

Streak Ahead: HR's role in the new normal

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ABSTRACT

Nearly 25 million jobs have been affected due to the coronavirus pandemic, but a policy response that is internationally coordinated can help the impact of the pandemic on organisations and people at work. This has created many challenges for employers and employees. The more significant challenges for businesses are business continuity and managing flexible work arrangements itself. Remote-working or work from home is the key to ensuring business continuity. Conducting regular meetings through online platforms not only to ensure business continuity but also to know the needs of employees. Halting recruitments tentatively as it is susceptible of incurring costs which gives more financial burden, rather, retaining employees should be focused with needful communication with them that they are the organisation's high priority which in turn makes them feel attached to the organisation increasing their enthusiasm and productivity in work. As a result, employee turnover risks get reduced. Appropriate policy management by considering the pandemic and its effects should be ensured. Setting up a well-defined crisis management team is inevitable in order to help the organisation to take timely decisions as the crisis management informs everything regarding the pandemic. Appraisals in the time of coronavirus is indeed a difficult task for organisations. Organisations can either wait to follow what other organisations are doing or adopt measures such as muted salary increases or delay increments by at least a quarter. Finally, HR should not hesitate to give an empathetic touch to the employees. Employees should feel that their emotional, mental and physical wellness and family are indeed a concern for the organisation. This study indicates in detail how HR can play a significant role in managing employees effectively to avoid discontinuation of business activities and to maintain organisational performance using HR.

Keywords

COVID-19, Pandemic, Business Continuity Planning, Communication, HR Technology, Performance Appraisal, Employee Well-Being.

Introduction

Several pandemics shocked the planet. Epidemics like Plagues, Cholera, Ebola, Swine Flu, SARS and MERS has taken millions of lives (Zeren et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, which was first appeared in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China (Estrada et al., 2020) which has already infected almost 133,718,495 people in more than 148 countries, which caused more than 2,901,600 deaths (as of April 8 2020). With 2.6 billion people worldwide being affected due to the prevailing situation and many countries still under lockdown, it has affected everyday life and business and the economy as a whole.

Lockdowns were exercised in order to maintain social distancing in order to control the spread of the virus. Companies were forced to cease functioning. A lion share of the sectors of the industry is affected. The tourism, hospitality and aviation sectors are the highly affected sectors that face the most impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

Under the circumstances, companies cut employees' salaries, providing them with pink slips and practising other cost-cutting measures. Employers are left with no option other than making employees work from home in whichever departments suitable for the same.

HR's role to play in the COVID-19 crisis is highly important for the sustainment of a business organisation. In an interview by Brian Kropp, chief of research, Gartner HR, says that "As the COVID-19 crisis disrupts organisations across the globe, HR leaders must respond quickly and comprehensively, considering both immediate and long-term talent consequences"(Mary, 2020). Gartner Business Continuity Survey reflects that only 12 Percent of organisations are completely prepared for COVID-19 (Mary, 2020). Only adequate preparation by taking required measures can help out organisations at this time of crisis. Therefore, there is utmost need to prepare for the fight against COVID-19 in organisational basis, mainly by HR, which deals with "people at work".

Literature Review

HRM refers to the leading and managing people of an organisation with the use of systems, methods, process and procedures which enable employees to reach their own goals, ultimately enhancing employee's positive contribution towards organisational goals (Bulmash, 2013). What makes really things happen in an organisation is the human resource itself (Opatha, H. H., 2009). Raymond, A. N. (2007) defines HRM as "the policies, practices and systems that influence employees behaviour, attitudes and performance". Ulrich (1997) states that the role of HR includes providing resources to employees to get things done, re-engineering organisation processes and aligning HR and business strategy with employee commitment and capability, as well as adapting the capacity to change. Acharya (2020) argues that work from home is the new facet that depicts task-based work culture procedure supported by an information communication system; yet, enlarged job management, line management, payroll biases, confidentiality and data protection are the challenges for it unfolded with the pandemic situation. Tang (2020) found that due to public health shock resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic, the functions of employee satisfaction are stagnant, but employee morale helps in coping up with this devastating situation. Bell, B. (2020) pointed out it is vital to take recovery measures and rescue packages for backing the existing jobs to stave off a slump of the labour market as there is a collapse in hiring as well as an elongated revival period of the labor market. Staiger, T. (2020) indicates the role of family-related career orientation may fall into depression due to the pandemic situation. Sasaki (2020) in their survey of 1421 respondents, found that more than 30% of the respondents were worried about job instability and psychological distress prevailing due to the pandemic situation.

