

A woman with dark hair in a braid, wearing a white face mask, a grey t-shirt, and a red safety harness, is operating a piece of industrial machinery. She is looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred industrial setting with red lighting on the right side.

# key challenges for HR

as businesses  
return to work.



# introduction.

As businesses around the world adjust to the new normal in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the HR department will be focused on return-to-work strategies that reflect the unique challenges of this time.

The **COVID-19** pandemic is a unique situation for modern employers that has given rise to a range of unprecedented challenges. In no area of business is this more evident than HR.

Organisations across the globe are adjusting to the new normal created by this crisis, and the HR department faces the task of helping people get back to work in a healthy, positive and productive way.

Here are four of the most significant workforce challenges you're likely to encounter as your organisation adapts to the new reality, and some practical guidance on how to meet them.

# 1. returning to work safely.

First and foremost, the COVID-19 pandemic is a health crisis, so employers and HR managers must ensure their return-to-work plans enable people to come back to their jobs as safely as possible.

Guidelines and protocols on how companies should operate in this new environment will vary between countries, industries and business types, so it's vital to get up-to-date information for your organisation from the government. Industry bodies, trade unions and healthcare authorities can also provide useful guidance on what safety measures and precautions you're expected to put in place.

Randstad has teamed up with other HR services industry leaders to produce a range of resources on [getting safely back to work in the new normal](#). A guide to best practice health and safety protocols outlines some of the steps and solutions you could put in place to maintain workforce wellbeing, including:

- staggered lunch and break times to stop people gathering in groups and ease physical distancing
- provision of personal protective equipment
- installation of separators in lunch rooms and common areas
- rearrangement of offices and desks to create more space
- improved ventilation and filtration to remove hazardous particles from the air
- more stringent cleaning and sanitation procedures

[Do you need a health & safety protocol? We've captured best practices from across countries and industry sectors.](#)

[learn more](#)



## how HR can support a safe return

One of the most important responsibilities of the HR department at this time is to engage with the workforce and provide as much one-on-one information and support as possible.

Research has indicated many employees have concerns about returning to the workplace after a long period either working remotely or not working at all, and these individuals will be looking to HR leaders for advice and reassurance.

A YouGov survey for the [Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development \(CIPD\)](#) - the UK's professional body for HR - found that 44% of people felt anxious about going back to work. The CIPD urged businesses to consider these three questions before bringing people back into the workplace:

- is it essential? - If people are able to work from home, they should continue to do so
- is it safe? - Protective measures (such as those listed above) should be put in place to reduce the risk of the virus spreading in workplaces
- is it mutually agreed? - There must be a dialogue between employers and workers so individual concerns and requirements are taken into account



## 2. gaps in the workforce.

COVID-19 has had a devastating financial impact on businesses around the world, with many seeing their revenue streams dry up in an extremely short space of time. One of the unfortunate but inevitable consequences of this is an increase in staff layoffs as struggling companies look to cut costs in an effort to stay afloat.

The repercussions of the pandemic for workers have been visible all over the world. In the United States, a further 2.1 million people made unemployment claims in the week ending May 23 2020, according to the [Department of Labor](#). There have been more than 40 million claims for first-time unemployment benefits since the coronavirus outbreak forced the US economy to shut down in March.

Across the European Union, unemployment is expected to [rise to 9%](#) in 2020 before falling to 7.9% in 2021, with Greece, Spain and Italy the worst affected countries and Germany faring the best.

As your business gradually transitions to the new normal in the wake of COVID-19, one of the HR challenges you may encounter is needing to fill gaps in the workforce and secure the workforce capacity you need to restart operations. The HR department will be tasked with rehiring laid-off employees, and if that isn't possible, sourcing new hires and onboarding them as quickly and efficiently as possible.

This is exactly the sort of situation where the benefits of a [flexible staffing solution](#) become clear. Putting flexibility at the heart of your workforce planning will help you meet short-term, unforeseen challenges and scale your labor capacity up and down as you see fit.

