



*Organizational Response to
the Pandemic: A Case Study
from New York*

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If anyone had told me in November 2019 that the world as we know it was about to change, and that I would be working from home for most of 2020 and most of my interactions with people would be virtual, I wouldn't believe it. But for better or for worse, it is where the world headed at the start of 2020. Despite all the time that has passed, I am still in awe that we are living in times that are so different from the one we were living just 8 months ago.

When a major event happens that poses an existential threat, many norms of life change, some in the short term and some for the long term (Arruda,2020). Change is never easy. Whether good or bad, all types of change require us to expend considerable resources to adjust and be aligned with the new change. COVID-19 was a sudden, unexpected change for the entire world, a change we continue to accustom ourselves to. When my company's CEO sent out communications in early March, about the need to stay at home until an undefined date, my first reaction was a mix of relief and anxiety. Relief, because I had heard about the virus in the news and the alarming number of deaths it was causing, and anxiety, because I had never been trained to do my job entirely virtual. I didn't know how long we were going to be in this situation, and everybody was looking for any type of information they could get, to make sense of all the ambiguity we were suddenly thrust into.

Many of the changes brought on by COVID-19 will disappear as time passes. We humans have the ability to move on, to go back to how things were before a major event struck us. However, many other changes caused by the pandemic will permanently transform various elements of our working environments.

The coronavirus has paved the way for purpose driven leadership. Companies have faced unexpected challenges in their operations and finances, and with the nature of challenges being unique for every industry and business, the course of action was different for each. Many companies have already stepped up to support their workers, customers, and local communities (The COVID-19 Corporate Response Tracker,2020). American companies, like the rest of the world, have responded to the pandemic in varying ways.

I have worked for PepsiCo for more than a year now and have witnessed PepsiCo first-hand during the pandemic. PepsiCo is a global food and beverage leader with a product portfolio that generates more than \$22 billion in annual retail sales through 22 brands . Our main businesses – Quaker, Tropicana, Gatorade, Frito-Lay and Pepsi-Cola – make hundreds of enjoyable foods and beverages that are loved throughout the world. As of December 28, 2019, PepsiCo has about 267,000 employees worldwide (PepsiCo, n.d.). I will focus particularly on what PepsiCo has done to help employees, but I'll also touch on how some other well-known companies have dealt with COVID-19.

The health and safety of employees is the first and foremost priority for companies right now. As a company, PepsiCo is adhering to social distancing regulations at all their facilities around the world, and all PepsiCo associates who have the option to work from home have been asked to do so, and those who do not are following social distancing guidelines provided by the local and federal governments. Since, global health agencies have advised that the most effective action companies can take against the virus is to maintain good hygiene. American companies have increased the frequency of cleaning at all facilities. Additionally, most companies here have increased the availability of hand sanitizer across their facilities, separated workstations, and provided masks for all of the frontline employees (PepsiCo's response to COVID-19, 2020).

Frontline workers are the backbone of every organization and during the pandemic, they prove this fact to be even more true. During this critical time, frontline workers for food and beverages companies like PepsiCo and Nestle continue to keep grocery stores and supermarkets stocked. Therefore, companies need to take their employees' health and safety very seriously. With this in mind, PepsiCo in the United States provide their associates, who have been assessed by a doctor and have been diagnosed or are symptomatic and therefore need to be quarantined, or who are caring for a sick family member, 100% of pay for a two-week period. PepsiCo also provides a minimum of two-thirds of pay for those diagnosed or caring for a diagnosed family member for up to 10 additional weeks. Many companies have also announced similar benefits for their associates (PepsiCo's response to COVID-19, 2020).

Companies also recognized the burden on associates because of inadequate childcare facilities during this time. For associates that may be affected by lack of childcare facilities due to daycare or school closures or the lack of availability of a regular caregiver because of COVID-19, PepsiCo offers a minimum of two-thirds pay for up to 12 weeks (PepsiCo's response to COVID-19, 2020).

