

To:

# The HR Specialist

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Subject: Practical HR strategies to boost your career

## In The News ...

### Start 2021 by updating employee job descriptions.

The pandemic changed the nature and duties of most American jobs. That means the start of 2021 is an excellent time to review and revise the job descriptions for each role.

Updating the duties and essential functions helps clarify your expectations for each worker going into the new year—and it can help shine a spotlight on workforce needs you may not have realized. Plus, accurate job descriptions can help prevent employee lawsuits relating to job classifications and disabilities.

**Online resource** For more advice on the key ingredients and common traps of job descriptions, go to [www.theHRSpecialist.com/jobdescriptions](http://www.theHRSpecialist.com/jobdescriptions).

### As more training goes online, when is it paid time?

The pandemic drove most employee training out of classrooms and conferences and onto computers. Just in time, the U.S. Department of Labor issued new guidance on when you must pay employees for that online training.

*The bottom line:* If employers allow workers to view online training during work hours, the employer must pay for the time, whether it's independently produced or created in-house. That's true even if viewing the webinar is purely voluntary.

**Online resource** Read the DOL's new training opinion letter at [www.tinyurl.com/opinion-letter-FLSA2020-15](http://www.tinyurl.com/opinion-letter-FLSA2020-15).

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## Identify & correct gender pay disparities now

If you've put off taking a close look at gender pay differences among your employees, the start of 2021 is a key time to run a compensation audit.



*The EEOC is going all out to make sure women are paid as much as men, and President-elect Biden has made equal pay a top priority.*

Agencies such as the EEOC are going all out to make sure women are paid as much as men, even if the differences are small or don't last long. Also, President-elect Biden has signaled that championing equal pay will be a top priority (*see page 3*).

A full 60% of employers say they are addressing pay equity in their organizations, according to a new WorldatWork survey. The most popular tool to achieve this even-pay goal: annual compensation analyses.

Federal law says men and women in the same workplace "must be given

equal pay for equal work. The jobs need not be identical, but they must be substantially equal. Job content (not job titles) determines whether jobs are substantially equal."

In addition to the growing regulatory and legislative risks, employers continue to face lawsuits under the federal Equal Pay Act, sex discrimination law and related state laws.

**Recent case:** JPMorgan Chase was accused of "systemic compensation discrimination against female employees," saying at least 93 women

*Continued on page 2*

## Complicated vaccine questions for employers

As COVID vaccines become more widely available in the coming months, employers have big questions to answer: Should they require it for all employees? What if employees refuse? Are the vaccines covered cost-free under your group health plan?

For starters, yes, you have the legal right to require that employees get a COVID vaccination, the EEOC said on Dec. 16. However, the agency made clear that you must provide exemptions or accommodations to workers who have religious objections to vaccines, pregnant staff or workers who have disabilities that may prevent such shots.

Nearly half (49%) of working Americans believe employers *should* require COVID vaccines for their employees, according to a new survey

of 1,000 U.S. employees by Ipsos and Eagle Hill Consulting (*see box below*).

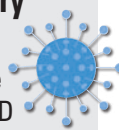
"Employers must get in front of the vaccine issue today ... The workforce is clearly split on employer vaccine mandates, so it's going to be contentious no matter where an employer lands on inoculation

*Continued on page 2*

### Who supports mandatory vaccine policies?

Overall, 49% of workers believe employers should require COVID vaccines for their staffs. A breakdown of those supporting a mandate:

- Men (53%) more than women (44%)
- Younger workers (62%) followed by Millennials (50%), Gen X (46%) and Baby Boomers (46%)



## Gender pay disparities

(Cont. from page 1)

were paid less than men doing the same work in the same department. It agreed to settle, paying about \$12,000 in back pay and another \$9 million to pay adjustments for all female and minority employees over the next five years. (*OFCCP v. JPMorgan Chase*)

**Bottom line:** Before being singled out for legal or administrative action, schedule a pay equity analysis for early in 2021. Showing that you performed such an audit is one tool in defending such equal-pay claims.

**Online resources** For details on what's required under the Equal Pay Act, go to [www.tinyurl.com/EEOCequal](http://www.tinyurl.com/EEOCequal). For a chart of state equal pay laws, go to [www.theHRSpecialist.com/equalpay](http://www.theHRSpecialist.com/equalpay).

## COVID vaccine

(Cont. from page 1)

requirements," says Melissa Jezior, CEO of Eagle Hill.

