

Designing a Return-to-Work Structure

Questions engineers need to consider when developing an effective reopening plan

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The disruption created by the COVID-19 pandemic stressed the entire AEC community. Consistent with their training, engineers responded to these challenges thoughtfully and responsibly. Now that states are beginning to reopen, engineers will once again be called upon to lead. How they respond to these challenges now will likely dictate whether they survive in

the months or years ahead. Firms that plan well will be better equipped to adjust to current and future changes. Below are five questions that engineers should consider when developing a framework for success.

1. Does your firm have a reopening committee and reopening plan?

To successfully manage the reopening process, every firm should have a written, but flexible reopening plan. The plan should be developed by a committee comprising one or more of the firm's business leaders who know the firm's customer base, *human resources leaders* who understand the firm's workforce, *facility or site leaders* who understand each of the firm's physical locations, *information technology leaders* who understand the firm's computer platforms and their limitations, and *security/safety leaders* who understand physical security and occupational health and safety concerns.

While the reopening plan should be in writing, it should also be sufficiently flexible to adapt to changing guidance from government authorities. To stay abreast of changes to important government policies, one team member should be tasked to monitor local and state requirements as well as OSHA, CDC, and other health-related recommendations. Each team member should participate in developing every aspect of the plan to identify gaps between departmental responsibilities.

2. Can/should your firm reopen?

Each state and local government possesses legal authority to regulate the health and safety of your staff and your ability to practice engineering. A failure or refusal to comply with government requirements could result in the loss of a business license, resulting in a complex, time-consuming appeal. If your firm has recently been operating as an "essential" business, new state-specific "sector guidance" may impose additional restrictions that were not previously required.

A more fundamental business decision is whether your firm's office(s) *should* reopen. To their surprise, more than a few firms have recently discovered that they can successfully practice remotely, at least in the short term. While there is no one-size-fits-all standard, a firm that operates in multiple jurisdictions may decide that opening only certain offices, such as in rural areas, may pose less risk than offices located in urban environments. Another important consideration involves employees' transportation needs. Those requiring public transportation may be less willing to risk infection than those traveling to the office by car.

3. Which employees will you bring back to work?

Determining which employees should be called back to the office will perhaps present one of your firm's biggest challenges. You need to also consider how this message will be communicated to your staff. Some state laws require that worker "recall" notices be in writing. Practically speaking, some employees may need notice to relocate or resign from other temporary or volunteer positions they assumed during the shutdown.

Additionally, many states seek to limit the number of employees who can be in the office or on site at any one time. To address such concerns, some firms may wish to "stagger" employees by shifts or by floors to address social distancing requirements. It is important to remember that traditional pre-virus labor and employment practices



remain in effect. Thus, firms need to continue to apply legitimate, nondiscriminatory rationale in their decision-making.

Equally important, firms need to remember that employees are not homogenous. All employees have their own personal challenges. Some may have underlying medical conditions or, for other reasons, may be more susceptible to serious risk if infected. Other employees may live with family members who are vulnerable. While EEO laws do not permit employers to make decisions based on an employee's vulnerability, the employee may, if properly asked, elect to defer returning to work.

The post-COVID work environment may require firms to update their employment policies to address new challenges associated with recent training and family leave obligations, as some states require employers to provide safety and other training to employees immediately upon their return to work.

4. How can firms approach their obligation to provide a safe work environment?

As employees return to work, firms will need to take all reasonable precautions to ensure worker safety. Among other steps, you may consider requiring employees to complete a questionnaire that identifies symptoms or behaviors likely to reveal an infection. Other steps, such as requiring employees to take their own temperatures before coming to work or providing trained staff to do so upon arrival to the office or project site may likewise be desired. Firms must remember,

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Does Bias in STEM Stifle Innovation?

Diversifying STEM, particularly in higher education, can improve innovation. Yet, a team of Stanford University researchers found that opportunities to bring new and beneficial concepts into the field are being stifled because of entrenched racial and gender bias.

The Stanford researchers examined US doctorate recipients and their dissertations over the course of 30 years. While underrepresented students innovate at higher rates than majority students, the researchers found that their contributions are discounted, which can lead to underrepresentation in influential positions in academia and STEM careers. The researchers named this phenomenon the “diversity-innovation paradox” in their white paper, “The Diversity-Innovation Paradox in Science,” published in April.

The team pointed out that scholars from underrepresented groups have origins, concerns, and experiences that differ from groups traditionally represented. These historically underrepresented groups, the white paper says, often draw relations between ideas and concepts that have been traditionally missed or ignored.

To measure innovation reception, the researchers looked at how innovations relate to two career outcomes. The first: whether graduate students become

research faculty after their graduation, as measured by graduating PhDs who go on to become a primary advisor of other PhD students. They believe this approach captures who transitions from student to mentor at a PhD-granting US university and who was able to secure a faculty job with a lineage of students. For example, with the last graduating cohort in 2010, the researchers looked to see who transitioned into faculty positions between 2010 and 2015. The second outcome of career success is whether graduating PhDs continue their career in research.

The team found a system where underrepresented groups must innovate at higher levels to have similar levels of career likelihoods. The careers of underrepresented groups end prematurely despite their crucial role in generating novel conceptual discoveries and innovation. The findings led the team to question how many trailblazers the field has missed out on. Based on the results, the team stressed the continued importance of critically evaluating and addressing biases in faculty hiring, research evaluation, and publication practices.



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however, that such information will likely constitute “medical records” subject to privacy laws.

Because scientists and medical professionals are learning more about the COVID-19 disease every day, the precise steps that firms should take to protect its employees will likely be outdated by the time this article is published. Accordingly, firms should continue to monitor safety guidelines issued by OSHA, the CDC and other governmental authorities. Firms should likewise keep in mind that personal injury litigation claiming COVID-19 exposure may not be covered by traditional forms of

insurance. Even if unfounded, such claims could become a public relations challenge.

5. How should firms plan for a COVID-19 resurgence?

As practices reopen, leaders need to keep their eye on the upcoming fall and winter seasons, when many expect the COVID-19 pandemic to return. So-called “critical” or “essential” workers already challenged by “round one” may by that time, be battle fatigued. Firms should consider preparing for a virus resurgence by providing employees with time to decompress or with additional flexibility during the upcoming summer

months. Additional leave or employee recognition programs could help prepare your staff for the next wave.

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