

SURVIVING COVID19 AND COMING OUT STRONG

An essential guide for the employers

written by Alan Wild, HR Policy Association



Introduction:

Not in the post WWII era has the world experienced a combined economic and social challenge like the current COVID-19 pandemic. Governments of the world, to various extents, have increasingly put **saving lives** and maintaining **social stability** above economics. Some have moved very quickly, others less so, but step by step two priorities have become clear.

Saving lives means shifting resources into the health and care sectors to cope with unprecedented service demand at a time when their own workers are open to increased risk and are falling ill. **Maintaining social stability** means assuring social isolation for the majority, whilst at the same time maintaining flows of money and provisions to the general population. Effective social isolation has meant shutting down all the non-essential manufacturing and services operations that increase the risk of transmission. At the same time it means shifting people resources, with maximum care for worker safety, to food producers and retailers, transport, banking and care organizations.

Employers are at the centre of making this work ... and **vital to success are the world's employers**.

For some, this is about keeping workplaces operational in the face of high demand; illness and stress amongst workers; shortages of supplies and, above all, maintaining a safe working environment.

For many others, this is about shutting down operations in a manner that keeps the financial and operational heart of the organization beating and ready for rapid restoration of the economy. **If businesses are not ready to expand at speed the world economy will suffer longer than is necessary.**

Employers have learned a lot in 2020 about working from home, communication with staff who are not at work, shifting resources from non-essential to essential work, introducing working methods that assure social distancing, dealing with stress and keeping the business in financial and operational shape to emerge fast and strong.

Governments have to make policy decisions ... and some of them will make enormous demands on employers. Governments may shoulder the responsibility for taking decisions ... but the operational side of providing safe working practices, managing inevitable short time working and layoffs, maintaining contact

with workers so that the return to work can be fast and effective and shifting resources to essential production falls to employers?

This is a one off and small example, but it underlines the general point. The government may call for increased production of ventilators ... but it was the designers, engineers and mechanics in the Mercedes and Red Bull Formula One racing teams that shifted their high-tech engine and chassis design teams into the design and production of new forms of ventilators... and, counter to anything they had done previously... gave their intellectual property rights away.

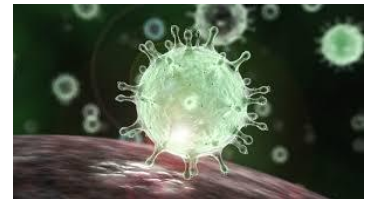
Since December 2019 I have been working with HR professionals around the world ... first in China and South Korea; then in Europe and onto the United States; and most recently in India to give advice, but mostly to listen, to the actions they have taken, and are taking, and spread them as widely as possible. I have held conference calls and workshops with more than 2,000 HR professionals in the last three months, and it is this experience that I will try to capture in this short “COVID-19 survival guide for employers”.

Our advice has evolved over time. At the onset of the pandemic the major issues were:

- Restricting travel, dealing with expatriates and getting travellers home.
- Advice on meetings involving medium to large sized groups of participants.
- Keeping operations open and safe, and dealing with exclusions of employees with corona-like symptoms,

These issues have been progressively overtaken by governments that have set down increasingly firmer rules on travel. What is, and what is not, an essential service and can remain open for business has become a subject of government decree. **As employer choice has become more limited, the challenges facing us have increased** ... and this will continue.

A world of caution - we are not medical practitioners and do not give professional advice on medical issues. This brief is a source of human resource management advice for employers on employment issues. At times you will need to take medical advice ... please use the many qualified resources that exist for this.



Taken from the practice of some of the leading HR professionals in the world, here are twelve pointers to keeping employees safe and making sure that business can bounce back fast and strong.

1 HAVE (A) DEDICATED CORONAVIRUS CRISIS OR SWAT TEAM(S)

The situation changes every day ... and for those continuing to operate, new issues arise minute by minute.

In every country in which you work there are daily updates to government advice and resources; the rate of escalation of the pandemic changes; new cases will arise in your workforce and issues around employee safety measures will come up.

