

Boston University**OpenBU****<http://open.bu.edu>**

School of Hospitality Administration

BU Open Access Articles

2021-02-07

HR strategies for a business during COVID-19: be ready for a new way of doing business

*This work was made openly accessible by BU Faculty. Please [share](#) how this access benefits you.
Your story matters.*

Version	First author draft
Citation (published version):	Suzanne Bagnera, Danielle Clark Cole. "HR Strategies for a Business During COVID-19: Be Ready for a New Way of Doing Business."

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/42458>*Boston University*

HR Strategies for a Business During COVID-19: Be Ready for a New Way of Doing Business

By Danielle Clark Cole and Suzanne Markham Bagnera, PhD

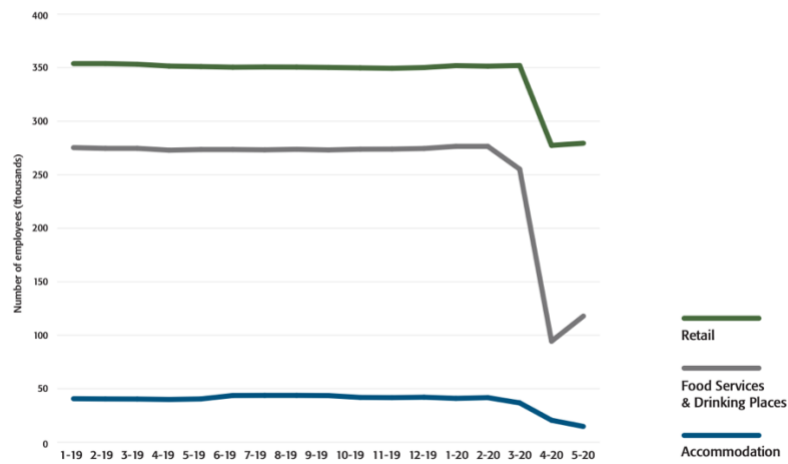


Photo Source: Dapiki Moto on Unsplash

As we enter into the tenth month of this pandemic, leaders across industries are learning-on-the-fly to manage their team through this unprecedented time. We all face a new challenge never seen by anyone before, figuring this out as we go. While there is some comfort in that (a sense of unity, of togetherness, of understanding) there is also some fear.

Prior to the pandemic, the hospitality industry in Massachusetts was a force to be reckoned with, where many of the small businesses employed less than ten people (Mikula & Hajjar, 2020). The Pioneer Institute has calculated pre-COVID and post-COVID employment in Figure 1 in Massachusetts (Paxton et al., 2020).

Figure 1: Number of employees (thousands) in selected industry sectors in Massachusetts, January 2019 - May 2020⁸



Source: Paxton Institute

For companies that recognize themselves in this figure, it is important to keep in mind that, eventually, the pandemic will end and (hopefully) businesses will once again operate at pre-pandemic levels. When that happens, businesses are going to need employees... along with every other operation. Although it might be an employer's job market right now, the end of the pandemic will flip the switch; it will then be the employee's job market once again. By taking the time now, to develop a plan which demonstrates loyalty and concern for employee's wellbeing. Even if the strategy includes processing furloughs or layoffs, businesses will create a solid foundation for the post-COVID world in which they can continue to operate successfully, thus keeping the team together for long-term stability.

HR Strategic Recommendations

1. Get creative.

Many organizations have found that either the services they offer, or their organizational structure is no longer applicable in a pandemic world. For businesses' that find themselves in this scenario, it does not necessarily mean that they need to shutter operations. Get creative! Of course, we see restaurants offering curbside pick-up and cocktails to-go, but there are other examples of companies pivoting to stay relevant.

Boston-based bakery [Flour](#) is offering kits for sale, which include the ingredients to bake seasonal favorites, accompanied by an Instagram how-to video. Boys and Girls Clubs have created virtual, interactive programming for kids to keep them engaged and maintain membership levels. The Columbus Hospitality Group is making available box kits that include an option for a cheese and wine tasting or a themed dinner package available with a partnership through the Boston Ballet Company for live virtual performances.