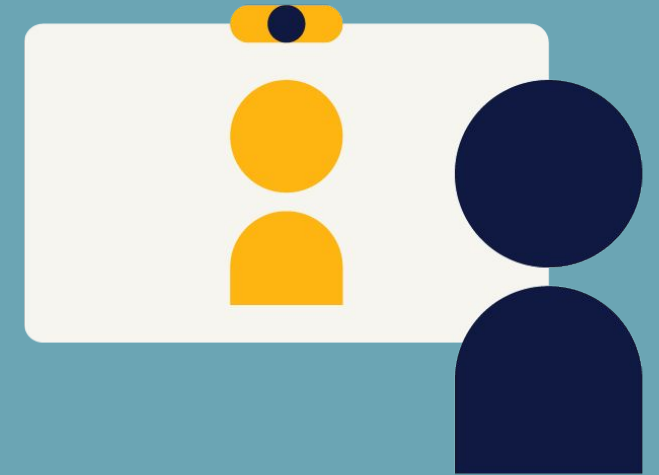


# 3. reluctance to return to the workplace.

Some businesses have been forced into the unfortunate position of having to lay people off during the COVID crisis, while many others have had to make big adjustments in how they operate and how their people work. Owing to the physical distancing restrictions enforced by the pandemic, one of the most significant changes has been a large-scale shift to **remote working**.

A report produced by **Slack** showed that an estimated 16 million knowledge workers in the US had started working remotely due to COVID-19 by March 27 - a number that is likely to have increased during April.

Furthermore, a survey of 6,000 office workers across Europe by Okta found that, in the UK, only **one in four respondents** were eager to make a full return to the workplace, with many showing a preference for a flexible model based on part-time remote working.



So what can the HR department do when you're faced with large portions of your workforce who are quite happy working at home and reluctant to return to the workplace?

The first step is to evaluate how necessary it is for people to make a physical return to work. If your employees have shown they're able to do their jobs effectively from home and it doesn't disadvantage the business in any way, it might be worth sticking with these arrangements for the time being. Your staff will appreciate your demonstration of trust in them and you'll also reduce the risk of the virus spreading in the workplace by allowing people to stay at home.

However, in some industries - manufacturing and construction, for example - remote working simply isn't possible or sustainable. If you need people to return to the workplace but they're reluctant to do so, take the time to engage with them one-on-one and listen to their concerns.

Those who are worried about the health implications of returning to the workplace might feel more confident once they hear about the actions and safeguards you're putting in place to protect staff. Develop policies that emphasise employee wellbeing as the organisation's top priority and make them available to all workers.

Some people might be reluctant or unable to return to work due to caring responsibilities or because they're self-isolating. In these cases, look for a flexible, constructive solution that ensures you can access the labor you need in the short term, but leaves the door open for employees to return once they're able.

Again, flexible staffing solutions can prove invaluable in this sort of scenario. A [dedicated recruitment partner](#) can help you meet short-term talent needs at speed, with maximum cost efficiency.

It's also worth considering how you can leverage the potential of modern HR tools and technologies. Platforms like [Gigwalk](#), which is supported by the [Randstad Innovation Fund](#), can connect companies with available workers in the gig economy.



## 4. cost pressures.



Most businesses working hard to stay afloat in today's uniquely challenging environment will put cost reduction at the top of their list of priorities. With so many firms seeing their revenue opportunities limited and profit margins squeezed, getting a handle on costs has never been more important.

From an HR perspective, there are various steps you can take to reduce costs. One option to consider is adopting process automation, which can optimise your deployment of human resources while increasing process accuracy and speed, minimizing the time and cost impact of rectifying errors.

It can also prove valuable to think about the costs involved in your recruitment activities. Hiring permanent employees can be expensive, with the costs of advertising the role, conducting assessments, onboarding, training, salary and benefits all having to be taken into account. This can be particularly hard to justify if your workforce needs are seasonal or prone to fluctuation.

Fortunately, modern employers have access to a flexible workforce that is more expansive and capable than ever before. The number of freelancers in the US reached **62.2 million in 2019**, up from 59.7 million the year before, and is expected to pass the 90 million mark by 2028. It's estimated that the proportion of US workers participating in the gig economy will increase to **43% in 2020**.

Specialist freelancers and flexible workers can be a valuable source of skills that might be hard to find in the mainstream labor market. They can be brought in quickly and kept onboard for as long as you need them. And overseeing this portion of your workforce can be made easier with a dedicated **freelancer management system**.

This level of responsiveness and flexibility could prove important to many businesses in the current environment, particularly those with immediate skills requirements that have recognized the need to reinvent their HR processes. Ultimately, taking control of your staffing and workforce management will help you succeed in the post-Covid era.



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