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Pandemic Playbook:

Common sense practices for an unfamiliar landscape

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Overview

The rapid spread of COVID-19, the coronavirus, has left organizations around the world scrambling to protect their businesses and the welfare of their workers. If the last 20 years are any indication, business leaders will have to deal with the disruptive effects of pandemics with increasing frequency. Over the course of the 20th century, there were three global pandemics. In the first 20 years of the 21st century, we've already had five. Granted, advances in medicine (and media) have made identification and classification of a pandemic outbreaks easier and quicker, and advances in public health policy and practice have radically reduced their scope. Each of the three pandemics in the 20th century had greater incidence rates, and far more fatalities than all five 21st century pandemics combined (see Table 1).

Table 1

Pandemic	Year	Virus Type	People Infected (approx.)	Est. Deaths Worldwide	Case Fatality Rate
Spanish Flu	1918-1919	A/H1N1	33% (500m)	50-100m	2-3%
Asian Flu	1956-1958	A/H2N2	?	1-4m	<0.2%
Hong Kong Flu	1968-1969	A/H3N2	?	1-4m	<0.2%
SARS	2002-2003	SARS-CoV	8,098	774	9.6%
Seasonal Flu	Every Year	Mainly A/H3N2, A/H1N1, and B	5-15% (340m-1b)	250,000-500,000 per year	<0.1%
Swine Flu	2009-2010	Pandemic H1N1/09	10-200m	18,500 (lab confirmed, WHO) to 203,000 (est. Lancet)	0.03%
MERS	2012 to date	MERS-CoV	1,917 lab-identified in 27 countries (WHO)	677	36%
Ebola	2013-2016	Ebola haemorrhagic fever	28,616	11,310	39.5%
Coronavirus*	2019/2020 to date	COVID-19	121,517	4,383	3.4%

*Data as of March 11, 2020; Source: www.worldometers.info/coronavirus

Since China notified the WHO of several cases of unusual pneumonia on December 31, 2019, COVID-19 has disrupted global supply chains, affected global tourism and been the cause of more than 3,000 deaths. Written in conjunction with our global partners in the PRAXI Alliance, this whitepaper is aimed at giving business leaders, HR professionals and consulting practitioners policy and practice suggestions aimed at minimizing impact on business operations and keeping the workforces we are responsible for as safe as possible.

None of this is rocket-science, and the applicability of the strategies, policies and practices suggested here will vary from one business to another. We hope that you find this whitepaper helpful as you think about preparations and mitigating actions for your organization.

Acknowledgements

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Communication

It’s been said that the first casualty of war is truth. In parallel fashion, the first casualty of a pandemic is clear communications. Everyone craves information in this situation, and conflicting and misinformation often fill the void. When there’s an information vacuum, it’s natural to fill it by finding the “dark lining in the silver cloud.” Our brains are wired to respond to worst-case scenarios, and in the absence of a reasonable worst-case, we often gravitate to an unreasonable one. Leaders can’t wait for a crisis to develop to start responding. It’s far better to anticipate as many questions as possible and develop draft answers now. It’s much easier to adjust those responses later than to develop them from scratch.

Clear communications are really what this paper is advocating for. Workplace prevention, business and personal travel, remote work, less restrictive sick leave or stay-at-home policies, caring for family-members and vendor/customer interactions are just a few examples of where some solid pre-work on messaging, and alternatives will pay big dividends. The rest of this paper looks at the measures companies can take and the policies, practices and processes they need to put those measures in place.

Share *credible* resources: There’s as much opinion, anecdote and misinformation out there as there is real information. Make credible resources available, like some of the sites listed later in the Resources section. Urge people to listen to local public health officials, the [CDC](#) and the [WHO](#). They are the experts, not the crowd at the water cooler.

Employee communication strategies need to be in place in advance, should be using all available channels and should have the ability to target specific communications for specific audiences and measure impact and outcomes.



Workplace Prevention

Person-to-person transmission of COVID-19 is via respiratory droplets. Transmission through close contact (about 6 feet) or as a consequence of an infected person coughing or sneezing droplets to another person are certainly transmission vectors, but those are actually transitory.

