

RETHINKING STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE RESPONSE IN THE POST-COVID 19 ERA

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic's development has brought about unexpected changes in how businesses and organizations are run. Employers and supervisors have also had to reconsider how to best manage their human resources (HR) while also preparing for potential future unexpected disasters in order to adapt. Unexpected events like external crises, which heighten employee insecurity and represent direct challenges to the performance and profitability of the firm, force today's enterprises to stay vigilant and adaptable. However, with the recent COVID-19 pandemic, organizations suddenly have to navigate the unprecedented and thereby find new solutions to challenges arising across many areas of their operations. To ensure that businesses continued, a work from home policy was implemented by almost every other business. This enabled everyone to do their work while maintaining social distancing. Despite the changes, this pandemic taught businesses as well as their HR managers a lot of lessons. This paper examined the need for rethinking human resource management practices in the post- COVID-19 era. The paper is conceptual in nature and thus largely a desk research which examined extant literature.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Work from Home Policy, Disruptions

Introduction

Changes to the professional world occur all the time. Tumultuous changes happen in a frequent rate as well, whether due to financial crises, natural disasters, biological epidemics or a

general change in culture. Hence, the need arises for updated methods to cope with unpredictable alterations (Khan et al., 2019). HCM has evolved to a point where it can no longer afford to be just a selection of decisions to make in order to achieve better hiring practices for profit (Swanson and Holton, 2008), but a distinct organizational cultural vision for developing and enabling employees for the greater good. This evolution encourages new and improved methods of employee management and development (Azizi et al., 2021), as well as encouraging employees to partake in activities aimed at their professional improvement and to potentially take on positions of responsibility (Chanana and Sangeeta, 2020). Taking on a more dynamic approach towards employee development is vital in these ever-changing times in order to better cope with fluctuations, variations and struggles encountered in both the business and social spectrums. Having to deal with the new trials posed by the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the unprepared nature of many organizations, institutions and societies (Butterick and Charlwood, 2021), in other words, it exposed the holes and faults in the way work strategies and cultures were laid out.

Organizations around the world find themselves in different phases of managing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Coibion (2020) estimated that 20 million lost jobs by April 6th, far more than jobs lost over the whole Great Recession. As a result, there is a possibility of a rising unemployment rate after COVID -19 periods. Gerdeman (2020) stated that the COVID19 outbreak, a huge crisis, poses a challenge to senior management as well as a huge opportunity to develop a Trust-Based culture that requires

trust and commitment. While the challenges can occur by different phases such as location, industry, and business maturity, it is important that identifying and implementing the right employee policies and smart approaches to remote work emerge as the most difficult and the most important.

The current global crisis is in twofold: health care infrastructures are overwhelmed by the spread of the virus, while the locked-down has adverse effect on the economy. The key issue then, is not just with the recorded cases, but the economic disruption it has caused due to the widespread and lockdown. Undisputedly, the impact of the coronavirus outbreak and global lockdown would be heavy and devastating as it threatens a number of companies irrespective of the sector with a possibility of insolvency and liquidation. Howbeit, for companies who may survive the bottleneck, the possibility of a number of employees losing their positions exist (Kelly, 2020). Although it may be too early to overstate the impact of the coronavirus outbreak but from all available indices, no event in the last century, save two World Wars and the Spanish Flu of 1918, that has disrupted the daily interactions that power business across all sectors. Thus, the scale of economic downturn may be in excess of what was experienced during the Global Financial Crisis experienced in 2008; indubitably, a recession is inevitable (Tooze, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in mass production shutdowns and supply chain disruptions causing global ripple effects across all economic sectors in a manner that was never expected. It is projected that the spread of the disease will have serious humanitarian challenges to the countries of the world and especially Africa and Nigeria in particular. Economically, the effects have already been felt as demand for Africa's raw materials and commodities in global market has declined and Africa's access to industrial components and manufactured goods from other regions of the world has been hampered. This is causing further uncertainty in a continent already grappling with widespread geopolitical and economic instability (Morné *et al.*, cited in Oruonye & Ahmed, 2020).

