



A CORPORATE PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT SERIES

# Managing the Post-COVID-19 Workplace

## Part IV: The Vanishing Road Warrior – Going to Market in a Virtual World

This is the fourth in a series exploring the workplace challenges and opportunities confronting organizations as they navigate a post-COVID-19 world.

The way organizations and businesses go to market changed dramatically when the coronavirus abruptly shut down travel and workplaces. Overnight, seasoned “road warriors” found their coast-to-coast travel schedules tossed in the dustbin and perfected sales pitches relegated to the small screen via videoconference. Though parts of the economy begin to open, it’s still unclear when, or even if, work travel and face-to-face encounters will rebound to pre-pandemic levels any time soon.

Sales teams are particularly hard hit, sandwiched between increased pressure to “make-up” for revenues lost during lockdown and the added hardship of operating in a pandemic economy where travel, critical facetime and relationship building activities are significantly limited. Just as the pandemic forced organizations to reevaluate [workforce strategies](#) and [policies governing where and how employees work](#), it has also driven companies to reimagine sales and marketing to develop models that minimize risk and protect employee health and welfare.

### Pre-Flight Checklist

Organizations should be deliberate in determining how they can maintain both healthy employees and sales pipelines. The first step to doing so is characterizing the specific risks for previously non-negotiable matters like travel, entertainment and other client relationship management techniques.

**How critical are face-to-face sales calls?** Travel and face-to-face interactions most definitely increase the risk of contracting COVID-19. First and foremost, organizations should consider if in-person sales calls are even necessary. Some of your customers will be conservative, continuing to allow employees to work remotely or limiting the number of on-site personnel through staggered schedules. Even if you’re ready to hit the road, these clients may not be ready for you.

**How do your employees feel about getting back on the road?** Don’t set policy until you have a firm understanding of how employees feel about travel. Get feedback early and emphasize your organization’s desire to listen to concerns and find unique solutions. Are there certain territories that are more impacted by the spread of COVID-19? In partnership with your team, determine what risks are mutually acceptable.

**“What if...” Mitigating reputational risk.** Right or wrong, companies must think about public and client perception. For those deliberating immediate return to travel, consider the ramifications if one of your employees or their teammates contracted COVID-19 on the road. How would your clients feel? What if cases in the region skyrocket? Would clients view your actions as irresponsible, holding you accountable for not only your employee’s health but for also contributing to unchecked spread through the community? As you evaluate new policies and procedures, ask yourselves: “How would my (client, team member, shareholder) perceive my decision in hindsight?”

**Reevaluate customer strategies and sales coverage.** With lockdown decreasing everyone’s travel, sales teams might have unprecedented access to “tough to reach” customers. Take advantage of these connection points to validate or refine new customer strategies. Based on customer insights, shifts in demand or other factors, now may be the time to right-size your sales team and redraw coverage maps. In some cases, less travel means that the hours previously spent on the road (at the airport or navigating shoddy in-flight internet) could be reallocated to serving customers more efficiently in a remote capacity. In others, reduced air travel may necessitate more reps to service the same territory.

**Adopt 'inside sales' best practices.** Before the pandemic, sales teams were often divided into 'inside' (remote, virtual) or 'outside' (field-based, face-to-face) functions. Certainly, most selling now is done via the inside model. Organizations should communicate inside sales best practices to their entire teams, as it's likely that all will continue to do some virtual selling moving forward. Teams will also likely need additional access to e-commerce and digital marketing tools, training and sales support to effectively transition to, and maintain, this model.

## On the Road Again...Safely

Once you determine when your teams will travel, be sure to establish protocols and best practices for sales staff to follow to remain healthy, safe and effective on the road.

**How should travel change?** If possible, consider driving more and flying less. Limit overnight stays or do so only at establishments with vetted health and safety practices. Restrict entertainment to activities where social distancing is possible.

**Align to new social norms.** COVID-19 also disrupted our social norms. Even the handshake, the ingrained custom for greeting clients, is socially forbidden now and replaced by the awkward elbow bump or similar gesture. Taking a client out for lunch, if an option at all, has its own tricky quirks to navigate, such as social distancing and when to wear a facemask. Consider developing frameworks to help your sales teams address expectations before meeting with customers (whether new or established) for the first-time post-lockdown.

**Find new ways to build rapport.** In the post-COVID-19 world, how we build connections with clients is a new challenge. What's missing from videoconferencing calls are the little things that strengthen relationships: what you did over the weekend, current events and other casual conversations. To recover some of those customs, be deliberate about making space for them. Open and close virtual meetings with small talk, and ask people how they're doing personally or what's been occupying them in their free time. Where possible, try to physically meet with clients in a safe way, such as at a coffee shop or for an outdoor meal at a restaurant. These intimate and face-to-face connections will help establish and deepen relationships faster.

## Conclusion

Companies are wary to send out their sales team en masse without serious considerations over health and liability concerns. That means envisioning different ways to market, limiting travel based on the needs of the organization and funneling more customer contacts through videoconferences and other means of communication. Take the time to right size your sales force for your "new normal," and ensure appropriate coverage now that sales teams have potentially gained hours of productive time due to significantly reduced hours spent at airports and on planes. It's imperative that firms listen to employee concerns and train them with the tools and skills to successfully sell in a post-COVID-19 world.

Crisis can often lead to innovation — use this time to create new and better sales teams that can support your organization through COVID-19, and help it grow into the post-pandemic future.

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