

## Insight & Employee Engagement Advice Note

# COVID-19

## Webinar: COVID-19 Return and Recovery – The Data Driving U.S. Decisions and Response

May 2020

### Overview

Brunswick Group hosted a webinar to discuss the results from our latest COVID-19 Workforce Outlook tracking survey and the data that will be driving the return and recovery decisions in the U.S. over the coming weeks and months.

Since March 16, Brunswick has been conducting a weekly poll of U.S. workers to understand what actions companies are taking, how they are communicating to their employees, and how employees are reacting. During the webinar, the team shared three key takeaways:

1. The faith of workers is being tested as companies, unprepared for this crisis and trying to survive, struggle to say and do the right thing.
2. Many companies face a crisis within a crisis as they contemplate how to handle worst-case scenarios.
3. There is hope, and companies will need to address new expectations as they plan for the future.

While these results reflect a broad range of U.S. workers, it's important to note that every company and employee body is different. Using external data is helpful to understand what your employees may be thinking, but maintaining two-way communication with them is the best way to understand their specific views and concerns.

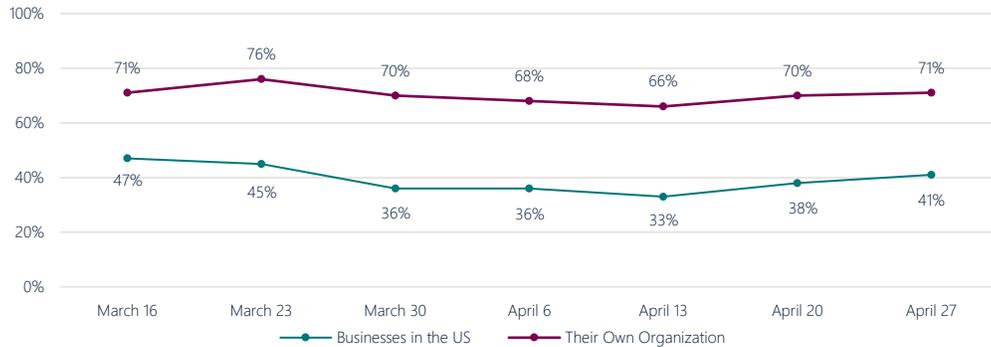
Below is a summary of these key themes discussed in the call. A full recording of the webinar is available on the Brunswick Group website, linked [here](#).

### Key Themes

#### Testing Faith: Gaps in Action and Expectation

Since the beginning of the survey, U.S. workers had more trust in their own organizations' readiness to face the spread of coronavirus than they did in the readiness of U.S. businesses as a whole. During the past seven weeks,

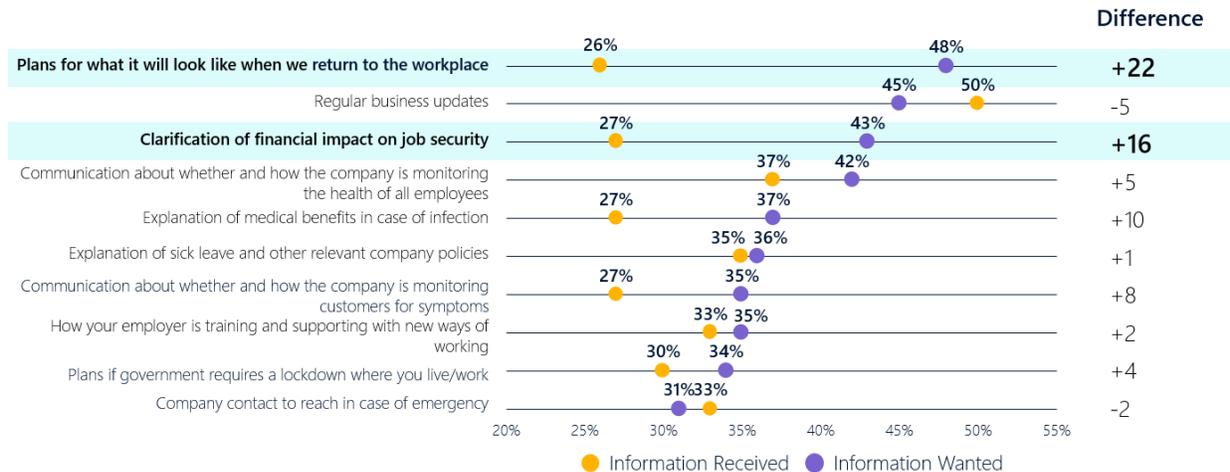
trust in employees' own organizations has hovered around 70%. Trust in business in the U.S. overall, however, has dropped from 47% eight weeks ago to 41% last week. It is important to note that remote workers are less optimistic than those who continue to work on-site, with only 33% of remote workers saying that businesses in the U.S. are prepared for the coronavirus outbreak.