Organizations are faced with increasing uncertainty as they navigate today's "grand challenges", or highly significant problems not typically confined to national, economic, or

societal borders (Eisenhardt, Graebner, & Soneshein, 2016). The grand challenges of today are diverse, involving a range of complex issues such as climate change, severe economic downturns, and political instability (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016). In our interconnected world, these significant problems can pose an immediate threat to organizations' vitality and survival, encouraging organizations to remain responsive and adaptive as they organize and manage their workforce. But with the recent outbreak of COVID19 ("Coronavirus (COVID-19)", 2020), organizations face a grand challenge of unparalleled proportions, one that forces them to dive into and directly manage unprecedented territory as they alter their workforce in technical, physical and socio-psychological ways not seen before.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a particularly challenging environment for human resource management (HRM) – with managers having to quickly venture into the "unknown unknowns" as they strive to help their workforce adapt to and cope with radical changes occurring in the work and social environment. For example, employees who formerly spent all or most of their time working inside their organization's physical boundaries now have to quickly adjust to remote work environments. Due to shelter in place orders and the closure of nonessential businesses, even those who might be well adjusted to remote working conditions are now faced with their own unique challenges due to an inability to seek alternative workspaces (e.g., cafés, libraries, co-working-spaces) outside of the home itself. This has likely further limited the segmentation between work and private spheres leading to greater difficulties in "unplugging" from work demands (Chawla, MacGowan, Gabriel, & Podsakoff, 2020). Aside from the increased inability to separate work and private life, the closure of schools and childcare services has increased parental demands for employees, further blurring the lines between work and family spheres. While these work-family interconnections seem particularly demanding for employees with children, single and childless workers are not immune to the negative consequences of such altered working conditions, as they may be at greatest risk of loneliness, a felt lack of purpose, and associated negative effects on well-being (Achor, Kellerman, Reece, & Robichaux, 2018).

At the same time, the current grand challenge of COVID-19 provides an opportune moment for management scholars to coordinate research efforts and turn them into actionable insights to support organizations in tackling one of the greatest challenges in modern history. It also offers scholars the exciting opportunity to look across disciplines for guidance and inspiration so that the unique HRM issues organizations currently face can be managed in an integrative way. For even if potential solutions exist, this global problem requires coordinated and integrated (research) action.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of COVID-19 on HRM practice as well as the offering useful insights in to how HR managers strategically respond to the issues thrown up in the work place as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The specific objectives of the paper are:

- i. To examine the challenges and opportunities of COVID-19 on human resource management.
- ii. To examine the role changes for a HR manager due to COVID-19 pandemic.

Statement of the Problem

As the current pandemic continues to unfold, the potential for conflict between the work and family spheres may be greater than ever. Indeed, in addition to managing the increased strain that can result from transitioning to remote working (particularly for those not accustomed to such autonomous work environments), employees are having to manage increased childcare concerns with the widespread suspension of schools and child-care services, and cope with constant concerns over the health and safety of family and friends. These newfound demands have further blurred work and family roles, thus making it more difficult than ever to maintain adequate work-family role boundaries (Giurge & Bohns, 2020).

As the lockdown eases in different parts of the world, industries and organisations are limping back to operations, hoping for normalcy to return during the next three to six months. Irrespective of the “new normal” that organisations are going to encounter as and when the lockdown eases completely, organisations are in for challenging times ahead. The primary strategic challenge for organisations will be to deal with reduced demand

and shrinking markets. Given the loss of livelihood, reduction in income and economic depression, consumers will postpone or become very conservative in buying products and services. For organisations, this implies decline in revenues. If they intend to remain profitable, they will have to reduce costs. They will have to cut down activities that may be regarded as non-essential in the short run as well as reduce staff. Investments will have to get postponed, new hiring to be stopped. All of these, while effective for profitability in the short run, are dangerous for the long run. Likewise, when employees are laid off, organisations often lose high quality talent. Moreover, it leaves a permanent scar in the minds of the employees who are retained because of the signal such expedient actions communicate about the long-term values of the organisation.

Today, the issue of working from home have been brought to the front burner. The concept of working remotely from home is not new in the advanced economies but it could be entirely new to developing economies where the level of digitalization is low. Companies in covid-19 affected countries including Nigeria have been compelled to implement a widespread change in work culture from total reliance on physical co-locations of people to remote working (i.e. use of virtual work-place) as required in covid-19 lockdown period. In this case, a greater percentage of the staff workforce are expected to be working from home, with only a fraction of staff on-site for managerial duties and/or critical jobs that cannot be done remotely.