By adjusting the operation to meet the current needs, increased revenue generation will make it possible to provide additional working hours for the team. If making food available through a

delivery service, consider using the resources of the team and have them become the delivery drivers' instead. Mistral had the general managers of Columbus Hospitality group work as delivery butlers, to gain the confidence of the customers for their safety measures. Even if there isn't an ability to make operational changes on the customer facing side, consider offering employees task force projects which will provide additional hours so they are earning closer to normal hours while still assisting in the completion of much needed projects.

2. **Review benefits.**

Take a look at the organization's benefit requirements and availability. If employees' scheduled hours are being reduced, can there also be a temporary reduction in the number of hours required for an employee to maintain benefit eligibility? If employees will be furloughed or laid off, is it financially possible to cover the cost of their benefits for a certain amount of time? Now, more than ever, health insurance is crucial. For businesses that can afford to, it is one of the most important ways to show appreciation for employees. For companies that will be covering employee's benefits, be sure to review the strategy with a benefit broker for the best route on how to handle the necessary paperwork.

3. **Communicate, communicate, communicate.**

Do you have a COVID policy? If not, that should be the first order of business. What are employees expected to do if they come in close contact with someone who has tested positive? Do they know what the expectations are?

Be proactive with team communication messages as this will save time in the long-run. For example, since everyone has access to new rules and regulations at the same time, a proactive approach to sharing a new update could include a quick note to say "we saw that the governor announced new regulations that will impact our operations; we're reviewing our current protocols and will have an update by the end of the week." A message, such as this, provides employees with confidence that leadership remains focused on important informational updates. Again, everyone is experiencing this pandemic for the first time, so while no one will have all of the answers, being open and honest is the best route to take.

If employees have been furloughed, what does their communication plan look like? Have any standards been established (e.g. they will be hearing from you monthly, when there are changes, or once their job is available)?

4. **Empathize.**

Have you ever had an employee that was going through a tough time and so you, as a caring leader, worked a little harder to empathize when they missed a deadline, started crying in a meeting, or lost their cool with a guest? That is the entire work force right now, including leadership teams. This does not mean that everyone gets a "get out of jail free card." It does mean that you should be gentle with your team and yourself.

5. **Understand the difference of a furlough verses a layoff.**

If you do have to make the difficult decision that not everyone currently on the team is needed, review the pros and cons of a furlough versus a layoff. If the plan is to bring the employee back at the end of the pandemic, a furlough may be the best route to take. The employee will recognize that they will have a job to come back to, which might encourage them to look for temporary, rather than permanent work (which means they will be able to quickly re-join the team when needed). Bringing an employee back from furlough will also save time because it eliminates the need to re-process all of the normal onboarding that is required with a re-hire (e.g. I9 forms, onboarding paperwork).

A layoff however, is considered a separation of employment. While the intention will be to contact them when business resumes, it is not an obligation. In operations where a collective bargaining agreement exists, it is more critical to understand the difference and when to provide notification so violations to the terms of the WARN Act can be avoided. The Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN) Act requires that employers provide a 60-day notice of a layoff to employees for businesses with more than 50 employees (Heathfield, 2020).

6. Commit to your safety standards.

If safety is identified as the number one priority, you should not be guilt-tripping an employee to come into work who is experiencing COVID-19 symptoms. Does this mean that sometimes employers could be taken advantage of by that employee looking for time off? Absolutely. Is it worth it to ensure that the rest of an organization, as well as any customers, are safe? That is an individual business decision, but from an ethical and public relations standpoint, we would give it a resounding yes.

7. Recognize public perception.

The world is watching how companies are handling this pandemic and companies will be remembered for how they treat their employees right now. To be clear, no organization should be making business decisions purely based on public opinion. You should treat employees well because it is the right thing to do. That being said, for anyone needing an added incentive, take a look at public response when it was perceived that the Four Seasons Boston took unfair measures against their team (Associated Press, 2020; Pescaro, 2020). On the other side of the spectrum, companies taking positive action, to help their employees and community, such as Newton-based [Karyopharm](#) and Boston-based [Toast](#), are also getting press (Marston, 2020; Walrath, 2020).

8. Review current policies.

In the current environment, do all of your policies still make sense? If not, there might need to be a temporary pause placed on some or a temporary COVID policy established. This might also offer the opportunity to revise something permanently based on what is being experienced now. Many organizations are reviewing their remote work policy and making permanent adjustments as they see productivity increasing in this new arrangement. A recent study indicates that employees would like to further explore some form of work-from-home or remote work policy, even if it is just one day a week (Mikula & Hajjar, 2020).

