

Seven Workforce Questions that Are Top of Mind During COVID-19

A Resource for Small Businesses

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What Small Businesses are Saying About Worker Health and Safety

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, both workers and small businesses have endured unprecedented stress and challenges. In this extraordinary time, it has become increasingly clear that their interests are aligned. For small business owners, the safety and stability of their employees is essential for business survival.

Small businesses owners have moved quickly to transform their operations while reassuring customers and employees that they are doing all they can to keep everyone safe. Many have gone above and beyond to protect and support their employees, from personally driving workers to and from work to giving personal protective equipment (PPE) to employees and their families. They know that supporting their workers is the right thing to do, but they also understand that it is good business. As Laura Wagner, co-owner of Well Crafted Kitchen in Baltimore, Maryland, explains,

“Small business owners want to be good to their employees. Firstly, because we have good ethics. And secondly, we are a small team. We are close to our employees, and we care about their wellbeing and growth. At the same time, we need to keep our employees. The costs of hiring and re-training people are so expensive, and it takes so long.”

Our research team interviewed small business owners, business advisors, workforce intermediaries, and small business lenders to learn what concerns are top of mind in this new and challenging environment. All shared how difficult it has been for small businesses to stay afloat during this time. And, while business owners are finding creative ways to support their workers, there is a need for additional resources – as well as clear guidance and robust public support – to weather this storm.

This resource is organized around seven health and safety questions that small businesses have grappled with since the start of the pandemic. For each question, we provide practical information, examples of steps taken by other small businesses, and links to helpful resources assembled in our [Job Quality Tools Library](#).¹

1. **How can I reassure my workers that we are following appropriate safety guidelines?**
2. **How can I create an equitable and inclusive environment for my employees and customers?**
3. **How can I help my employees communicate and implement safety measures with customers?**
4. **How can I help my employees manage increased stress?**
5. **How can I help my employees get to work safely?**
6. **How can I recognize and respond to my employees' caregiving responsibilities?**
7. **How can I support my employees' financial stability?**

IMPORTANT: Please note that this resource is a general information resource and should not be treated as legal, medical, or expert guidance about workplace safety. Rely on the information at your own risk and consult the most up-to-date recommendations of federal, state, and local public health and workplace safety officials. E.g., the [National Safety Council](#)² provides resources that you may find helpful, including federal guidelines and state-specific resources regarding COVID-19 and the workplace. Further consult with your own qualified advisors about any specific issues or circumstances you might have.

This guide is a work in progress, and we hope to continue adding resources, guidance, and examples as we continue to conduct research and as new information about COVID-19 becomes available. We welcome your feedback and ideas.

1. How can I reassure my workers that we are following appropriate safety guidelines?

As scientists learn more about COVID-19, federal, state, and local guidance for safety and protection continues to evolve. Small business owners are now tasked with keeping up to date on safety measures and are responsible for educating their employees and customers about efforts to keep them safe. The information and tools below can help small businesses establish systems to bolster workplace safety and engage their employees as part of this process. As always, though, consult with applicable federal, state, and local public health and workplace safety authorities for their latest requirements and guidance.

Communicate about what you're doing in a variety of ways

Business advisors and owners described using a range of communication tactics to make workers aware of new safety measures related to physical distancing, PPE provision, and workplace cleaning. Some businesses are using signs, manuals, and videos, regular staff emails, social media channels, and team meetings if they can be held safely. Communicating in a variety of ways helps to ensure that information is visible and accessible to all employees. It also helps to ensure that every member of the team (whether furloughed or employed) receives up to date information on rapidly changing policies, and that frontline managers are providing the same consistent message. It is also helpful to account for differing literacy and language comprehension levels. Bilingual workers may be able to assist in translating safety and training documents during compensated work time. A helpful example of a safety poster from the restaurant industry can be found on the last two pages of [Safety First: Serving Food and Protecting People During COVID-19](#).³

Provide health and safety training as a routine business practice

Given evolving guidance and regulations, small business owners noted that they need to stay updated on the latest safety guidance and establish routine practices for onboarding and training workers. The [National Safety Council](#)⁴ has compiled resources, including federal guidelines, industry guidance, and state-specific resources for employers. You may also be able to draw on free resources like the mobile phone-based training [Stop COVID-19](#),⁵ which uses lessons delivered by text and WhatsApp to train workers on workplace safety.

