Your utility may not be ready to go back to work, but it can go forward

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In our web conference series on planning the return to the workplace, we heard from many utilities that, early in the pandemic, their executive teams held virtual all-staff meetings every week.

CEOs gave updates on work-from-home policies, shout-outs to frontline workers, reassurance on job security, details about the Family and Medical Leave Act, and advice on staying physically and mentally healthy.

Watch the back-to-the-workplace webinar recordings

Whether you're an E Source member or not, you can watch the recordings of our webinar series about returning to the workplace post-COVID:

- Engaging utility employees in the return to the workplace
- Planning the return to the workplace: COVID-19 workshop
- Planning the return to the workplace part 2: COVID-19 workshop

But as the pandemic dragged on, these corporate meetings occurred less often. One-on-one chats between supervisors and direct reports became the preferred communication channel.

What we're seeing is that COVID-19 has shifted the employee experience to the employee's experience.

That's because employees didn't need information pushed to them as much as they needed information pulled from them. They wanted to connect with each other and their managers on a personal level. They wanted their managers to call and ask them, "Hey, how are things going for you at home?"

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How can employees continue to connect?

Utilities thought going back to the workplace would help employees feel more connected. But efforts to reopen are creating unintended consequences, such as:

- Tension among office workers who want to come back to work, field-workers who have been on the front lines or who have been sidelined for months, and workers who must continue to stay at home due to health risks or family needs
- Alienation of employees who can't return to work
- Pressure for employees to come back to work even if they're afraid to do so
- Fear that fellow employees in the office aren't taking precautions such as wearing masks and keeping socially distant

It's clear that utility staff won't be rushing back to the office any time soon. In the meantime, how do you continue to engage staff at home and help them connect with one another and their managers?

Make sure all employees have access to company information. For example, if your field-workers don't have work computers or VPN access, set up web pages that they can get to from their phones or personal computers.

Set up virtual lunch meetings with direct reports. If you're a manager, schedule lunches with your team members. Recreate the dining-out experience by sending lunches to your employees via a food delivery service.

Encourage employees to share photos and videos. Ask your working-from-home employees to take pictures of their home offices or make videos of their kids or pets. Ask your frontline employees to film their work in the field. What does fixing a downed power line or inspecting a gas leak look like during a pandemic? This will help groups better understand how COVID-19 is affecting other departments.

Send do-it-yourself mask kits to people's homes. Include a blank-canvas mask, a few art supplies, and a friendly note. Tell employees to join a company-wide videoconference where all staff members can decorate their masks together.

Send handwritten or digital thank-you cards. Don't overlook the value of a digital recognition badge or a stamped and postmarked letter. Make employees feel noticed and appreciated. Check in with them periodically and ask them how you can make their remote working experience more productive and fulfilling.

When will we get back to normal?

We all want life to go back to normal, but it's looking more likely that we'll have a string of next normals. Now is the time to think differently about employee engagement, to focus less on the group and more on the individual.

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You and your staff are establishing new norms together, which means you need to talk about them together. Think about how you can create a dialogue with employees, how you can set up feedback

channels, and how you can support the dozens, hundreds, or thousands of unique coronavirus stories people are living and telling at your utility.

Watch the recordings of our virtual workshops

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