9. Get a lawyer.

If you do not have legal counsel, now is the time to get connected with a trusted and well-known law firm. As we are all faced with new challenges, there aren't a lot of resources available as a guide in a difficult decision (for example, an employee refuses to wear a mask for religious reasons. What now?). Having a lawyer to consult with can help minimize a company's risk and guide leaders through appropriate steps to take with tricky employment situations. Many law firms have been offering complimentary webinars and continue to do so to support their clients as they navigate together an understanding of the law and measures to take to mitigate risk reduction.

10. Review your boundaries.

Normally, the recommendation is for companies to stay as removed as possible from an employee's personal life. But we live in a world where personal decisions can have immediate impacts on the health and safety of anyone that we interact with. What, if any, are the expectations to be set for the team? What will be done if you see an Instagram post of an employee at a 30-person Christmas party? What if someone travels to see family? These aren't easy questions to answer, however, it is better to think about them now and integrate it into a company COVID policy rather than try to make a spur of the moment decision when faced with the situation.

Very few of these "to-do's" have clear and easy answers or outcomes. The decisions will not be made lightly; adaptation strategies will probably have to be made based on the results of what you learn. The good news is that a pandemic is not a time for perfection. So be flexible, use that hospitality grit, and have compassion for not only yourself but the team as well. These points should help ensure that when this is over (and eventually it will be over), a loyal team will be ready to jump in provide outstanding service for your loyal customers.

References

- Associated Press. (2020, June 11). *Luxury Boston hotel lays off workers, even as it reopens*. Boston.Com.
<https://www.boston.com/news/coronavirus/2020/06/11/four-seasons-hotel-boston-layoffs>
- Heathfield, S. (2020, April 17). *Employers must follow WARN act requirements in layoffs*. The Balance Careers. <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/warn-act-layoff-requirements-1918297>
- Marston, J. (2020, March 18). *Toast launches a relief plan for restaurants*. The Spoon.
<https://thespoon.tech/toast-launches-a-relief-plan-for-restaurants/>
- Mikula, A., & Hajjar, S. (2020, November 16). *Pioneer report highlights pre-pandemic employment growth in Massachusetts' hospitality & food industry*. Pioneer Institute.
<https://pioneerinstitute.org/covid/covid-economy/pioneer-report-highlights-pre-pandemic-employment-growth-in-massachusetts-hospitality-food-industry/>
- Paxton, R., Mikula, A., & Sullivan, G. (2020). *Public policy guide for economic recovery from COVID-19 for hospitality and retail businesses* (Public Policy Research No. 210; p. 42). Pioneer Institute.
- Pescaro, M. (2020, June 11). *Luxury Boston hotel lets go workers, even as it reopens* [NBC Boston].
<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6941677-Four-Seasons-4.html>
- Walrath, R. (2020, April 24). *How Boston companies are supporting employees during coronavirus* [The business journals]. BostInno.
<https://www.bizjournals.com/boston/inno/stories/news/2020/04/24/how-boston-companies-are-supporting-employees.html>

Bio



Danielle Clark Cole believes that great leaders can transform the success of an organization. With experience as a senior Human Resources leader at both large companies and small start-ups, she is passionate about coaching leaders to make solid business decisions with a hospitality mindset. She is the Director of Human Resources at Trillium Brewing Company, the Co-Founder and Principal of Hospitality Leadership Academy, and the co-author of *Human Resource Management in Hospitality Cases*, a textbook.



Suzanne Markham Bagnera, PhD is an Assistant Clinical Professor in the School of Hospitality Administration at Boston University, where she specializes in teaching hotel operations and human resource management. She has held positions as General Manager at Holiday Inn Hotel & Suites, Staybridge Suites, and Holiday Inn Express. Suzanne earned her M.B.A. in Management and B.S. in Hotel/Restaurant Management from Johnson & Wales University and her doctorate from Iowa State University in Hospitality Management. Suzanne is the co-author of *Human Resource Management in Hospitality Cases*, a textbook and the managing director of the Hospitality Leadership Academy.