Develop a system of continuous safety improvement

It can be helpful to establish ongoing procedures for communication, training, and monitoring related to safety. Processes could include [establishing a safety committee](#),⁶ tracking and monitoring safety indicators, and holding regular safety meetings where employees are asked for feedback and ideas. While setting up these systems requires up-front investment of time and resources, they can help reduce the burden on small business owners over time as employees begin to play a more active role in communicating and operationalizing safety protocols. Giving workers opportunity to participate in decision-making about health and safety measures can strengthen buy-in, awareness, and execution. Small business owners also noted that it is important to make yourself available to respond to employees' safety questions and concerns as they arise.

"We use face masks at the front counter. We explain the importance of PPE. I used to be on the subcommittee for restaurants for Baltimore City so I can explain to [my employees] what's going on." –Naijha Wright, Co-Owner of Baltimore-based vegan soul food restaurant Land of Kush

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2. How can I create an equitable and inclusive environment for my employees and customers?

Businesses of all sizes are grappling with this critical question. Owners recognize that workers of color are disproportionately experiencing the compounding emotional, physical, and financial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to an increased likelihood of contracting the virus, 61% of Latinx workers and 44% of Black workers have reported job and wage losses due to COVID-19.⁷ Additionally, Asian and Black workers are reporting increased stigmatization because of their race and ethnicity since the Coronavirus outbreak.⁸ Many small business owners are taking new steps to create an inclusive workplace where employees and customers of color feel welcome and safe. We've captured some of these steps below, and shared tools to help small business owners prioritize equity.

Assess how your equity practices stack up

An assessment can help you identify employment practices your business can adopt to make the workplace more inclusive and equitable. For example, it can help you understand the equity implications of who has been furloughed or had their hours reduced.⁹ [This guide](#)¹⁰ developed by Associated Black Charities details 10 essential questions business owners can use to examine their internal policies, practices and organizational culture. For restaurant owners, [this toolkit](#)¹¹ developed by Race Forward and Restaurant Opportunities Centers United can help you incorporate racial equity into your business' operations, practices, and culture.

Speak out to protect your workers

Asian Americans have faced [increased discrimination](#),¹² as many have been wrongly accused of starting and spreading the virus. And as calls for racial justice grow stronger, many Black people have been the targets of heightened racism.¹³ As an employer, you can stand up against racist behavior by customers or other employees. The Center for WorkLife Law's [Bias Interrupters](#),¹⁴ a series of tools to disrupt discrimination in the workplace, may be a helpful starting place.

Bolster supportive management practices

Frontline managers are the people who workers interact with the most. They often dictate what frontline workers experience at work, including whether they feel safe, supported, and included. Supportive management can help to assure your employees that their health and safety is important, and that voicing concerns won't put their jobs in jeopardy. As Casey Spigel, co-owner of Forever Wireless, explains,

"We're a diverse group: African American, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and Russian. [When the Black Lives Matter protests occurred], I went to individual employees and asked: what can we do as a company to support you? I wanted them to feel comfortable expressing themselves on an individual basis."

Supportive management is especially important in workplaces where employees deal with customers or team members who exhibit bias. While not explicitly equity focused, [Google re: Work – Manager Training Tools](#)¹⁵ and [PHI Coaching Approach](#)¹⁶ are two helpful training resources for supervisors looking to strengthen their communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills.

"We talked to our team [about the fact] that [racial equity] is something we are grappling with and continue to. I would love resources on how to support racial justice during COVID-19. As white business owners, it would be really helpful."

–Laura Wagner, Co-Owner, Well Crafted Kitchen

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3. How can I help my employees communicate and implement safety measures with customers?

Employees who routinely interact with customers are now tasked with a new set of responsibilities, including communicating new safety measures and reassuring customers that the business values customer safety. Some employees may encounter upset customers who do not understand or wish to follow business' safety protocols. Here, we capture steps that some small business owners have taken, and tools that small business owners can use, to support their employees' safe interactions with customers.

Provide clear guidance to customers about safety protocols

Once you've familiarized yourself with applicable federal, state, and local requirements (such as mask mandates and building capacity limits), communicate safety information to customers. You may want to do this on your business voicemail, website, and social media channels. If customers enter your business, alert them to new procedures as they enter and find ways to support their compliance. Some businesses hang up signs throughout the store and assign an employee at the front door to alert customers about safety procedures. For example, employees can greet customers at the door and offer hand sanitizer or check if customers are properly wearing masks. Listen to the community response to these new procedures. Customers can be a great source of ideas, and two-way communication can help you continue to improve health and safety policies over time.