In the midst of a number of layoffs happening around the country due to failing businesses, companies who could afford to hire new employees stood up to do so. In the past 7 months PepsiCo hired ~6,000 full-benefit, full-time, new frontline employees across the U.S. Companies in e-commerce have especially needed more employees since the entire shopping space has become virtual. In March, Amazon said it would hire additional warehouse and delivery workers across the country amid a surge in online shopping during the coronavirus outbreak. Since then, Amazon said it has hired more than 100,000 new employees and, as a result, is staffing up even more to help fulfill orders (Palmer, 2020).

Amid COVID-19, America also went through grave social injustices perpetrated on its colored population. With ongoing protests against police brutality and systemic racism erupting across the United States, the need to implement practices and policies that support inclusivity of all Americans – including people of colour, who are disproportionately affected by the coronavirus crisis – was even more keenly felt (The COVID-19 Corporate Response Tracker, 2020). The killings of George Floyd,

Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery sparked outrage across the nation. There was an outpour of emotion and calls for action. Many Asian-Americans also faced blame for the pandemic merely on the basis of their racial identities. These circumstances had employees feeling increasingly emotionally vulnerable in the workspace.

PepsiCo for example, at the grassroots conducted virtual 'safe spaces' where associates could come together and express their true feelings, without judgement from others. Companies like PepsiCo, Amazon, Adidas, Apple, IBM, NASCAR to name a few, donated millions to social justice reforms, as well as pledged to have more opportunities for people of color in their organizations.

As important it is for companies to make reforms to help employees navigate through these uncertain times, it is equally important for these companies to provide some direction as to when offices will reopen, as well as what work hours will look like once we are back in the office. Companies also face the ethical concerns of asking employees to travel to work, without the assurance of the vaccine in the near future. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly one-third of the U.S. workforce, are able to work from home. Though the number of people working partially or fully remotely has been on the rise for years now, the COVID-19 pandemic may have pushed the fast-forward button on this trend. However, the chance to work from home was appreciated by both the corporate leaders as well as employees. The ease of availability and collaborative nature of many platforms like Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Slack and others helped employees adapt to the new work-from-home setup.

Doing away with time-consuming commutes has given employees the opportunity to be able to attend to their children and family members who are also stranded at home because of the virus. Companies realized the vast amounts of money saved due to limited functioning of their work spaces and the probable chance of not having long term property leases for their offices. Twitter, in a forward-thinking, unprecedented statement, told their employees that they may remain working from home "forever" (Kelly, 2020). Soon, other companies followed suit as well.

The rising popularity of working from home was noticed by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), a professional society devoted to serving human resources professionals. The group pointed out that a large number of companies, including PepsiCo, Facebook, Capital One, Amazon, Microsoft, Zillow and others, have announced that they will extend their work-from-home programs. CEOs and top executives indicated that almost a fifth of companies are planning to transition to full remote-work policies and 89% are planning at least partial remote-work policies (Arruda, May 2020).

There are benefits to this new trend. Employees can now apply to any job without having to worry about relocating close to their office vicinity. When given the permission to work remotely, where the employee is working from doesn't matter, as long as they are meeting their deliverables.

There are also downsides to working remotely. Communicating face-to-face is no longer possible and sometimes there is no substitute for physical interactions during meetings. We have video conferencing, but some employees can slack off, or not engage with the rest of the video conference attendants. Feeling a sense of cohesiveness with one's team can be difficult as well. Productivity can also suffer in this work from home environment as employees may tend to be distracted, or not be motivated enough. Burnout can also be a concern, since we can never really disconnect from our work and there are no clear boundaries demarcating office from home. Work-life balance can be very difficult to maintain in these times. American companies are trying to quell this by offering employees additional paid time-off, mental health days and limitless access to the Employee Resource Groups.

While talking to my family, friends and colleagues, I realize that the virus has been a very noteworthy experience for all, and for many, it is a really trying time as well. The virus is propelling us to change as individuals of society, as well as employees of the workforce across the globe. As the old adage goes, 'This too shall pass'. Though the end doesn't seem to be in sight right now, things will slowly start to return to pre- COVID times. Some things will go back to the way they were, but for now, this is the new normal!

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