

# Crisis Conversations: The Uncertain Future of Work

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**BRIGID SCHULTE, HOST:** Welcome everyone to another edition of Crisis Conversations from the Better Life Lab. Today we're going to be talking about returning to work. The crisis the pandemic continues to rage on, and yet there are states that have reached levels where they've decided to go into different phases of reopening, businesses are talking about reopening. We've got some high tech companies saying people can continue to work remotely if they choose for some time. On the other hand, there are workers who've been essential workers who are saying that they still don't have the protective gear that they need. Now we've got non-essential workers, so to speak, going back to work.

We're going to be talking about going back to work in the short term, but then also looking at what does this mean in the long term. Today we're going to have stories not only across the spectrum, if you will. Often our conversations are siloed and today I really want to include everyone. We're talking about white-collar workers, we're talking about essential workers. We've got Richard Gegick here, who works at a restaurant.

We'll be having hourly workers essential workers talking, so I really encourage all of you who are participating to share your story, to be part of the conversation. That this really raises some very important questions about the way we work in the short term and also what it could mean in the long term. What lessons we're learning, how we can emerge better and stronger.

What I'd like to do is start off with a conversation that I had earlier this week with Kendra Goodenough, she is at Microsoft, she's an investor relation there. She works as a white-collar worker and she has some very interesting thoughts about the return to work. Let's start with the clip from my conversation with her to start the conversation today.

**KENDRA GOODENOUGH:** What I think will be hard going is when people do start going back into the office, there will be those that either because they have access to child care, or they don't have children, or whatever that situation is, it's easier to do that

versus -myself maybe included in here- where I have to stay home, I can't go in because schools aren't open.

I'm unclear on, I guess, what that will look where all of a sudden people are back face-to-face. If I'm remote or others are remote, we miss out on those hallway conversations that naturally happen when people are in there? Will people remember that we're dialing in remote when you don't forget to dial in when you start a meeting because I can't be in the office yet. It's unclear yet how that will play out, and that's got [unintelligible 00:02:57] people have developed as we've all been working remotely if that will continue. People remember that there are many other still potentially working remotely once the office does open back up.

**BRIGID:** Manar, let me go first to you. Manar Morales, she is the president and CEO of the Diversity & Flexibility Alliance. Manar, you've been working with a number of firms as they transition from pre-COVID to dealing with working remotely. What are you hearing from firms? What are companies and managers dealing with as they think about going back in the short term, and then also in the long term?

**MANAR MORALES, PANELIST:** I think Kendra raises a lot of really good points that a lot of the firms and the companies that we're working with are thinking about, which is that note everybody can return. I think you had that initial phase where everybody was working from home and it leveled the playing field, so normally where people would be concerned I'm missing out when they were telecommuting perhaps more on one-offs.

As I think they're going back they really do have to take a step back and look at what does the next normal look like. We can't assume, I think we're always cautioning our companies about languaging, so when they issue these memos and they say, "We're all anxious to get back" I have to remind them that first of all, who are you defining in that? Are you actually thinking about everybody? Did you survey? And to also remember that you have to think about that actually going back causes a lot of people to be anxious. Being mindful of that when you start to think about how do you create this hybrid phase.

I think what Kendra raise is a lot what we caution a lot of our firms and our members about, which is you have to think about inclusion. It can't be a situation where we know that you're going to have to thin out conference rooms, so I caution to say if you have a meeting a conference room and you had ten people but now you can only fit four, who

gets a seat at the table and who doesn't? That's an inclusion issue. Actually, everything should then be virtual.

Even though you have an opportunity for people to go back in-- and they're being very cautious about it, I don't think companies and firms that can continue, they were surprised at how well remote work worked for everybody, so they're not actually very eager to immediately jump back in. I'm hearing from them to say, "Even if states reopen, we're taking it cautiously to say we're going to phase it in and we are advocating that it be reason neutral for a significant period of time" meaning don't even ask somebody why they want to go back because you shouldn't be the arbiter of whose reason is better than the others in other words.

Because I'm taking care of my father does that mean that I'm better than the person who has anxiety about coming work, or a person who's taking care of children or whatever the issue is? You shouldn't be in a position to be the arbiter of who has a better reason to not be in. Really open it up and allow everybody to be voluntary, reason neutral to step up and say, "I want to continue to work from home", and then make sure that when you're having team meetings, when you're doing that, that you continue to do that virtually so that everybody is involved.