Challenges to HR

In order to ascertain the measures required to make preparations to defend the detrimental impact of COVID-19 on organisations, the challenges that the organisations faces should not

be overlooked. According to (Syed, 2020) most HR leaders point out business continuity planning as one of the most challenge faced during the COVID-19 outbreak along with managing flexible work arrangements and communication with employees the other notable challenges.

Business Continuity Planning

According to (Cerullo, 2004) "a BCP is planned to mitigate risks in order to decrease the effect of an emergency (i.e., catastrophe condition); and to diminish the time to re-establish conditions to a state of business as usual and there is no single suggested method for coherence management". Instead, each organisation ought to create a comprehensive BCP based on its own based on the circumstance.

So, based on the COVID-19 crisis. HR has to acknowledge the following for Business continuity planning

- In order to reduce the chances of misinformation and panic from it, also to mitigate the pernicious effect on the economy and individuals, proactive communication based on credible information must be delivered to all stakeholder groups.
- Setting up a multi-functional team together that includes professionals from HR, IT, communications and business-line leaders in order to plan for different scenarios and optimise execution to ensure that there is minimal impact on the business when everyone connects remotely.
- Ensuring employees possess required facilities at their home enabling them for "work-from-home" such as laptops/computers, mobile phones, Internet connectivity, webcam, remote access to company intranet along with access to files and systems with passwords.
- Institute fresh policies and guidelines related to work from home, which includes:
 - i) Setting a system with particular working hours but which are

- flexible (e.g. One should work these many hours or complete particular tasks/activities in a day)
- ii) Detailed information about working days and use of leaves.
 - iii) Exact information about different communication and collaboration tools.
 - iv) Training utilising company assets and confidential data.
 - v) Methods to be followed by employees in order to raise in case of any difficulties when working remotely.

Prepare employees to make adjustments that is required for the scenario. Absolute care should be taken towards co-ordination, immense patience should be practised during technical glitches, continuous checking of required infrastructure and technology should be a mandate, above all, co-operation and sincerity from all stakeholder groups should be ensured, considering and taking into account all the above may help keep business active and thriving even it is work from home.

Managing flexible work arrangements

1. Bringing flexibility in working by not providing a stringent schedule of working rather making the working hour flexible to the employees. Tight schedules limit the productivity of employees (Landrum, 2020).
2. The challenges faced by employees while working from home should not be overlooked. It should be considered by all means, and necessary support should be given (Pinola, 2020). Especially if their family members or any personal affairs interrupts them while working, they should not be embarrassed.
3. Work-life balance is still a priority even while working from home. Employees should be helped with finding their own physical and mental space as well as a healthy work-life balance which provides them with an equal opportunity to find

time for themselves and their family along with their work (Backman, 2020).

4. Ensuring employees have ample technology to do their work should be one of the top priority while assigning remote working (Apgar, 2014).

The Vital Role Of Communication

Employers should have a committed group of workforce who are always following the updates related to the pandemic and the measures taken by the government to contain the same. Such group must inform a senior official from the human resource department of the day to day situation and the later ought to keep up continuous communication with employees to state the on-ground situations, precautionary measures to be taken and regarding measures which should be adopted by the administration to guarantee the security of employees(Rao,2020).Such communication should help employees to take decisions such: (a) cancel business trips and maintain a strategic distance from not important personal travel to places afflicted with the virus; and (b) report their their family members travel history along with their family's to any foreign nation.

