



# Preparing for a New Reality

## Thoughts on Flexible Work Arrangements in a Post Pandemic World

By Melody Jones and Fred Knowles

Due to the global pandemic, many companies were forced to move employees to home office status overnight (literally). And while many organizations tout effective flexible work practices, the sheer number of employees who became “virtual” in a compressed timeframe affected all companies in one way, shape or form.

This mass migration to virtual work now affords companies a great opportunity to re-envision their flexible work arrangements for the post pandemic world. In order to capture the lessons learned during this unprecedented shift to virtual work, companies should devote time to:

- 1) gather real time data on the effectiveness of a virtual workforce;
- 2) test certain long-held assumptions about working in an office environment; and,
- 3) develop an appropriate flexible work arrangement plan for the post pandemic reality.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the **key actions to take now** to develop a solid post pandemic plan.

### **Step 1: Set up a Task force and Treat This as a Project**

Things get done when a clear goal is established, resources are deployed, a plan is developed and progress is measured. It’s very important to declare this as an initiative and recruit the right employees to participate. Here are some questions that will help you decide who should be on the Flexible Work Arrangements project team (with example team members):

<u>Question</u>	<u>Potential Team Member</u>
• What business processes will need to change?	Business leader(s)
• What management practices will need to change?	CHRO/HR leader
• What is the role of technology, including data security?	CIO/IT leader
• What is the cost?	CFO/Finance leader
• What job duties will need to be changed or re-assigned?	HR leader
• What behavior changes do we need from employees?	HR leader
• What can we learn from current virtual employees?	Virtual employee(s)
• What will this mean for our real estate footprint?	CFO/Facilities leader



## **Step 2: Gather Information**

Gather information from your employees. The speed at which employees were required to adjust to the pandemic offers great insights into employee behaviors. In addition to employee insights, research what other companies are doing regarding Flexible Work Arrangements. A well thought out information gathering strategy is essential to obtain the data needed to build a proper glide path to the future state. Here is the type of information you'll want to collect:

- Lessons learned during the pandemic from the perspective of employees
- Lessons learned during the pandemic from the perspective of managers
- Lessons learned during the pandemic from customers (internal and external)
- Employee engagement during the pandemic
- Employee input regarding their comfort levels in working from home

This type of information can all be gathered via short, concise surveys. Additionally, you'll want to gather or create the following:

- Detailed summary of any bottlenecks that occurred during the pandemic (e.g., IT staff bandwidth, equipment shortages, etc.)
- Best practices from companies who are considered best in class virtual organizations (consulting firms, etc.)

## **Step 3: Inventory Current Flexible Work Principles, Policies and Practices**

In order to prepare for the new reality, it's important to document the company's existing flexible work arrangements. What policies and practices did you have in place? For example, you'll want to gather or create:

- All formal/written flexible work arrangement policies
- A list of any informal practices that are being used

#### **Step 4: Develop New Flexible Work Principles**

This is the time to take a fundamental look at the principles that will drive your flexible work strategy. You may find it quite useful to invert the typical approach to this exercise: **start from the assumption that everyone will work from home from now on**. Using that extreme as the stepping off point requires that you thoughtfully consider the necessity of each position or job category being performed in an office setting. Here are some things to consider as you develop your new principles:

- What is the business rationale for the principle?
- Is it clearly written?
- What are the unforeseen consequences of this principle?
- How easily can the principle be translated into policies and practices?
- What criteria can we articulate to describe which positions are best suited for office work?
- For these positions, how do the principles differ? How are they the same?

#### **Step 5: Develop New Flexible Work Policies and Practices**

Now that you have gathered information from your employees, benchmarked best practices, inventoried your current principles, policies and practices, and developed your new Flexible Work Principles, you are ready to develop your future state policies and practices. List all the policies and practices you will need in place in order to follow the new principles. The following considerations will guide the way:

- List everything that the virtual employee will need to be effective
- Organize these lists into similar categories and assign ownership, e.g. HR, IT, business unit leader, etc.
- Develop an overarching policy to govern remote work arrangements in general; as needed, work with individual functions/business units to create specific additional policies to govern their respective areas.

Remember, throughout the development of these policies, work backwards from the position of: “All employees work remotely”, and prove the opposite for each job function or position.

### **Step 6: Develop a Change Plan**

Even though you have carefully worked through the first 5 steps, a successful implementation will require a change plan. Employees will need to know **what** is changing (Policy and Practices) and **why** (Principles). This is also where you should consider the timing of the implementation. Here are some questions that highlight what needs to be considered in the change plan:

- What are our financial obligations to our various office space commitments and under what timeframe can we realize savings from reducing this footprint?
- How many of these savings will be offset by required investment to ensure successful remote work?
- Which roles/job functions/specific employees will be required to work at the office?
- How will we get buy-in from our employee base?
- How will we describe what is changing in a detailed way?
- What communication channels will we use to explain the change?
- How will we train employees on new practices or business processes?
- How will we measure effectiveness of the change plan?
- What is the specific implementation plan, e.g., big bang? Phased? Geo-specific? etc.

### **Conclusion**

The 6 steps outlined above are not necessarily complicated, but they do require time and resources to execute. Forward-looking companies who dedicate the time and energy to re-envision their Flexible Work Arrangements will be rewarded for their efforts. And while we all wish this horrendous pandemic never happened, it's critical that we glean lessons and take action now to ensure we are ready to thrive in the post pandemic world.

We **will** get through this terrible period (hopefully sooner rather than later). **Now** is the time to think strategically about your future working environment.

---

***Fred Knowles** is President of Executive Transition Coaching (eTc), a web-enabled coaching firm focused on career transition coaching, executive development and mentoring.*

***Melody Jones** is Founder of 32-80 Advisors and a senior eTc coach.*