Because people are going to put a lot of pressure on themselves to feel like, "Am I missing out?" And people from underrepresented backgrounds who already felt like perhaps when I'm in the office I didn't feel seen and now I'm concerned that I'm out of sight out of mind, so I'm putting pressure on myself to feel like I should go in in order not to miss out on opportunities. I think thinking about that and thinking about training for exactly some of the issues and concerns, like how you manage remote teams and how you're successful requires a level of training, and how you do that in a hybrid environment also requires a level of training.

I think the other thing is creating ombudspersons to be there in case you know that it's going to happen where people are going to feel a power struggle of, "I'm feeling pressure to go in even though I'm not comfortable", and they need to find a place to go take that concern too outside of their immediate supervisor or the person they're working for. I think all of those are issues that are important to think about as you're transitioning. I'm always careful to say back to the office because people have been working really, really hard during this time.

**BRIGID:** You're right, it's not a back to work at all, it's a back to doing work in a different place.

**MANAR:** Exactly.

**BRIGID:** Although the question that she brings up around childcare is something that I've been hearing, I think we've all been hearing more and more about, how on earth can you go back to work? Not back to work, but back to an office or a FaceTime setting when childcare centers may not be open? When it's unclear what's going to happen at school? Then, do you have to make a choice? Does one go and one doesn't go?

Then, if you have to make that choice, who is that? We do know from a lot of research that women tend to be the ones that step back. Now you've got researchers who are writing pieces really all around the world saying, "If you don't figure out child care in this reopening section, you may set women's advances back 40 years." How are you addressing that with the firms that you're working with?

**MANAR:** We're talking about the fact that you can't ignore the fact that this issue exists. You can't expect people that are just going to shed and show up and pretend that they don't have child care responsibilities, or eldercare responsibilities during this time through no fault of their own. Saying to organizations you need to create a culture where people can step up, and speak up and check in with them and say, "This is what I'm experiencing".

I think we have to be really careful when we say this to our firms and our members. Don't assume just because somebody has childcare responsibilities that they want to be taken off of things, that they don't want to work because of that also penalizes them. It's about having the open conversation to ask them what's going on, what's on your plate, how can we help, what can you do because some people are saying, "Look, I can shift my hours", or, "I'm available for this two hours and then I'm trading off with somebody" and I'm this shift and they're doing different shifts that they're working out or they're working into the weekend.

I think having open conversations is what's important, and allowing people to speak up and feel comfortable that they're not going to be penalized if they speak up during this time is really incredibly important.

**BRIGID:** Let me go to Richard. Richard, when we talk about people returning to do work in places other than homes, you work at a restaurant, you weren't able to do work

at home. There are tens of millions of people in America who are out of work. Talk a little bit more from your perspective. You're with Restaurant Opportunities Centers United. What is your pandemic experience been like? What is going back to a restaurant at this moment?

**RICHARD GEGICK, PANELIST:** Well, the pandemic experience of being laid off it's just been one of complete mystery. We as restaurant workers have been unsure what the business will be like when we come back, what are the circumstances we're coming back to, and what will the industry look like. There have been reports of closures of restaurants, loss of jobs, etcetera. As we come back now in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, we are at 50% capacity in dining room, we have protocols in place for safety protocols, but the safety protocols really only exist on the guest's behalf to make the customers feel comfortable. We wear masks, we change our gloves after every interaction.

The customers, they're asked to follow guidelines, but the guidelines are unenforceable. If they choose not to wear a mask when they get up from the table, they don't have to. If they choose to simply not wear a mask at all, they don't have to, they can sit as long as they want in the dining room without being asked to move along and speed up their dinners. The only limit they have are the party limit, they're not allowed to have a party of four in the bar area, a party greater than four in the bar area, or a party greater than 10.

**BRIGID:** Yes. When we talked the other day, you were also saying that because restaurants are trying to limit the number of people there, there's also a lot of staff that aren't there. The people who have returned, like you, are actually now doing a whole lot more than you used to. You're also doing it while you're earning the tipped to minimum wage, which not a lot of people know is a little more than \$2 an hour, you basically rely on tips in order to just make a living wage, right?

