

# COVID-19 – How should employers in India Respond, Recover and Restore?

As uncertainty due to COVID-19 continues and employers try to respond to this unprecedented human crisis, they must also plan to recover and more importantly restore in the new normal. During a time when the Government of India has ramped up safety measures and has advised to enforce Work From Home (WFH) for private-sector employees (except those employed in organisations providing essential services) for an extended period of 21 days at the minimum, the role of the Human Resources (HR) function has emerged as the most crucial.

One of the immediate steps that employers took since the outbreak of the virus, is encouraging employees to work from home (WFH). However, a low level of preparedness for WFH amongst many companies has been exposed, as companies struggle to cope with the technological and behavioural challenges of implementing seamless WFH experience. This and many such related challenges have brought to the fore the critical role of HR as businesses try to protect their number one asset - people. Keeping in mind the stress that employees are having to endure, employers need to urgently review their policies and implications on employee health and safety, business continuity, productivity, performance management and rewards. Here are the top recommendations for employers in India.

## Review HR policies and practices

Companies need to assess their overall HR policies and procedures, especially with reference to communicable disease management and disaster management. If companies do not have a business continuity plan to deal with such exigencies, COVID-19 should be taken as a serious reminder to put one in place.

It is critical for organisations to strictly adhere to the restrictions and guidance's provided by the local authorities and ensure that they are suitably incorporated and communicated to the employees.

They also should review and clarify policies around pay and benefits if an office or factory is closed or impacted.

## Business continuity plan

The seriousness and uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak has exposed the vulnerabilities of businesses like never before. Now is the time for organisations to review the efficacy of their business continuity plan. The first step is to identify mission-critical operations and business functions. A formalised method is needed to separate the essential from the non-essential functions that can be suspended during a major business disruption.

Communicable disease instances require special consideration than the common catastrophes (e.g., earthquakes, fires, storms, floods) that result in physical damage to property and assets. Most organisations would have a traditional business plan, but it is prudent to assess whether the same plan can be adapted, or a new design would be required to mitigate COVID-19 and similar situations. Even though, majority of companies have implemented a forced work from home, having this infrastructure/plan in place will help when the situation eases.

## Employee health and wellbeing

Here are key factors that employers should consider:

- **Personal hygiene** – Even at the workplace, employers should ensure that they are providing employees with a functional ecosystem where they are able to practice the safety and personal hygiene measures recommended by the national and local public health authority. Whether it is being reminded about personal hygiene etiquettes or maintaining social distancing through educational posters and emailers, providing an alcohol-based hand rub or soap, or the necessary support system to maintain hygiene, every step should be taken by employers to follow clear guidance from public

health authorities. Employers need to continue communicating with employees to maintain this at home as well and treat this as a non-negotiable.

- **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** – Irrespective of whether an employee or family member is sick, COVID-19 is creating widespread anxiety and turmoil. Many employers offer mental health support resources, and now is the time to continue to communicate the support available through an EAP or other emotional wellbeing program like telemedicine. EAPs should offer 24/7 access to qualified resources who can help employees and family members on mental health issues. Also, seek regular feedback, so that employees' responses and challenges can be gauged on a regular basis. Employers should also consider using emergency response systems to communicate in real time with onsite and remote workers.
- **Financial wellbeing** – It is important for employers to understand that COVID-19 is already causing an adverse impact on the global economy which is bound to have an impact on India's economy at least in the short term, and hence on individual investments.

The financial market volatility may increase employee anxiety and impact overall productivity. Providing employees access to qualified financial planners who are able to help the employees with information and counsel on managing their finances will help employees address the stress and go a long way in showing that employers care.

- **Social Responsibility** – In highly communicable instances like this where the risk carriers themselves are humans, appropriate social etiquette like social distancing needs to be strictly followed. While governments and law enforcement authorities take the necessary measures, given the influence the employers have, they too have a role in reiterating that message. Employers need to keep reminding employees about social distancing, following government guidelines in case of symptoms, discourage them from hoarding essentials like masks and sanitisers and encouraging them to stay home. In case of business or personal travel, advise employees to follow advice of government, local authorities and employers.