Typically, companies do not act quickly unless they organize deliberately to do so. An issue in Malaysia that waits for HQ in Chicago to wake up is simply too slow. Here's a common example. A company in Asia had its first case of an employee suffering Corona-like symptoms. In a highly pressured environment with concerned employees, the local manager decided he could not wait twelve hours for a signal from HQ and sent all staff home. A good immediate decision, but he had not communicated to people how their return to work would be handled, when that might be, how the workplace would be made safe and had no useable or up to date record of employee contact details.

You can do a lot of, “what if”, planning ... and I’ll come to that ... but **you need to have a way of making decisions consistently and fast ... and learning from experience.**

If you are an international company, set up an international team of people that are pre-authorized to make immediate decisions ... and who can be escalated to 24/7. Think about line, finance, HR, communications and medical experts ... and have deputies.

Circumstances vary country by country, and sometimes State by State ... set up country and/or State teams.

You can get these people ready for quick decision making by letting them learn and get experience from the experience of others ... pose real questions from other companies and get them to work out what their response would be.

2 INFORMATION – RESPONSIBILITY AND SOURCES

There is no shortage of information on COVID-19 and no shortage of people who are studying it. In fact, there is too much to digest, some of it is spin and some is downright untrue.

Having everyone doing everything wastes time and causes confusion.

Many things are changing daily – what is “essential work”, what rules have the authorities set on exclusion, have new forms of funding become available, have the rules changed on short time working or separations? Often news coming through is incomplete or simply wrong.



Make sure you have defined sources of information about what is going on internally and externally and a team of people who are collecting it. This is really important at the national level as things vary enormously by country and changes occur at different speeds. If you are going to make international policies and protocols and share best practices ... best to know what is going on.

These individuals are the essential support to your SWAT team and the “go to” people for decision makers.

3 EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION

Whether your employees are at work, working from home or are on some form of lay-off they are concerned for their health, their short-term financial security and their longer-term jobs. In international companies employees are interested in their colleagues around the world ... in January, European and American employees wanted to know what was happening to their colleagues in China. Today, employees want to know what is happening in HQ whether that is Madrid, London, New York or Tokyo. Uncertainty causes stress and volatile reactions.

Make sure you have a means to contact your employees. **Be predictable ... your employees, whatever their status, need to know where they can get information from you and how frequently** ... a number of companies are updating their staff twice per day.

Information is one thing, but **make sure you can answer employee questions.** Companies are using message boards, chat room and chat lines and 24/7 hot lines to respond to employee questions. If you have an Employee Assistance Program, remind people that it exists. Employees suffering from stress or with financial

problems are more likely to look for trusted sources of advice outside the company. **Employee may want to let off steam ... make sure it comes to you rather than elsewhere.**

Finally, **be prepared to deal quickly with gossip** – whether it is oral or through social networks.

Build in quick poll and pulse surveys to find out how employees feel and to let them know you care.

4 HAVE AN EXCLUSION PROTOCOL

Where you have a case of Coronavirus-like symptoms, **have a clear protocol that everyone understands.** It might look like this:

- *Isolate the individual and send home*
- *Report upward*
- *Identify those who have been in direct contact, isolate and send home*
- *Close the affected area*
- *Deep clean over 24/48 hours*
- *Back to work*

This protocol should also include dealing with employees refusing to do certain types of work because of alleged health risks. In most countries, employees have a legal right to a safe working environment, but the definitions are usually very specific. Not wishing to commute, to attend certain locations or have general concerns about the workplace are unlikely to be valid. Often these concerns will be more emotion than fact based. **Take time to talk to employees and allay their concerns before taking other action.**

5. REINFORCE GOOD HYGIENE

COVID-19 hates good hygiene habits.

We all know the importance of regular hand washing and personal hygiene. Make it obvious. Put notices **everywhere** “WASH YOUR HANDS ... DO IT HERE ... DO IT NOW”.