**RICHARD:** Right. What the pandemic has really done is really highlighted even further the interesting power dynamic in restaurants. Again, we take all of the precautions of staff for the customer to decide how much they want to pay up. We are being asked to do a lot more work. I know in a lot of restaurants, including mine, assistant staff like [unintelligible 00:12:42], servers assistants, bartenders have not been called back, my management is taking the 50% pay cut. We are being asked to do a lot more for a lot less money. That's including having only 50% capacity, so we are making less in tip in general.

**BRIGID:** The last question to you, Richard, and then I want to go to you, Alex. When you're working with ROC United, what are some of the issues that you really want to see change? Not just in the short term, but when it comes to restaurant work in the long term, what are some of the things you all are fighting for?

**RICHARD:** Well, the most pressing issue because of the pandemic has been paid sick leave. We are a third of workforce that does not have access to paid sick leave. It's unfathomable, I think, to us to ask people to return to work, especially those of us who handle your food, cook your food, serve your drink, to have to work sick. The choice is, in my industry, if you don't show up, you don't get paid. Most of us are going to choose to get paid rather than take a day off because we're sick.

The biggest issue that we're pushing for right now, I think at long term, we've always been focused on raising the tipped minimum wage, safeguards for workers in the back of the house, as well as the front of the house. There are a whole host of other issues as well, but I think those are the most present at the moment.

**BRIGID:** Let me go to you, Alex. Alex, for those of you who don't know, is a fantastic writer. Let me see if I can get these in my screenshots. He's written *Rest*, even though that's a little backward. These books are back on my bookshelf there and his latest one is *Shorter, Work Better, Smarter, and Less. Here's How*. It's a fantastic book. Alex, you do a lot of work and thinking about work, where we are now, how we can work effectively, what are work systems that work in the future.

As you've been watching work systems, frankly, really undergrow huge disruption and in some cases really crumble in the pandemic, what are you seeing in terms of where we are now? How is this going to change work in the future? One of the things I'd love for you to talk about is you talk about the four-day workweek and everybody cries and thinks, "Yes, I'd love a four-day workweek." But we also live in a country where a lot of people can't even get a four-day workweek, or they're earning such little money that working four days a week is not going to cut it for them. How do we address work hours across the board in this country? That was a whole lot of a question, but I want you to talk about the future of work and not just robots, I want you to talk about humans here.

**ALEX SOOJUNG-KIM PANG:** No, that's cool. I think what we've seen over the last several months is, first off, COVID and the pandemic laying bare a whole bunch of structural inequalities and problems that either we're underneath the surface or that we

knew about but have become a lot more urgent. I think that the growing and designed precarity of labor that has made a few people really, really rich, and those people now are on their private islands where they're not exposed to COVID, and a large class of people who have struggled to find stable work and to make ends meet.

The stubborn problems with keeping women in the workplace at a level commensurate with their male colleagues, particularly when they're having to juggle work stuff, family stuff. I think that COVID has laid bare the disconnect between essential work and our support for it, and the fact that a good bit of that essential work has been for [unintelligible 00:16:59] to coin a phrase. I think it's also made clear, I hope in a good way, the amount of work required to manage work and family and the enormous amount of emotional labor that people have to engage in order to keep those two things separate. How complicated and often fragile are the systems that individuals have had to build in order to deal with those things.

As schools are closed, childcare centers are closed, I don't need to rehearse for anybody the amount of work that people have had to put into both working from home and being teachers and pediatricians, etcetera. I think also that it has revealed the degree to which companies and organizations can actually change really quickly when they need to. The number of managers who before this would have said, "Work from home is a hill I will die on" have discovered that, in fact, the earth will not crash into the sun if they can't see their people in the office 10 hours a day.

I think that the hopeful thing there is that it's revealed that all kinds of things that we thought were impossible in the world of work can be changed. I think part of the challenge going forward is to push for the good, as opposed to the bad. I think one of the other things that is laid bare is the degree to which our workplaces actually often are super spreaders. We've got open offices that love viruses, I mean, open offices that viruses love with all the recirculated air and these common surfaces, crowded kitchens. We got to figure out how to deal with all this stuff.

**BRIGID:** Yes, we're getting a little bit of noise in there, I think we're having some technical difficulties. Alex, let me ask you one question, and I want to go to Yama and Adil. This whole idea about shorter work hours or the four-day workweek, is that even a possibility? How would that work for someone like Richard, who right now is earning a little over than two bucks an hour? How is that going to work across the board?