Open communication should be maintained by employers with employees to pass information regarding potential cases of infection in the workplace and the measures that are adopted in order to insulate the concerned employee (Merchant, 2020). This also helps in reducing the chances of facing a lawsuit by an employee stating that the employer did not provide adequate safety measures.

Flooding of information regarding work as well as information on the current situation of infection might increase the chances of making employees “psychologically sick” making them to be less productive. Therefore it is essential to share tips and suggestions which helps them to make the best out of their time on a routine basis (Alt, 2020).

In the present virtual world, Communication should be dealt with absolute care. What intended by the sender should be decoded in the same sense by the receiver. The tone, pace everything should

be used legitimately and should get straight into the context. Employees should be encouraged to make informal video conferences with colleagues in order to mitigate the destructive effects of isolation.

Measures to be taken by HR

Considering the situation and the impact which the coronavirus crisis would have on business, HR should take imperative measures to ensure business continuity as well as managing the employees effectively and efficiently at this point of time (Syed, 2020).

Health and safety should be the first to begin with. Equipment and whatever facilities required for the safety of employees must be assured. In a survey, It is found that as per the quarantine measures imposed by the Chinese government, 90% of organisations are providing protective equipment for their employees and 81% of organisations have entrenched 'special team' for exclusively handling the covid-19 in their organisation. More than 35% of the organisations are providing psychological counselling for the employees facing mental stress and other psychological issues due to remote working and the current situation due to the pandemic. Organisations should make necessary arrangements to bring back employees who are travelling or atleast do the needful for them there in terms of ensuring proper accommodation, food, other basic needs and safety from getting exposed to the virus.

Most of the companies HR departments are forced to focus on short-term tactical goals procrastinating the long-term strategic tasks. The tentative halting of recruitment is one of the measures considered the most by many of the organisations to deal with the pandemic, it is obvious that there might be a severe lack of resources and deliberate demand for talent in the near future. Organisations should check and verify if the scenario of high absenteeism occurs due to the crisis whether staffs are cross-trained to perform multiple tasks.

While implementing remote working, the feasibility of the same should be considered according to the work, department and employees.

It will be difficult for manufacturing companies to implement work from home as there will be many employees conducting quality checks and working on the shop floor for assembling parts, , etc. In that scenario, it is advisable to put into action remote working in batches. Further, It is a mandate that employer should always ensure the confidentiality of company property. The IT team should help by providing any assistance in those cases. The organisation should also be able to provide necessary infrastructural facilities before implementing remote working for its employees.

Regular meetings should be done through video conferencing. During working hours, employees could be asked to stay connected into company-wide communication channels so that they will be available to get in touch through call, email or chat.

Using productivity tools for planning and assigning tasks among team members helps in clarifying the goals and deliverables. Sharing tools such as G-Suite(Google Drive, Sheet, Docs and Slides) would be of great help when working in teams.

Policy Management

As mentioned earlier, there should be a crisis management team which works cross functional in order to track and monitor the situation and inform the concerned authorities and employees time-to-time. Policies should be developed proactively adhering to the public health recommendations and workplace laws. When employees are obliged to perform activities as remote working, definite policies should be set for work from home, pay and re-imbursement (Kessler , Henderson, & Medeiros, 2020). A clear policy should be made on travel bans and employees who are travelling, working in contaminated places and returned from different places.

Travel

Travelling is inevitable for many employees of different companies. In this case, travel restrictions and the advisory of the government of that particular country should be followed (WHO, 2020). All non-essential business travels should be

deferred. Special care on employees returned from affected regions and different countries should be given. A compulsory 14/28 days quarantine should asked to be followed by the employee who has returned from the aforementioned places. Employees who are in contained areas for business activities must be offered with necessary support.

Workplace norms

The workplace should be given deliberate care. Proper sanitising of the workplace and common areas should be ensured. Social distancing and non-handshaking greeting should be encouraged to be practised. Meeting size should be limited or should be converted into virtual meetings. Employees should be restrained in participating in any physical learning programs or events other than virtual ones. On-site gyms, cafeterias and common areas should be closed. Appropriate shifts should be implemented in order to reduce overcrowding. It is advisable to temporarily close offices in covid-19 hotspots and affected areas. Biometric technologies which uses fingerprints such as biometric attendance system should be discontinued and could be replaced with manual attendance register.