Literature Review

COVID-19 Pandemic

The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, which originated in China, has infected tens of thousands of people all over the world. Its spread has left businesses around the world counting costs. The virus is posing a growing threat to the economy of many nations as the pandemic is moving from travel restrictions of individuals to that of business organizations (Davidson, 2020). That extends the pandemic’s reach into nearly every corner of commerce as many consumers avoid large gatherings of people in commercial places and beyond. The outbreak of the new coronavirus infection, COVID-19 was initiated from the Huanan seafood market in Wuhan city of China in December 2019, and within a couple of months it has turned out to be a global health

emergency. Live animals like bat, frog, snake, bird, marmot and rabbit are frequently sold at the Hunan seafood market (Wang, Horby, Hayden & Gao, 2020b). Genomic analysis revealed that COVID-19 is phylogenetically related to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome-like (SARS-like) bat viruses, bats could therefore be the possible primary source. Although the intermediate source of origin and transfer to humans is not clearly known, the rapid human to human spreading capability of this virus has been established. As per the latest update of WHO on 1st July 2020, the outbreak of COVID-19 had spread in more than 200 countries. Approximately 519,953 people had died after contracting the respiratory virus out of nearly 10,848,916 confirmed cases, whereas more than 6,066,672 people have recovered from the disease. These numbers are rapidly changing upwards (website at <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>).

Coronaviruses may be carried among animals however this type of virus does not spread among humans, although with an exception to the SARS and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) which usually spread through close contact with infected people. This is evident in the later discovery of cases among medical staffs with no linkage with the seafood market thus an indication that there is a human to human transmission of the virus (Liu, Hu, Kang, Lin, Zhong & Xiao, 2020).

Authorities of countries of the world resorted to lockdown strategy to prevent the spread of this virus. This is because of the routes for transmitting the COVID-19 that is, droplet transmission, contact transmission and aerosol transmission. These modes of transmission make the spread of the virus wild and the situation that accompanies it a pandemic. The transmission through droplets occurs when someone infected with the virus coughs or sneezes and a non-infected person in close environment inhales it. The transmission through contact is when an infected person touches a surface which is touched by a non-infected person or the infected person comes in contact with a non-infected person who ends up touching his or her mouth or nose. Aerosol transmission is when respiratory droplets mix with air is inhaled into the lungs of a non-infected person usually in a closed environment (National Health Commission of People's Republic of China, 2020).

Challenges Forced on HR Departments by COVID-19

According to Azzouzi and Makkaoui (2022), the specific challenges that we are going to explore, which were forced upon HR departments by the COVID-19 pandemic, are the issues of employee morale and motivation, organizational flexibility, employee retention, remote work and staffing:

Employee Morale and Motivation

The ordeal that was COVID-19 has left some significant lasting marks on different aspects of society. As a result, many businesses have suffered along with their staff, which has taken a toll on many employees. Negative effects such as stress caused by job insecurity have led to an important decrease in workplace loyalty and employees' faith in their companies (Gigauri, 2020). This is where HR teams need to step in and act as a healing mediator to insure that the well-being of the staff is cared for in this new state of the workplace. Employees have started perceiving the workplace through a different lens, hence the importance of retaining and indeed augmenting their morale and motivation. Necessary situational alterations such as remote work, although beneficial, have also resulted in mental health issues for many people (Bailenson, 2021). Maintaining a healthy level of communication with employees is now extremely necessary for HR because of how differently every individual has perceived the drastic changes enforced by the pandemic (Sulaiman et al., 2020). This steady rate of communication can allow HR teams to pinpoint what exactly motivates each individual employee, what drives them, what worries them and what changes if any they'd like to see introduced into their work environment.

Organizational Flexibility

The organizational flexibility issue affects both the companies and the employees therein. When it comes to the employees, workplace flexibility is a focal point to those who want to adapt, stand out and survive in a tumultuous economy (Anjum and Zahan, 2021). Being flexible at the workplace does not simply make you a more valuable employee, but also increases your chances for a promotion while decreasing the likelihood of losing your job. As for the companies, flexibility in how to better organize the workforce, delegate tasks and evaluate each individual employee is of the utmost importance (NIU, 2021). A change in HCM culture is necessary in order to achieve the flexibility required for an easily adaptable

organization, and including employees in the decision making of these changes is vital to creating a healthy HCM culture (Khan et al., 2019).

