reaffirmed or reimagined. To build resilience, companies will need to carefully consider longer-term measures, including leader and manager training and extending (or expanding) new benefits such as hazard pay, mental health counseling and extended sick leave. And build in real time feedback loops for employees, including surveys, to show you are listening and working to address their concerns.

+ WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR DIVERSITY & INCLUSION AS WE RETURN TO WORK?

This will be an opportunity for companies to underscore their commitments to diversity and inclusion and live their core values. Mindfulness about diversity and inclusion will be especially important as employees continue to feel stress and worry about the unknown as they return to the workplace. Xenophobia and population divides may persist as we go into a recovery period. Efforts to ensure diversity, equity and inclusion will need to be prioritized to ensure that both existing biases (gender, race, age, socio-economic status, working parents) and new divides (perceived preferential treatment, ostracism of those who have recovered) do not become further entrenched. Intentional inclusion will go a long way in positively impacting employees' wellbeing, sense of belonging, and, as a result, productivity.

+ HOW CAN WE ENSURE WE FOCUS ON THE RIGHT PRIORITIES AND DON'T AUTOMATICALLY RETURN TO OLD HABITS?

Despite all of the challenges that COVID-19 has presented, it also offers a unique moment to rethink assumptions of past practices. Leaders and employees will need to reflect on lessons learned and consider how their actions have altered organizational culture. As outlined in this white paper, leadership should adopt a transformation mindset and will need to evaluate whether 2020 strategic priorities, scorecards, programs and related resources need to be changed.[2] It will be important to conduct an internal assessment of how priorities and practices have evolved – including what changes should be made institutional or, conversely, reversed and remedied, such as making sure that employees know that they will not be penalized for working remotely or taking time off when sick. Extend and modify those practices and priorities that promote the wellbeing of employees, create shared value for stakeholders, adhere to company values, integrate lessons learned and support a more resilient and sustainable business going forward.