Original Research Article

Key challenges and solutions for HR professionals in the "New Normal" 2022

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ABSTRACT

It has been two years into the Covid-19 era, the world as we know has changed drastically, stumbling into survival mode as it tries to adjust to the new realities. People are learning to cope with rapid changes that can be disruptive and confusing. They are constantly faced by health scares, financial pressures and domestic challenges. The companies have been crushed by instability and workers are in stressful condition, in such a situation, it becomes the prerogative of HR professionals to step up and keep everything in perspective and aligned. As a result, Human Resources (HR) has become one of the most critical functions of any enterprise in these extraordinary times. This paper intends to highlight the challenges faced by companies and solutions for the same.

Purpose of Study: This conceptual paper is an attempt at deliberating on how COVID-19 has changed the work-culture landscape. What drastic change it has bought for the HR professionals and what needs to be recognized and adapted to in this new normal. The objective is to understand the hitches and challenges that has come with this new arrangement and lay down some solutions that can bring back the old growth regime.

Materials and Methods: This is a descriptive study based on information gathered from many HR professionals across industries. In-depth interviews of various stakeholders from a representative range of Indian organizations were conducted and some of the key human-resource related issues and challenges that have come up during the Covid times were identified and enumerated in this paper.

Findings: With Covid still very much prevalent but the economies slowly opening up, it is not possible to continue with traditional systems, processes and strategies that the HR professional were using in the pre-covid era. New measures, methods and stratagems need to be laid down to bring people back to work. There is a need to create new policies to re-align and re-connect the individual goals with organizational goal to bring about a similar level of growth. Thus further accentuating the need for navigating and adapting around the 'new normal'.

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1. Introduction

The consistent growth during the last three decades in the pre-Covid times had bought a kind of stability in the day to day chaos. Everything was progressing and developing, a disruption in the arrangement now and then was followed by many alignments, adjustments, fixations and new inventions bringing back the balance.

The coming of Covid-19 bought everything to a standstill. Economies, organizations and work-structures halted. The Human Resource (HR) professionals had certainly not imagined the challenges that Covid-19 has dawned on them. The uncertainty and instability has reversed the growth of many companies, employees productivity has been greatly affected due to lack of tools, effective communications and stressful environment

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all around them. As realization dawned that this has become the "New Normal", HR executives started operating around the clock, taking extraordinary action to keep their workers safe and ensuring that their companies thrive. They navigated cutbacks, layoffs, and force reductions. They're still adapting and strategizing to the new model of "remote jobs", 'work from home" and developing on the new communications and interactions interface, at mass level. [1,2] They are developing corporate contingency plans, preparing emergency communication protocols and trying to inspire a de-motivated and stressed workforce.

2. Objective

This is a conceptual paper aimed at deliberating on how COVID-19 has changed the work-culture landscape. What drastic change it has bought for the HR professionals and what needs to be recognized and adapted to in this new normal. The objective is to understand the complications and challenges that has come with this new arrangement and contemplate on some solutions that can bring back the old growth rate. The objective is to expand the awareness and understanding and to gain fresh insights in the new and additional HR challenges in the present Covid-era. This is a study about what has become the "new normal" and what solutions the human resource professionals are trying to enable them to align the "new normal" with the traditional organizational goals.

3. Materials and Methods

This is a descriptive study based on information gathered from many HR professionals across industries. In-depth interviews of various stakeholders from a representative range of Indian organization's were conducted and some of the key human-resource related issues and challenges that have come up during the Covid times and still prevalent were identified and taken. Finally, a summarized version of "what" many companies HRs are planning to effectively manage, motivate, create a sense of belongingness and bring employees back to work has been explored and presented.

4. Discussions

Exhaustive discussions with various stakeholders from a representative range of Indian organizations were conducted. It helped us understand and reflect on the changing scenario faced by HR professionals due to the occurrence of Covid-19 leading to complete lockdowns. A detailed and comprehensive view of the key challenges faced by them and the solutions they conjured for the same were inscribed. Deliberation's with several HR heads has helped us in summarizing and presenting the following key challenges and solutions faced by them.