Engaging with medical experts, health bodies and government:

It is required to engage with government, medical experts and other health bodies in order to receive guidance and act accordingly. Mitigation plan should be made reviewed by medical experts. In order to review people and work management policies engaging with legal expert is advisable. Following local government portals helps in keeping track of advisories and policies. Adding to that the time-to-time information form the World Health Organization should be followed.

Setting up a crisis management team:

While setting up a crisis management team basic protocols and necessary guidelines to be followed should be set up for the lucid functioning of this team. Starting from the top leadership, all members of the team should be aware of all activities their fellow team members are doing. Team members should be cross-trained to perform critical functions so that in case if any of the team

members unexpectedly goes on leave or on quarantine the functioning of the team won't be interrupted. A contingency plan is required by the team. The crisis plan should be framed in a manner in which there is a streamlined flow of information and that its veracity is undoubted. A core element of crisis planning is data itself which helps in analysing different situations and the effect of the same in short, medium and long term business.

The crisis team should have sub-teams under it so that functions can be delegated and focused. Public relations and communications teams are responsible for delivering the internal and external messages in the organisation. Legal and regulatory teams are responsible for analysing and understanding the organisations' risk exposures and subsequently providing measures and advice regarding mitigating those risks. Operational response teams are held responsible for handling everything else, including the essentials required for lucid functioning of other two groups.

Role Of HR Technology

88% of the HR professionals admitted that the COVID-19 has made them realise the importance and effectiveness of HR Technology tools used in the organisation. (Garg, 2020) Even though there are numerous advanced HR technology tools that have a transformative effect on HR but are left unrecognised and relinquished. It has come to a crucial point where HR has to significantly discover and adopt appropriate HR technology tools for the advantage of the department and organisation as a whole.

Henceforth, It is necessary to adopt technology wherever possible in order to help HR and the organisation for the safe and sound continuance of its activities (Kundu, 2020). The following HR Tech features can help HR in ensuring employee safety and ensure business continuity, especially in the present situation of the COVID-19 crisis:

Limiting employees movement

It is imperative to keep the movement of employees limited to maintain social distancing. Virtual ID Cards, which is to be carried by employees in their gadgets, helps to attain this as the QR code of that particular employee will be

scanned to verify their shift assignment and subsequently, their attendance gets marked only if it matches with the system. This way, the organisation can properly track the employees coming to the office and unwanted movement can be limited.

Geo-Tagging with Facial Recognition

As physical contact should be avoided as much as possible rather than punching or fingerprint attendance system, attendance tracking features such as facial recognition could be adopted. Subsequently in order to limit the range of attendance punches, geo-fencing employees can also be practised. Deep Vision AI, SenseTime, Amazon Rekognition, FaceFirst & Trueface etc., are some of the softwares which can be used for facial recognition.

Remote Check-Ins

Softwares which provides Clock-in features such as SentryPC, Time Doctor, Veriato & ActivTrak etc., which identifies employees location and document their planned and completed tasks, helps managers to track his/her team's work location and their respective planned tasks for each day. Similar features help the employees to stay connected to their direct managers and update regarding their daily or periodic work and location instantly.

Easy Shift Allotment

Using the Shift Blocks feature in HR Technology applications such as Deputy, Shiftboard, Humanity & When I Work etc., employees can be assigned according to day-wise shift in the entire week. It will be an added advantage if these shifts could be diverted into Work from Home or Office shifts.

Risk Vulnerability Assessments

It is necessary to ensure that employees health condition is fit and possess no threat, this has to be ensured even before the employees attend office and commence their work. The employee's Profile View feature can help the management in obtaining information regarding the health, family and travel history of the employee. It is mandatory to make employees work from home who has a pre-existing health condition or the employees

who have family members below 8 years or above 60 years.