If you're going to mandate vaccines, put it in writing. Prepare to articulate an objective business reason. Apply it impartially to all and listen to your employees.

"Different industries will have different needs," says Jezior. "For example, employee incentives rather than mandates might be more appealing for workers."

**Insurance coverage:** The Affordable Care Act says employees can't be required to pay out-of-pocket for qualifying preventive services like the COVID vaccine. But it's unclear whether employees can be charged for the doctor visit.

**Key point:** If the vaccine is billed together (not separately) from the office visit, health plans cannot impose any cost-sharing burden on employees. So tell your employees to tell their doctor's office that the primary purpose of the appointment is to receive the vaccine.

For advice on requiring the vaccine, go to [www.theHRSpecialist.com/mandatevaccine](http://www.theHRSpecialist.com/mandatevaccine).

# After inauguration, expect federal COVID safety rules to have more enforcement teeth

U.S. employers should take action now to make sure their COVID safety policies and procedures are compliant with CDC guidance. That's because the incoming Biden administration is expected to quickly issue emergency temporary standards that add more enforcement strength to current employer COVID rules.

Resisting calls for tougher restrictions, the current U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration leaders are using existing rules—specifically OSHA's "general duty clause"—to enforce employer COVID safety.

In the first days after inauguration, look for Biden's new OSHA team to set specific, enforceable COVID standards for employers on issues like:

- Protective equipment, possibly including masks.
- Hygiene and sanitation.
- Social distancing, and requiring remote work when possible.
- Employee training.
- Communication during outbreaks.



It's still unclear whether OSHA will address the COVID vaccine and employer's role in encouraging Americans to get the shot.

**Stepped-up enforcement.** During the campaign, Biden called for more aggressive enforcement of worker safety rules and said he would double the number of OSHA inspectors. There are currently about 750 inspectors, down from about 1,000 a decade ago. After a year of hiring and training, expect Biden's new surge of safety inspectors to be up and running in 2022.

More immediately, the new administration can immediately step up enforcement efforts by inspectors who are already on staff. Plan on more inspections, citations and fines.

Also, look for more employee whistleblowing in workplaces with coronavirus infection outbreaks.

**Online resource** For employer COVID safety actions currently being advised by the CDC, go to [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/workplaces-businesses](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/workplaces-businesses).

## New IRS rules add to W-4 refiling reasons

The turning of the calendar is a good time for all employees to review their W-4s and check their withholding. This is especially important now, since new IRS regulations add six items to the list of circumstances requiring employees to refile their W-4s within 10 days.

**Status conscious.** Employees have always been required to refile their W-4s within 10 days if they experience a change in status (e.g., they divorce, if they were claiming married status). The new regulations retain this rule and make new additions, including:

- Employees must refile their W-4 if they can no longer claim head-of-household status.
- Employees must refile if they have more than one job (or both spouses

work) but only one W-4 is completed on which the box in Step 2c is checked.

- Employees must refile if they complete Step 4b (Deductions), but reasonably expect their tax deductions to decrease by more than \$2,300.
- Employees must refile if they complete Step 3 (Claim Dependents), but reasonably expect their tax credits to decrease by more than \$500 from the amount they have taken into account in completing Step 3.

**Tweaks to withholding rules.** If new hires don't provide you with valid W-4s or employees don't provide you with new W-4s by Feb. 15 to continue their exemption from withholding, you must withhold as if they checked the single box in Step 1c.

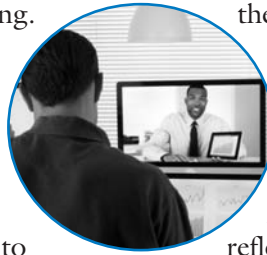


## Automated interviews raise new bias concerns

During the pandemic, many employers are opting to automate initial aspects of screening. One growing option: Have applicants provide a video in which they answer scripted questions about their qualifications and experience.

The process happens even before candidates are invited to a live interview. It cuts scheduling hassle and helps quickly screen out clearly unqualified applicants. But there are also legal risks. What to watch for:

**Built-in bias.** Automated interviews based on artificial intelligence don't



necessarily prevent hiring discrimination because AI programs may reflect the biases of the designers.

**Advice:** Ask automated interview vendors what they have done to make their systems bias-free.

Also, see if applicants who make it through the process reflect your applicant pool.

