

EMPLOYEE SAFETY TOP OF MIND AS COMPANIES BEGIN TO REOPEN

BY MICHAEL CRUMB

As the state transitions into reopening and the economy begins to crawl back from the collapse of COVID-19, leaders of some of Iowa's largest companies are working to find the balance between resuming normal activity and keeping their employees and customers safe.

Part of that discussion includes what the future will look like as employees, who have been working remotely for the past two months, begin transitioning back to the office, or whether many will stay at home, leaders of Vermeer Corp., Fareway Stores Inc., Ruan Transportation and Wells Fargo & Co. said.

Companies, from small businesses to the state's largest corporations, have begun the process of reopening after restrictions put in place to slow the spread of the coronavirus expired last month.

For each company, the decisions they make are as different as the products they produce or the services they provide. But they're also very much the same as they revolve around the central concern of safety.

“Our goal has been first and foremost, keep our people as safe as possible.”

Ben McLean, CEO of Ruan Transportation.



BEN MCLEAN

That hasn't changed because of the pandemic; it's only created new challenges, McLean said.

“So when we talk about our guiding principles, we begin with people and safety, and it also includes an unrelenting commitment to delivering for our customers,” McLean said. “So the pandemic that we've been dealing with has confronted us with new health and safety considerations.”

Ruan shifted about 1,000 employees who worked in an office, including about 400 in Des Moines, to working from home, but has been able to keep its drivers on the road.

He said that as businesses closed, Ruan shifted deliveries from those companies to deliver to customers – such as grocery stores and hospitals – that stayed open, were deemed essential and saw an increase in demand.

While drivers will begin to resume deliveries to companies as they open, Ruan, which has 300 operations around the country, is evaluating when it will be safe to bring employees back to the office, McLean said.

“We will continue the protocols that we put in place around safety, knowing we're no longer in an environment where anyone should ever show up to work and power through an illness. I think we've realized that's behind us, and it should be,” McLean said.

He said the company is monitoring state and national health reports as it

considers bringing employees back to the office.

“We want to see cases declining. We want to have good testing in place. We want to have good monitoring systems in place ... so we can understand whether there's an elevated risk. I think that's important, whether it's Des Moines or any other cities in which we're operating,” McLean said.

Ruan will also consider that employees have been effective and productive working from home, which may change the workplace dynamic moving forward.

“Folks have done pretty well with the technology we have, and the ability to connect and communicate and get their work done,” McLean said. “We've found that our ability to be successful remotely has maybe exceeded our expectations.”

He said that remote working will remain an option, but that some employees are looking forward to returning to the office.

“I don't think you'll see us with a brand-new approach to working from home through this. I think you'll see us push the envelope in how we think about process change,” McLean said. “This crisis forced us to change processes very rapidly, to create improvements, to simplify some things. That will likely be the most enduring piece of what we've seen here, that we can change things rapidly and institute improvements in ways we didn't think were possible in the past.”

“We'll be open to what the new world looks like,” said Mary Andringa, chair of Vermeer Corp.'s board of directors.



MARY ANDRINGA

At Pella-based Vermeer, which makes industrial and agricultural equipment, about 800 employees were working from home to support the production sector of its operation, Andringa said.

She said the safety of Vermeer employees and their families is the No. 1 concern as they transition to the new normal, whatever that may look like.

As the company moves forward, it will rely heavily on the experience it gained in its response to the tornado that struck the Pella campus in 2018.

“It's unfortunate, but our communications team is great at crisis,” said Liz Sporrer, communications manager at Vermeer.

She said the company learned how to improve its processes and learned what it could do better and how it could better communicate with team members.

“We found ways to work through that and we did a good job of connecting

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with our team members,” Sporrer said.

Unrelated to the pandemic, the company launched an app in late February, not knowing “what our new reality would be very, very shortly,” she said.

Sporrer said the app has been a useful tool to share information with employees.

“When we realized we needed to change protocols at work ... we began almost daily communication explaining protocols and the whats and whys and hows,” Sporrer said.

The app has allowed Vermeer to conduct anonymous employee surveys to gauge employee reaction to the changes and to the prospect of returning to normal, and to let employees express their concerns and fears, Sporrer said.

Andringa said she believes the company will likely continue its increased safety protocols at least until June, and then it could start bringing smaller numbers of people back only on certain days of the week.

“I think we’re taking it pretty cautiously,” she said.

Andringa said Vermeer communicates with other companies on best practices and what they are doing, and whether a company is seeing an increase in COVID-19 cases. It also is monitoring state and federal health reports.

Because the company has employees who come from multiple counties, the company will proceed with caution and flexibility, Andringa said.

It’s too early to say what the clear path forward will be, but factors such as testing and numbers of confirmed cases “will play out in our thinking,” she said.

Vermeer did a survey on employees’ attitudes about returning to work. A lot of employees said they liked working from home because they didn’t have to commute, that they had more flexibility and were able to be more productive. But others, Andringa said, indicated they missed the camaraderie and environment of working in a team environment.

“If people ... don’t follow recommendations, they are creating a danger for all us,” said Reynolds Cramer, CEO of Boone-based Fareway Stores.



REYNOLDS CRAMER

Cramer said safety of the company’s employees and customers is paramount as it moves forward. A major component of that is continuing to follow safety protocols that were put in place when COVID-19 began to spread across the country, he said.

“The real trick is, how does that affect Fareway, and do we have people going out and about more ... and then those same people come to Fareway,” Cramer said. “Hopefully, they’re following these guidelines so it’s not affecting the grocery store even more than it has.”

Cramer said while individual stores have remained fully staffed to serve customers, Fareway has non-store employees working from home, and it will begin determining how best to bring them back to the office.

“All employees who have worked remotely have been able to do everything they do with a laptop at their home, from having Microsoft Team meetings to accessing our systems, making purchases and working with vendors,” Cramer said. “It has gone very smoothly.”

Moving forward, Cramer said he envisions the new workplace being a “little of everything.”

“A lot of employees have young families and children, and that opportunity to work from home has taken on a whole new look,” Cramer said. “I think people have become more efficient.”

“We don’t yet know when our business-as-usual activities will resume,” said Steve Carlson, vice president of corporate communications for Wells Fargo.



STEVE CARLSON

Carlson said the company is following guidance of health experts as it moves forward, and anticipates working in its current model of about 200,000 employees working from home companywide through at least June 30.

“We are creating a thoughtful, phased plan for returning to the workplace, and we will use guidance from health experts to maintain a safe workplace for all employees, including those who have continued to work from the office and those who will be returning to the office over the course of time,” Carlson said in an email.

“This is an opportunity to get better, to provide services in a better way and make sure we have our employees’ best interests in mind when we think about work from home and telecommuting,” said Joe Murphy, executive director of the Iowa Business Council.



JOE MURPHY

He said as the next few weeks and months unfold, there will be a mix of companies opening at different paces and varying comfort levels among consumers as they navigate through the “new normal.” But Murphy said he’s confident Iowa will come back.

“Iowa is an incredibly resilient state, and so are its people and its businesses, and we’ve come back from crises before,” Murphy said. ■