Change on-site operations to reduce risk of COVID-19 exposure

The small business owners we spoke with have all changed their operations to reduce customer interactions, such as restaurants shifting from indoor dining to curbside pickup and delivery. If feasible and allowed for your business, you can take steps to limit the number of customers inside. For example, offer customers set appointment times, or offer options for contactless pickup and delivery. Analyze your business process for opportunities to reduce physical interaction between customers and employees.

Train and support employees to manage hostile customers

Recent media coverage of [customers who refuse to comply with safety guidelines](#)¹⁷ has many workers worried. It's important for business owners to support their employees if customer conflicts arise, and to provide training on prevention strategies and ways to de-escalate threatening situations. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published [guidelines for limiting workplace violence associated with COVID-19](#),¹⁸ intended for use by employers and employees in retail, food service, and other customer service oriented businesses. It offers specific guidance on actions employers can take to prevent workplace violence and includes printable infographics in nine different languages.

"We've found it very important as owners to role model enforcing [safety] policies confidently and explain that those against safety may be the loudest voices but the rest of the customers may be silently approving and appreciating the enforcement. We keep saying that our systems need to be able to protect us and our team, regardless of customer behavior. I think it's also been important that we have not asked our team to do anything that we are not comfortable doing ourselves and we have regularly been working customer-facing shifts alongside our team."

—Laura Wagner, Co-Owner, Well Crafted Kitchen

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4. How can I help my employees manage increased stress?

Employees may face challenges ranging from financial stress to fear of illness to new education and care responsibilities. For many workers, these pressures are not new but have become more acute with the pandemic. Small business owners have expressed that they are especially concerned about their employees' wellbeing during these extraordinarily challenging times and want to find ways to support both worker and business stability. Below, we share strategies and tools small business owners are using to support their employees' mental health.

Communicate to your employees that you care about their wellbeing

The small business owners we spoke with have made a point of telling their employees that they understand that these are unprecedented times and that they want to be supportive as workers navigate increased pressure and a variety of unknowns in their lives. There are many ways to communicate this, including asking questions and showing empathy, providing safe channels for feedback, and finding ways to offer increased flexibility.

Review and expand benefits and policies that support psychological health at work

If available, remind employees about your employer-sponsored [employee assistance plan](#).¹⁹ Share details about the plan and encourage them to use these resources or connect them to other free options, such as national helplines. The National Alliance on Mental Illness provides [free help via text](#)²⁰ and [a useful guide](#)²¹ for navigating mental health during COVID-19. The EEOC has also provided [guidance](#)²² on providing accommodations to employees whose pre-existing mental health conditions have worsened during the pandemic.

Create space for community building

We heard small business owners finding innovative ways to create safe space for sharing, staying connected, and strengthening employees' support networks. For example, some businesses have been organizing virtual or outdoor get-togethers and team-building activities. Casey Spigel, co-owner of Forever Wireless, hosted Zoom get-togethers with his furloughed employees. "I really liked them and wanted them to stay on board," he says, "and the only way to keep checking in was to maintain a relationship. Every other week for eight weeks, we chatted. It helped us bring people back." Be mindful that if an activity occurs during non-work hours, some employees may not be able to participate.

Ask employees what kinds of practices would support their emotional wellbeing

Getting some fresh air during a work break may be restorative for some, and others may appreciate the opportunity to have more team check-ins to combat loneliness and isolation. You can encourage workers to come up with ideas that may work for them and for the larger team and communicate that you are actively listening to their concerns and feedback.

"From the beginning, we established communication. Employees know they can talk about anything at any time with us. We won't question if they are really sick, we trust if they say they aren't feeling well. So being supportive and understanding is the biggest thing—anything they tell us, we will really listen to. Any time they need to take off for mental health, that can happen, and our leave policies lend towards that."

—Khari Parker, Co-Owner of Baltimore restaurant Connie's Chicken and Waffles

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5. How can I help my employees get to work safely?

Transportation challenges for small business employees have worsened during the pandemic, as public transportation can increase risk of illness and may be operating less frequently. Small business owners report that they are increasing communication with workers about transportation options and looking for creative solutions. Below, we share resources and innovative strategies small businesses are using to get their employees to work safely.