**Disability impact.** Automated interviews may screen out disabled applicants who have difficulty interacting online. Ensure the tool is compatible with technology that assists communication with vision or hearing limits.

## Protect firing rights: Last-chance agreements

It makes sense to give a second chance to good employees whose performance is slipping because of personal challenges. But you can protect against future lawsuits by imposing a formal last-chance agreement that says any subsequent transgression will result in termination.

**Recent case:** Paul, a Boeing mechanic, struggled with drug addiction. His performance deteriorated and he missed work frequently. After a stint in FMLA-covered rehab, Paul returned and signed a last-chance agreement.

It called for immediate termination if he had two attendance infractions

in the next 10 months. He had to arrive on time and call in to report late arrivals. When he missed a return-to-work date without calling, Boeing fired him.

He sued, citing FMLA interference. But the court tossed the case out, saying Boeing legally fired him for breaking the last-chance agreement. (*Alkins v. Boeing*, 3rd Cir.)

**Sample LCA** Download a Word document that includes a customizable Sample Last-Chance Agreement, a Discipline Warning Notice and a Follow-Up Warning Memo at [www.theHRSpecialist.com/LCAsample](http://www.theHRSpecialist.com/LCAsample).

## Does 'religious freedom' give OK for job bias?

Employer policies often show an inclusive nature to certain groups, such as the LGBT community. But what should you do if an employee cites "religious freedom" as a reason to reject those company efforts?

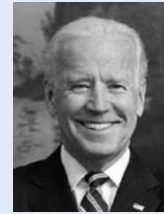
While federal job discrimination law does protect the rights of LGBT workers, it also requires you to provide reasonable accommodations for employees' religious beliefs. That often means finding a middle ground.

**Recent case:** Two Arkansas grocery workers objected to the rainbow heart

insignia on the new company aprons, saying it endorsed LGBT values. The employees offered to wear different aprons but the company refused and eventually fired them. The EEOC sued the store on the employees' behalf.

**Advice:** While you should obviously accommodate something as simple as an apron change, don't let employees use the broad brush of "religious freedom" to discriminate against others. For example, refusing to hire a gay co-worker because "it's against my religious belief" would clearly violate federal law.

## Biden's first 100 days: What to expect on workplace legislation & regulation



President-elect Biden's first 100 days will consist of undoing many Trump administration actions and pushing pro-family, pro-leave policies. His

approach depends on Senate control.

If Democrats win the two runoff races in Georgia on January 5 (and, thus, majorities in both chambers), look for Biden to pursue more efforts via legislation in Congress. But a Republican-led Senate would require Biden to rely on regulatory action and executive orders to accomplish those goals. Some key 100-day issues:

**PANDEMIC.** Expect Biden to issue binding workplace safety rules, in addition to a possible masking mandate and rules for workplace exposure prevention, testing, isolation and temporary closures (*see page 2*).

**PAID TIME OFF.** Various bills mandating paid time off for workers enjoy wide support in Congress, but the parties differ over funding it. Also, at press time, Biden was pushing the extension of the government-funded paid leave pandemic program (Families First Coronavirus Response Act) beyond Dec. 31.

**PAY EQUITY.** Expect a variety of efforts to push for gender pay-equity early in the new administration. Biden chose three women for top economic posts who have supported gender pay equity throughout their careers. As Biden nominees fill seats on the EEOC, count on enforcement efforts to target gender pay equity violators. Now is a good time to run a pay-equity audit of your compensation (*see page 1*).

**IMMIGRATION.** Look for Biden to quickly undo many of Trump's immigration initiatives. He will reinstate the Obama administration's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which provides protection for adults brought to the United States illegally as children. In addition, Trump placed new restrictions on foreign work visas, which Biden may ease.





## COVID rage: CDC offers anti-violence tool

News reports often feature accounts of frontline workers being verbally or physically assaulted by customers who object to being told to wear a mask or leave the premises. Now the CDC has published a web page of advice to help employers counter the threat. The key is training employees how to respond. Employees should not argue with irate or violent customers. If necessary, they should retreat to a safe place and call police. Also, use entry-door signage to set your rules on masking and social distance. Find the CDC's advice at [www.tinyurl.com/CDC-covid-violence-prevent](http://www.tinyurl.com/CDC-covid-violence-prevent).

