

Upholding an Employer's Reputation with Employee Safety Initiatives During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic continues to validate the importance of an employer brand during a crisis. As employees return to the workplace, organizations must prioritize safety. If return-to-work plans go wrong and employee safety is not a top priority, not only will the health and safety of employees be at risk—but the organization's reputation will be as well.

This article explores how safety impacts an employer's brand, reputation and recruiting efforts—and how to transparently highlight safety measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace with current and prospective employees and the general public.

Why Safety Matters

The decisions that employers make about managing employees during the coronavirus pandemic will define their reputation for the next several years, so it's critical to put some thought and planning into policies and communications. Now, more than ever, organizations will be judged not by their words, but by their actions.

Employers have a duty under the Occupational Safety and Health Act to provide a safe workplace. When developing safety plans, consider the following workplace safety measures to protect employees from COVID-19:

- COVID-19 testing and contact tracing
- Temperature screening
- Social distancing
- Personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Personal hygiene and etiquette
- Workplace cleaning and disinfecting
- Paid time off and sick leave policies
- Business travel guidelines

Taking these significant steps to ensure safety during the pandemic won't be effective unless employees are aware of all of the efforts. Keep in mind that informed employees who feel safe at work are less likely to be unnecessarily absent. Lastly, it's important that all employees are engaged and participating in company-wide safety efforts. Effective communications will help achieve buy-in from employees.

Employers should continue to monitor updates from federal agencies including OSHA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as guidance from local officials.

Employee Safety & Communication Efforts

An organization's response to COVID-19 will impact their overall brand and image, along with their perception in the employment market during these challenging times. Proactive and effective safety efforts may help an organization recruit and retain employees during the pandemic and beyond.

Because the coronavirus pandemic has affected the lives of most people, it should be a core component of an employer's brand. In addition, how an employer responds to the pandemic will affect their reputation. Reflect on how the organization has responded thus far to the pandemic and what tough choices have been made—and why. It's vital to keep in mind the health, safety and well-being of employees when making business decisions.

At the forefront of concern for current and future employees is safety. The goal is to remain truthful and transparent. Consider these ways to help highlight COVID-19 safety efforts through employer branding efforts:



- **Establish a safety and health program.** Creating initiatives or committees to address workplace safety and health can further document and promote desired behaviors. Organizations can publicly share general safety initiatives as well.
- **Provide usable and appropriate safety training or education.** It's important that employees understand and follow workplace controls like personal hygiene protocols and PPE usage.
- **Include safety-related expectations in job descriptions and postings.** In the post-coronavirus employment market, a top concern for job-seekers is safety. Key messaging or FAQ documents may be helpful to ensure leadership or designated spokespeople understand and can deliver talking points for both internal and external audiences. Additionally, human resources and communications departments should maintain a consistent message.
- **Prioritize safety in employment-related company branding.** Employers should consider updating their careers webpage to include attractive employee benefits like telecommuting, flexible work hours, staggered shifts and hazard pay.
- **Prioritize safety in nonemployment-related company branding.** Employers should consider dedicating a section of their website or posting on organization social media to outline the organization's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and highlight how employee health and safety is being prioritized. On these sites, employers can identify thought leadership opportunities, but should be prepared to publicly address any topics discussed if asked to do so.
- **Create a dialogue with vendors and partners.** Employers should talk with business partners or customers about their response plans. Employers are encouraged to share best practices with other local businesses—especially those in their supply chain.

If an organization has taken significant steps to be adaptable and keep employees safe during this challenging time, those pandemic efforts are part of their brand story. Employers should communicate their evolving brand story to current and prospective employees and the general public, when appropriate.

Summary

The coronavirus pandemic offers a unique opportunity for employers to redefine their employer brand. Keep in mind that actions speak louder than words. So, put employees first, and lead with empathy, authenticity and transparency.

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