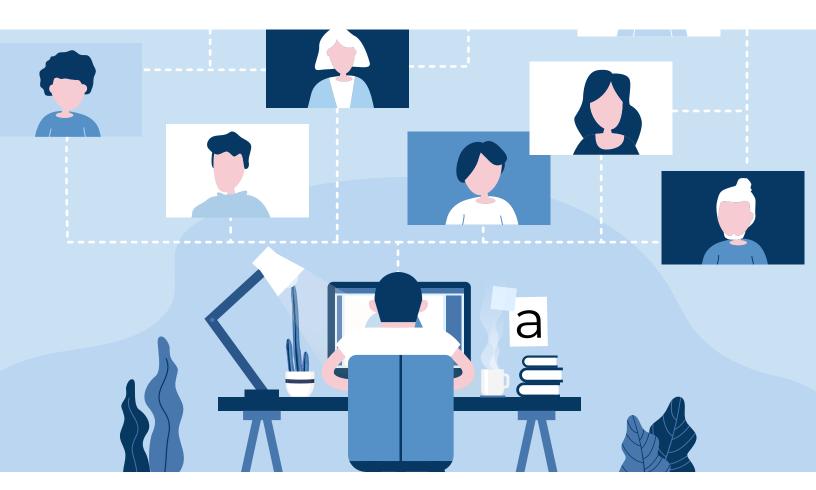# Return to Work: Innovation in the New Normal

COVID-19 forced many industries, including insurance, to quickly transition employees from working in the office to working at home and to rethink not only what the workplace looks like, but how they can ensure employee health and safety.

During a fireside chat sponsored by IBM and hosted by Digital Insurance, industry leaders discussed how their organizations are helping employees through this crisis while increasing employee satisfaction and productivity.

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Panelists:
- Dr. Sharon Smith, Vice President and Chief Medical Officer, Prudential
- Enza Ianopollo, Senior Analyst, Forrester
- Dr. Kyu Rhee, Vice President and Chief Health Officer, IBM
- Amy Wright, Managing Partner, IBM's Talent and Transformation Global Business Services

Moderator:
- Danielle Fugazy, Contributor Editor, Digital Insurance

Back-to-Work—But Not Back-to-Normal

Perhaps never before have companies had to pay such close attention to local, state, and federal public health agency recommendations and incorporate those guidelines into their own workplace strategies, noted Enza Ianopollo, Senior Analyst, Forrester.

For example, IBM quickly understood the seriousness of the pandemic and activated a task force to make sure its 350,000 employees in 170 countries across the globe were safe and healthy, said Dr. Kyu Rhee, Vice President and Chief Health Officer, IBM. The task force met daily to review data and created playbooks to support employee health and well-being.

IBM divided their workforce into two cohorts: groups of employees who were the first to-return to their worksites (mainly data centers or critical businesses, like hospitals, where IBM has onsite data centers) and those that could successfully perform their jobs from home. IBM then adjusted their workplace planning based on updated public health data globally as well as local regulatory requirements. Agility is key, said Rhee. "Companies must be willing to take a step back when conditions change," he explained.

Prudential also activated a pandemic team and held daily meetings in the beginning of the crisis, then fine-tuned their response. "We continue to look at masks, social distancing, elevators, and bathrooms. To feed employees in our cafeterias, we have free grab-and-go lunches," said Dr. Sharon Smith, Vice President and Chief Medical Officer, Prudential.

She continued, "Since most employees are not going back to the office until 2021, we need to support employees at home and in the field." For example, Prudential updates the threat level state-by-state and sets parameters for agents to stay safe such as the number of clients they can meet with or if they can travel.

Prudential is analyzing which roles need to be done 100% onsite, 100% offsite, or a hybrid. For example, employees assigned to an agile project may work onsite for a few months and return to work at home once the project is complete.

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— Dr. Kyu Rhee
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A flexible approach is appropriate, noted Amy Wright, Managing Partner, IBM's Talent and Transformation Global Business Services. One client law firm Wright worked with brought its senior team members back first, but then realized that senior folks were more likely to have space at home to work so they switched places with more junior employees.

Supporting Those Employees Not Ready to Return

While some employees are anxious to return to the office, others are hesitant, worried about their own health or the health of family members. Others are struggling to balance working at home with childcare, homeschooling, or other responsibilities.

Enza Ianopollo, Senior Analyst, Forrester, stated that it's critical for employers to understand when—and if--employees are ready to come back and to have safeguards in place such as PPE, distancing, ventilation, and sanitization.

"Trust between employers and employees is fundamental," said Ianopollo. "Just because an employee is older, you can't assume they are not ready to come back to the office." Ianopollo recommended that companies use surveys and employee feedback channels to make sure they don't discriminate based on incorrect assumptions.

Both Prudential and IBM support employees who are uncomfortable returning to the workplace. "We ask managers to take individual needs into account, understanding that travel or childcare may be an issue for some employees," explained Dr. Rhee. "There's a new social contract evolving between employer and employee based on trust," he added. "It's a much different dynamic."

Dr. Rhee noted that IBM focuses on keeping employees engaged and connected with their team, even if they are working at home.

Thankfully, a willingness to listen to employees is the norm, noted Wright. "Every company I've talked with is receptive to whatever employees are comfortable with and are providing tools to make employees productive, whether they are in a workplace or whether they're working from home."

A Data-Driven Approach to Work

In this new normal, companies will need to decide on everything from when to bring employees back to office to how to manage facilities to contact tracing. IBM's Watson Works uses artificial intelligence (AI) to help companies make those determinations while protecting employee healthcare data.

Wright explained, "Employees are sharing data because we're in an emergency. Once we start connecting the data that we have inside corporations--and it can be blinded--then we can make predictions and implement protocols to make employees feel safe. And that's really, really powerful."

Companies have a responsibility to keep data secure. "The leading principles are transparency and trust," said Ianopollo. "Companies must face the liabilities created by collecting so much sensitive personal data during a public health emergency. Once the emergency is over, companies need to dispose of this data."

In addition to providing insights to employers, data can also inform external enterprises. For instance, blockchain technology can connect suppliers with buyers for PPE, masks, and ventilators.

"IBM recognizes the importance of bringing together the assets, resources and capabilities of IBM to help the broader community, such as using our supercomputing capabilities to help speed discovering a vaccine or repurposing drugs for COVID-19," said Dr. Rhee.

Bottom Line: Safe, Healthy Employees

Summing up the thoughts of her fellow panelists, Wright noted, "Every employee has the right to feel comfortable with their personal health and safety."

But it's not just employees who are watching, said Ianopollo. Consumers are as well. "How employers treat their employees in this moment will define their brand for years to come," she said. "Data, privacy, and transparency is part of that trust-building exercise in this moment of responding to the emergency."

Dr. Rhee added that while it's important to reflect on your values as a company around health, it's also important to leverage data analytics and AI to support and facilitate trust and transparency.