## OSHA's employer COVID fines top \$3.5 million

Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic through Dec. 3, the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration has issued citations arising from 263 inspections for violations relating to coronavirus, resulting in penalties totaling \$3,504,345. Among the leading offenders: Hospitals that have been slapped with

a series of \$13,494 fines for failing to ensure adequate respiratory protection for employees. Expect the enforcement and fines to spike under the Biden administration (*see page 2*). Find OSHA guidance on coronavirus safety at [www.osha.gov/coronavirus](http://www.osha.gov/coronavirus).

## Include hazard pay in determining OT rate

Employers must factor any amount of coronavirus-related hazard pay that they provide an employee into that person's regular rate of pay when calculating how much to pay for overtime hours. So says recently issued guidance from the U.S. Department of Labor. Review it at [www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/flsa/pandemic#q20](http://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/flsa/pandemic#q20).

## Wearables, genetic testing eligible for FSAs

Among the hottest gifts are DNA testing kits, which allow individuals to trace their ancestry. The IRS recently said that if the kit serves a medical purpose, it's possible that employees may be reimbursed by their flexible spending accounts for the health services (not the ancestry services). [*IRS PLR 201933005*] The IRS' reasoning could also apply to wearables like smartwatches and FitBits, which monitor users' health.

## HR Q&A

### Remote employees want to move out of state: What are implications, what should we say?

**Q.** We have a few of our remote employees inquiring about moving out of state. We have a telecommuting agreement but not an eligibility/procedure policy for assessing an employee's out-of-state request. Do you have anything like this for reference? — *Adreanna, California*

**A.** Deciding whether to honor these requests is complicated (and not only because you may, at some point, wish to require them to physically report to the workplace). For example, when you place a worker in a new state, your organization will need to register its presence with that state and make arrangements to pay taxes and other assessments on behalf of your employee. (Short-term arrangements in the pandemic's early days may not have triggered these obligations, but localities are unlikely to refrain from compliance for long.)

Also, unemployment compensation, wage payment requirements and benefits laws may exist in that jurisdiction that you do not expect. For example, what does the local state law say about reimbursing workers for business expenses? Will you cut salaries if the employee's cost of living decreases? Also, employees may be surprised to learn their new state's laws differ on compensation and leave.

There is no one correct answer to your question and no model policy to suit every employer. The important thing is to investigate carefully what hiring a worker in a remote jurisdiction would require of your business, and decide whether you are willing to permit these relocations.

### How do we fix a benefit deduction error?

**Q.** Due to a computer error, some benefits deductions did not occur on the last paychecks. Can we double the benefits premiums on the next paycheck or these employees? — *Van, Texas*

**A.** You should first look at your summary plan description for any mention of underpayments or missed payments to see whether this topic and a procedure are addressed. If it is, proceed accordingly. If not, and because neither the IRS nor state wage payment laws provide guidance on what's allowable, you'll need to take the following into consideration (which will likely require the attention of your attorney):

- Whether make-up deductions are required to uphold the cafeteria plan rule that employees' elections are irrevocable midyear, unless your plan allows such mid-year changes.
- Whether state wage laws allow make-up deductions, and if they do, whether you must get employees' consent.
- The Fair Labor Standards Act allows deductions that take an employee's wages below minimum wage so long as the deduction isn't for the employer's benefit.
- If the deductions are allowable, ensure that they're taken in the same plan year, to avoid the cafeteria plan rule that employees can't defer their pay into the next plan year.

*Do you have a question? If so, you can email it to The HR Specialist at [HRSEditor@BusinessManagementDaily.com](mailto:HRSEditor@BusinessManagementDaily.com).*

## More bonuses this year, but probably worth less



More companies rewarded their employees with year-end bonuses or gifts in 2020 than in 2019, but the value

of those bonuses appears to be lower, according to a new survey by the Challenger, Gray & Christmas consulting firm.

Eighty-one percent of employers reported they would offer at least some employees a bonus or holiday gift this year.

That's a higher percentage than in years past. In 2019, 65% of companies reported they offered a year-end bonus or gift, similar to results in 2017 and 2018. In 2016, 73% of employers reported offering year-end cash or other rewards.

For 2020, 25% of employers said they plan to offer all employees modest bonuses or gifts worth \$100 or less, or grant an extra vacation day. Another 25% said bonuses or year-end perks would go to high performers only. Other employers said their year-end bonuses would depend on meeting organization-wide performance measures.

In general, bonuses and gifts are likely to be worth a little less than last year. Sixty percent of employers said year-end rewards would be about the same as last year, but 30% said they would be smaller.

