

Managing an essential business through COVID-19

A construction executive's point of view



The Covid-19 pandemic has hit us all at home and at work.

But 'Essential Businesses' are asked to continue with their work. We rounded up insights from a recent webinar we hosted with leading construction industry experts. In this document you will find a broad range of questions and answers resulting from the webinar.

Insights are based on the points of view from the following webinar speakers: Mike McKelvy, Chief Executive Officer, Gilbane, Bob Pragada, President and Chief Operating Officer, Jacobs, and Jim Roberts, Chief Executive Officer, Granite Construction.

What are some practical tips about how to cope, roll with the punches, and get through the crisis stronger?

- Consider the long-term perspective: Avoid being reactive but focus on the afterward and what kind of company we want to be for our employees. Picture a company where employees will be proud to have weathered this storm.
- Transparent communication with employees is critical. Communicate what you know, what you do not know, and what you are still trying to figure out. Empower your employees' abilities to look for the solutions of the future.
- Don't panic and take care of yourself so you can take care of others.

How do you keep people engaged and productive through this crisis?

- Technology is a key asset; use it to keep employees working in a safe environment while maintaining work productivity.

- Routine is very important. The pandemic has upended every aspect of our workplace but keeping a routine as much as possible with daily calls and staff meetings brings a sense of normalcy.
- Provide weekly or daily updates to your workforce. Encourage local managers to check in with their teams to ensure everyone remains connected.
- Be creative: Offer virtual exercise classes for your employees and their family members. Engage your workforce with virtual happy hours, parties, birthday celebrations, etc.

Developing the right response to these economic challenges will help us all ensure a full and quick recovery. So what measures are you taking to protect your company through this challenge?

- Make it clear to our employees that they come first. The viability of any company is directly related to the engagement of the employees.
- Make it clear to employees that their health and safety and that of their families is a priority. Tell employees to focus on themselves so they can in turn provide you with their best.
- Cash is king during times like this. Keeping liquidity on the balance sheet is imperative.
- You may have to institute pay reductions for some or all of your employees and you may have to make some tough decisions. Look for relief programs available to minimize the impact on your company and workforce.

Have you been able to close new business, and are you interacting with customers remotely?

- This is an excellent time to reach out to contacts, clients, potential partners, potential new business projects. It's a unique opportunity to show your customers that you really care about them, whether they have business or not.



- We have not really seen a slowdown in business development opportunities over the last few weeks. But the situation has changed for many clients, and we need to be cognizant of that when pitching new business.
- Use social interface tools to maintain client relationships and leverage the trust you have built with clients over the years.
- Business development people will have to adapt. Our clients are making decisions faster, because they are not waiting for everyone to show up for a meeting.
- My biggest concern about revenue generation is where we will be in six to twelve months, or from eighteen to twenty-four months if we start seeing the economic depression.

Are there certain markets that are less affected by these changes? And, has the sales process changed at all?

- Our residential projects have really slowed down, along with projects that are more entertainment oriented. But education continues to do well. Health care has continued, though that can vary by state. Our work with the US military has continued in large part, but we have had some industrial projects that have come to a stop due to rules of their locality, rather than due to the market.
- The bidding process is different now: we can have more people able to interface and participate remotely, whereas only half of them may have been in the room previously.
- Many markets are critical areas moving forward including advancing national security, critical infrastructure, lifesaving therapies or support functions around working remotely.
- Transportation and water are sectors deemed essential, so they remain up and running.

Tell us a little bit about how your leadership style has had to adapt, maybe relatively quickly, to lead significant essential organizations during tough times.

- I have probably learned to listen, listen, listen better than ever in my entire career. The other thing is to display a high level of empathy. Everybody is going through something different. And when they have their own personal struggles at home, we want to be empathetic and understanding.
- Be willing to be flexible. Be willing to run all activities in a virtual environment.
- It is easy to spend your entire day being COVID-focused, but what about the rest of the business? We still have a business to run. Our employees need to know that the company is still going. Things are still in process. Things are still being built.

- Our employees are going through things that we never imagined before.
- In difficult times, leaders lead. The strongest leadership is transparent and compassionate.
- While you are operating today, look to the future. We know that if we take care of today, we will weather this as a team.
- Whenever you feel the most exhausted, just keep going. Know that, as a leader, you are wired to do what you are doing today.

For more information on how to lead in this disruptive time visit kornferry.com/challenges/coronavirus.



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