



The Resilient Family Enterprise series:

Cultivating a post-COVID “workplace”

Before 2020, the term “workplace” generally meant a dedicated office space for people to work together. And while there was a growing trend toward more remote work, COVID-19 has accelerated that movement, forcing businesses to rely on distributed networks of employees connected only by the strength of their internet connections. Now comes the question of what the workplace looks like once the crisis subsides.

Here’s the thing: as challenging as this year has been for employees suddenly forced to work remotely, most are getting used to it—and they don’t want to go back. A recent survey of more than 1,100 remote workers by *The New York Times* and Morning Consult found that 86 percent of workers were satisfied with their current situation.¹ Why are they willing to work from the kitchen table? No time spent commuting, greater flexibility, and more time outside—to name a few reasons.

Business leaders tempted to view these arrangements as temporary might need to adjust their thinking. Instead of focusing on what has been lost, it’s time to start considering what could be gained if the workplace reality is forever changed. Take the now ubiquitous Zoom calls—once seen as a compromise stand-in for physical meetings. Teams are increasingly finding these interactions to be bonding opportunities, providing new windows into a world in which family members and pets pass through the background.

For family businesses around the globe, this dramatic shift in the way that work is accomplished might appear to threaten some of the advantages they’ve had in developing and nurturing talent. Family enterprises are known for providing mentoring opportunities through direct access to leadership. They also tend to be strongly rooted in the communities in which they operate and serve—a quality

that implies a physical presence. But, with careful thought and attention, these inherent traits can be preserved and enhanced in the post-COVID workplace. And, it turns out, family businesses already have an advantage in making this transition possible.

The trust advantage

In business, we spend a lot of time trying to identify the sources of competitive advantage. Quality products, superior innovation, smart marketing, a strong culture—these are the things people generally point to as delivering value. But, even before the pandemic hit, companies were trying to understand the impact that trust has in enabling those differentiators to emerge. They rightly came to see trust as currency for building loyalty, earning goodwill, and even permission to try new things.



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COVID-19 has cast a spotlight on the importance of trust in a commercial setting, not the least of which is in the employer-employee relationship. Employers have to trust that their employees can be productive in a non-traditional setting, even as family pressures are competing for their attention. And employees have to trust that their employers are managing the crisis effectively and making decisions that are in their best interests as well as the company's.²

In this respect, family enterprises are in a prime position. We know that, compared to other organizations, employees of family businesses are more likely to place trust in their employer. For many, it comes down to what their company stands for. Sixty-four percent of large family business employees polled by Edelman last year agreed that the organization they work for acts on its value, compared to 54 percent of large non-family businesses who say the same.³ What's more, 68 percent look to their employer as a trustworthy source of information about social issues and other important matters, versus 62 percent for those working for large non-family employers.⁴

Because of this level of trust, family businesses have greater license in the current environment to adjust how work is accomplished. One area that is ripe with opportunity is the use of technology

solutions to see how teams are working together in real time. One constraint of physical working relationships is a lack of traceable data on how people are collaborating. Now, thanks to the need to partner virtually, organizational network analysis tools are revealing some interesting insights about how clustered some teams are through their digital interactions. Increasingly, business leaders are using this information to create cross-connections between teams. When people hear about such attempts to "scrape" their passive data, they might become suspicious. But employers who have established trust with their workers are far more likely to obtain their buy-in and help create a better workforce experience.

"L" versus "I"

These kinds of initiatives, that tackle enterprise-wide efficiencies, amount to the big "L" of leadership decisions. But often, it's effectively managing the everyday little "I" tasks that rate just as highly, if not more so. Here, it's more a matter of leadership style. Once the crisis hit, it became apparent pretty quickly that team leaders had become the critical node for many organizations, maintaining important connections with employees and caring for the culture. But some overdid it by establishing a controlling environment with rigid check-ins for their workers, scheduling too many Zoom calls, and generally using the calendar as a productivity prod.

What many learned is that their employees need defined time—and lots of it—in which they could work asynchronously as they also dealt with non-work demands. Germany's Siemens drew a lot of attention when it established mobile working as a core component of its "new normal" strategy.⁵ In a statement, Chief Executive Roland Busch said Siemens would adopt a two-fold approach: 1) focus on outcomes rather than time spent in the office, and 2) trust and empower its employees.⁶ What Siemens and scores of other companies have realized this year is that good workers can be productive in any setting once you help them connect the dots.

As family businesses look to leverage the trust they've established with their workforces in this new reality, the ways in which they communicate are critical for maintaining it. Once you've set clear goals regarding expectations and guidelines for responsiveness, it's time to back off. Instead of scheduling a multitude of Zoom calls and check-ins, focus instead on the human dimension and giving each employee the space and insight they need to be productive. Embrace authenticity. The pandemic is a level-setting event in many ways, with workers and business leaders alike facing similar challenges and concerns. That's creating an opportunity for authentic communications focused on these shared experiences. You might be surprised how much trust you can build by conducting

regular town halls with CEOs and other senior leaders from their own homes, where they share some insights as to how they're managing the pandemic while also communicating the information employees need to effectively do their jobs.

The workplace bonds that are nurtured during this crisis may pay dividends in the post-COVID environment, in which a hybrid of physical and virtual work becomes the norm. The parking lot may

not be full Monday through Friday, but people will still get together at dedicated times to collaborate and socialize, before returning to the freedom to work independently and on their own schedules. For family businesses, this is a remarkable opportunity to gain new insights even as they protect what makes them popular employers. As long as the trust is there, family enterprises stand to emerge from this crisis as more connected and more resilient organizations.

Notes

1. Anya Strzemien, Jessica Bennett, Tracy Ma and Eve Lyons, "[Out of Office: A Survey of Our New Work Lives](#)," The New York Times, August 20, 2020.
2. Jeff Schwartz, Steven Hatfield, Nicole Scoble-Williams, Erica Volini, "Workforce strategies for post-COVID-19 recovery," Deloitte, 2020.
3. 2019 [Edelman Trust Barometer: Implications for Family Business](#), May 30, 2019.
4. Ibid.
5. Justin Bariso, "[This Company's New 2-Sentence Remote Work Policy Is the Best I've Ever Heard](#)," Inc., July 27, 2020
6. Siemens press release, "[Siemens to establish mobile working as core component of the 'new normal'](#)," July 16, 2020.

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