### Will year-end rewards change?

About the same as last year



Increase in value



Decrease in value



Source: Challenger, Gray & Christmas survey, Nov. 2020

## 3 strategies to ease the post-COVID return to work

As coronavirus vaccines roll out, employers and employees alike have begun contemplating how the post-COVID workplace will work. Many want to come back to work on site. Others are in no hurry to return, maybe because they have a health concern or simply prefer to work from home.

Here are some ways employers can accommodate both groups:

### 1. Health care incentives.

Improving health benefits can ease some return-to-work anxiety. Employees have already seen that telemedicine can effectively and inexpensively treat low-urgency medical conditions that previously might have precipitated an expensive emergency room visit.

For 2021, health care plans offering permanent telehealth options—not just during shutdowns—have proved popular with employees. So have plans that include remote counseling and other help dealing with the stress that has accompanied the pandemic.

**2. Telework help.** Employers are refining their telework plans and benefits programs to accommodate varied worker needs. For example, some workers want to continue telework to avoid illness. Others want to return to the office for various reasons that made telework difficult.

One option is to provide backup child care. Some employers offer remote educational counseling for employees' kids who are struggling with remote learning.

### 3. Permanent remote work.

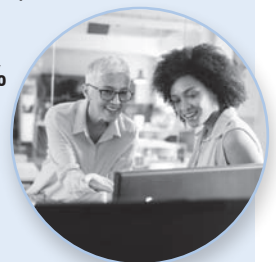
Permanent telecommuting may work surprisingly well for some workers. As the pandemic ravaged cities, some people have moved to lower-density communities. Regular commuting to and from the office may be difficult or impossible if they are recalled.

Allowing telework may help retain those workers who would otherwise accept job offers from employers that fully embrace remote work.

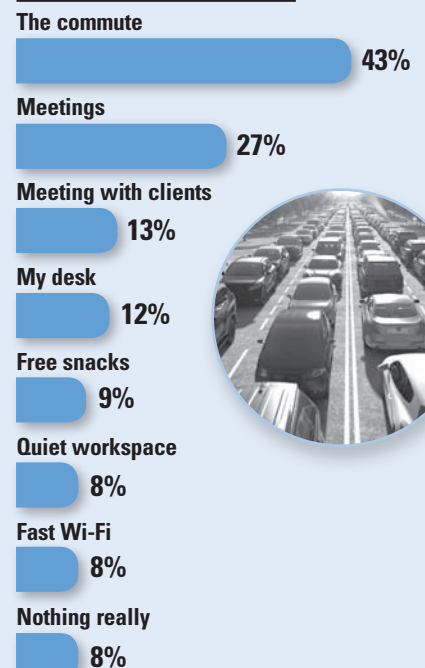
## Working from home: What we truly miss ... and what we don't

Nine months into white-collar America's mass move to remote work, many of us miss the socialization of office life. Others couldn't be happier working from home.

### What we miss most



### What we miss least



Source: HotelsbyDay survey, October 2020

To: \_\_\_\_\_  
 From: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: January 2021  
 Re: Resolving workplace conflict

## Communication

# Conflicts in a COVID world: 8 tips to resolve disputes

Conflicts at work have been around forever, but the ongoing coronavirus pandemic is adding a new level of co-worker tension and turmoil as more employees return to the workplace.

Disagreements over masks, cleaning methods and keeping a safe distance from others are popping up in workplaces across the country. One survey said more than a third of employees are upset by co-workers who don't follow proper mask or social-distance guidelines.

The coronavirus itself has led to disputes, with 29% of employees saying they've clashed with co-workers over the question of the true danger of the coronavirus.

In many cases, managers need to step in to prevent these conflicts from becoming louder, more legally dangerous or even violent.

Here are eight strategies for dealing with any kind of disruptive conflict at work, not just COVID-related disputes:

**1. Listen actively, empathetically and responsively.** Organizations typically manage by telling people how to behave. Instead, try asking questions and then listening to the answers. You'll get useful information and employees will feel respected.

**2. Change the context of the conflict.** Step back, reflect on recurring issues and see if you can change employees' expectations about how their issues will be addressed. For example, a manufacturing company increased productivity and reduced claims by rewarding employee input rather than labeling comments as "complaints."

