



COVID-19:

Lessons Learned from the Pandemic and a Look at EHS Moving Forward

The damage wrought by COVID-19 to businesses worldwide is self-evident. Moving forward, firms should examine the changes to working practices and technology which were necessitated by the pandemic to determine business priorities in the medium to long-term. To better understand how firms tackled COVID-19 and the renewed importance of EHS programs, Verdantix spoke to Robert Somers, Director of Environment, Health and Safety at Perrigo, an over-the-counter pharmaceuticals manufacturer, and George Kalfayan, Global Senior EHS Manager at Cytiva, a pharmaceutical manufacturer. Both firms worked with the Benchmark ESG (Gensuite) team to establish measures to deal with COVID-19 across their businesses, resulting in an evolution of the discussion around EHS issues and greater emphasis placed on the role of EHS in wider business discussions.

COVID-19 HIGHLIGHTS THE CENTRALITY OF TECHNOLOGY WITHIN EHS PROGRAMS

Despite the disruption caused by COVID-19, businesses can use lessons learnt during the pandemic to shape their EHS direction moving forward. As the pandemic developed, many firms were unprepared for tackling related issues such as track and trace and reduced employee numbers. Technology emerged as a central part of EHS responses to COVID-19. The pandemic has

Driven digitization to overcome EHS-related hurdles.

The pandemic brought with it new hurdles for the EHS practice, such as managing greater incidence of worker sickness, reduced resourcing, tracking contact events and supervising site permissions for workers who had been self-isolating. These challenges appeared practically overnight, and for businesses with nascent digitization initiatives, the transition to new working processes, such as staggered working hours and social distancing, posed greater issues. Many firms relied on digital technology to overcome these hurdles: 36% of the 301 corporate EHS decision-makers in the Verdantix 2020 global EHS survey reported that COVID-19 has accelerated the digitization of their EHS function. While COVID-19 acted as the impetus for accelerated digitization across firms, the benefits will extend beyond the pandemic's lifespan, assisting businesses with everyday EHS issues and providing more rapid response times for future shock events.

"While the EHS and operations team have been using Gensuite extensively since its integration within our processes, the wider business has found major utility in the incident management solution during the pandemic. For example, the HR team now relies on Gensuite software to follow up on contact events to facilitate the safe return of workers post-recovery. COVID has sped up the institutional implementation of Gensuite (now Benchmark) across all of our business functions."

– Robert Somers, Director of EHS at Perrigo

Encouraged firms to leverage technology to ensure operational continuity.

The unprecedented disruption caused by COVID-19 left many EHS executives without a cogent strategy to tackle business resilience issues. Some firms relied on internally built solutions to tackle COVID-borne problems. For example, at Perrigo, track and trace management was handled through spreadsheets. But many firms have found these tools unwieldy and became rapidly inefficient as the situation worsened. The Benchmark team identified these issues and worked with customers, such as Perrigo, to develop and integrate a COVID-19 exposure event tracking module, the Pandemic Exposure Event Form, within its incident management platform. At Cytiva, the Benchmark ESG platform was used for COVID-19 response training, whereby workers would not be admitted to specific sites prior to the completion of COVID-19 training. For many businesses, the adoption of innovative technology shaped the efficacy of their pandemic response, allowing firms to maintain operations despite the challenging circumstances.



Opened discussions around the use of technology in working models and mental health awareness.

Converging fears around personal health and the health of loved ones, economic uncertainty and other unknowns have amplified existing mental health problems (see Verdantix Strategic Focus: Supporting Worker Mental Health And Wellbeing In The Digital Age). With close to one in six Americans suffering from mental illness (51.5 million in 2019), prolonged periods alone and a lack of normal social interaction have exacerbated anxieties about the future, with many workers incapable of discussing these issues in a meaningful and remediating way. Firms have become acutely aware of the value of providing mental health support to employees during this challenging period, with 92% of the 301 corporate EHS managers in the Verdantix 2020 global EHS survey confirming their plans to use occupational health, mental health, and wellbeing monitoring software in 2021. Businesses will look to better integrate mental health initiatives alongside mental health monitoring software, such as informal catch-up meetings and exercise, as pandemic restrictions recede.

"What we focused on the last 3-4 months was mental health wellbeing. Members of our executive team were great role models, discussing their mental health challenges during leadership round tables and giving advice on how to say no when being loaded with meetings. We wanted to help our employees adjusting their daily work schedule and coping with the increased stressors that have come along with COVID-19."

- George Kalfayan, Global Senior EHS Manager at Cytiva

COVID-19 SHAPES FUTURE PERCEPTION OF WORKER SAFETY WITHIN THE EHS FUNCTION

Technology emerged as a crucial element for many businesses in their efforts to resume normal operations during the global pandemic. Alongside technological progression, EHS teams have experienced a paradigm shift in how their practice is perceived and as well as a realigning of EHS priorities for the future. These changes include:

Increased focus on safe operations and ongoing risk management.

The sudden changes in COVID-19 case numbers demanded an active assessment of risks in the workplace alongside a constant review of risk response to ensure worker safety as circumstances changed. Site management such as tracking worker proximity became an integral part of working processes as the pandemic continued. Perrigo used the Benchmark ESG incident management platform to designate site leaders who administer site permissions for employees who have been isolating. Firms will build on the ongoing risk management strategies forged in response to the pandemic, improving safe operations for workers in the long-term.

"We are better at general illness case management because of the pandemic. With temperature monitoring we can catch things early and people are now more appreciative of the work we are doing to help keep them safe. After COVID, we will be driving communications around general worker illness more - illness at work will continue to be a focus and not just go back onto the shelf once the pandemic is over."

- George Kalfayan, Global Senior EHS Manager at Cytiva

Louder voice of the EHS team in discussions concerning risk management.

With a larger proportion of workers within businesses directly interacting with EHS initiatives and risk management software, the visibility of EHS teams rose significantly during the pandemic. The HR team at Perrigo became familiar with Benchmark ESG incident management software while handling contact tracing events for employees; and Benchmark's COVID training made many Cytiva employees more aware of EHS initiatives. The crisis has brought EHS issues to the forefront of business discussions. Moving forward, EHS managers will be included in executive level discussion. Firms now recognize their value in preparing for future shock events as well as the ongoing fundamentals of health and safety.

"We've had things like bird flu and MERS, but this has really shown what the EHS team can do to help them in their lives. No one knew how to spell PPE back before the pandemic: it has really raised the alertness of EHS. It has raised the importance of having EHS and crisis management in the executive team."

- George Kalfayan, Global Senior EHS Manager at Cytiva

Changing emphasis on the management of remote and contingent workforces.

Pre-COVID, it was unthinkable for many businesses that the bulk of their employees could work from home as efficiently as they would in an office. Lockdown orders forced firms to adapt their workforce for remote operations and systemize return-to-work processes for occasions where on-site work was unavoidable. To meet this challenge, Benchmark ESG launched U Connect, an in-app remote collaboration tool to connect remote experts with on-site workers via video conference, group chat, and file sharing without ever needing to leave the platform. U Connect allows workers to carry out regularly scheduled inspections, audits, and investigations in collaboration with a remote expert, while simultaneously sharing audit checklists or addressing action items through their Benchmark applications. Once COVID-19 has passed, firms are certain to continue leveraging new digital tools, such as U Connect, to manage a growing remote and hybrid workforce.

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