However, when those droplets are deposited on surfaces, the virus can survive for up to a week, so latent transmission can be far more prevalent. Frequent handwashing with soap for 10-20 seconds and using a hand sanitizer that’s more than 60% alcohol-based are the best ways to stop this kind of transmission. Whenever

employees are involved in ANY activity that involves locations where other people have been, these two actions should become second nature.

Signage and Sanitizer: The first and most immediate action is to make these two things ubiquitous everywhere in the organization *and* at home. Every conference room, rest room, shared workspace, cafeteria and break room should have both within sight and within easy reach.

Desk Kits: Drive home the message with two kits on every desk – one for work and one for home – sanitizer, tissues, disposable wipes and a tip sheet.

Small changes in social behavior can also have a big impact on transmission rates. Give everyone “permission” to dispense with certain niceties and to behave a bit differently. For example:

No handshaking. A gracious hello, a quick wave or a simple nod will suffice when everyone understands why. This is a relatively easy change with colleagues but can feel awkward with vendors, suppliers or customers. This is where signage can help everyone avoid the momentary awkwardness and move on.

Doors: On the “push” side, open with your hip. If touching the handle is unavoidable, use a tissue or paper towel. Communicate the change with signage and tip sheets and have supplies within reach of every doorway. Make sure there are doorstops in every conference room – first person in opens, last person out closes.

Light switches & elevator buttons: Use a knuckle or elbow or use a tissue (once!).

Sensitize everyone to the importance of the same behavior out of the office – doors, gas-pumps, escalators, handrails, grocery carts and *every* surface of an airplane, train, bus or hotel room are all easy transmission sites. Everyone should have (and use) hand sanitizer, disinfectant wipes and tissues whenever they’ve been in a public space.

Power up the cleaning crews: Maintenance supervisors should review the cleaning products kit and confirm that sanitizing products are central. Increase cleaning frequency and change cleaning protocols to include daily sanitizing wipe-downs of every surface. Protect workers with disposable nitrile gloves and encourage everyone to change them often to avoid cross-contamination.



Social Distancing

Keeping your organization running is a team sport but keeping people apart whenever possible is an essential element when you’re working through a pandemic. It’s important to have special policies in place quickly.

Staying Home

COVID-19 appears to have a longer-than-usual period of asymptomatic incubation and is highly transmissible as soon as symptoms appear. These symptoms mimic a mild cold – exactly the same symptoms that most of us would conclude are insufficient for a “day off,” even if you could be productive working from home. For managers and employees alike, this may be the biggest adjustment of all. All the organizational norms and cues about “toughing it out” have to be relaxed, and a fair amount of trust has to be placed in employees exercising caution rather than putting work commitments first. Shifting this mindset is a significant communications challenge – one that needs to come from every level, every function and every channel that it can be delivered through.

Travel Restrictions

The first casualty in pandemic-fighting should be non-essential travel. Unfortunately, this is especially true for conferences, symposia and other employee development or marketing events where there will be large gatherings of people from different locations. When travel is deemed “essential” – key customers, major transactions, subpoenas – the same workplace prevention activities outlined earlier should be explicitly communicated and reinforced through travel-specific channels.

Business travel: For essential travel, it may make sense to encourage people to drive. For many trips in the 300-400-mile range, total travel time is comparable for either driving or flying. As an example, we time-tested a trip from Boston to Philadelphia. The door-to-door drive time was 5 hours and 12 minutes. By comparison, driving to the airport, checking in, getting through TSA, pre-boarding wait time, boarding, flight time, deplaning and a cab to the location was 4 hours and 35 minutes (without checked baggage). The 37-minute penalty seems like a small price to pay for the more limited transmission exposure.

For longer, essential travel, additional levels of approval may be necessary. In vendor/customer relationships, it may also be possible to meet remotely, and in fact, that may be the preferred option for people at the destination site. At some point, it may be necessary to require essential business travelers to self-quarantine, by working from home for the CDC-advised incubation period for COVID-19 (at this writing, 14 days). Finally, consider (and budget for) cancellation expenses. Inevitably, employees will have followed their company’s travel policies by purchasing 21 days in advance or buying non-refundables. Those expenses should fall to the company.

