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The importance of humanizing compliance during a global crisis

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Inspiring employees to care about compliance isn't a challenge new to 2020, but in the midst of a global pandemic, that challenge is understandably magnified. This year, many employees turned their attention to figuring out a remote work environment and adjusting to new expectations and uncertain futures. Those concerns remain valid, and as a result, compliance is not at the forefront of the average employee's mind.

Of course, the need to maintain compliance hasn't disappeared just because of the global crisis. Compliance has changed—in terms of risk, everyday application, and employee needs—so organizations need to change, too, so their guidance is received, understood, and embraced by employees. Humanizing compliance offers a path toward acknowledging employees and emphasizing their important role in keeping the company safe, along with themselves and their coworkers.

A new risk landscape

Sheltering in place forced a significant percentage of the workforce to work from home. We became used to seeing kids and pets wandering in the background on video calls, and we could identify people's favorite T-shirts and baseball caps that they wear at home. We also changed our view of what's important, because no matter what your role was, or which company you worked for, we were all susceptible to a shared threat.

The global pandemic fundamentally transformed—and continues to transform—our professional priorities. This presents major ramifications for compliance, especially if the organization had a “paper program” in place that traditionally handed employees rules and policies and said, “Learn this.” In a COVID-19 world, this approach, at best, is tone-deaf and, at worst, invites workforce apathy.

Furthermore, the pandemic has opened a whole new swath of risk concerns. For example:

- How do you manage talent and monitor ethical conduct in a fully or partially remote workplace?
- Are there areas where risk protocols have changed, like third-party management and supply chain, especially changes in diligence requirements for third-party vendors?
- Will employees who are immunocompromised or have immunocompromised family be pressured to return to the office or face discrimination for being remote?
- How do you protect the privacy of employees who test positive for COVID-19?
- How do you enforce mask policies in accordance with the organization's guidelines and government requirements?
- How do you prevent employees and customers from getting sick—and avoid potential legal action if they do?

- How do you prevent unconscious coronavirus-related bias from seeping into your culture of compliance?

The potential risks go on and on. And with more employees working away from the office, conduct risk naturally increases—even if it's unintentional—because there's less oversight or helpful reminders and social reinforcement of the company values. Further, organizations may experience a reduction (or at least a more complex view) in reporting misconduct as employees choose to stay quiet for fear of retaliation or losing their jobs during such uncertain times. Compliance must adapt to this new reality, from the ways policies are updated to the strategies for communicating those changes while promoting a speak-up culture.

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