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# An Unsettled Workforce

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Richard D. Alaniz • Sep. 09, 2020



The Coronavirus pandemic has turned our world upside down, impacting virtually every aspect of our daily existence. Businesses have been shuttered and jobs lost, many permanently. As the long-awaited reopening of our economy was becoming a reality, the unexpected resurgence of COVID-19 infections in several parts of the country put a halt to reopening efforts. In addition, with a new school year beginning, parents of school-age children are dealing with the dilemma of in-person versus online classes.

Progress is being made in the search for a vaccine, but experts say it will be available before year's end. Nonetheless, the infection numbers are beginning to trend downward and we may soon be seeing light at the end of the tunnel. Whenever this pandemic ends, there are sure to be lingering effects. One area in particular where the effects of Coronavirus have been significant is the workplace. Those workers in "essential" industries who kept working as well as those gradually returning to the workplace have been confronted with a radically altered work environment. They have faced pre-work temperature checks and other screenings, the need to consistently follow social distancing, hand washing and sanitation protocols, and some have had to undergo COVID-19 testing.

For their part, employers continue to have their entire focus on trying to ensure that their businesses and workplaces are safe from potential exposure to Coronavirus. In this crisis, there has been little time to attend to routine employee concerns. Perhaps more significant has been the lack of attention to the unique pressures created by the potential for Coronavirus infection. Employees experience an understandable anxiety created by being in unavoidable proximity to others for hours each workday. The concern is not only for themselves, but also for passing on the risk of infection to family.

In the early days of the pandemic it was not uncommon to hear of employee walkouts and demonstrations over actual or perceived employer failure to take adequate safeguards against the virus. In some cases, lawsuits have been filed alleging such claims as failure to provide adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), failure to enforce social distancing and other CDC recommended protocols, failure to inform employees of a coworker's positive test result, and similar claims. There have also been reports of employees refusing to return to work from layoff due to fear of possible infection.

Workplace safety concerns have spread notwithstanding employer efforts to implement and follow guidance on prevention measures. With the exception of

certain high-risk occupations, personal safety in the workplace had rarely been a concern for most workers. That is no longer the case as a result of the Coronavirus. The potential for infection of both employees and their families no doubt generates anxiety in most workforces. That anxiety is almost certain to impact productivity, quality of work, and ultimately the employees' well-being. Whether the fears are rational or reasonable is immaterial if it impacts employee performance.

There has been yet another effect of the pandemic on almost everyone, but especially on employees: Uncertainty about economic security. It was only months ago that anyone who wanted a job could easily find one. Unemployment was at record lows. Wages were rising, even for groups that historically had been left behind. This all changed almost overnight. The federal enhancement to unemployment benefits may have eased the financial pressures temporarily, but a return to a booming economy remains the only true solution. However, speculation of even more, permanent business closures and further layoffs in the future do little to instill confidence that all will be well. The result is even greater employee uncertainty about their financial futures.

It has long been recognized that the desire for personal safety and health, including economic security, are among the most fundamental of human needs. In a normal world, they are rarely a conscious concern for most employees. While it may not be fully evident yet, these fears and anxieties will very likely confront both employers and employees for the foreseeable future. Day-to-day workplace issues or irritants can easily become exaggerated for otherwise unsettled employees. A minor gripe can become a major problem. This means that employers must live by the common claim that "employees are our most valuable asset." The unsettling nature of all that they have been living through makes it imperative that employers actually demonstrate that they truly value those "assets." When there is little more that can be done to provide a Coronavirus-free work environment or to assure our employees that we will promptly return to a growing economy, employers must make an extra effort to emphasize the small things that ultimately, truly matter to employees and keep them productive.

While wages, benefits, and promotions may be important, over the years, studies have confirmed that of most concern to the majority of employees is working for employers that genuinely care about them. Having a caring workplace culture that creates employee good will can overcome almost any employee problem, even concern for personal safety and economic security. Taking the time each day to

demonstrate that employees are appreciated goes a long way in generating employee good will.

It takes little effort and costs nothing to thank someone for staying late, completing a critical project on time, or simply for being there and making a sincere effort.

Spending time on the work floor on a daily basis interacting with employees in a positive manner is the type of managing-by-walking-around that helps to demonstrate that you are all in this together. Keeping employees informed of any issues related to Coronavirus prevention as well as to business prospects will help satisfy the critical need of employees to be informed of what could affect them.

Finally, making sure that your supervisors are providing the same type of care and attention to employees on a daily basis will complete your efforts.

No one knows when the pandemic will end or how promptly the economy will rebound, but by making every effort to show employees your appreciation for all they do will help ensure that you and they successfully navigate any Coronavirus fallout.

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Rick Alaniz, JD, of [Alaniz Associates](#), has been at the forefront of labor and employment law for over forty years. He began his legal career as a trial attorney with the U.S. Department of Labor, served on the President's Cost of Living Council and prominent posts within the National Labor Relations Board.

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