When asked how they feel about their company in light of its handling of coronavirus, 41% of employees said they feel more positive about their company now than they did before. 37% of respondents say they feel the same about their company, while 23% feel less positive about their company than before. Here we see another discrepancy in employees' feelings, with 28% of hourly employees saying they feel less positive about their company now, compared to only 16% of salaried employees.

As for communications, employees seem largely satisfied with their company's communications about coronavirus, with 71% saying they are satisfied and 13% saying they are not. The disconnect appears when discussing what information is important. While regular business updates are surpassing employee expectations, there is a huge gap in two main areas:

- Return to the workplace planning: Almost half of the surveyed employees say they want information on their company's plans for return to the workplace, but only 26% say they have received such communications.
- Clarification on job security: 43% want information on the financial impact on job security, and only 27% say they have already received it.



Understanding these gaps is the best way to shape what you are talking to your employees about and how to talk about it. Companies have been communicating with employees more often, more transparently, and more personally. CEOs and other leaders are sharing heartfelt videos, highly empathetic and grateful social media posts, and articles about the lessons they have learned and plan to take forward as we look toward reopening.

While companies have increased the volume of their communications to employees, some of our data notes that only 11% of people surveyed believe their company is going above and beyond with communications. Employees are saying they aren't sure of the decisions being taken or where to find the information they want, which shows they are looking for employee engagement and not just communication.

Engagement entails meeting employees where they are emotionally. Different employee groups are experiencing unique impacts and emotions due to the outbreak, and they should be offered unique experiences in how they are informed and inspired. This may require that you go back to basics with your communications, including outlining your different audiences, retailoring messages to ensure they are both rational and emotional, and prioritizing your corporate purposes and offering proof about how different employee groups are valuable to that purpose.

Your leaders should be ready to listen and adapt during the reopening process, and you need to bring together various employee groups to share what they are learning and better understand the diverse experiences across the company. Finally, visual and compelling campaign-like content will help draw a thread through the what and how of reopening and beyond.

## When There's a Crisis Within the Crisis

The COVID-19 outbreak has caused a number of mini-crises within the larger issue we are all experiencing. Two main ones that we focused on in our data collection are employee deaths and employee activism.

### Communicating the Worst-Case Scenario

When communicating an employee death due to COVID-19, we found that almost half of the surveyed employees would prefer to hear about it from their direct manager or team leader. While company leadership, including the CEO, should communicate with the company in that situation, this suggests that direct lines of leadership and personal connection are really important for such a sensitive topic. Direct managers are by far the best first source of information for this.

We also found that email is overwhelmingly the most preferred method of communication in that scenario. It allows employees the time to process the information privately rather than in a public forum, such as a team or company call, which can come later.

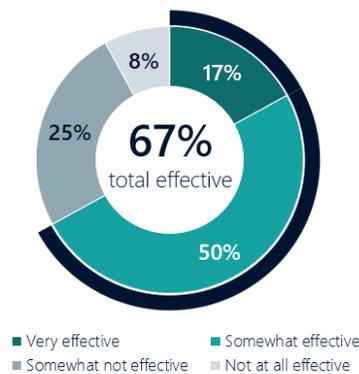


## Employee Activism

During the last two months, a number of companies have seen various forms of employee activism and protest against their handling of the COVID-19 outbreak. Our survey has found that people side with employees almost always, regardless of context, and are optimistic about how effective a walk-off would be in reducing health risks.

When asked about what actions they would take if they feel their employer was putting their health at risk, most respondents said they would raise it to their direct manager or HR – far more than the number who would pursue activist tactics. As before, however, the breakdown of respondents paints a slightly different picture. While only 25% of all employees said they would join a strike if they felt their health was at risk, that number was 46% for unionized employees. The same discrepancy can be seen in raising issues to the media (26% overall vs. 45% for unionized) and posting concerns on social media (29% overall vs. 44% for unionized). These numbers show that companies with unionized workers need to be especially thoughtful about how their employees' concerns are heard.

**How effective do you think employee walk offs will be in motivating companies to reduce health risks for employees?**



**If you felt that your employer was asking you to work in a way that put your health at risk, how likely would you be to take each of the following actions?**



Employee deaths and other situations that may lead to employee activism are all highly emotional situations, making actions more likely, especially seeing that employees believe they would be effective. We cannot ignore employees when they speak loudly about issues within the organization, especially during dangerous and highly emotional times. Rather than ignoring or punishing employees who raise concerns, the true work comes from building a model of influence and action to give employees opportunities to be heard and take action accordingly.

