

Silver Linings: Managers See Upsides During the Pandemic

Amid the uncertainty, anxiety and on-the-job pressures during the COVID-19 crisis, managers tell of bright spots

By Brian O'Connell

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No doubt about it, the coronavirus has taken a sledgehammer to parts of the U.S. business landscape. The unemployment rate hit 14.7 percent in April, representing 33 million U.S. workers—or 10 percent of the entire U.S. population, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. (<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf>)

Yet some company leaders say the pandemic has produced an abundance of "silver lining" experiences that have lifted spirits, improved productivity and forged relationships with staffers that will linger long after the coronavirus leaves.

A survey of 11,491 U.S. employees by Reflektive, a San Francisco-based performance management services company, found three bright spots:

Increased productivity. One of the most prevalent comments employees shared was that they were more productive when they worked from home. "Employees cited the lack of commute and fewer distractions from colleagues as the main reasons that they were able to accomplish more at home," the survey stated.

Support from managers. Employee performance was also boosted by strong relationships with management, as "managers are providing empathy and helping to drive 'employee first' mentalities at companies."

Feeling safe. Employees appreciate that employers prioritize safety and are doing what they can to protect workers from the coronavirus. "Employees can more easily stay engaged and productive when they're not worrying about their health," the survey said.

Management Silver Linings During the Pandemic

Managers have experienced their own unexpected upsides.

"Leading during the pandemic creates immense opportunities for rethinking the way we work, do business and interact with the world," said John Caplan, president, North America and Europe, at New York City-based Alibaba.com, an online commerce company that links buyers and sellers.

"Personally, I'm seeing a level of simplicity, calmness and increased focus, allowing me to rethink what the company should keep doing and prioritize building the bridge to the future for our customers."

Caplan is hardly alone. Other managers and business owners have discovered silver linings while working during the pandemic. Here's what they're finding:

A more human connection with employees. "From a personal standpoint, the breaking down of the barrier between work life and home life has been positive in my eyes and will have lasting effects," said Matt Erhard, managing partner with the recruiting firm Summit Search Group in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

Erhard said he's recently found himself checking his staff's physical, mental and emotional health and receiving more open and honest answers. "Now it's easier to know how to make the workplace more comfortable and give employees a better work-and-life balance," he said. "I imagine many managers are seeing the same, and I believe that will linger after the pandemic."

Automation potential becoming a reality. At Drew Eckl & Farnham, an Atlanta-based law firm, managing partner Joe Chancey said the firm is expediting a companywide mission to become fully automated during the pandemic—just in time for a remote workforce that needed all the technology help it could get.

Chancey said his firm had to reinvent its operational and administrative processes on the fly. "We needed to act quickly so that all of our attorneys and staff could transition virtually seamlessly to a remote working environment," he said.

Since the law firm's employees were physically disconnected during the pandemic, the company's emergency response team had to find ways to help managers and staff communicate efficiently, stay coordinated and connected, and eliminate the need to lay hands on paper in any aspect of its operations.

To meet those needs, the firm recently started using Microsoft Teams, a workplace communication and collaboration platform that combines chat, video meetings and file sharing to connect workers.

"We had installed MS Teams prior to going fully remote but hadn't rolled it out to our people beyond our leadership group before the shelter-in-place order," Chancey said. "When we went to remote status, we encouraged all of our practice groups, committees and administrative departments to use Teams to organize their communications and to use its videoconferencing features to stay connected."

Additionally, the company replaced its old paper distribution process with a fully electronic accounting process that allows it to handle billing remotely. "Basically, the crisis provided us the need—and opportunity—to implement new technologies on the fly," Chancey said.

More robust recruiting practices. Another upside to the coronavirus outbreak is the acceptance of an entirely remote workforce.

"Amidst the pandemic, individuals across the world began working from home to ensure business continuity," said Claudia Johnson, director of internal recruiting at Addison Group, a national staffing agency in Chicago. "Despite the uncertainty and anxiousness this remote shift caused, companies realize that with the proper technology and policies in place, most jobs can be done just as effectively at home as in the office."

The mindset that geography is not a barrier will translate to better hiring practices, Johnson said.

"Remote work gives employees the ability to expand their candidate pools and discover talent that once may have never entered their hiring pipelines," she noted. "As more companies embrace the practice of recruiting, filling and onboarding a job role completely remotely, employers will be empowered to hire the right person for the role, regardless of where they're located, enabling smarter and better hires. Plus, relocation and housing barriers will no longer be a factor when discovering and hiring talent," she said.

A new culture of collaboration. "Collaboration, productivity and personal development are a few areas that have become more elevated during the COVID-19 crisis," said Sundar Ramasamy, co-founder and CEO of Wilco Source, a business technology consultancy based in Santa Clara, Calif.

"Our teams in India and the U.S. are working more closely together than they ever have before, and there's been this sense of 'a rising tide raises all boats,'" he said. "We're leaning on one another to learn new skills, [and] employees are stepping up to mentor one another through shadowing and training."

"It's been amazing to see the team come together in this way and really focus on using this time as an opportunity to grow personally and professionally. Overall, this has created more energy throughout the company, too, and we've seen productivity increase significantly as a result."

Streamlined decision-making. With a sharper focus on what's important and what's not during a crisis, managers are finding that it's easier to strip away "nonimportant" issues and make better and faster decisions.

"The process by which company decisions are made has shifted more efficiently during the crisis," said Jared Weitz, CEO and founder of United Capital Source, a financial services firm in Great Neck, N.Y. "Decisions once contained a bulk of superfluous intake that has been eliminated.

"This transition has created a more productive process and is something we plan to leverage moving forward," he noted. "When you remove the unnecessary details from a situation, the core needs and values of your customers and your business become crystal clear."

Emerging with a Renewed Sense of Purpose

One common sentiment among managers during the pandemic is that they have forged stronger bonds with employees. It's a major silver lining coming out of the crisis, and it isn't going away, managers believe.

"One of the biggest upsides is the way everyone at the company came together and supported each other," said Monica Eaton-Cardone, co-founder and COO of Chargebacks911, a risk mitigation firm in Tampa, Fla. "I've seen a spirit of camaraderie and unity among teams, and it gives me confidence that we will come out of this stronger than before. The ongoing crisis has taught us to cherish the people in our lives, and I think that also translates to the way we treat each other at work, especially as we try to make the best of a bad situation."

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