Technology-assisted Talent Acquisition

Many companies follow online interviews for recruitment but the remaining recruitment process are still mostly using traditional methods which involves direct physical contact between individuals. HR Technology can flawlessly help HR in incorporating HR onto a single platform which precipitously reduces physical contact between individuals. Using recruitment analytics solutions such as Resume Parser, which helps in aiming the right candidate by extricating candidate data from resumes and saving those inappropriate data fields such as contact details, experience, education, skills etc., helps saving a lot of time and effort as structured data of candidates is readily available and process-ready. Softwares like RecruiterFlow, ICIMS, Ideal etc., helps HR in talent acquisition. Likewise, all other recruitment steps can made to be HR-Technology enabled.

Creating a virtual tour portal of the organisation helps the employees to be hired to get an understanding of the work environment and get familiar with the work culture.

Real-Time and Continuous Feedback

Continuous feedback features available in HR Technology solutions such as BambooHR, IBM Talent Management, Clear Company & 15Five etc., helps employees, peers and manager to have continuous contact, which ensures that the employees are engaged as employees share feedback on tasks and peers appraisal is easily done throughout the organisation. With these sophisticated HR Technology solutions, employees will be able to receive feedback from managers and peers in just a few clicks.

Digital rewards and Recognition

As employee engagement is highly associated with productivity, It is imperative for the organisation to reward its employees for their work and make them assure that they are a valued part of the organisation. HR Technology can help HR in replicating the values of the organisation into digital badges which all the employees can

view. By confining the number of points that employee could give, HR can incentivise recognitions and control budgets. Further, HR should be able to trace the top recognisers and receivers throughout the organisation by the use of a leaderboard in order to create a sense of healthy competition which in turns ensure employee engagement in the organisation.

Employee Redressal

Employee redressal should always be dealt promptly and resolved expeditiously. Particularly at this hard times of COVID-19, there would be many challenges that the employee faces. An online helpdesk with special attention for the COVID-19 related queries and redressal will be an appropriate measure so that the employees can easily and quickly reach the managers and HR for help.

Self-Generated HR letters

It has become obliging for employees to quickly self-generate letters which are company signed with the help of HRM software in order to submit towards government authorities as there is restrictions for physical movement imposed by the governments/authorities. Using the HR Documents feature in the HR Tech platform of the organisation, the organisation can create special letter templates with digital signature which allows employees to self-generate letters with required mandatory details including date and stamps.

Virtual Notice boards

As we know that communication is the lifeblood for the organisation to carry out its activities, especially at the new normal, daily information should be passed throughout the organisation using broadcast. Organisation social networks such as Darwinbox's Vibe module helps organisations to broadcast all certain information on the online notice bards, which will be visible to all the employees throughout the organisation.

Prompt and easy HR Policy sign-offs

HR policy features in HRMS can help organisations can make mandatory digital sign-off from employees in order to promptly create

policies and reference documents. This helps organisation swiftly dispatch necessary documents and policy change information to reach employees in order to keep them informed.

In a very difficult and challenging times of uncertainty and disruption, it is imperative to equip HR with technology in order to help the organisation balance productivity and engagement while giving due importance to employee's safety and well-being (Kundu, 2020).

Dealing With Suspected / Infected Cases

According to WHO, a person should be considered as suspected case if he/she meets with any of the conditions below:

1. A person having acute respiratory illness (fever, cough or shortness of breath) and a history of travel to a COVID-19 affected country or region during or before 14 days to the occurrence of symptoms
2. A person having acute respiratory illness who got exposed with a confirmed or probable COVID-19 case during or before 14 days to the occurrence of symptoms.
3. A person having severe acute respiratory infection (fever, cough or shortness of breath) and require hospitalisation, where there is no other etiology that completely clarifies the clinical introduction.

The management ought to mandatory make the employee to work from home as well as get himself medically examined in case if he/she has been reported as a suspected case either by themselves or by other employees.