- **Mental resilience** – Making employees understand that it is normal to feel sad, stressed, confused during a crisis. Building a sense of hope for employees during this time is extremely important for their engagement and their performance. Hope offers a sense of optimism, elevating the employees out of the current challenges into a future which is full of possibilities. It builds mental resilience and makes employees believe that the future will be better and that they have the power to make it so. That belief nurtures engagement, which benefits an employer's relationships with its people.

#### **Insurance plan for employees**

Enable the employees to understand their insurance plan benefits, specifically the coverage and exclusions. Employers need to provide access to a support mechanism and communicate it in a simplistic manner covering Third-Party Administrators, brokers, hospital network and HR personnel most equipped to handle queries on insurance. In case of planned procedures of the employee or their dependents, ask them to consult their treating surgeon to confirm whether it can be postponed without risking the health condition.

#### **Employee Communication and change management**

With flexible working arrangements, employers are faced with the task of keeping in constant touch with employees to help them navigate through the challenges and keeping them engaged in a meaningful way.

In situations like this, while it is better to err on the side of over communicating than not communicating at all, employers are better advised to communicate optimally to avoid fatigue. They should be mindful of the number of channels they communicate through, the frequency of communication, keeping communication brief and easy to understand and most importantly making sure that the communication is adding genuine value to the employees to combat the many challenges posed.

Employers should invest in providing an enabling technology ecosystem for client facing employees while also leveraging it to hold town halls conducted via virtual sessions aimed at addressing employee challenges and grievances. Employers should also train people managers as expecting the HR

department to cover the entire workforce is not practically possible.

### **Remote Working, employee productivity and engagement**

Work from home is the new reality. This is the first step (involuntary training) in the Future of Work journey. Companies are reviewing their working arrangements and its implications on business outcomes and productivity. Global studies by Willis Towers Watson on this subject, have highlighted that ~70% of the companies have introduced flexible working arrangements in their workplaces, most common being work from home policies (some other are split team arrangements, shift-working, etc.).

Employers should consider collaboration platforms like Skype, Teams, Blue-Jeans, Zoom, Google Hangouts among others to facilitate remote working.

Managing remote productivity will define how well business will come out of this situation. Managers should learn to adjust their mindset and trust employees while consistently focusing on clear goal communication and regular work output review. The most simple and best way for employees is to start the day as you would in an office environment.

Prolonged remote working could see issues of workers' emotional health – it may cause loneliness and isolation. This will ultimately impact productivity and managers need to be equipped with tools and material that enable them to engage with their teams. Consider daily calls and close of business update calls or involving teams for brain storming sessions where employees can participate virtually. Going beyond work and engaging employees on fun or wellbeing activities will also go a long way in boosting morale and keeping the workforce interconnected. For eg. some employers are running online contests on healthy food recipes and most creative ways for keeping children meaningfully occupied. Employers who demonstrate genuine concern, are proactive and communicate empathetically and effectively are far more likely to see a more secure, motivated and engaged workforce, the value of which will be realised for a long time to come.

### **Performance management, Compensation and Rewards**

We expect compassionate short term and realistic long-term implications on pay and compensation. Despite the negative economic outlook for the year,

most companies across the region do not have plans to adjust their annual salary increase budget. While ~20% of companies are expecting a downward adjustment of the annual salary increase budget, we do observe that a small portion of companies (<5%) plan to take more intense measures such as salary reductions and lay-offs to contend with the impact from the continuous epidemic outbreak. Employers should take an informed wait-and-see approach on variable compensation amid continuing uncertainty. That said, if the situation does not change for the better by mid-May, then there is a possibility of employers in hard hit industries considering selective salary cuts and rationalisation in teams.

Whilst the restoration phase could either be a U, V or W pattern, this pilot of WFH is a reminder of the things to come, albeit with some positives like flexibility in human movements outside of home. Employers need to constantly evaluate the evolving situation and continue to adapt keeping in mind guidance's provided by the local authorities to protect their human capital. Companies who have already started to adapt will be in a better position to come out stronger on the other side. And in the coming days, more employers will be re-examining their plans in response to the ongoing situation. With COVID-19, the time to act is now. Delayed or deferred decisions could have a long-term impact on business continuity.

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