**3. Acknowledge and integrate emotions to solve problems.** The unwritten rule that emotions have no place at work is neither realistic nor helpful. "Good" emotions, such as enthusiasm, are expected and rewarded, while

"bad" emotions such as anger are labeled irrational. But to the person in conflict, his or her emotions are logical. Discussing and expressing emotions in a safe environment can lift barriers to a more effective working relationship.

**4. Make sure employees know the "why."** When work-

ers know the *reasons* for your policies or procedures—say specific COVID restrictions—they're more likely to follow them without complaint.

**5. Search beneath the surface.**

It's a surprise when someone blows up over something small. But disruptive behavior is like the tip of an iceberg with hidden fears, desires and intentions that help explain what's really wrong. Regular check-ins help to defuse mounting tension.

**6. Separate what matters from what gets in the way.** At some point the debate over who is right and who is wrong does no good. Move past unproductive dialogues by presenting a challenge for those in conflict to work together.

**7. Solve problems collaboratively.**

Managers have a tendency to deal with conflict by separating people. That may be necessary with a harassment complaint. But there may be a better way. Can you get them to work together? People do better when they are given clear goals that make sense to them.

**8. Let them vent.** Make sure you give your employees real opportunities—online and in-person—to voice their concerns and complaints in a productive manner. Again, regular check-ins with each of your staff members will help let air slowly out of the employees' frustration balloon so the issue doesn't blow up into a conflict.



## Some common myths about workplace conflict

- **Conflict is always negative and should be avoided at work.** When problems are hidden, they fester and grow bigger. Conflict has to be acknowledged and addressed. Workplace conflict is often creativity trying to happen, and savvy organizations look for ways to embrace and optimize healthy conflict.
- **Difficult people are the cause of most conflict.** While bad behavior is certainly a contributing cause, failing to set realistic expectations is a big contributor. Confusion and conflict can result if people don't understand what the organization or manager expects of them.
- **In conflict, there are always winners and losers.** A position is a stand we take in a negotiation or conflict. It is what we demand from the other person. Interests are what we really want—our needs and desires. Focusing on interests, rather than positions, is more effective. Also, stand in the other person's shoes and contemplate what they really want.
- **It's a manager's responsibility to fix employees' problems.** Unless a problem involves behavior or performance that needs to be addressed, a manager doesn't own it—the employees do. When managers intervene and exert authority, employees miss the opportunity to develop conflict management skills. Problems should be solved by the individuals who own it.





# Lessons from America's worst employers of 2020

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has taught us a lot about ourselves and fellow Americans. These lessons also extend to the workplace.

For example, have you heard about the meat processing plant manager who organized a cash buy-in, winner-take-all betting pool for supervisors to guess how many of the plant's 3,000 employees would test positive for COVID-19? In case you are wondering, the current answer was over 1,000, with five deaths.

How about the company accused of firing office workers who expressed concern about their employer's plan to end remote work arrangements? It insisted that all employees return to work in person. For the record, this entity is a large national HR certification and lobbying organization.

What about the company that fired its HR manager for "exaggerating the China Virus," after she sent an email to employees about COVID and required two employees to stay home for one

week after vacationing in China and Malaysia?

Or the theme park employer accused of keeping employees in the dark about which of their fellow workers are sick with the virus, and requiring COVID-positive employees to return to work before the end of their CDC-recommended isolation?

(or are accused of doing), but what we learn from their stories.

I try to live my life by the Golden Rule: Treat others as you would want to be treated. This is also a great rule by which employers should live. Treat your employees how you would want to be treated as an employee.

During the ongoing pandemic, this means not betting on which of your employees will get sick ... allowing those who can work remotely to do so (without penalty) ... advising employees when they might have been exposed at work ... understanding that your remote employees may need to deal with some

minor background nuisances like kids and pets ... and otherwise treating the virus with the seriousness that more than 300,000 dead Americans dictate.

**The management Golden Rule:**  
Treat your employees how you would want to be treated as an employee.

Or the employer who fired a work-at-home mom because her one- and four-year-old children were making noise in the background of her conference calls? She says no clients ever complained. The only person who took issue was her male boss.