Employee Retention

The costs that were cut by organizations could have a negative outcome on the workforce when it comes to employee training and development. Not only will it result in unqualified employees, therefore an unqualified organization, but it is also a demotivating factor to the employees if they are not given the chances to evolve and are instead stuck in stagnation (Gigauri, 2020). Taking into consideration an employee's professional path can save a company the costs of turnover (Sanders, 2020). This is where the role of HR departments should lie in introducing these clear and exciting evolutionary, communicative and informative solutions for the staff for a more motivated and more productive workforce (Gaikwad, 2020).

Remote Work

Many organizations have adopted the remote work method as a solution to the limitations that were introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic (Hasteer, 2020). This work-from-home culture, although quite beneficial, has created some unintended side effects, chiefly among them is the fact that employees have gotten so used to the remote work method to the point where they now find it both difficult and demoralizing to get back to an office space (Friedman, 2021). Also, there is the problem of a distributed workforce. It will be difficult for HR departments to supervise and administer certain tasks, such as compensation for extra hours, payroll and availability to employees who are working from home (NIU, 2021). Technical issues that can occur while working from a distance is major hole in remote work, as the employee is left to either figure the solutions out for himself or to seek the help of someone who is also communicating from a distance. Thus, the need for employees to have digitization skills is highlighted (Anjum et al., 2022). The HR departments should also provide its personnel with clear, simple and accessible communication lines so that they can communicate the latest and any information to their colleagues (Sulaiman et al., 2020).

The Role Changes for a HR Manager

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted organizations and caused human resources

managers to think differently about their role as they adjust to social distancing practices and a new work environment that they may never have imagined. To prevent the spread of the coronavirus, companies have switched to a remote work model at a rate and scale they've never experienced. As face-to-face collaboration is replaced with e-mail and videoconferencing, HR managers have to do difficult work under difficult circumstances. Not only are HR professionals concerned about employees' health and well-being during the pandemic, they are also under the strain of processing the paperwork and providing solace to the millions of workers who have been laid off or furloughed. For employees still on the job, HR managers are trying to keep their workers productive, motivated, engaged and connected—all factors that are moving targets in the new normal. HR managers have to let employees know that they know they are at home with their family, that they are stressed because the kids are trying to get their attention while they are working, and that the company is there for them. HR managers' number one job right now is to keep people up-to-date, be reassuring and build trust.

The role change for HR managers in the post COVID-19 era is enumerated below:

1. Coping with Flexible Work Arrangements

Due to COVID-19, the whole world has shifted their workforce from ground to online (Working from home). Before this COVID-19, "Working from home sounds like a dream; however, like any job situation, there are many disadvantages to home employment that may become apparent over time. For some, this can mean making a few adjustments to make the situation more tolerable" (Smith, 2014). Due to this pandemic, these adjustments make the workforce more comfortable and safer by working at home.

Many managers will be familiar with flexible work arrangements (FWAs) that formalize where, when, and how employees do their work (Chen & Fulmer, 2018). FWAs, such as flexible scheduling of work and working from home, have been shown to deliver positive benefits for employees' health (e.g., Anderson, Kaplan & Vega, 2015). IHRM has unique insights into FWAs; for example, people working in global teams are accustomed to working from home and outside standard business hours. IHRM research has highlighted the importance of practices such as FWAs that help MNE employees to maintain

their health and wellbeing to cope with the demands of working across geographical and temporal boundaries (Adamovic, 2018).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many Multinational enterprises (MNEs) have been forced to rely on one type of FWA: employees working from home. This is a new challenge for many, including IHRM scholars and practitioners. A survey conducted with 800 global HR executives in March 2020 found that 88% of organizations had either encouraged or required employees to work from home during the COVID19 crisis (Gartner, 2020). Because this shift has been involuntary, continues over a lengthy period, and requires entire households to be house-bound, there is more potential for employees to experience increased work hours, as well as increased work-life conflict. For employees who were globally mobile, and now find themselves working from home during the pandemic, the shift is particularly significant and borders between work and family may require re-negotiation and re-organization. There are several specific ways by which managers and HR can help their employees to work from home in a safe and healthy manner.

