

# COVID-19: Getting Back To Work in The New Normal



It's been with us since the tail end of 2019, and wasn't declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) until March 11, 2020—but the COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) virus (also known colloquially as the *novel coronavirus* or simply *coronavirus*) has managed to fundamentally alter nearly every aspect of life for individuals and organizations around the world.

When it became apparent that the virus would be a persistent, if unwelcome, addition to everyday life, the new challenge faced by organizations looking to survive in a troubled global economy is no longer simply overcoming or waiting out the virus, but finding ways to live with COVID-19 while getting back to work.

But in a world where the “new normal” means striking a balance between limited resources, questionable access to both employees and customers alike, and uncertain assistance often sporadically provided by government organizations that are also struggling to cope, finding ways to get back to business can be a daunting prospect.

Fortunately, as top minds apply themselves to the problem, they're finding strategies businesses can use to mitigate the devastation of the COVID-19 crisis, and find their footing while preserving their productivity and protecting their staff in this brave new world.

## State of the Pandemic: COVID-19 and Getting Back to Work

Day after day, the media presents a staggering array of statistics and other information related to the coronavirus pandemic.

And while some areas have shown—through strenuous effort in applying social distancing techniques, shelter-in-place mandates, and reserving adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) such as face masks for healthcare

providers—remarkable improvement, others have reported somewhat troubling instances of reinfection and continued spread of the disease.

As of July 24th, 2023, the United States Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported a total of 6,209,122 confirmed hospitalization cases of COVID-19 in the US alone, with a total of 1,135,364 deaths across 55 jurisdictions.

On the upside, the World Health Organization reported that, despite a global infection count of 1,914,916 confirmed cases and a staggering death toll of 123,010, as of April 15th, 2020, no new countries, territories, or areas had reported cases of COVID-19 in the preceding 24 hours.

Of the confirmed cases, 510,666 had recovered.

In countries like Italy, where lockdown measures began to ease following a decline in new cases accompanied by a sincere desire to ignite economic recovery, concerns about reinfection or even a second wave of new infections led to an abundance of caution.

Social distancing measures remained firmly in place, and the companies allowed to reopen were required to follow strict protocols set by the federal government. The general public continues to operate under stay-at-home orders in order to minimize infection.

Elsewhere, in Spain (where infection rates also peaked and began to fall in mid-April 2020), lockdowns remained in place while some essential businesses, including construction and manufacturing, were allowed to reopen.

As with Italy, those businesses were required to follow strict protocols, including providing personal protective equipment to staff and enforcing social distancing measures—including at least two meters of distance between all employees at all times.

In China, where COVID-19 is presumed to have originated, a rash of new infections put a damper on the company's slow move toward easing quarantines and shelter-in-place requirements amid fears of new and recurring cases of infection.

In countless areas of the 210 countries affected by the coronavirus pandemic, common problems complicated the prospect of taming infection and moving

toward a new paradigm allowing economic recovery to begin, including:

- Undersupplied, understaffed, and overworked healthcare providers.
- Limited essential supplies such as testing kits and PPE, as well as unclear or poorly communicated standards for administering either.
- Difficulties faced by health authorities in educating the public about the importance of hygiene and social distancing protocols in both the short and long term while combating the spread of COVID-19.
- Asymptomatic individuals, or those who attributed their respiratory symptoms to problems other than the virus (such as allergies) ignored or disregarded social distancing and infection prevention advice in some cases, as they “felt fine.”
- In its April 15th update, the CDC joined other various government organizations in expressing concerns about non-scientific and false information being spread across social media and the mainstream media outlets, stressing the need for scientific rigor and conscientious, coordinated efforts by the public at large to understand and combat infection through proper social distancing, self-quarantine, and infection prevention methodologies.
- Secondary health conditions made the disease more dangerous for some than others.
- Limited resources and disruption of supply chains due not just to shortages, but consumer behaviors such as profiteering and hoarding.
- Unprecedented need to reduce business costs and establish new workflows as workers stayed (and sometimes worked from) home, key suppliers shut down, and production and profits were threatened by disruption of daily life as well as local, national, and the global economies.
- In the US, where health care coverage is tied to employment for most, the crisis was exacerbated as lack of work caused by lockdowns led many to seek unemployment benefits or make the impossible choice between protecting their families’ health through self-quarantine or providing food, medical care, and shelter during a global pandemic with a job that exposed them to increased risk of infection.