Personal travel: Adopting a policy on personal travel may also make sense. There’s no air-tight enforcement practice that an organization can rely on, but shared responsibility, notice and some flexibility can go a long way. That policy may include a requirement to advise HR of any domestic or international vacation travel destinations, a work-from-home or (if that’s not possible) a mandatory furlough requirement. Writing in an exception policy that puts discretion in the hands of Employee Health & Safety, HR or a healthcare provider should be included. Direct managers are conflicted. They’re under too much pressure to get the work done and may not be objective.

This is obviously a place where the right policies and practices can be perceived as draconian or invasive, so it’s important to think through your organization’s position in advance and give employees as much advance notice as possible. Conveying a sense of “we’re in this together” and “everyone has a responsibility to protect their colleagues and their families” are important and effective messages.

Teleconferencing

Replacing face-to-face meetings wherever possible is an obvious and essential element of a social distancing strategy. For organizations that haven’t completely embraced teleconferencing, it can be an adjustment, but the barriers are largely cognitive/social, not costly/technical like they used to be.

For many organizations, this section will be basic, but we want to be as helpful as possible to those who don’t have the capability already. It’s also easy to forget how far this capability has come and how broadly it has been adopted. When the last pandemic event occurred in 2009/2010, a conference room system cost \$12,000-\$15,000, required a dedicated telephone line and frequently “tipped over” mid-meeting. There were no other options, so capacity was constrained by having to book the equipped conference room. Today, the same capabilities cost about \$1,000 and only require a standard, high-speed internet connection. Here’s a rough-out of what you need.

Conference Room Set-Up

Item	Cost
Chromebook (Lenovo, HP, Acer, Dell, etc.)	\$279
50" Flatscreen Display	\$389
Auto-Pan Camera/Microphone	\$180
Total	\$848

You can obviously spend *more* on a system, but since getting up and running quickly and inexpensively is the objective here, this is a completely serviceable solution. Spare laptops around can often be re-deployed to conference rooms (even mildly obsolete ones), further reducing hardware costs. In non-office environments, break/training rooms can be re-purposed, or the individual system outlined below can be deployed as a shop-floor kiosk.

The price points on individual teleconferencing systems now makes them easily available to everyone. Remember, airborne transmission is limited to about 6 feet, so social distancing strategies can be effective inside the workplace as well. With an internet connection, and the unlikely assumption that there's no laptop or desktop already in the mix, a complete individual teleconference set up can be deployed for about \$400.

Individual Set-Up

Item	Cost
Chromebook (Lenovo, HP, Acer, Dell, etc.)	\$279
Conference Speakerphone (optional)	\$129
Total	\$408

Platforms: While there are literally dozens of teleconferencing platform brands out there, most of them use the same Cisco-delivered infrastructure. Some of the larger brands include Zoom, BlueJeans, Ring Central and Go-to-Meeting and generally cost about \$20/month per host (individuals or individual conferencing sites). These work well for internal conferencing too, of course, but Microsoft Office 365 includes Teams software and may be a better option for getting everyone up and running quickly. Including a complete MS Office Suite, MS 365 is about \$12.50 per user/per month.

Telecommuting

Any job that can be done (even temporarily) on a remote basis should be authorized to do so. For most roles, all that's needed is the individual teleconferencing capabilities described in the prior section. For other roles where resources aren't cloud-based or require extra layers of security, a more involved solution might include a virtual machine set up or provisioning a Virtual Workspace on Amazon Web Services might be necessary. It requires some advance work, but that's why you're reading this playbook, right?

To assuage managers' possible concerns about productivity loss or "present-ness" (which, by the way, is usually profoundly misplaced), it might help to establish clear log-in/check-in policies and practices or use organizational

network analysis software to confirm from electronic traffic what you already know anecdotally – that people generally hold themselves accountable even better than their managers do, especially in a crisis situation.

