



THE RESILIENT FAMILY ENTERPRISE SERIES

Cultivating a post-COVID-19 workplace

Before 2020, the term workplace generally meant a dedicated office space for people to work together. And while there already was a growing trend toward remote work, COVID-19 has accelerated that movement, forcing businesses to rely on networks of employees linked only by their internet connections. Now comes the question of what the workplace will look like once the crisis subsides.

But even though employees have had a challenging year after being suddenly forced to work remotely, most are getting used to it—and don't want to go back. A recent survey by *The New York Times* and Morning Consult found that, of more than 1,100 remote workers polled, 86 percent were satisfied with their current situation.¹ Why are they willing to work from the kitchen table? To name a few reasons: there's no commute, they have greater flexibility, and they can enjoy more time outside.

Business leaders tempted to view these arrangements as temporary might need to adjust their thinking. Instead of focusing on what's been lost, it's time to start considering what could be gained if the reality of the workplace is forever changed. Take the now ubiquitous Zoom calls, once seen as a compromise for an inability to meet in person. Teams are increasingly finding these interactions to be bonding opportunities, providing new windows into each other's lives, with household members and pets making cameo appearances.

To family businesses around the globe, this dramatic shift in work procedures might appear to threaten some of their advantages regarding developing and nurturing talent. These types of enterprises are known for providing mentoring opportunities through direct access to leadership. They also tend to be strongly

rooted in their communities—a quality that implies a physical presence. But with careful thought and attention, these traits can be preserved and enhanced in a post-COVID-19 workplace. In fact, family businesses already have an advantage in making this transition.

The trust advantage

In business, we spend a lot of time trying to identify sources of competitive advantage. Quality products, superior innovation, smart marketing, a strong culture—these are what people generally point to as delivering value. Still, even before the pandemic hit, companies had been trying to understand the impact that trust had in helping to differentiate themselves from their competitors. They rightly came to see trust as currency for building loyalty, establishing goodwill, and even gaining permission to try new things.

COVID-19 has cast a spotlight on the importance of trust in a commercial setting, especially regarding the employer-employee relationship. Businesses have to trust that their staff can be productive in a non-traditional setting, even as family pressures compete for their attention. And employees have to trust that their employers are managing the crisis effectively and making decisions in their best interests—as well as in those of the company.²

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In this respect, family enterprises are in a prime position. Compared to other organizations, employees of family businesses are more likely to place trust in their employers, with appreciation of company values playing a large role. Sixty-four percent of workers at large family businesses who were polled by Edelman in 2019 agreed that their companies act on their values, compared with 54 percent of those at large non-family businesses.³ What's more, 68 percent at large family enterprises considered their employers trustworthy sources of information about social issues and other important matters, versus 62 percent of those at large non-family organizations.⁴

Accordingly, family businesses have more licence in the current environment to adjust work practices. With traditional in-person interactions, there's been a lack of traceable data on how teams collaborate. But now, thanks to the need to connect

virtually, organizational network analysis tools are revealing some interesting insights about how clustered some teams are through their digital interactions.

Increasingly, business leaders have been using this insight to create connections between teams. Normally, people might become suspicious upon learning of such attempts to scrape their passive data. But if their employers have earned their trust, they're far more likely to buy into changes in communication standards and thus help create a better work experience.

L versus l

These kinds of initiatives, which tackle enterprise-wide efficiency, amount to the big **L** of leadership decisions. But often, effectively managing everyday, little-**l** tasks is just as important, if not more so. The latter often boils down to leadership style. After the crisis hit, it was apparent that team leaders had quickly become the critical node for many organizations, maintaining important connections with employees and managing the overall company culture. But some overdid it by creating controlling environments, demanding rigid check-ins, scheduling too many Zoom calls, and generally using the calendar as an efficiency prod.

What many learned is that their employees needed defined time—and lots of it—in which they could work while still dealing with personal demands. Germany's Siemens drew a lot of attention when it established mobile working as a core component of its new-normal strategy.⁵ In a statement, CEO Roland Busch said Siemens would adopt a twofold approach: first, focus on outcomes rather than time spent in the office, and second, trust and empower its employees.⁶ What Siemens and scores of other companies have come to realize is that good workers can be productive in any setting once they've been helped to connect the dots.

As family businesses now look to bank on the trust they've established with their staff, how they communicate is critical for maintaining this trust. Once clear goals for expectations and guidelines for responsiveness have been set, it's time to back off. Instead of scheduling a multitude of Zoom calls and check-ins, focus instead on the human dimension and allowing each employee the space to be productive. The pandemic is a level-setting event, with workers and business leaders alike facing similar challenges and concerns; this creates opportunities for authentic communication around these shared experiences. It might be surprising how much trust a company can solidify and even further build by conducting regular virtual town halls in which CEOs and other senior leaders, attending from their own homes, share insights into how they're managing the pandemic while also relaying the information employees need to do their jobs effectively.

The workplace bonds that are nurtured during this crisis may pay dividends in a post-crisis environment in which a hybrid of physical and virtual duties becomes the norm. The company parking lot may no longer be full Monday through Friday, but people will still get together at dedicated times to collaborate and socialize—albeit virtually—before returning to the freedom to work independently and on their own schedules. This can be a remarkable opportunity for family businesses to gain new insight, even as they protect what makes them popular as employers. As long as there's trust, they stand to emerge from this crisis more connected and more resilient than before.

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1. Anya Strzemien, Jessica Bennett, Tracy Ma and Eve Lyons. "Out of Office: A Survey of Our New Work Lives." *The New York Times*. August 20, 2020.
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3. 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer: Implications for Family Business, May 30, 2019.
4. Ibid.
5. Justin Bariso. "This Company's New 2-Sentence Remote Work Policy Is the Best I've Ever Heard." *Inc.* July 27, 2020.
6. Siemens press release, "Siemens to establish mobile working as core component of the 'new normal'," July 16, 2020.