There are many simple and cost-effective ways to encourage healthy lifestyle habits. For example, encouraging healthy work practices such as working within regular hours and taking regular work-breaks will help employees to switch off from work (Adamovic, 2018; Chen & Fulmer, 2018). Communicating clearly and managing work expectations will help employees to maintain their family responsibilities. The pandemic offers an opportunity for managers to explore how to implement flexible work arrangements that can enhance the health and safety of employees well into the future, particularly that of globally mobile employees.

2. Global Teams and Virtual Collaboration

For International Human Resource Management (IHRM), the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of how employees can work effectively across borders while remaining at home. The focus on global teams has become particularly salient. With employees sharing the same global stressor, future studies should examine whether their experience of getting through it together has fostered greater cohesion and, if so, whether those MNEs that have spent time to train their employees on cross-cultural

virtual collaboration now have global teams with greater expectations of reliability among the members. Working from home has exposed employees' full selves as conference calls are bringing colleagues into each other's homes, possibly seeing each other's pets, children, and home décor. Future studies should examine whether the COVID-19 pandemic has fostered greater global virtual team cohesion by providing visible evidence of each other's true selves.

The crisis also offers a new opportunity for Hr managers to look at the fundamentals of virtual collaboration. IHRM researchers could use the current situation of large scale virtual working as an 'extreme case scenario' to examine the extent to which virtual collaboration can be effective. They could ask whether the methods that we have derived from virtual collaborations amongst managers or technical experts (e.g., information systems engineers) suffice for achieving effective work in the types of collaborations that were previously not virtual, for example among administration staff inside the MNE.

3. Lessons from Remote Working

The current lockdown and social distancing due to COVID-19 compels businesses to shift to remote working. This is essential for the continuation of their work because this virus is here to stay and businesses have to learn to survive with this. Even after the crisis, there is a high chance that remote working will become the new normal. Therefore, it is an opportunity for the businesses to change their way of work so that they can benefit from the remote working in the long term as well. Some of the benefits include reduced cost of office space and business trips, an increase in employee retention and productivity, shorter breaks in between work and a greater focus of employees. On a larger scale, remote working will also help them to tackle unexpected events in the future. It is therefore important for the businesses to ensure that they are investing in a new operational model which is based on flexibility as well as remote ways of working, a corporate culture that supports the new business model, business goals that are aligned to the new cultural standard and a data driven method of analysis to get a much better and deeper insight into new learning patterns (Verbeemen, 2020).

It is also imperative for them to increase their investment in technology to ensure that they have the necessary infrastructure for remote working

arrangements. Some of the measures that they must take include issuing laptops to employees so that they can work from home along with reviewing and upgrading the digital system to ensure stable and effective communication and productivity. However, the most important for the businesses right now is to ensure the security of their data as the reliance on the internet has given the hackers the opportunity for malware and phishing attacks. A lot of businesses use the Zoom application for business discussions however; the app has no end-to-end encryption and so is not safe at all. According to a Google report, there has been an increase of 350% in the phishing websites since the start of 2020 (Cohen, 2020). Thus, it is extremely important to ensure the privacy of business data and in this extreme crisis; Interpol has provided a cyber safety checklist to help businesses deal with such crimes.

4. Communication

Communication in this pandemic is very important for the survival of businesses. It is the key to employee engagement and productivity. Since workers are not working from their routine workplace, they often feel disconnected and disassociated with their colleagues and the management due to lack of social interactions. This can affect their work performance and motivation. Therefore, it is important to schedule regular meetings to increase the interaction and to ensure that everyone is on the same page. However only meeting does not suffice, it is imperative for management to build a virtual water cooler. This will help everyone in the meeting to get comfortable with each other through a virtual channel and they will feel that they are an important and integral part of the team. They will interact in a way that will reinforce the values and culture of their business and hence it will cultivate a sense of belonging in them. This will create a role change for the HR manager. The virtual water cooler will also be the basis of successful online meetings as it will connect and familiarize each other before the actual meeting takes place (Debara, 2020). Moreover, it will also give management the chance to communicate and build strong relationships with those employees with which they are unable to interact that much at the workplace. Such interactions will add a sense of normality and would eventually help everyone to stay focused and accountable.

