



Gartner Finds 44% of HR Leaders Are Planning for a Voluntary Return to the Workplace

Organisations Must Consider Three Factors to Determine Reopening Strategy

ARLINGTON, Va., May 20, 2020 — A Gartner, Inc. survey of 214 HR leaders in April found that 64% are prioritising employee experience more highly now than before the coronavirus outbreak. To effectively choreograph the return to the workplace, HR leaders need to create new “employee journey maps” to identify and manage the moments that matter most to employees upon re-entry into the workplace, such as their first day back and their first team meeting. “The return to the workplace is not just an operational challenge, it’s a human challenge,” said Elisabeth Joyce, vice president of advisory in the Gartner HR practice. “While several people, including the CEO, General Counsel and CFO, will be involved in the decision of when, who, and how to return to workplace, the CHRO must be the voice of the workforce.” One-third of the 449 HR leaders Gartner surveyed on May 5 reported that they don’t yet know when they will be able to reopen closed facilities and start bringing employees back. Among the 142 HR leaders Gartner surveyed on April 21, 44% are planning a period of voluntary return to the workplace where employees can continue working from home if desired. “As companies contemplate and implement their return to the workplace strategy, the feelings and reactions of their employees will likely play out publicly,” added Ms. Joyce. “The decisions that organisations make across the next several months will define their employment brand for the next several years.” Gartner recommends CHROs and senior HR leaders consider the following factors when making key operational decisions on reopening their workplace: When to return? Health and safety is a top priority. As workplaces start to re-open, health and safety is critical. In addition to a plan for opening their workplace(s), organisations must have a plan for re-exiting as well. Senior leaders must determine triggers for closing the workplace again and communicate this to their workforce. Employees need to feel safe. It isn’t enough to establish safety measures; employee perception is key. HR must be transparent and specific about the efforts being undertaken so employees understand the safety measures being enacted on their behalf. Employees are (powerful) stakeholders in return to work decisions. HR should gather data to assess employee sentiment and comfort about returning to the workplace — and continue to monitor to take the pulse of employees once they do return. If employees are unwilling or unable to return to the workplace, companies should not force them. If employees start to feel unsafe, this should be a trigger for re-exiting the workplace. Who returns first? Sequence the return by segment. Some organisations have already formally segmented employees — according to their roles, activities, skill sets and ability to work remotely. HR should use the recent experience with remote work to determine which employees have been able to adjust quickly and remain productive remotely. Ultimately, staggering the return to the workplace should minimise the impact on workers that don’t have to return. Make remote decisions based on the work, not the worker. At organisations where employees are remaining productive remotely, require managers to make the business case for returning them to an on-site location. Employers should lead with flexibility rather than creating rigid policies. How does return look? Employee experience and safety come first. The employee experience of returning to the workplace is as much a potential landmine as health and safety. Employees who don’t feel safe and supported will be less engaged and less productive. Leading organisations are working to identify and manage the moments that matter most to employees upon reentry into the workplace, e.g. the first day back and first team meeting. Communicate candidly about the risks. The perception of safety is as important as safety itself. Leaders should be as transparent as possible with employees about any changes in the risk of transmission. A lack of perceived safety will undermine employee confidence in the return to workplace plan. Acknowledge employees’ non-work stress. External factors, including reduced mass transit availability and reduced or nonexistent childcare will have an outsized impact on the employee experience. An organisation may be open for business, but the employee experience is broader than what is inside the building. Continued disruptions in daily life will drain productivity. HR can open a dialogue by inviting employees to share specifics of their situation and equipping managers to respond. “For the CHRO, architecting how employees experience returning to the physical workplace is critical, both to maintain employee safety and well-being and to drive critical business outcomes,” said Brian Kropp, chief of research for the Gartner HR practice. Learn more about how to lead organisations through the disruption of coronavirus in the Gartner coronavirus resource center, a collection of complimentary Gartner research and webinars to help organisations respond, manage and prepare for the rapid spread and global impact of COVID-19. About the Gartner HR Practice The Gartner HR practice brings together the best relevant content approaches across Gartner to offer individual decision makers strategic business advice on the mission-critical priorities that cut across the HR function. Additional information is available at <http://www.gartner.com/en/human-resources/human-resources-leaders>. Follow news and updates from the Gartner HR practice on Twitter and LinkedIn using #GartnerHR. About Gartner Gartner, Inc. (NYSE: IT) is the world’s leading research and advisory company and a member of the S&P 500. 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