Overcoming these challenges requires the concerted effort of governments, organizations, and individuals alike.

But businesses in particular can implement some best practices to help their

teams get back to work and reignite economic activity in their regions, nations, and the world.

*Despite the sobering nature of this pandemic, strides have been made in containing it, and professionals the world over are beginning the difficult process of building new standards and best practices that will help companies do business while still actively fighting to contain and eliminate the spread of COVID-19.*

## **Best Practices for Getting Back to Work Safely—and Sanely**

Does this sound familiar?

Much of your staff is scattered, working from home if they're lucky enough to be working at all. Your old workflows, built around physical presence and assumptions of readily available resources pulled from a complex global supply chain, are either working sporadically or crashing to a halt.

Everyone from the CEO down to the interns find themselves struggling to understand and comply with complex quarantine, shelter-in-place, and social distancing regulations needed to keep the coronavirus under control.

And in the middle of it all, you and your team somehow have to keep production going, your employees employed, and your business alive.

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### **1. Take Inspiration from Those Winning the War**

In Asia, where the coronavirus outbreak began, the struggle continues, but so does the return to economic vitality. According to 2020 research from McKinsey, major shifts in key areas of life and business can help establish what they call “the next normal”:

- **Focus on mobility, scalability, and speed.** Developing contingency plans that allow for the generation, acquisition, and distribution of essential resources on demand supports the mobility required to begin addressing challenges much more quickly than you could otherwise manage. In China, this meant mobilizing and deploying thousands of medical professionals, hospital beds, and other care resources to where they were needed most. For your business, it could mean leveraging data analysis to switch materials, suppliers, or materials as needed, transfer production, or even virtualize entire divisions in order to cut costs and meet consumer demand.
- **Redefine Your Supply Chain Management Paradigm.** The ever-expanding importance of concepts like Big Data and digital disruption have contributed to the corresponding increases in complexity of global supply chains. But as life during the pandemic has shown, having access to local or regional resources as well as global ones can help you keep the lights on, production rolling, and your business operating when disaster strikes. Data analysis tools and artificial intelligence could be the key to developing smarter, more agile supply chains that enable you to make real-time, contextual decisions for all your business processes.
- **Eliminate Old Stigmas and Embrace New Frameworks for Shared Success.** We all live and work under the social contract, but when coming together can put your team in literal danger, it's time to consider embracing new ways of getting the job done while your staff stay at home. From greater flexibility of scheduling to increased support for working remotely to advanced education for managers who need new strategies to manage and motivate diverse and widely distributed teams, getting back to work will likely mean tossing out what doesn't work and finding ways to embrace a less physical, but no less productive, paradigm.

## **2. Work with Public Health Officials, Industry Leaders, and Community Leaders.**

The virus spares no one, and everyone has a vested interest in minimizing its destruction while also protecting the ability of the citizenry to work, live, and play without fear of death, unemployment, or illness.

Collaborating with local, regional, and national officials, businesses can work to

develop new procedures that preserve (for example) social distancing techniques and other infection prevention strategies while still allowing for necessary work to continue as safely as possible.

Businesses can also view this as an opportunity to invest in their own communities, either directly by purchasing much-needed medical supplies or in a more supportive role by creating public education initiatives or expanding the availability of wireless internet for easier telecommuting and teleconferencing.

### **3. Invest in Tech Tools That Support Digital Transformation.**

This brave new world relies heavily on data collection, organization, and manipulation, as well as process optimization to achieve the cost reductions and value creation a business needs to stay lean, mean, and competitive (whether there's a global crisis going on or not).

Implementing a comprehensive procurement solution like PLANERGY can help companies of all sizes achieve digital transformation in a number of ways, including:

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- **Improved collaboration and communication.** When everyone's on the same page and able to share data and work together regardless of location, your business can get down to business without fear of contagion or miscommunication.

# Is Your Business Ready for the New Normal?

Finding ways to get back to work when the world's struggling with an unprecedented crisis can be frustrating.

But by working with health experts, your local officials, and your own management and staff, you can develop and apply the protocols and procedures that will help you protect your employees' health and safety while ensuring your business is ready for the next global crisis—and continues to thrive while contributing economic growth to your community, your nation, and the world.

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