These allegations are awful. The issue, however, is not necessarily what these employers did

*Jon Hyman is a partner at Meyers Roman in Cleveland. You can learn which employer was voted "America's Worst" in his popular blog at [www.coronavirusslaw.blog](http://www.coronavirusslaw.blog).*

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## Biden aims to limit noncompetes, no-poaching pacts

President-elect Joe Biden says he will push for legislation in 2021 that will prohibit employers from asking workers to sign noncompete agreements as a condition of employment. Biden would only allow such pacts that are “absolutely necessary to protect a narrowly defined category of trade secrets.” In addition, Biden is calling for “an outright ban” on no-poaching pacts in which companies agree not to recruit and hire each other’s employees.

## Half of workers say pandemic stalled career growth

A full 50% of working Americans say their career development has stalled or even regressed during the pandemic, says a survey of 1,000 workers by Doodle, an online scheduling firm. Nearly half (49%) say they’re not getting enough training, coaching or mentoring to advance their careers. Two-thirds of workers said their bosses haven’t scheduled more one-on-one meetings with them since the pandemic began.

## The impact of COVID on workers’ comp claims

At the start of the pandemic, the workers’ compensation industry openly worried about an onslaught of claims. But with fewer people in the workplace, employers have seen a big decrease in non-COVID workers’ compensation claims, down about 25–50% since early March. Employers expect total claims to fall by about 20% for the year, says a Health Strategy Associates survey. And most COVID claims are not likely to be expensive. In the survey, one payer reported that 96% of COVID claims cost less than \$3,500.

## CDC revises its COVID mask guidelines

As COVID cases reach all-time highs this winter, pay attention to new safety guidelines issued in December by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The

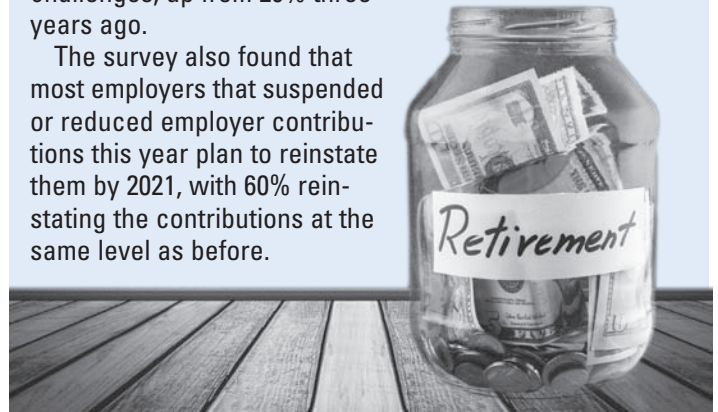
## With financial stress adding up, employers get creative to help workers

Employers are eyeing a variety of new retirement plan features to enhance employees’ overall financial well-being, including a growing interest in adding services that help workers build rainy-day funds and repay student loans, according to a new survey by Willis Towers Watson.

Also top of mind: Creating plan features that help employees generate a steady flow of income during retirement. Interest in so-called lifetime income solutions has increased fourfold since 2017, indicating an increased focus on retirement spending, not just retirement savings.

Driving the push for innovation in 401(k) and 403(b) retirement plan design is widespread concern that financial worries distract employees from their work. About a third of respondents (34%) indicated that short-term financial stress among workers is creating workforce challenges, up from 26% three years ago.

The survey also found that most employers that suspended or reduced employer contributions this year plan to reinstate them by 2021, with 60% reinstating the contributions at the same level as before.



CDC tightened mask guidance, advising Americans to wear masks in all indoor spaces outside of their homes. A CDC statement called masks “the most important, powerful public health tool” for stopping COVID’s spread.

## Zoom fatigue taking a toll on employees

A full 30% of professionals surveyed by staffing firm Robert Half said they spend at least one-third of their workday on camera in virtual meetings. And nearly four in 10 say they’re experience video call fatigue. The report suggests that meeting organizers ease the video burden on workers by limiting the guest list when possible. Small groups tend to be more effective and engaged than those in mass meetings. Also, set expectations and an agenda in advance so the meeting can run quickly and efficiently.

## Delivering critique? Give employee some control

Managers and HR can soften the blow of criticism by giving employees some amount of control over when, where, and how that critique is delivered. Try saying, “When would be a good time for me to give you some feedback?” A degree of control over how one receives bad news helps the person deal with it better.

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- **Fringe benefits: taxable or non-taxable?** How to reward fringe benefits to employees without crossing swords with the IRS
- **W-2s, W-3s, 1099s and more: What errors will land you in the IRS hot seat?** We'll tell you how to avoid them
- **What's the law in your state?** Check out the appendixes for the requirements in your state.

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