

Flexible and adaptive working during COVID-19 – act now to safeguard your business.

The COVID-19 epidemic is a rapidly evolving global event with no established playbook. Despite its spread to over 80 countries, the World Health Organisation remains confident that the flu-like virus can be contained, particularly as new infection rates in China fall gradually.

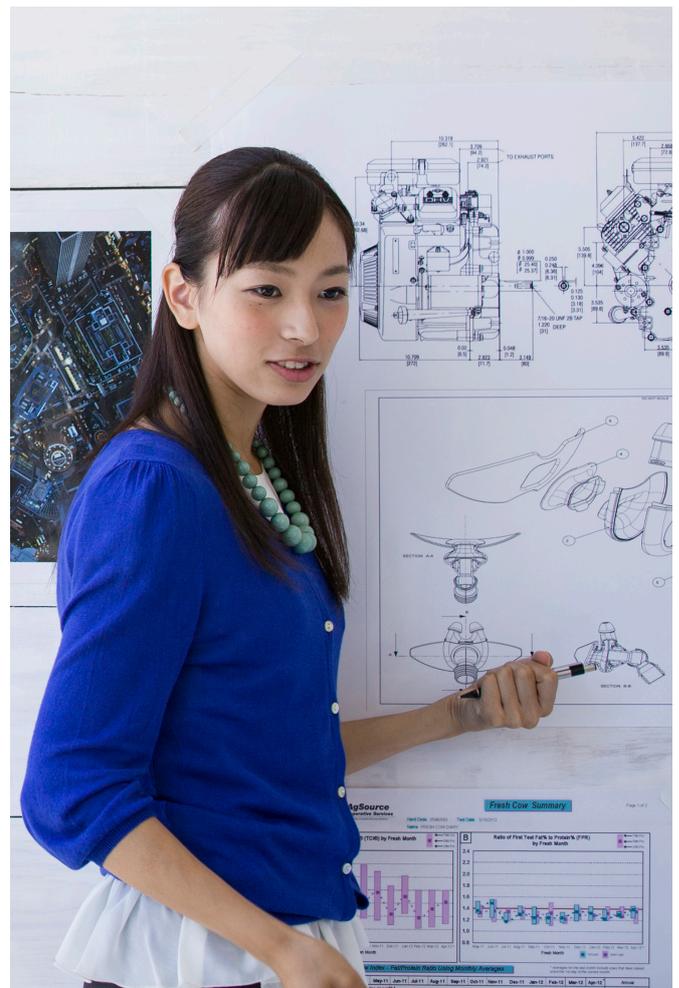
As the situation is changing daily, employers must have short, medium- and long-term people strategies in place to mitigate the impact of the outbreak. It is vital to keep up-to-date with the latest developments and communicate to employees what is being done to protect them and to maintain business continuity. The situation is a timely reminder that *healthy people = healthy business*.

A key defense against COVID-19 for individuals is social distancing. On the work front, that means using remote, flexible and adaptive work arrangements to reduce potential exposure in the office and during the commute.

Before the onset of COVID-19, flexible work practices had not been prevalent in Asia. But the current health emergency has implored employers to act urgently. As business viability is being threatened, functional flexible work arrangements have never been more important.

Mandatory quarantine is a real possibility in many regions, so being able to work outside of the office can make or break an organization. Even if quarantine is not imposed, poorly organised flexible work arrangements could mean reduced productivity at best. At worst, critical talent and business could be lost.

At the same time, working remotely over long periods could have serious ramifications for talent engagement, motivation and retention, so shaping your talent strategy post-COVID-19 is vital.



In February 2020, a Mercer survey of businesses in Asia, *Mercer Talent All Access – Business Responses to COVID-19 Outbreak*, found that 58% of private employers had already adopted flexible work arrangements in virus-affected regions. But we think the number of businesses needing to have better policies on flexible work arrangements is much higher.

Where do you begin?

Mercer has developed a proprietary framework to help guarantee business continuity and safeguard productivity. Our strategic approach to workplace flexibility is based on a clear and structured methodology that delivers practical, measurable and repeatable results. Mercer Asia's latest guidelines on flexible work practices depends on where your organisation is at with COVID-19. If you are:

Reacting to COVID-19 – Then keep up to speed with the latest advice and adapt your remote and flexible work arrangements right away. Here are some things to think about:

- **Design and shape HR policies** for flexible working arrangements.
- **Set clear and structured job expectations.** For example, do workers need to be physically present at the office? What work can they complete outside? Think about the five dimensions of work: *When* work is done; *Where* is work done; *What* work is done; *How* work is performed; and *Who* does the work.
- **Keep talking.** Your employees will need a consistent flow of clear communications. Use a calm, factual tone and remember that your responses will need to be adjusted as the situation changes.



Returning to work – Then the landscape has changed dramatically and will require structural adjustments, deep understanding and support from employers. Think about the following:

- **Design and shape HR policies** for return-to-work arrangements, incorporating new flexible work practices.
- **Assess your business-critical talent.** How engaged are they post-event? How do you retain and motivate them in the changed landscape?
- **Improve efficiency** by automating internal processes for flexible working arrangements.
- **Prepare drafts** of useful communications and agree trigger points for sending them.



Rebound to growth – Then think about what you can do better, not just next time, but right now?

- Make sure your HR policies now **cover pandemics.** Assess your flexible working data, quantify problems and identify risks.
- Realize extended remote work will have **engagement ramifications.** Track employee engagement with Mercer's pulse survey, Sirota. Be open to communicating the results and responding to them.
- Think about **workforce planning and talent strategy.** Your people have gone through an emotional time and their priorities might have changed. It's time to review how to effectively recruit, retain, develop and engage talent.



Act now

There are seven immediate actions you can take to safeguard business continuity and ensure your employees stay engaged and productive while working remotely:

- 1** **Design flexible working arrangements** that align with the latest advice, your organizational values and employee agreements.
- 2** **Adjust your HR policies** for flexible working arrangements in response to developments. With very few exceptions, existing flexible working arrangements were not designed for extended periods of remote work, so what needs to change right now? Keep asking the big questions: How is it working? What's working well? What can we do better?
- 3** **Keep communication lines open** in both directions. Managers and leaders should communicate clearly and frequently. But listening to your employees' feedback is just as important. Their motivation will be significantly affected by the quality and quantity of communication and information flow.
- 4** **Develop communication templates**, conversation guides and resource guides for managers to meet the needs of employees *in real time*.
- 5** **Remember your managers**. It is an exceptionally challenging time for everyone, and your managers also need to be supported.
- 6** **Compassion and empathy** are integral to leading successfully during turbulence. Genuine concern will have far greater impact than just following processes and protocols.
- 7** **Actively review and manage performance** remotely. None of us have been through COVID-19 before, so keep an open mind on what your employees can realistically do given the current environment.

**Remember, healthy people = healthy business.
Your number one priority is the physical and
mental wellbeing of your people.**



Speak to Mercer now about the Flexi-work Toolkit, which includes:

- **Diagnostics:** 1-page flexible working readiness check
- **Review:** HR policy and operations guideline reviews
- **Change enablement:** Employee communications
- **Tracking:** Employee engagement pulse survey and market practice benchmark

The right strategy can help engage employees and safeguard productivity during challenging events.

About Mercer

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