Confirmed case: If a confirmed COVID-19 case occur in the organisation, the management should allow the employee to avail his/her accumulated leaves. If he/she has already exhausted the accumulated leaves, the organisation ought to provide paid sick leaves. This will encourage employees to report themselves if he/she is a confirmed COVID-19 case. Otherwise, if the employees knowingly hide their medical condition due to the apprehension of losing pay due to

leaves, it might put all other employees in the organisation at high risk.

Delaying increments by at least a quarter:

As employers are monitoring the current economic condition closely, some of them have decided to delay the increments by atleast a quarter

In an interview with Rajul Mathur, Consulting Leader India – Talent and Rewards, Willis Towers Watson said “The majority of Asian employers have maintained pay and benefits for employees unable to work due to COVID-19. It would be fair to say that employers are taking an informed but compassionate approach on compensation amid continuing uncertainty” (People Matters, 2020)

Many business analysts and consultants argues that as many sectors faces pressure and are forced to cut down costs, retaining talent rather than fresh recruitment helps in saving cost. If organisations need to retain talent, not only immediate required help but also re-iterating and acknowledging top talent as top talent to themselves is the key. This can be made possible by effective communication. This also gives them the notion that when the economic condition turns positive there will be an increase in increments that they will receive. Therefore, communication should be given much importance.

In order to ensure that the business runs and exploit opportunities even in the time of crisis, the organisation requires people and their particular teams in place. After this crisis situation ends, organisations would be requiring a large number of people.

The empathy touch to employees that HR can provide

Educate employees by arranging webinars with doctors in order to deliver accurate information and medical advice on COVID-19 to employees. Share success stories of people coming together to fight against this pandemic by mutual co-operation and adherence to government regulations. Conducting online competition like quizzes, drawing and singing competition etc.,

helps the employees to rejuvenate and regain enthusiasm. HR can encourage employees to take up online courses related to their work, so that they can enhance their skills. Also trainings can be given online.

Employees can be encouraged to spend time on their mental, emotional and physical wellness. A connection with the families of employees could be established making them assure of their safety and wellbeing has been taken care. Festivities and special days could be celebrated remotely that would bring happiness and feeling of togetherness. The strategy that the organisation may adopt after the pandemic could be communicated so as to restore confidence.

Conclusion

According to various assessment reports, nearly 25 million jobs will be affected due to the coronavirus pandemic but a policy response which is internationally co-ordinated can help the impact of the pandemic on organisations and people at work. A study by Korn Ferry indicates that majority of organisations believes that the pandemic will have a negative impact on business and directly affect their business in 2021.

However, Organisations should hold affirm and stand together with employees at this time of crisis. Organisations are ought to balance business continuity by maintaining employees and customer's health. Ensuring regular sanitisation of the workplace should be a fundamental duty of the employer. The greater challenges for businesses are business continuity and managing flexible work arrangements itself if both of these and proper communication could be handled properly by the organisation, then lesser the worrying.

Remote-working or work from home is the key to ensure business continuity. Implementing remote working wherever possible should not be overlooked. Conducting regular meetings through online platforms to not only to ensure business continuity but also to know the needs of employees and cater to whatever possible should be taken care by the organisation. Halting recruitments tentatively as it is susceptible of incurring costs which gives more financial burden

in a worst economic condition which is prevailing. Instead, retaining employees should be focused with needful communication with them that they are the organisation's high priority which in turn makes them feel attached to the organisation increasing their enthusiasm and productivity in work as a result employee turnover risks get reduced.

Appropriate policy management by considering the pandemic and its effects should be ensured. Setting up a well-defined crisis management team is inevitable in order to help the organisation to take timely decisions as the crisis management informs everything regarding the pandemic. By engaging with medical experts, the organisation can bust myths and other fake information, subsequently providing accurate and reliable information to employees regarding the disease and health conditions.

Appraisals in the time of coronavirus is indeed a difficult task for organisations except those which have completed their appraisal by January. Organisations can either wait to follow what other organisations are doing or adopt measures such as muted salary increases or delay increments by at least a quarter. Finally, HR should not hesitate to give an empathetic touch to the employees. Employees should feel that their emotional, mental and physical wellness and their family is indeed a concern for the organisation.

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