Make it easy for people to do the right thing: provide hand-sanitisers in key places.



Make your cleaning routines obvious and let employees see it happening.

There are varying views on masks and gloves ... most medical professional will say that someone who is not ill or providing medical services close to people who may be ill should not wear masks.

Handling packages from affected areas like China, Italy or Spain may be completely safe ... but **understand the emotional nature of these concerns**, and the cultural differences in your workforce. Many people in Tokyo or Beijing routinely wear masks in the street in normal times because of pollution or out of concern for others if they cough or sneeze.

People can only work well when they not only “are” safe but also “feel” safe.

6 SOCIAL DISTANCING IN THE WORKPLACE

Social distancing goes beyond the immediate work-station. **Distance from customers and the public** is crucial for retailers and service providers. Inside companies that are working normally, think what you can do to assure distance and food safety in cafeterias: **minimize large numbers of people congregating in close proximity** – where they have to wait in line to “clock in”, “gown up”, when they leave work or go through security checks. Stagger start times, work breaks and mealtimes.

Hold off or restructure planned events that require people to congregate for meetings and briefings.

7 UNDERSTAND THE RESOURCES THERE TO HELP YOU ...AND THE RESTRICTIONS ON YOU

To come out stronger ... this is the biggie.

Many governments have put in place schemes to assure continuity of the employment contract. These vary from payments to employees, tax breaks, late payments, loans and in some cases limitations on individual or collective dismissals. These are often complex and can be bewildering ... they have been written quickly by governments and negotiated by committee.



Make sure you know the rules and assure you take maximum advantage of them.

It has become clear that governments will resort to any measures to underpin social stability through a continuation of income for the population and to protect jobs. Given that we are probably in at least a twelve-week cycle, cutting off pay and benefits to large numbers of the population would undermine isolation policies and cause social unrest.

At the outset of the pandemic many employers committed to paying employees excluded from work for 14 days for example ... be careful that payment procedures you establish do not set precedents that are not sustainable or that will be hard to change.

Right now, governments are less concerned with economics than with lives and essential services. Likewise, **if companies are to restart quickly after the crisis then some kind of relationship needs to be maintained with employees.**

It is just as clear that companies who continue to pay large numbers of people without work and without substantial assistance will go under.

Think creatively about this... large separation payments to large numbers of people in the business will drive the company under faster than other forms of protecting at least some wages. This varies widely by country ... large separation payment in much of Western Europe open up more opportunity for creativity than do typical practices in the United States ... but there is still scope for creative design. **What worked in 2008 is unlikely to be fit for purpose today.**

Models are emerging where manufacturing companies are effectively loaning employees (with or without a pay top up) to those companies that are defined as essential and facing increased demand together with high levels of absence. The same applies to the not for profit sector ... although the financial equations will be different.

Reputations will be built and lost by the way companies deal with this.

8 WORKING FROM HOME

Review and re-write your protocols to allow employees to work from home. If your company makes automobiles, you can't send your assembly line employees home to work. But in other types of companies, remote work will be an effective option to help stop the spread of the virus.

You will need to know if your employees have the tools necessary to work from home? Do they have computers and if so, do you have a secure VPN in place? Do you have access to solutions to allow your people to hold virtual meetings and share important information? Have you trained your managers on hints and tips on managing remote workers?



Remember ...the plans that you put in place to survive two weeks are likely to be needed for three months or longer.

9 RE-WRITE THE EMPLOYEE RELATIONS PLAYBOOK

Many of the initiatives companies will want to take will **require either information and consultation procedures with works councils or trade unions or the renegotiation of collective agreements.** These processes cannot take place in an environment of “hard” isolation and social distancing. That said, **companies will need to take urgent action and cannot wait for meetings to be allowed before moving forward.**

You need to check your national laws on whether remote conference call meetings are provided for ... and if so use them. More likely, this form of meeting may be possible by agreement. Work to get that agreement ... there are as yet few examples of employee representatives refusing to meet. If this does happen then consider their concerns and try to address them, **being clear that a failure to meet will not result in a failure to act** but an inability to benefit from representatives' views. Any court cases may be well down the road (many courts are closed) and **those who try “genuine best endeavours” may well be treated with understanding ... and will still have a business.**

It would be **very unwise** to simply ignore the responsibility to enter into dialogue because physical meetings are not possible.