Again, if this is the first-time telecommuting is deployed at your organization, a comprehensive messaging and communications process should be planned for, that helps first-time telecommuters come up to speed on staying productive, staying in touch and collaborating in different ways.

Personal Equipment Policy: If yours is a “desktop” culture, now is the time to work through a thorough personal equipment policy. Organizations rarely still require employees to carry 2 cell phones – one personal and one for work. The same issue needs to be sorted out with respect to telecommuting. To the extent that work materials are in the cloud, home equipment is just an internet connection. However, if employees are accessing enterprise systems or secure files, this becomes a more complex problem. It’s important to sort this out early, before the questions flow.

Vendor Policies

Because vendors are calling on multiple customers, they can constitute a greater community transmission risk than employees do. Their circle of contact is broader than the typical employee’s, so eliminating all non-essential vendor visits is a prudent step to consider early.

At minimum, vendors should certify that they haven’t travelled internationally in the last 30 days, especially to a country where COVID-19 is prevalent. We recognize this may be completely obsolete soon, as prevalence in the US and other countries grows. Wherever possible, vendor interactions should be replaced with teleconferencing.

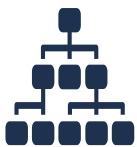
Where vendor visits are necessary, as in the case of physical audits or inventories or specialized equipment maintenance, all the Workplace Prevention steps outlined earlier should be rigorously followed.



Children & Families

In addition to the workplace and public spaces, schools are of course a major community transmission avenue. Caring for a sick child or elderly parent usually takes one parent out of the picture but given the high transmissibility rate of COVID-19, both parents will likely have to self-quarantine if they need to care for a loved one.

Supplemental sick/care leave: Even if there is no illness, the possibility of large numbers of school and day-care closings will leave parents scrambling. That’s where well-conceived remote working policies and capabilities will be essential. In order to keep the work-at-home ethos intact, it may also be necessary to provide a supplemental sick leave/care policy that only applies to these cases. That way, parents who honestly cannot work in order to give care will be able to do so.



Business & People Strategies

If the Asia and European experiences are any indication, radical reductions in business activity are in the cards. On March 4th, the OECD slashed their global GDP growth forecast from 2.9% to 2.4%, with India (down 1.1%) and China (down 0.8%) experiencing the largest reductions. Supply chain disruption due to factory closures, driver shortages and transport disruptions will throw sand in the manufacturing sector gears. Any business that’s driven by bringing people together – movies, theme parks, performing arts, and foodservice – will face early and obvious challenges. This is where *real* workforce planning has to kick in, simultaneously considering staff reductions, staff shortages and redeployments.

Cashflow Conservation

Managing cashflow carefully will be an existential issue for many businesses, and since HR costs are the single largest expense in a service economy, that could include a larger portion of the US economy than others.

Travel & Entertainment: Social distancing measures – restricting business travel, eliminating air travel, etc. – have the collateral effect of conserving cash in the short-run.

Salary Freeze: Considering a salary freeze for the duration of the efforts will be much more palatable if it's communicated in advance with clarity, authenticity and the commitment of being "temporary" is followed through upon. If salary reviews are done at a common review date, this becomes easier to communicate and deliver on, as that date is pushed back for everyone, as necessary. If salary reviews are done on an individual basis (like work anniversaries), it becomes more complicated to administer, but the same comprehensive messaging and commitment is necessary.

Planning for a significant earnings "hit" should also take into account the consequences to profit sharing and incentive programs that have a tie to corporate performance. While it's not necessary to broadcast the impact until it's known, equipping HR business partners and senior managers with thoughtful, honest responses to the inevitable questions will be very important.

Workday Reductions and Pay Cuts: In the US, hourly workers may need to be asked to work reduced shifts to conserve cash and avoid layoffs. Given the parallel likelihood of there being less work to do, this may be the best way to preserve the workforce and spread the pain equitably. Salaried staff shouldn't be exempted by this, even though the mechanics may be different. Since they're paid for the job they do, not the hours they work, it may be necessary to institute a pay cut – basically revaluing the job – until economic conditions associated with the pandemic improve.