You say that in the past remote and flexible work managers would say, "This is a hill I'm going to die on." A lot of people are saying that now about the four-day workweeks, "No way." In America, we work long work hours and we wear it like a badge of honor, there's no way we're going to move forward on that. What do you see happening?

**ALEX:** First off, I've looked at more than a hundred companies that have done this in ranging from software and advertisement firms, professional services to restaurants, and nursing homes. I think it is something that is doable across a far wider range of industries than we think. Fundamentally, the reason that it's possible is that technology over the last 30 years has made possible enormous increases in productivity that have been buried under a rubble of multitasking, and outdated managements, and overly long meetings, etcetera.

Once you clear that stuff away, as some companies have done during this emergency, you recognize actually it's already possible to do five-days work in four without cutting people's salaries. Although the situation is a little bit different in, let's say, restaurants and nursing homes, wages for hourly workers do have to go up in those places, but the savings in terms of not having to hire temporary workers, not dramatic reductions and turnout, improvements in quality of service, end up actually making these programs economically viable.

Not to mention the fact that it has a huge benefit in terms of reducing burnout, making possible-- let's say, very creative head chefs who are reaching that point after 10 or 15 years of 70 hour weeks. Recognizing that, "You know, I'm not going to be able to do this for that much longer, and if I breakdown, the whole restaurant goes away." Making it possible for them to have sustainable careers for a very long time.

The final thing I would say is that, if you think a crisis sounds like the wrong time to try something radical like this, actually, crises are exactly when companies have adapted four-day weeks. Leaders have faced burnout when they've had huge recruitment issues, when you've got competition moving in. It's big things like that that have made companies take the jump and go to a four-day week. Not because it's some left-wing touchy-feely thing, it's a very smart strategic business decision. I think in an era when we got to think about how we can return to work in a way that keeps people safe, that allows people to space out in formally crowded offices, and in the long run, how we can make organizations more resilient, and flexible, and creative.

Places that have moved to four-day weeks have been very effective at doing all of those. I think that both has a short-run solution, and in the long run as a tool for helping us prepare for the next phase of this pandemic.

We're not at the end of the movie, we are at the end of the first season, and the villain is about to come back. Both in the short and the long run. It can serve as a really useful tool that will not only make people safer and healthier, but also improve people's lives, improve work-life balance, and help companies reopen faster, safer, and more sustainably.

**BRIGID:** Let me, at this point, go to Yama and Adil. Thank you so much for coming on. You both are from Make The Road New Jersey. Just yesterday, I've got your flyer here, the right to refuse work caravan. Yama, talk a little bit about you are an essential worker. You have continued to work through the pandemic. What are you still facing now as more and more people are coming back to places of work? What are some of the things that you are seeing? And why were you on the caravan yesterday?

**YAMA, CALLER:** Thank you for calling me. Esta situación que nosotros hemos vivido de verdad que ha sido de mucho riesgo. En nuestros trabajos hemos tenido oportunidad de ver lugares no seguros, lugares donde no hay seguridad para las personas. Lugares donde no hay las cosas básicas, como una persona que esté encargada del aseo.

**BRIGID:** Adil, for the listeners who don't speak Spanish, can you help translate what Yama's saying? It sounds like that there's still a lot of risk that people are facing when they go to work.

**ADIL, CALLER:** That's right. Yo puedo contar, si pero Yama puede comprender todo de mi ingles también, si yo no puedo traducir algo por favor, dígame. I think Brigid, you caught that what Yama was just transitioning to was owners are taking a lot of risk, there's no security. In particular, workers are taking on multiple jobs, and do this in their workplace that's putting them more at risk. Similar to what Richard was talking about a little earlier. Now, I think, Yama was going to start talking about how workers are taking on these multiple roles and putting themselves more at risk.

**BRIGID:** At the same time, putting themselves more at risk. Then, like Richard was saying, they don't have paid sick days. Also, dealing with low pay and not having the supports that you need, like paid sick days, or time off if you need to get care, paid time off, or saving for retirement, or having access to healthcare. You're putting so many

essential workers, you're putting yourselves at risk, and is it continued now that there are more people coming in. Is that increasing the risk?

**YAMA:** That's right. I think this is a great opportunity to make action, to eliminate [unintelligible 00:26:55]. That's just the most terrible for every people who have been here and don't have the opportunity to health insurance, to a great pay, to security [unintelligible 00:27:16]. Es terrible porque las personas todo el tiempo sienten inseguridad. I have an ID to pay my taxes. We don't believe it, but when I paid my taxes, the government [unintelligible 00:27:39] when I need it. Now in this opportunity, they don't have that option. Only that ID to pay these taxes. This [unintelligible 00:27:53] approach to slavery. I think it's a kind of slavery.