5. Results

The term 'new normal' first appeared in 2008 financial crisis, stressing the intense fluctuations during that period leading to many changed lives. This term has now, come up again during the COVID-19 pandemic. It confirms the depth to which the world altered due to the epidemic. Our findings suggest- two year after COVID lockdowns and restrictions, the emergence of corona pills, advanced vaccinations, and many other measures have the economies coming back to normal, the businesses slowly limping back to life, however it is not possible in the current scenario to continue with traditional HR systems, processes and strategies. New programs, policies and plans need to be laid down to bring people back to work. There is a need to create new procedures to recognize, to re-align, to re-connect and to re-charge the employee's. Individual goals need to be realigned with organizational goal to bring about the original levels of commitment, motivation, growth and development.

6. Key Challenges

The New Normal bought many complexities. The complexities that HR managers faced, depended upon the sector and scale of their business, but this much was obvious that all organizations had to compromise and make adjustments in the changed scenario. Lot of variations in business plans were mandated in the present era. [3,4] Businesses need committed employees more than ever to get through this puzzling period. The employees were suffering from feelings of insecurity, seclusion and loneliness, here the HR needed to devise strategies to make employees comfortable and productive in this new normal.

The sudden shift in work-life balance has brought new challenges for HR. The top priority for HR professionals was crisis response and how to keep the employees involved, provide the right communication channels and tools for aligning them with organizational goals.

The key challenges faced were:

6.1. Employee emotional health and safety (stress and health)

It's not only the mental ability and skill but also the employees emotional health the impacts his productivity and performance. This abrupt change in work-culture has affected both employee's emotional health and safety. Certain problems like workplace tensions, nervousness and other cognitive challenges have always been prevalent and Organizations have often introduced fitness schemes, promising protection thru health insurance and flexibility to their staff in order to solve these health concerns. [3,4] However, the unexpected outbreak of COVID-19 has triggered front seat psychological distress for employees. Pulsations and sensitivity of an employee who is physically

present in the office can be more easily understood and solved. But employees working from far flung-remote areas, with communication routes significantly compromised, left the managers in difficult situations. Understanding the employee's emotional state, triggers and how to divert them back in the direction of goals became a huge challenge.[5–10]

6.2. Remote-work culture

The drastic shift from a physically present office work culture to a remote working society has not been easy for both the organisations and the employees. Less than 50% of businesses had no remote job platform until the COVID-19 epidemic stuck. Nearly everybody had to rapidly create plans, facilities for remote jobs. This contributed to a number of unforeseen issues. The HR administrators who always aimed towards the creation of smooth routes and tactics to solve the obstacles were stuck.[7,8] All the carefully planned routes and approaches became redundant. There were no annually or quarterly planned strategies but everything was to be done in real time. This in itself was an enormous challenge. The emphasis transited from employee morale and involvement to quick response and diagnoses.

6.3. Employee interaction and communication

Communication has always been the key to solving many employee problems and concerns. The anxiety, uncertainty that has accompanied Covid can most effectively be addressed and answered by effective and continuous communication channels. But the change in work scenario like remote working, lack of adequate internet facility, or bandwidth has made Communication a major challenge for the HR people. It becomes easier to manage the workforce with the right communication channels. The Covid-19 crisis had the HR professionals on toes and kept them looking for the accurate remote working tools that match their work culture.[10–12] Though tools like webex, Zoom have come up, but they certainly were not enough.

6.4. Employee commitment

One of the major HR goals is to improve the loyalty and commitment of an employee. The traditional HR strategies like congenial and gratifying working atmosphere, aligning individual goals to organizational goals, providing employees opportunities for self-development, a paid holiday or company off site all become impossible in the face of Covid-19.

It became more challenging to keep the employees connected and engaged when they were working remotely and that too, in a crisis. Aligning Cross-functional, Cross-country teams became more difficult.[13,14] With distant working, it is always problematic to follow a routine and thus HR professionals could not expect a systematic workflow from employees. Many new challenges like updating them regularly or arranging meetings/ sessions with mind counselors came up.