10 TAKE CARE OF YOUR EXECUTIVES AND MANAGERS

Your **executives and managers are probably working long hours, outside their comfort zone and dealing with new and stressful situations – both at home and at work.** Give them guidance on how to manage remotely where you have workers at home ... there are plenty of short training modules. This will go on for at least three months ... make sure you build time off into their schedule.

Managers and Executives will fall ill or be quarantined ... **make sure you have a list of people who can step in and also cover for time off.**

11 USE YOUR INTERNAL RESOURCES WISELY

Some people in your business will be extremely busy whilst others will have a lower workload or be idle. Thinking about HR as an example ... get your people who are usually recruiting or doing induction training to man help lines and chat rooms or to do a cycle of supporting calls to line managers.

12 AN OPPORTUNITY FOR LEARNING

Whether your employees are working from home or simply not working at all as their operations are shut down. **Look at this as an opportunity for learning ... to improve current skills or to build new ones.** Think about those valuable learning opportunities that usually compete with productive working ... like unconscious bias, process compliance, understanding the company its history and its products and personal development. It is also an opportunity to get all of that out of date personal information up to date.

How many of your workers would invest their own time in learning to code if you provided the materials ... they are available at low costs and will pay back later.

We hope that at least some of the twelve ideas for action are helpful. You may have thought about or implemented most of them.

If they make sense, then **circulate them to friends and colleagues ... and competitors. After all we are in this together.**

If you have any questions or ideas to for inclusion ... let me know,

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CORONAVIRUS

COVID-19

Some useful URLs for BEERG members

<https://beerg.com/covid-19/>

COVID 19 pandemic

The **BEERG training program** scheduled for April has been cancelled with existing bookings being transferred to our October program, which will run October 14/16.

We have also **postponed our June Sitges meeting** as it is unlikely that there will be any return to normality before then. We plan to move our October members' meeting from Brussels to Sitges.

We will circulate confirmation of dates and agendas as soon as we can.

BEERG MEMBERS NETWORK MEETING: Hotel Estela, Barcelona, Sitges, June 10-12. Our June meeting is from Wed, June 10 to Fri, June 12, at the Hotel Estela, Sitges, Barcelona. We have a special session from 14:00h to 1600h on Wednesday, entitled: "Reflections on a Lifetime in US Labor Relations" featuring Rick Warters, who retired from UTC last year.

The meeting begins with a poolside reception on Wednesday afternoon and will see presentations on Thursday and Friday on such topics as:

- *The Irish Data Protection Regime: Too Many Big Eggs in One Small Basket?*
- *The Gig Economy: Different Courts, Different Countries, Different Decision*
- *Brexit: What's That Working Out For You?*
- *Recording Working Time: Everybody Back on the Clock?*
- *Goodbye Social (Media) Mogue, Hello Social (Media) Voice?*
- *The US: Four More Years?*
- *The EU Social Policy Agenda: Back Alive and Kicking After Brexit?*

BEERG Dates for your Diary:
Events are now all subject to confirmation

Date	Event	Venue
22-24 April	BEERG April Training Programme	Hotel Estela, Port d'Aiguadolc, Sitges, Barcelona, Spain
10-12 June	BEERG Members' Network Summit	Hotel Estela, Port d'Aiguadolc, Sitges, Barcelona, Spain
30 Sept & Oct 1	BEERG Members' Network Summit	TBC - Hotel Estela, Port d'Aiguadolc, Sitges, Barcelona, Spain
14 - 16 Oct	BEERG October Training Programme	Hotel Estela, Port d'Aiguadolc, Sitges, Barcelona, Spain