**BRIGID:** Thank you so much, Yama. Alex, let me turn to you coming to the next phase of the conversation which is, you were talking about radical design or restructuring can happen in the middle of a pandemic, and I'm thinking of like the black plague. That so many people ended up tragically dying then, all of a sudden, labor became more-- you could ask more for your labor and broke the chains of [unintelligible 00:28:38] in many parts of Europe. Are we going to see something like that now? Or is this a time for a major restructuring of the way we work across all sorts of systems? Or are we not there yet? You're on mute Alex.

**ALEX:** I think it is an opportunity for that. None of these futures are cast in stone, and it's a question of what we're able to work toward. I think that, arguably, the single biggest thing that this has revealed is the need to improve part of the infrastructure for supporting people during times of economic disruption. Not only has exposed people to risks in very desperate non-fair ways, but countries that offered better-organized support at the beginning of the pandemic. Places like New Zealand and Denmark have also been able to come out of it a lot faster with a lot less disruption, and with fewer people getting sick and dying.

In addition to a way of changing the way that we work, and using this as an opportunity to move back from the ridiculousness of thinking of long hours as equivalent to a board of high productivity in virtually every job. We have a chance to address some of these structural issues at a time when it's really, really clear that we ought to do so.

**BRIGID:** Let me play one last clip from Kendra. Then, Manar, I'm going to ask you for your final thoughts. It really struck me about what she was saying in terms of what we're learning in the current situation, that she hopes moves forward.

**KENDRA:** I am so hopeful that this empathy we're seeing will continue once we go back. It's almost like it's forced people to understand what it's like to have other responsibilities outside of work, commitments, whether it's elderly parents, kids, siblings or whatever it is that you're responsible for, that makes it a little bit more challenging to show up for a 7:00 AM meeting or to stay incredibly late at night. That not everyone is able to meet that kind of ideal worker norm.

**BRIGID:** Manar, could this be the end of the ideal worker norm? The notion that the impossible standard that you put work before everything else and you're always available.

**MANAR:** Yes. I certainly think it has opened up a whole new conversation in firms and in companies around this. I used to say my biggest competitor to flexibility was the status quo. That it wasn't about others doing this, it was about what was the challenge of how do we mentor? How do we know if somebody is really working? They need to be committed and all of those things that they couldn't just see, and now having the status quo completely flipped where everybody is working virtually and they're seeing it.

I do think that it will, that the smart, that the innovative organizations and companies and firms will pivot and not go back. That they will look at how do we make these changes, not just on working from home and telecommuting but on all sorts of flexibility. I do think it's given some greater empathy. I do think that that is correct because there's also men in leadership positions whose wives have been involved, that I've talked to, whose wives are involved in COVID research, or other things where they've had to take on all of the childcare responsibilities and they keep saying, "I had no idea and I am now having-"

I talked to one partner in a law firm, four young kids and he leads a group. He was saying, "I have to do all the care and monitor all the schooling while I'm leading my group." I think that greater empathy for understanding how all of that works will translate in new initiatives and new policies being put into place. Not every firm is going to do that, not every company, I think, will do that but I think the smart and

innovative ones will absolutely look at how does this change and recalibrate how we're doing everything.

**BRIGID:** Thank you so much. I'd like to thank all of the panelists for being here today. I'd like to thank the participants as well. I love that thought. I hope that that empathy will expand not just to white-collar workers but also to workers like Richard and Yama, and we can really rethink the structures of work in general. How to make them more human-centered so that we can actually flourish as human beings.

Thank you so much to Alex, Manar, Adil, Yama, and Richard. Thank you so much for being here. Thank you to the participants for joining us today. I'd like to thank the Better Life Lab team, Jahdziah St. Julien who helps me with the podcast. Thank you to the New America events team, to David Schulman a great podcast producer. Just to Manar's last point, I hope you'll join us next week where we will actually be talking about how men's roles are changing and shifting in the pandemic, and whether that will also last and lead to lasting changes. In the meantime, I hope everyone stays healthy and safe. Wash your hands and we'll see you next week.

**MANAR:** Thank you.

**ALEX:** Thank you.