



Small Scenarios for Changing Times:

# After the Furlough

By Heather Bussing, Michael Kannisto, and John Sumser

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*As employees begin to return to work, many are going through a kaleidoscope of confusion, fear, exhilaration, grief, and anxiety. Since that fateful Friday afternoon when everyone went home expecting to be back the next Monday, workers have been subjected to confusing information and treatment every step of the way.*

## Generational

After years of discourse about multiple generations in the workforce, the implications will have been played out with unprecedented finality. Older workers won't come back at the same rate as younger workers because they are more vulnerable. Younger workers who don't have resources to survive long term unemployment may have since moved back in with parents. Newer employees may decide to take their portable skills elsewhere. Seasoned employees may choose early retirement in order to focus on family. Everyone is rethinking their priorities and what matters.



"Room full of girls seated." National Archives, General Records of the Department of Labor

## Furloughed or not furloughed?

As the impact of the pandemic has grown more profound, decisions were and are being made about who is and should be working. Those who have continued to work will resent their exposure to danger and having to do the work of many. Those who were deemed "expendable" and directed to their state unemployment website will remember the decision and take it personally. Companies that avoided mass layoffs are now evaluating how

to stay afloat in an economic downturn we are just beginning to understand. The decision about who works and who doesn't will be the defining career moment for every employee working today, and nothing will ever change that.

## Executives

Executives who voluntarily forfeited bonuses with no impact on their lifestyle may find it difficult to connect with returning workers. Words of mid-pandemic encouragement transmitted from their dedicated home studies may not have landed well with the worker huddled in the corner of a bedroom or kitchen tending to the company spreadsheets.

Some returning workers may have been bullied into coming in to work. Some may not have received safety equipment.

# After you have evaluated and implemented all of the health and safety protections, here are five things you should do to prepare for your employees' return:

## 1. *Get ready for some very uncomfortable questions from your employees.*

Your employees are survivors. Whether they had COVID-19 themselves, or were locked in a cramped living space for months on end, they will all have a new perspective. They have endured, and they won't be shy about asking you tough questions.

## 2. *Consider preparing a timeline to show how and why you made the decisions you did. Be truthful.*

Most organizations made the best decisions they were capable of making with the information they had at the time. They were at times generous, shortsighted, honorable, and selfish. In other words, they were human. Tell the company story as it happened – it will reveal your true culture. (If that frightens you, you have larger issues.)

## 3. *Expect to take a hit on engagement and be open to learning from it.*

Associates have very few ways to give their organizations feedback. In many organizations employee engagement surveys are about the only venue most workers have to talk about what they like and don't like about their company, and only some of those allow employees to tell you what they want to say. If you are lucky, your score will go down – focus less on that, and more on where they went down. If you've broken trust with the

workforce or people are afraid of getting fired, your engagement scores may go up. This should make you worry.

## 4. *Create (or validate) a list of human capital values, and declare your organization publicly accountable to them by audit.*

Coming out of a crisis is an ideal time for self-reflection. Consider asking for help in making your values real and measurable.

## 5. *Review your org chart, and consider adding back-up responsibilities to job descriptions.*

Formalizing the fact that your sales director may have to fill in for the marketing department in a crisis will eliminate unpleasant surprises (and might even encourage her to learn about what happens in the marketing department when there isn't a crisis).

*The return to work will be disorienting, but it also represents an unprecedented opportunity for the entire organization to learn and grow. This is not the time to simply tighten belts. It's a time to rethink how the work in your organization gets done, what your priorities are, and appreciate how valuable your employees are.*

## About the Small Scenarios series:

Massive change is afoot. The pandemic gives us the opportunity to rethink and reappraise. The small scenarios project is designed to provoke thought about the medium-term future and how it will be different. The goal is to help HR prepare for the future we will encounter in a few short months.

## The Small Scenarios Team



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## About HRExaminer

HRExaminer is a research and publishing company focused on the evolving edges of HR and HRTechnology. The publications team includes a 25 member editorial advisory board who deliver insight and opinion. The company also produces two award winning podcasts (live on Thursday and Friday mornings at 8:00 AM Pacific). Each year, HRExaminer delivers the market benchmark report on the evolution of Intelligent tools in HRTechnology.

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