Reevaluate employer policies related to transportation

If you previously provided transportation stipends or reimbursements for employees, consider if this is still relevant and useful. Employees may prefer bikeshare credits, parking reimbursements or other up-front, flexible benefits. The [Women's Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation – Employer Toolkit](#)²³ is a useful resource for evaluating employer transportation policies.

If your employees must take public or shared transportation, make a plan for how to stay safe and minimize potential exposure to the virus. Some businesses have shifted schedules so that employees can commute during off-peak hours. At Connie's Chicken and Waffles, co-owner Khari Parker explains, "The majority [of our employees] are taking the bus. We are giving them the option to work double shifts and minimize time on the bus. For example, an employee can work two days for longer hours versus coming in four times." Others encourage modes of transportation that have better air circulation (for example, a bus with open windows versus an underground train). Ask your employees if public transportation schedules are affecting their ability to work certain hours and consider providing workers PPE for their commute. This includes masks, hand sanitizer, and wipes for use while on public transportation and/or before entering the workplace.

Share resources with your employees to stay safe while commuting

Health experts have compiled useful information, some of which can be found at [CDC – Protect Yourself When Using Transportation](#)²⁴ and at [WebMD – Transportation: Getting Around During an Outbreak](#).²⁵ Knowledge about COVID-19 is evolving rapidly, so it's important to stay current about health and safety information, including information about safe transportation. Your employees may also be interested in learning about groups in your community working to expand transportation access, like the [Baltimore Transit Equity Coalition](#).²⁶ Some community lenders like [On the Road Lending](#)²⁷ may be able to help workers purchase vehicles at affordable interest rates.

"There are so many systemic issues that are being highlighted by COVID-19. A lot of our kitchen team doesn't have access to a car and took transit and ride shares. People are hesitant now. It's hard to support our team with transportation because we don't have money. The best solution we have right now is taking employees to work in our cars."

–Liz Bower, Co-Owner, Well Crafted Kitchen

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6. How can I recognize and respond to my employees' caregiving responsibilities?

Long before the pandemic, businesses of all sizes and their workers expressed frustration about lack of affordable, high-quality childcare impacting attendance and productivity. COVID-19 has exacerbated the challenges facing working parents. Many workers have been pulled into [new care responsibilities](#)²⁸ during the pandemic, such as taking care of children whose schools have gone virtual or whose daycares have closed, or helping a sick relative. Below, we share steps small businesses are taking to support workers with care responsibilities.

Adapt your scheduling practices to better meet the needs of caregivers

If possible, provide a flexible or modified schedule that workers can align with their caregiving responsibilities. For hourly workers, setting regular, [predictable schedules](#)²⁹ and posting these at least two weeks in advance can help workers line up care. It's helpful to communicate these policies to your entire workforce so that everyone understands what the policies are, regardless of if they are currently utilizing them.

Help your employees access affordable care

[Some employers](#)³⁰ provide care referral assistance as a benefit. You can do this through a formal program, or simply learn about the childcare options near your workplace and share a list with your workers. Other employers, such as [Best Buy](#),³¹ offer back-up care, purchasing, subsidizing, or negotiating a discount for a set number of days of care through a childcare center or an in-home provider platform like Care.com. This can help to ensure that your employees won't miss work or quit their jobs during the pandemic if they don't have access to childcare. If you reduce your employees' childcare costs, you may also be eligible for a tax break. Small business owners can also offer dependent care Flexible Spending Accounts to help employees save money by paying for childcare with pre-tax earnings. You may also want to help your employees [vet](#)³² their child care for COVID-19 safety and quality.

Use your voice to advocate

Businesses, particularly small businesses, are unlikely to be able to adequately address their employees' childcare needs on their own. And yet, childcare challenges and concerns limit employees' abilities to contribute at work and can create costs for businesses. Some small business owners have used their voices to push for state and federal [policy changes](#)³³ to ensure that all working parents have access to quality, affordable childcare.

"We really care about work-life balance. We make the schedule on Sundays, and let employees know that they have until then to request time off. We're not restrictive, it can be a week or three months. Being flexible is important to us."

—Shawn Parker, Co-Owner, Connie's Chicken and Waffles

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7. How can I support my employees' financial stability?