Rolling Furloughs: If preserving a high-quality workforce is a key objective (and it usually is), then rolling furloughs might be a better answer than layoffs. These could be first done on a voluntary basis, and then if necessary, on an involuntary basis. A rolling one-week furlough period is basically an unpaid vacation. As it gradually works its way through the organization, capacity is preserved, customer service issues can be mitigated, and the "pain" isn't concentrated in a smaller segment of the company. As this is being written, United Airlines has announced the cancellation of 10% of its domestic and international flights and a voluntary furlough program. Since the business consequences of the pandemic will hit parts of the business with different levels of severity, it's the perfect time to consider temporary reassignments and rotations, especially for high-potential staff or areas where cross-training is key.

Outright Layoffs: They're a last resort, but layoffs might be inevitable. From the company's perspective, the most important thing is to make these difficult decisions in the best long-term interests of the organization. Those activities that are hurt most in the short-run cycle of the pandemic, like components manufacturing, are creating pent-up demand. While cutting those activities might look like the obvious choice today, when that pent-up demand comes roaring back, it's important that the company has the talent capacity to respond. Mass layoffs are a delicate exercise. They need to be carefully planned and staffed by well-trained, empathic and patient HR people. The Communications team needs to be fully briefed, as well as other constituencies like state government and supply chain partners.

Events/Mass Gatherings

Even if employee-attended events are local and don't require travel, any close-in congregation of people is a potential transmission vector, and participation should be carefully considered. The size, format and location of

the event are all legitimate considerations, although adjudicating which events are OK and which ones are not could become a problem in larger organizations.

On the flipside, now is the time to plan for events that you host that you may be cancelling soon. Will you tell paid sponsors that you're postponing and will hold their places, or will you refund their sponsorship funds? The same questions apply to your paid guests. If it's a charity event, what discussions do you need to have with the charity leadership?

From dealer showcases to charity golf tournaments, these events are often an integral part of your sales and marketing strategy. This is also the right time to think out of the box. Is there a way to structure a virtual event that accomplishes many of the same goals? Teleconferencing infrastructure is as scalable as it is cost-effective, so webinars and virtual conferences could be a good short-term fix.

Resources

BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/news/health>

CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/summary.html>

CDC Twitter:

https://twitter.com/CDCgov?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor

FDA: <https://www.fda.gov/emergency-preparedness-and-response/mcm-issues/coronavirus-disease-2019-COVID-19>

Find a Health Center: <https://www.findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov/>

Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy: <http://www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2020/02/study-72000-COVID-19-patients-finds-23-death-rate>

John Hopkins University: <https://systems.jhu.edu/research/public-health/ncov/>

Medline Plus: <https://medlineplus.gov/coronavirusinfections.html>

National health Service: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-COVID-19/>

WHO: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

WHO Twitter:

https://twitter.com/WHO?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor

About GattiHR

GattiHR is a leading provider of search, workforce consulting and HR technology. Our teams have extensive HR experience and follow an approach that is research-based, collaborative and customized to specific client needs. We value authenticity, hard work, and the constant pursuit of excellence on behalf of clients and candidates.

The GattiHR search practice focuses exclusively on HR executives and professionals. GattiHR Industrial focuses on Supply Chain, Engineering and Manufacturing. Both practices were founded in 1985.

We have a simple mission: Recruit the best teams and then help those teams succeed. We build better workplaces with exceptional talent, actionable insights, and tech-supported solutions. Our search teams work hard to understand clients' culture and business objectives and find innovative and agile leaders. Our data science team provides comprehensive workforce analytics and organizational improvement advisory services across the employee lifecycle. Our technology team delivers high velocity, high volume recruiting and employee engagement solutions. Check some of our solutions out at www.talentboost.cloud and www.hdtalentboost.com.

For more information about GattiHR, visit www.GattiHR.com.

About PRAXI Alliance

PRAXI Alliance provides international Executive Search and HR Consulting solutions to help clients develop and pursue their human capital strategies. Our members are in more than 35 countries and 70 offices worldwide. GattiHR is our member covering the United States.

Can we assist?

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