

The Columbus Commitment: Equitable Workplace Practices while Navigating COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused much uncertainty and change for the residents of Columbus. Women are being disproportionately impacted around the nation as both racial and gender disparities are becoming more evident. In Ohio, more than 6 in 10 minimum wage workers are women. About 35% of families in Columbus are headed by single mothers, compared to only 9% by single fathers. Women also often take on the burden of home care and child care even in households where both parents work full time—especially when children are young.

As employers begin to re-open, re-strategize and build back up, this presents an unprecedented opportunity to establish companies as gender equitable and parent-friendly. Doing this right will have positive impacts on recruitment, retention and engagement. It is more important than ever that we continue to use a gender lens when making decisions impacting our workforce.

Equitable Workplace Practices	Implement a Flexible Work Environment
	Continue Open Communication with Employees
	Encourage Remote Inclusion
	Support the Whole Employee
	Focus on Employee Mental Health

Section 1: Implement a Flexible Work Environment

- Continue or expand work-from-home flexibility
 - Working from home is a reasonable accommodation if all the essential functions of the employee's job can be performed at home
- Consider opportunity to go part-time, split shifts or job sharing
- Consider flexible schedules, allowing for late arrivals and early dismissal
 - Example: Remove or soften penalties for those employees who cannot telework; do not punish those arriving late or who have to leave early
- Focus on the work getting complete verses when the work gets done. When women are playing multiple roles at home (teachers, cleaners and employees), sometimes the work is done at non-traditional times
- Consider lifting restrictions on when and how employees can use their sick and paid time off

- Example: Consider allowing employees to combine their annual PTO and emergency leave so they have the option to take them all at once
- Consider increasing allocated paid time off for 2020 or introducing “COVID-19 time”
- Consider a Phase-In Approach: Assess whether transition back to work could be staggered (e.g., employee gradually increases from 20 hours to 40 hours per week over a certain time period)
 - Be aware of impact on unemployment benefits
- Consider scheduling meetings 50 minutes versus 60 minutes – that will give employees an opportunity to stretch their legs, take a walk and eat between meetings

Section 2:

Continue Open Communication with Employees

- If in-person work must continue, maintain COVID-19 social distancing guidelines and update employees on upcoming changes
- Establish communication about child care prior to the return of workers to the physical office space
 - Be aware that child care centers that reopened on May 31 did so with strict restrictions. Many employees may lose or have already lost their child care arrangements due to COVID-19 restrictions
- Ensure you are giving employees ample time when you make decisions
 - Such as return to work, give them as much time as possible (at least 4 weeks) to plan for day care and other factors
- Listen to your employees
 - Consider pulse check surveys to hear where employees need support
 - Send out polls and work with employees to create an understanding environment
- Keep Senior Leadership visible.
 - Consider creating a virtual series where senior leadership can answer questions and share updates to engage with front line employees on a regular basis
- Allow for flexibility on project deadlines and team-meetings

Section 3:

Encourage Remote Inclusion

- Engage with your employee resource groups (ERGs) and encourage them to stay active by providing virtual opportunities to connect and learn
- Provide as many options as possible for video or audio conferencing to allow continued engagement
- Create informal networks with other employees to foster a community of care within your workplace
 - Slack channels, Zoom hangouts, informal discussions/icebreakers/online games
- Use Diversity and Inclusion as a lens as you create plans for re-opening, making staff changes or re-building
- Continue to Build Leaders: whether through virtual webinars or a mentorship program, continue to provide opportunities for employee growth

Section 4:

Support the Whole Employee

This means supporting employees in the other roles they may have during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Consider starting, enhancing or increasing emergency childcare or eldercare for your employees or relax restrictions on emergency funds to access child care services
- Take employee health seriously
 - Consider providing extra protective equipment for their family (provide extra face coverings, gloves, etc.)
- Consider creating an employee emergency fund
 - Employees can apply for grants to access funds or relax criteria for existing funds
- Work together with the business community to share resources and create networks of support for employees
- Connect with local nonprofits to provide information about existing employee resources
- Trust your employees
 - Many are juggling home and work at the same time. Identify appropriate deadlines together and then put your trust into employees that they will get the work done
- If you have FSA accounts, remind your employees that this is a “use it or lose it” benefit. Advise employees of their options to change or stop their deductions if warranted

Section 5:

Focus on Employee Mental Health

- Create community networks within your organization: This can look like a Slack channel or an anonymous helpline/email
- Host Self-Care or Wellness Webinars (during work time): Bring in local experts to share tips and techniques on how to focus on self and make sure your employees know the resources that are available to them
- Provide opportunities for non-work virtual meetings/hangouts
 - Set up a “Water-Cooler” Meeting: Increase virtual opportunities for employees to check-in with one another and talk about non-work related topics
- Consider supporting employees with access to mental health applications
- Encourage employees to use company or insurance provided services to address added stress
- Consider adding an Employee Assistance Program as part of your benefit offerings
- Encourage leaders to check in with employees often and start by asking how they are doing personally and what they need to be successful
- Leverage your Employee Resource Groups and help moms and women have a network to count on

Questions? Thoughts? We value your feedback.

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