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The original outplacement company



CONTACT

Colleen Madden Blumenfeld, Director of Public Relations

Mobile: 314-807-1568

colleenmadden@challengergray.com

For Immediate Release

From Hiring Private Eyes to Accommodating Child Care

EMPLOYERS GRAPPLE WITH MODIFYING WORK FROM HOME (WFH) POLICIES AS REOPENINGS LOOM

CHICAGO, May 21, 2020 – As the nation's employers consider how to reopen their offices following stay-at-home shutdowns triggered by the Coronavirus pandemic, many are facing challenges regarding how to modify or extend current work from home (WFH) policies, including hiring private eyes to monitor employees, accommodating flexibility due to child care, and dealing with the mental health of isolated workers. Going forward, employers must protect their workers while also figuring out how best to do business, according to one workplace authority.

"First and foremost, employers have a moral and ethical obligation to protect their workers, their families, and their communities," said Andrew Challenger, Senior Vice President of global outplacement and executive and business coaching firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc.

"Employers will need to be ready to handle the inevitable requests to continue working from home, especially as states start to reopen without proven treatment or a vaccine. In addition to working toward making employees comfortable, employers will also need to protect employees' privacy when it comes to health, family, and age issues.

"Workers are attempting to protect their own families and their jobs, as millions file for unemployment and hundreds of thousands fall ill," he added.

While the American death toll from the virus reaches 94,000, some restrictions have started to ease in every state in the U.S., as businesses such as salons and restaurants begin to reopen. Still, most states' executive orders require that if the work can be done from home, it must. In a recent Challenger survey, 28% of employers reported they would make WFH accommodations permanent for some of their workers, while another 27% said they would leave COVID-related

WFH policies in place for workers until they are comfortable returning. Another 6% said they would make these accommodations permanent for all workers.

In fact, Twitter's CEO, Jack Dorsey, announced his workforce could WFH "forever." This pronouncement is a step further than Google and Facebook, which recently announced workers could WFH until the end of the year.

One of the biggest barriers to returning to the office for many employees is child care. In recent days, many colleges, universities, high schools, and primary schools across the country announced they will continue remote learning into the fall, with some schools stating that their plans to resume in-person classes extend past the new year. According to Education Week, at least 124,000 U.S. public and private schools and a minimum of 55.1 million students have been affected by school closures during the pandemic.

Some workers will continue to have daycare issues because they are uncomfortable sending children back to their providers and are wary of asking for special privileges as working parents. According to a survey conducted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) April 2-10 of more than 500 child care providers across the U.S. and Puerto Rico caring for more than 215,000 children, 50% of child care centers and 27% of family child care homes were completely closed. Along with state-mandated closures, more than 100,000 providers of child care have been closed across the country.

In Challenger's survey, 67% of employers reported they are addressing child care. Of those, 33% reported they are being more flexible knowing their workers may be home with children. Another 67% said they are allowing workers to use PTO. Under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) passed by Congress in April, parents are eligible for two-thirds pay for up to 12 weeks for a maximum of \$10,000 if they are on leave due to child care issues through December 31, 2020.

"How and where the nation's employees work will depend a lot on what happens with their children. If elementary school children will be learning from home, many parents will need to continue working from home," said Challenger.

"Employers will need to create policies for workers who are uncomfortable with the risk of returning their children to schools or daycare centers that are reopening while cases of COVID-19 are still being reported," he added.

Some employees will want to continue working from home because they are high risk due to age, medical conditions, or pregnancy.

"This is a sensitive situation for employers because their workers' privacy must be protected, even while they are requesting accommodations," said Challenger.

The federal Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) protects any worker 40 years of age or older from employment discrimination in the U.S. Other employees are simply frightened to leave home too early and refuse to be put in what they view as an unsafe situation. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) provides guidelines for workers and their right to refuse dangerous work.

"Not all employers feel permanent WFH is a solution. There are concerns regarding the negative effects on efficiency and profitability. Managers also worry about employee burnout, with workers juggling family commitments while also trying to work full time at home, as well as mental health issues caused by prolonged isolation," said Challenger.

While many workers are grateful for the ability to WFH and keep their jobs as the country dips into a recession, and possible depression, many others are eager to return to their workplaces. This could be because they are tired of the distractions common with working from home, such as roommates, spouses, parents, or children; because they do not feel productive working alone at home; or because they crave interpersonal interaction with co-workers.

"Many workers are concerned that this period may halt the progress of promotions or other career development opportunities, as workers miss out on important face time with their managers," said Challenger.

Meanwhile, supervisors are growing weary of the challenges of managing remotely and keeping their teams engaged, and in many cases, managers are not convinced all employees are as productive as possible while working from home. Recent reports from ABC News and another published in *The Sacramento Bee* found some employers are hiring private investigators to monitor their high-level executives during this period to ensure they are working.

"While this level of monitoring is extreme, the idea that workers are not as productive at home, even in the face of contrary evidence, still pervades a lot of workplaces. And in fact, many workers prefer to work at an office, at least part of the time," said Challenger.

"HR leaders are often asked to balance the needs of the company with those of their workers. In this pandemic, it is a huge task. HR leaders need to be prepared to provide guidance to company executives and managers to deal with this rapidly changing environment so they can be proactive in creating meaningful policies while also advocating for employees," he added.

Challenger offered the following advice for employers to maximize WFH:

- Be flexible. Explore extending WFH options. Establish a WFH policy that allows employees who want to continue working from home to do so without penalty or stigma. This does not necessarily need to be permanent, but could be for as long as the pandemic risks continue.
- Encourage the creation and implementation of employee engagement initiatives. If the company needs a new hire, search for someone with this expertise. Employees who are working from home should not feel they are isolated or working in the dark. Transparent, clear communication of goals and expectations by managers is vital to keep employees engaged and feeling part of the team. Leaders need to keep the balance between being supportive and micromanaging.
- Train managers on how to lead and empower remote teams.
- Be sure everyone knows how to successfully navigate teleconferencing programs. Ask IT teams to conduct webinars to bring everyone up to speed.
- Create or update an employee handbook to include guidelines on working from home. Be sure the company is in compliance with current labor laws. Be clear in how employees should handle proprietary information.
- Be sure employees have the proper equipment needed to WFH.
- Inform employees of all the precautions being taken by the company to reopen. If employees learn about planned staggered shift work, new sanitizing processes, or required personal protective equipment, they may feel more at ease about returning to work.
- Facilitate communication between employees wanting to stay home and their managers so it is clear to business leaders that workers are being productive (perhaps more so without commutes, needless meetings, or office chitchat). Establish regular check-ins so employees can describe their accomplishments in detail.

Source: Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc. ©