The Workplace After Covid-19
Navigating a New Normal

By: Ronia Kruse, President and CEO of OpTech
The ripple effects from the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted every facet of the global economy and marketplace, and the uncertainty of its impact are still largely unknown. In the United States, the jobs report showed a loss of 701,000 jobs during the first month of the pandemic (Bureau of Labor Statistics) indicating a worse outcome than economists initially expected. The unemployment rate jumped from 4.4% (in March) to over 16.1%, with 22 million jobs lost in April and has now tapered off to 13.3% in May, the highest level since 1939, according to Dow Jones.

Despite efforts by the Federal Reserve to restart the economy with trillions of dollars in cash and loans, millions of Americans remain unemployed and sadly, new economic forecasts show unemployment rates hovering at Depression-era levels in the coming weeks. These projections indicate these rates remaining relatively high at 9% through the end of 2021 (Congressional Budget Office).
Prior to the pandemic, talent was difficult to come by, and we saw talent shortages across several industries. The U.S. economy was booming with unemployment rates as low as 3.5%. Today, however, projections show that an 18 month look at unemployment rates, hovering at 9%, would translate to more than 4 million people left jobless. Because of the virus, some jobs won’t come back at all and those that do will be added slowly. Initially, it will be a mismatch of job destruction and job creation.

Companies are anxious to get the economy up and running, but most plans to invigorate the economy assume people that can work from home will stay there for a very long time. Even President Donald Trump’s own guidelines suggest that businesses “encourage telework, whenever possible and feasible with business operations.” Some economists are suggesting that staff who can work remotely do so until we have herd immunity and have found a vaccination which could take anywhere from 12 months to two years.

**What does this mean for your business?**

Realistically, work will never look the same again. Since the onslaught of the pandemic, employers were suddenly forced to transform their operations and transition their teams to an instantaneous remote workforce. Most companies rose to the occasion and have adjusted to this way of life, but many hope it is only temporary. Interestingly enough, however, the demand for flexibility in how people work has been building for decades. Prior to the pandemic,
surveys repeatedly showed that 80% of employees want to work from home at least part of the week. More than one third said they would take a pay cut to have this flexibility. The pandemic has given the workforce a taste of what could be, and going back to the old 9 am - 5 pm environment will be met with resistance.

The Biggest Roadblock to Remote Work
Trust has been the biggest roadblock to remote work; old-school managers just don’t trust that their people would perform their job duties within the comfort of their homes. In the past, employers where hesitant to allow remote work because it seemed easier to manage by counting a person’s hours spent in the office or time spent behind their desk rather than by results. One of the greatest competitive advantages a company currently has is dumping this old mentality and adopting trust in its employees. Seeing the back of someone’s head is not and never has been an indicator of work performance, just an easy way out. If you manage by results, you don’t need to ask the question, “how do I know if my employee is working from their home?”

As a business owner, this adjustment or mind-shift is critical because top talent can and will flee for a competitor that does adopts to the change, and anxious employees could prove less productive.

Today’s Challenge
Today’s challenge lies in how to adapt workplaces for the future, and the biggest question facing President’s, CEOs and VPs is “is our company ready?” If you are unable to answer that question right now, here are four tips to consider as you work toward the new workplace of the future.

Recruiting/Interviewing
Right now, Few people on either side of the process are comfortable with face-to-face meetings. The interviewing process is adapting throughout this crisis, and apps such as Skype, FaceTime
and Zoom are safer and the majority of people today have used at least one of these applications. The bonus is they allow multiple interviewers in different locations to participate which is perfect for shelter-in-place situations.

On-boarding
On-boarding is a valuable time when interpersonal relationships are established and bonds are formed so the idea of handling them virtually may feel impersonal. However, organizations can provide a meaningful on-boarding process via video that is far from cold or impersonal. Just seeing the genuine side of another person through their smile or lighthearted camaraderie can welcome a new employee. As an employer, it is important to build an on-boarding program with a company ambassador that demonstrates a positive attitude when welcoming a new employee.

Company Culture
Company culture should be paramount and one of your top priorities. Now is the time to establish guiding actions and decisions of both leaders and employees. Trust should be a hallmark of your company culture. This means adopting a results oriented approach to getting the job done and throwing away the idea that you need to punch a clock or sit for 8 hours a day to get it done. Focus on building a culture of performance and employee engagement and you will be surprised with the end result.

Technology
How efficient — or inefficient — a company is with their technology won’t just depend on the infrastructure, but the IT staff as well. In the past, many IT teams were associated with the employees you call when you need help changing your password or when your computer won’t remotely connect to the internal system. These team members are also the ones who build, create and maintain the tools that allow a company’s employees to be productive with their technology and the people who keep up with security policies and stay up to date on the latest anti-hacking technology.

In a more virtual workplace, IT becomes
Employers will need a strong IT staff to support both in- and out-of-office employees. New policies will also have to be written and maintained as the infrastructure changes.

**Conclusion**
In less than two months, Covid-19 has created arguably the world’s largest collective shift in social activity and working practices. How the workplace will change once this pandemic is over and the world goes back to normal is yet to be seen. But it’s likely that the new normal will include a shift in employee and employer preferences – and the expectation of a more virtual workplace. The only question you are left with is what we asked earlier, “Are you ready?”

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**About OpTech**
OpTech is a premier workforce solutions provider of engineering staffing, talent acquisition, talent management, executive search, and project engineering services (Statement of Work). Our key clients include Fortune 1000 companies and the Federal Government.

OpTech is a woman-owned company headquartered in Michigan with offices nationwide, and with an outstanding reputation for delivering quality and effective services. We are proud to be honored as one of Forbes “Best Professional Recruiting Firms” and an Inc. 5000 company, which is a reflection of our strong commitment to our customers, employees, suppliers and community.