5. Enhancing Relationship-Oriented HR Systems

Accordingly, the challenges brought on by COVID-19 beckons organizations and research to consider the unique challenges and demands childless and single employees face. Organizations may want to begin addressing this issue by adopting a more inclusive and thereby creative approach to supporting all employees, considering various forms of family status. For example, human resource managers may want to look toward enhancing relationship-oriented HR systems in order to combat the greater risk of isolation among childless and single employees and better prepare them for unanticipated events (such as our current crisis) that can lead to feelings of loneliness and social exclusion. Such relationship-oriented HR systems can help employees build ties both within and outside the organization (Kehoe & Collins, 2017) and thus develop a reservoir of resources needed to cope with possible social shocks like the one we currently face, such as by focusing on network-development, training and feedback. Further options include regularly sponsoring professional and social events, where the childless and singles can find meaning, strengthen purpose, and instituting formal mechanisms (such as regular team meetings) to encourage employees to connect with one another (Collins & Clark, 2003).

6. Building Virtual Collaboration Skills

HR Managers can further support effective virtual working through each stage of the human resource management process (Zimmermann, 2018). The requirement of working over distances should be included in job advertisement and assessment centers, not just for managers but also for technical staff, to attract and select employees who regard this as part of their professional identity (Zimmermann & Ravishankar, 2011). After recruitment, skills of virtual collaboration can be developed through formal training that covers ICT as well as intercultural knowledge and experiential exercises (Sit, Mak, & Heill, 2017). As mentioned, cross-cultural training is important for those who work virtually across countries, supporting cross-cultural relationship formation and team-working skills. On the job, new recruits can early on be given the opportunity to work on virtual teams and visit remote offices to develop an awareness of different cultural and organizational contexts that may cause misunderstandings in the virtual collaboration. Rotational assignments and short-term projects

abroad serve to enhance the collaboration in global virtual teams by allowing members to develop a better shared understanding of their tasks, goals, and social norms, and to build stronger social ties and a shared team identity (Zimmermann, 2018). For this purpose, the organizational design must allow for the movement of staff in all geographic directions.

Research on virtual collaboration also suggests what measures managers can take to alleviate obstacles to virtual work; to create a more positive work experience for employees; and to increase employees' motivation to make good on their commitments in the team and the firm. First, managers can facilitate perceived proximity, by allowing employees to communicate frequently and share personal information with remote colleagues, including social media, to help identify personal similarities and to develop stronger relationships (O'Leary, Wilson & Metiu, 2014). Shared understanding, in turn, must be supported by defining strong shared goals, a clear communication structure, interaction rules, and team member roles (e.g. Earley & Peterson, 2004). To give virtual working skills the attention they deserve, managers should also include employees' effort in virtual communication and teamwork as criteria for employee performance appraisals. The process of virtual working, not just its outcomes, should thus become relevant for rewards and promotion.

In sum, research on virtual collaborations can teach managers much on how to handle the challenges and reap the benefits of collaborating at a distance, which the COVID-19 crisis has brought to the fore. To cope with virtual collaboration on a large-scale during this crisis, managers must develop and reward employees' virtual collaboration skills, foster perceived proximity, and design ICT, work goals, and the communication structure in a way to foster collaboration. If managers now use the opportunity to take on these insights, they can build their firm's capability of virtual working for the future. In the long run, virtual collaboration skills will become a more important part of employees' professional identity. In an international setting, this also implies that HR managers in different organizations will need to collaborate to design career paths that balance the aspirations of employees at different sites and foster their motivation to work with each other.

Conclusion

Companies have to take strong steps to counter this situation at least for two years. There is a huge responsibility for Human Resource managers to maintain the motivation of all employees and make them more productive and efficient. Companies HR managers are still working on this transition of work from home. They have to consider the calmness and mental state of all employees because every employee would not be from the same cities. As mentioned by Joy: "The more you're able to find inner calm during this crisis, the better able you are to make decisions and lead your business" (Joy, 2020). Eventually, in this transition of work from home, HR managers are working on the priorities of their work because pressurizing the employees in their work would affect their well-being and efficiency as a manager doesn't know one's personal situation in this pandemic of COVID-19. As mentioned by famous consultant Joy: "Your first priority should be the safety and well-being of your employees. Up next would be communicating with your employees and customers. They may not be in a position to patronize your business, but they still want to be updated on any changes to its operations. The same goes

