

Title: *What Long COVID-19 Means for Return-to-Work Plans: Supporting Employees on the Long Road to Recovery*

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What Long COVID-19 Means for Return-to-Work Plans: Supporting Employees on the Long Road to Recovery

Since the first wave of COVID-19's global spread in the spring of 2020, a growing portion of the patients with confirmed cases of COVID-19 have reported wide ranging and long-lasting symptoms in the weeks and months following their initial recovery. While most people infected by COVID-19 report seeing symptoms start to improve about five to six days after they first feel sick, others experience lingering health problems long after recovery from the initial illness. In these patients, even while there are no longer active traces of live coronavirus in the body, symptoms persist and can become debilitating. This bewildering and protracted illness has been termed long COVID by healthcare professionals and the fallout of this condition for patients can be as devastating as it is confusing.

According to a 2021 study published in *The Lancet*, a hefty list of over 200 symptoms is known to be associated with long COVID including extreme fatigue, muscle pain and shortness of breath. Cognitive symptoms like memory loss, difficulty concentrating, and depression have also been reported. The criteria for long COVID encompasses a wide array of new, recurrent or ongoing health problems and can present as different types and combinations of health problems in different patients. However, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the common feature among all 'long haulers' is the duration of symptoms lasting more than four weeks after infection.

As the world seems poised to resume business as usual, returning to work presents a broad set of challenges for long-haulers and their employers to navigate. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic forced many employers to quickly rethink how their workers worked, often in the span of weeks or days. The current trend toward a broad loosening of COVID restrictions now presents employers with a new imperative to consider the health and safety logistics of returning to work. Indeed, the number of people experiencing long COVID will likely increase in the coming months and years, so it is therefore crucial that businesses look for opportunities to support these individuals.

While research continues to emerge, studies like that from *The Lancet*, indicate that "by seven months, many patients have not yet recovered... have not returned to previous levels of work, and continue to experience significant symptom burden." Further, a report from The Brookings Institute indicates that because long COVID can develop as a result of up to 30% of all COVID-19 infections, it may be responsible for at least 15% of current labor shortages. What's more, according to a study from *The American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, the COVID-19 pandemic has cost organizations over \$138 billion in lost work hours. When taken together, these statistics not only provide insight into the economic consequences of the pandemic, but perhaps more crucially, provide context to help organizations understand the necessity of factoring the lingering effects of the pandemic into their return-to-work (RTW) plans.

Addressing the workforce challenges posed by long COVID requires strategizing comprehensive RTW plans, including reframing old models of workplace support initiatives and a more nuanced understanding of how some, but not all employees with long COVID, might qualify for accommodations under Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which requires covered employers to make reasonable workplace changes for qualified employees with medical conditions that meet the definition of disability.

While developing adaptive strategies might seem to impose yet another hurdle for organizations conceptualizing their RTW plans, it is worth noting that supporting employees nets positive gains for organization in maximizing employee retention and engagement. Data suggests that including supportive policies for people with long COVID is an effective strategy across the board. It is important to note that the very nature of long COVID presents an inherent uncertainty. The fluctuating needs of long haulers requires organizations to be agile and flexible in their approach to drafting RTW plans.

The long-term implications of this pernicious illness are only now beginning to get sustained medical attention, so it is especially important that employers and their organizations become familiar with the symptoms of long COVID and develop best practices for managing and supporting employees suffering from the illness. Implementing adaptive strategies like flexible work hours and remote or hybrid officing enhances an individual's ability to manage their symptoms and thrive at work. Similarly, solutions like enhancing employee communications and reinforcing health and wellbeing across the organization can empower their employees to feel supported, focused and healthy.