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an economic crisis for workers, especially Black workers and other workers of color.³⁴ Your employees may be supporting family members who have lost their jobs or are coping with increased financial strain and uncertainty, such as mounting medical, rent, and credit card bills. Below, we offer tools and approaches small business owners can use to support their employees' financial security.

Provide financial assistance to help your employees manage emergencies

Assistance can include launching programs like [income advance](#)³⁵ to provide short-term advances and emergency loans to workers facing cash flow issues so they can avoid turning to high-cost lenders. Another option, if financially feasible, is to offer hazard pay or bonuses to employees to signal that you understand they are taking on additional risk and expenses to continue working in your business. For example, Forever Wireless, a mobile phone vendor and repair franchise in Baltimore, provided weekly hazard bonuses, as well as a bonus tied to sales during the pandemic. This financial assistance allowed workers to reap the benefits of their hard work and compensated them for taking the risk of coming into work. You may also be able to apply for loans and other forms of relief to be able to continue to provide steady income to workers and retain their positions. Pacific Community Ventures has compiled a list of resources for small business relief [here](#).³⁶ [COVIDCap](#)³⁷ from Duke University's Fuqua School of Business also offers relief resources that can be filtered by state.

Connect workers to community resources

You can also share resources that help workers connect to financial assistance programs (see [AFL-CIO – Resources for Workers Impacted by COVID-19](#)).³⁸ Your employees may be eligible for help from [the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance](#)³⁹ program, which can determine eligibility for tax credits and refunds. For employees that are not U.S. citizens, consider researching and sharing information about non-profits that offer relief programs, such as United We Dream's [NationalUndocuFund](#).⁴⁰ Finally, local community development financial institutions and community development credit unions may be willing to come on-site to help your employees set up free checking accounts and get information about loan programs and other financial products. Learn more about trusted local financial partners [here](#).⁴¹

Practice financial transparency with employees

Many small businesses would like to increase wages but are cash-strapped and uncertain about the future. In the meantime, some are turning to [open book management](#),⁴² sharing the business' financials and profits with workers to help them build the organization's financial intelligence and take advantage of more business opportunities.

"We've been thinking a lot about how we can shift our pay structure and explore different models of tipping and non-tipping. We've also thought a lot about what would profit sharing look like? Something that we want to dip our toes into is to be more transparent in offering financial information to our team and engaging them in our financials. We want to give them optimism. They have their own concerns and stressors at home." –Laura Wagner, Co-Owner, Well Crafted Kitchen

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Supporting Small Business Owners to Invest in Workers

In our interviews with small business owners and organizations that support them, we heard that small businesses want to provide quality jobs, protect worker health and safety, and foster equitable workplaces. But we also heard how hard it has been for owners to invest in workers when facing lower and unpredictable revenues.

Business owners are struggling to afford PPE and provide supports such as guarantee paid leave, health benefits, and childcare stipends. They are stressed about staying up to date with safety recommendations and regulations – especially in places where public guidance is not clearly stated or enforced. Small businesses will struggle to survive without robust support from the public sector, including financial incentives and deferments, flexibility in contracts, and clear guidance on navigating COVID-19. We hope this resource provides useful information to help small businesses navigate these challenging times. And we hope it motivates consumers and practitioners who care about small businesses, their workers, and local economies to advocate for additional resources and supports.

About Reimagine Retail

Reimagine Retail, an initiative launched in 2015 by the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program and supported by Walmart, explores ways to enhance job quality and improve mobility for retail workers. The questions and answers shared here are informed by conversations with workforce providers and business leaders across our national Reimagine Retail network.

As part of this initiative, we are collaborating with Pacific Community Ventures (PCV), a community development financial institution, and the National Fund for Workforce Solutions (NFWS), a national workforce development network, as workforce intermediaries support small businesses in Baltimore and Des Moines to make job quality improvements. We are grateful to PCV and NFWS, whose work with workforce organizations and small businesses before and during the pandemic has informed our thinking about the challenges facing small businesses and workers as a result of COVID-19, and how workforce providers can play a role in supporting these businesses and their workers through the crisis. This profile draws on several years of work with these partners, and we appreciate the current and former staff who contributed. We are especially thankful to Tom Woelfel, Sanjana Seth, Kristy Henrich, Ana Hageage, Tom Strong, and Janice Urbanik.

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Endnotes

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