COVID-19 and Conflicts: A Human resource Perspectives

Variation of contract

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused significant unpredictability and upheaval for businesses. Recent reports show that the unemployment rate has risen to a 17-year high of 7% in Hong Kong. Employers have had to act swiftly to implement alternative working structures and to counteract financial pressures. These challenges are likely to continue. The pandemic has led to job losses with its attendant industrial conflicts as labour unions would not totally accept the layoffs. Employers have explored a variety of measures to reduce operational costs and alleviate financial pressure, including: Salary and benefits reductions, reducing or changing working time or working days, and asking employees to take unpaid leave. Making changes such as these to an employee's terms and conditions will constitute a variation of contract and requires employee consent, unless the employment contract includes a clear right to unilaterally vary the specific term. In practice, it is unusual to see clauses which allow a unilateral change of salary or hours. Accordingly, employers must engage with affected staff to

agree the relevant change and document this in writing. Failure to do so may result in a constructive dismissal situation. Employers can seek to persuade staff to accept reductions by explaining that changes are temporary and required to stabilise and sustain the business. In addition, such measures may help to reduce the likelihood of lay-offs, redundancies or other more radical outcomes.

Redundancies

In serious circumstances employers may be forced to reduce headcount. Depending on the situation, redundancy may be a valid ground for termination if the termination occurs wholly or mainly because of:

- Closure of the employer's business;
- Cessation of business where the employee is employed;
- Or because the requirement for the employee to carry out particular work ceases or diminishes.

While there is no regulatory framework governing redundancies, employers must avoid discriminatory reasons and other grounds where termination will be considered unlawful. The employer must provide the required notice (or payment in lieu) and termination payments. Primarily this means a severance payment for staff who has been employed for at least 24 months, but employers should not overlook other contractual entitlements such as salary, fixed bonuses and incentives such as stock options which may be accelerated by the termination. Internal and external communications are again important. Employers should consider how redundancies may affect consumer or customer confidence, as well as how to maintain morale among remaining employees in this scenario.

Recommendations

Communication with affected employees is important and should be clear and consistent. Employers must not involve any discriminatory reasons in selecting affected employees.

Work from home

Although there is no statutory right to WFH and this must be contractually agreed, WFH arrangements have proved a necessary and effective practical response to government restrictions, reducing the risk of infections in workplaces and accommodating employees with children while schools are closed. Nevertheless, both employers and employees continue to be

bound by employment obligations during WFH. Such arrangements throw up several issues worthy of attention.

Conclusion

The need of social distancing gave rise to the concept of "working from home concept (WFH)" for corporate for keeping alive the working spirit of the employees. Work from home (WFH) is where the individuals can do their job from home through massive use of digital platforms. After this pandemic, business trends have completely changed and majority of business activities are performed through mobile, or other digital platforms. Artificial Intelligence, analytics all have changed the way companies used to run and functioning a business. During the current COVID-19 pandemic, in order to keep the operation going, businesses are forced to move to work from home mode for their employees, wherever possible. There is a huge responsibility for Human Resource managers to maintain the motivation of all employees and make them more productive and efficient. Companies HR managers are still working on this transition of work from home. They have to consider the calmness and mental state of all employees because every employee would not be from the same cities.

The following recommendations are put forward;

- i. While employees are dealing with a lot of stress and anxiety these days, their leaders and HR managers should give them hope and should promote positive thinking as this will help them in reducing their negative feelings and frustrations. Moreover, they should support employees work life balance and reduce extra work burden as this will help the employees to perform better.
- ii. As a result of the lockdown, a lot of businesses are facing financial problems. Their production, sales and profits are falling and some small businesses cannot afford to pay all of their employees. As a result, they are firing employees and firing someone in these times is traumatic. What important is the fact that this should be conveyed to the employees in such a way as to cause minimum pain and with as much compassion and kindness as possible (Knight, 2016).
- iii. Leaders and HR managers are considered role models and during this pandemic, they have to demonstrate calm and optimism. They

must reframe the pandemic threat as an opportunity for their organization. This will turn an uncertain and unlikely situation into one with hope and positivity as stress can turn out to be good if it is framed constructively (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).

- iv. It is also imperative for organizations to increase their investment in technology to ensure that they have the necessary infrastructure for remote working arrangements. Some of the measures that they must take include issuing laptops to employees so that they can work from home along with reviewing and upgrading the digital system to ensure stable and effective communication and productivity.

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