

SHRM CEO Advises Flexibility for Small-Business Owners

Listen to employees before changing policies for COVID-19

By Nancy Cleeland

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Nearly six months into the COVID-19 pandemic, many small businesses are struggling to survive while still trying to maintain a productive and engaged workforce. Those employers that exhibit flexibility, empathy and openness with their employees will be ahead of the game as the economy recovers, advised Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP, president and chief executive officer of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).

In a live-streamed interview with Jordyn Dahl, small business editor at LinkedIn, Taylor answered some of the most pressing questions small-business owners have about managing their employees through this unprecedented crisis.

Start with Understanding Needs

Before making blanket policies on issues such as remote work, it's important to understand the needs of individual employees, Taylor said.

"Have one-on-ones if you can. This is easier for smaller employers," he said. "You may find some people have school-age children and others don't. Some people can work remotely part time, maybe they have a partner who is home a couple of days a week. There are all sorts of ways we are encouraging flexibility, but it starts with listening to your employees."

Employers should also be mindful of any state and local laws that may apply to remote work situations, Taylor said.

A SHRM survey of small businesses conducted in late May (<https://shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/Documents/SHRM%20CV19%20SBO%202%20Research%20Presentation%20v3.pdf>) found that 82 percent planned to adopt broader or more-flexible work-from-home policies. In addition, 43 percent of small employers planned to accommodate employees with children by allowing flexible hours or compressed workweeks.

Numerous (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/311375/reviewing-remote-work-covid.aspx>) surveys (<https://www.pwc.com/us/en/library/covid-19/us-remote-work-survey.html>) have documented the shift to remote work that began as state and local governments ordered businesses deemed nonessential to close. The trend has continued as health concerns (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/professionals-afraid-covid.aspx) and virtual schooling (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/employer-child-care-covid.aspx) keep many workers home.

However, Taylor noted that remote work isn't a long-term solution for everyone. Some employees prefer the camaraderie of the office or don't have an adequate space to work at home. Employees with children may be distracted throughout the day, while those who live alone could be stressed for other reasons. "When you put someone in a house by themselves for long periods of time, you add a new level of stress at a time when mental health is starting to become a real issue," he said.

According to SHRM research, small-business owners are planning to call back 75 percent of their staff by Labor Day, he said.

Taylor said even employees who enjoy working from home could be hurt by extensive remote work—because they can be replaced by employees who would work for less in a lower-cost locale (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/pages/remote-workers-living-lower-cost-locations-be-paid-less.aspx). "I say to employees, 'Be careful what you pray for,'" he said.

SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Coronavirus and COVID-19 (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/communicable-diseases.aspx)

On Testing Employees for COVID-19

Several small-business owners on the LinkedIn chat wondered about testing employees for COVID-19, and whether they should pay for it.

Taylor noted that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has stated that employers may test employees for the coronavirus and that the agency does not require employers to pay for it. But that doesn't mean testing is advisable. "Most employers aren't requiring testing," he said, in part because employees may regard it as intrusive.

If an employee tests positive at the workplace, or informs the employer of a positive test, the employer must take action, first by removing the infected employee to isolate at home and second by notifying any other employees who may have been in contact with that person so that they can take appropriate action.

However, the employer must not divulge the name of the infected employee because that would violate medical privacy laws. "You have an obligation to keep the individual's identity confidential," he said.

Initiating Difficult Conversations

SHRM's most recent research, on perceptions of racism at the workplace (https://togetherforwardatwork.shrm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/20-1412_TFAW_Report_FNL_Pages_V2.pdf), found striking gaps between how Black and white employees and HR professionals view the issue. Taylor was asked about one particularly notable finding: 68 percent of Black HR professionals say their organization is not doing enough to support Black employees; only 35 percent of white HR professionals say the same.

"We've got to get people to start talking about these issues," he said. "One thing all of us can do is encourage honest dialogue, get it out on the table. ... You can't fix what you don't know."

To that end, SHRM developed a toolkit for starting difficult conversations (https://togetherforwardatwork.shrm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/20-1407-TFAW-Conv-Cards_v2-1.pdf), which it has made available as part of its Together Forward @Work (https://togetherforwardatwork.shrm.org/?_ga=2.5843891.1849099250.1597584197-1021787754.1579020315&_gac=1.53626842.1594299459.CjwKCAjw88v3BRBFEiwApwLevXYTYu_3T6_8GDFaSuwY-GC23K0nPFW6aSJmGImQ5XHq0MbyLRq3SRoC0UQQAvD_BwE) initiative launched earlier this month to promote racial equity in the workplace.

"There is a major problem when any group of employees feels like they're being discriminated against," Taylor said. "We have got to figure out a way to build that muscle that allows us to have uncomfortable conversations in a smart, effective way."

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