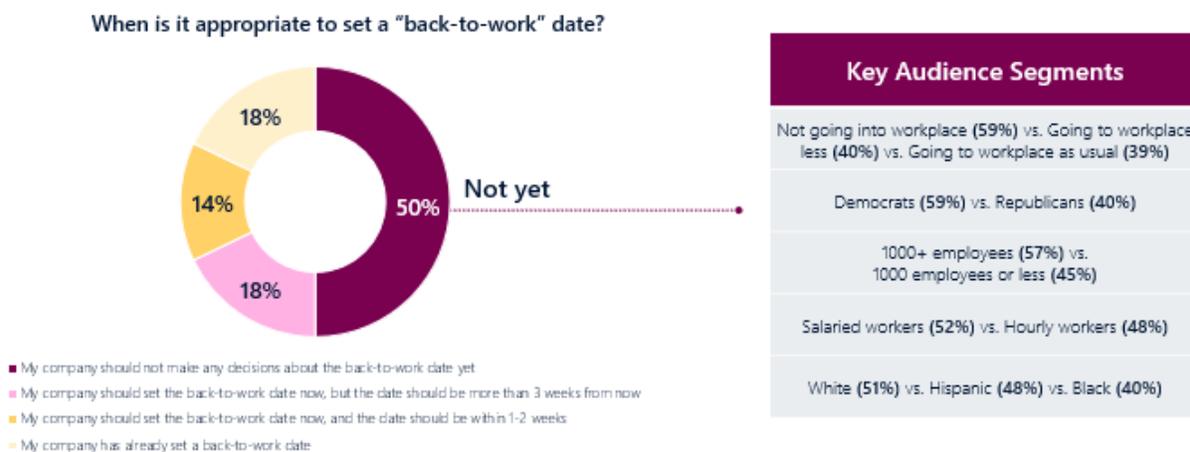
- Ensure you have a strong foundation. Decisions and communications should align with the company's past behavior and stated values. If employees see a disconnect, they will feel, at best, disappointed and, at worst, betrayed. Negative action like activism is sparked when companies fail to live up to their values.
- Invite employees to be heard and influence where they can. You can do this through listening sessions with leaders and teams, surveys to solicit input on process, policy, and other decisions, virtual focus groups, inside-out research pulling from social media and external platforms, or collecting anonymous feedback.
- Establish proactive platforms for employees to take positive actions and make sure they work within your company culture.

Soliciting input from employees is beneficial, but that also needs to be reflected in the decisions being made in response. Decisions have to be shared transparently for employees to feel they were part of building your company's future.

## Planning for the Future

The final part of our survey focused on planning for the future as shelter-in-place orders ease and businesses start returning to a more normal state. We focused on the timing of return and what that return looks like.

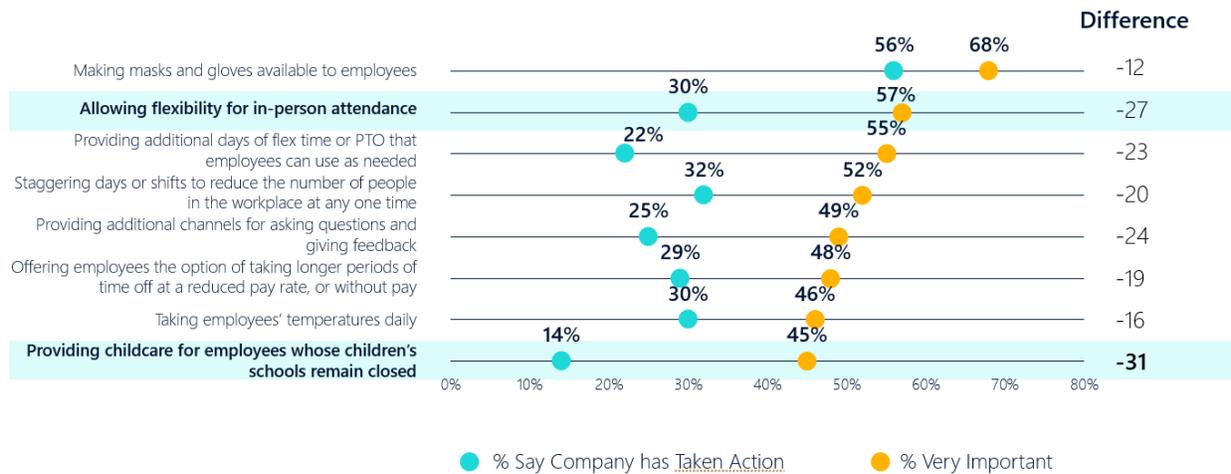
When asked when it's appropriate to set a "back-to-work" date, half of the employees in the survey said their company shouldn't make any decisions on a date yet, while 18% said the company should set a date at least 3 weeks into the future. The responses varied by audience, specifically those working remotely vs. those who are still going to their workplace, salaried workers vs. hourly workers, and those at large vs. small and medium companies. Race and political affiliation also played a part in how employees responded to this question. No matter what the subset was, however, no group had less than 39% saying it was too soon to set a date for return.



While the results show that it may be too soon to set a specific date for return, that doesn't mean you shouldn't be communicating with employees about it. Employees want to hear what their companies are thinking, even without a lot of clarity. It's important to communicate at the cadence you've set even if there are no new decisions being made to ensure that employees don't wonder if decisions are being made without them being told.

Looking at what return to work actually looks like, there are significant gaps in what employees say is important to them vs. what their companies have already said they're taking action on.

The widest gaps are in companies allowing flexibility for employees' non-work responsibilities. While 45% of employees say it's very important that their company provides childcare for employees whose children's schools remain closed when they return to work, only 14% say their companies are taking action on that. In-person attendance is another point of discrepancy, with 57% of employees saying they need flexibility on that and only 30% saying their companies are taking action. Companies seem to be doing best when it comes to providing masks and gloves to employees, something 68% of employees say is very important to them to return to work.



Finally, our survey shows that employees are almost evenly split on whether or not there will be significant changes to how employees work together when they return to work, and 5% of employees say their company and/or industry is unlikely to exist after the crisis. This week has seen the biggest increase in people expecting significant changes since we started the survey.

Of the 46% of employees who say there will be significant changes to how they work, however, 53% think those changes will be mostly positive. The number of those who are not sure if the changes will be positive or negative is down from 40% last week to 33% this week. It is important to maintain this positivity and optimism among employees and ensure their input on what return looks like contributes to a positive change after the crisis.

## The Waves of Return

While offices and sites around the world are considering how to reopen, we cannot assume it is one milestone, or treat it that way. We should look ahead to the mid- and long-term and the waves of change that will happen. Given what we do and do not know about COVID-19, we can assume that reopening will happen in waves, with our employees' ability to focus and stay productive oscillating as well.

The pause that is needed here is to look ahead across these waves. Reopening marks one of the first moments in this crisis to plan for the future. So, we should be considering some key things before jumping into the planning and communications.

First, the steps you take today will change your company going forward, and your response will shape employee expectations for leadership and the company's culture. Second, each wave of reopening will need thoughtful decision-making, communications, and engagement planning. Keep going back to the basics to ensure employees are well-informed of the decisions and the process leading up to them. Finally, find ways to show you have learned from this crisis and have become a better place to work through it. The data shows that people are optimistic, so there is an opportunity to help them realize their place in the future of the work.

## Speakers

### **Rebekah Metts-Childers**

*Partner, Chicago and Head of U.S. Employee Engagement*

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**Rebekah specializes in providing counsel to companies during times of change – connecting communications strategy and business strategy to drive results.**

Drawing on her 20 years of experience in corporate communications, Rebekah has a strong focus on strategy, M&A and employee communications. She has worked in the U.S. and London, with global experience across Europe and Asia. Before joining Brunswick in 2018, Rebekah was a member of the leadership team at a strategy execution firm focused on transformation communications, leadership development, employee engagement and culture initiatives for Fortune 500 companies. Rebekah also spent nine years at Takeda Pharmaceuticals in a number of global senior positions and worked with top PR firms doing corporate, technology, crisis and financial communications.

### **Mara Riemer**

*Partner, Dallas*

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**Mara brings over 15 years of market research, communications and branding experience across a wide range of sectors.**

Before joining Brunswick, Mara was Global Head of Research and Brand Strategy at Las Vegas Sands, where she built and led a cohesive international team and served as an internal advisor to global marketing, corporate communications, investor relations, human resources and development.

Mara previously worked for Altria Group. There, she headed the research efforts to support the Marlboro brand strategy and conducted extensive message testing to ensure compliance with newly enacted FDA regulations.

Early in her career, she conducted research while at R&R Partners to support the “What Happens Here Stays Here” advertising campaign. She earned her MBA from the University of Pittsburgh with a concentration in Marketing. She is a member of the Advisory Board for the University of Texas at Arlington Master of Science in Marketing Research Program and the incoming President for the Insights Association Southwest Chapter Board.

Mara joined Brunswick in September 2015 and provides clients with data-driven advice in the areas of corporate reputation, brand and marketing strategy, employee engagement and narrative development.

### **Hannah Page-Salisbury**

*Associate, Washington, D.C.*

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**Hannah Page-Salisbury is an Associate at Brunswick Insight, where she specializes in designing research approaches for complex situations.**

Hannah helps clients across sectors translate data into strategy and has a particular interest in employee communications. Previous clients include McDonald’s, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the US Chamber of Commerce, and Blue Origin. Prior to her four years at Brunswick, Hannah worked on a number of political campaigns before spending two years at a bipartisan lobbying firm in DC. She holds a BA from Middlebury College and previously served as the Communications Chair for the Government Affairs Industry Network.