6.5. Ambiguity and insecurity

Ambiguity and uncertainty about the future, left all the employees with the frightening feeling of not knowing what the future holds and what measures to take to sustain themselves, making them extremely anxious about their future. Covid-19 has affected everyone physically as well as mentally. And the HR Teams have to struggle to keep everyone motivated and aligned with organizational goals. To meet the challenges of the crisis and develop effective measures and strategies for all was an enormous task.[11,15]

6.6. Quick changes in policies requiring instant adaptation

The past and present Covid-era have been extraordinary. The new waves of Covid-19 led to formulations of many new policies and government regulations. The HR professionals needed to stay continuously updated, they had to keep communicating unceasingly and implementing the sudden policy changes due to the new based on the new government guidelines.

7. Strategic Solutions

These are extraordinary times, under normal circumstances, companies would train their employees on how to work from home and be productive, and then some employees would choose to work from home and some may not, however.

None of this is happening here. Mass remote working from home was thrust upon us by situation caused by Covid-19. It was not a systematically pre-planned option. Since nobody could anticipate and plan in advance the magnitude of change in the work environment bought upon us, by the Covid-19 crisis, everyone struggled and are still grappling. As the new realities are sinking in, slowly people are coming to terms with what has now become the "New Normal". Much rides on how the HR professionals handles and create an environment of trust and security during this crisis, In the coming future we will see various forums talk about how the employees felt trusted supported and whether they were given the right tools and technology to do their jobs. Companies getting negative reviews will struggle to survive and attract new talent.[15,16]

Thus, the HR professional need to lay down strategies and policies, find novel ways to create an environment of trust, of confidence, to let the employees know that they are safe and that the company is there for them. There is a huge challenge of disconnected, unmotivated employees. To ensure greater motivation, high morale, more loyalty and commitment many companies HR professionals have

started laying down policies and strategies for realignment-reconnecting the employees to the organization.[11,17] Many HR professional have adopted the following mantra:
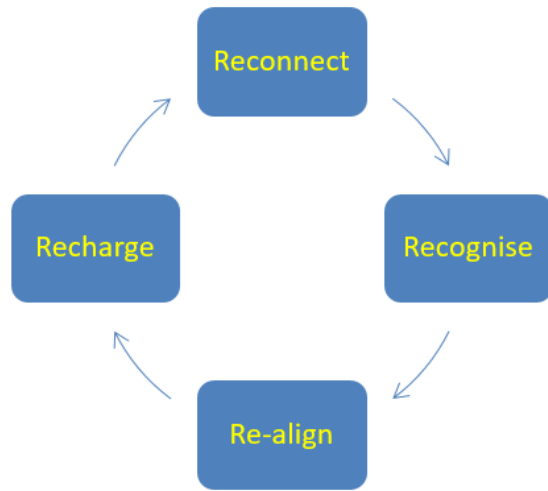

Fig. 1: "Reconnect-Recognize-Realign-Recharge"

7.1. Reconnect

Ensuring uninterrupted two way communication channels

All employee needs to be continuously connected to the organization, The HR professionals need to reconnect the management with the employees by keeping everyone up-to-date through messages, mails, blogs and videos. Employees need to be provided all kinds of tools and technology to be able to access all communications. Group leaders are encouraged to make motivational and inspiring videos to increase visibility and connection to mission. Webinars with motivational speakers, online sponsored talks with psychologist all have contributed towards reduction of stress and connecting employees to the organization.[17]

7.2. Recognise

Recognize implies creating visibility. With everybody working from home during the Covid era, no physical meetings or gatherings, the noticeability of ones achievements, his hard toil and contribution remained unknown to others. To be appreciated by one's peers, friends and superiors creates the feeling of self- achievement. Thus, to Identify and Recognize individuals for their contributions. To create a visibility platform for high achievers was the aim under this policy An appreciated and recognized employee will always feel connected, belonged and in turn he/she will spread a sense of commitment and satisfaction towards the organization. HR professionals can highlight individual and group achievements with meaningful moments of recognition. This can help remote

employees feel valued when they may be feeling isolated, and allow company to acknowledge employees who are making sacrifices and contributing positively in these times. Moreover, this can be perceived as a strong attachment factor by the organization towards the employees. Hence, creating a feeling of being part of the bigger whole.

7.3. Re-Align

Big responsibility and bigger challenge for the HR professionals lies in. Re-aligning individuals with organizations. To achieve this objective the HR needed to provide all kinds of support be it financial or physical provisions that a remotely-isolated employee may need. They needed to redevelop a sense of oneness with the organization. By providing appropriate tools and techniques that improves financial, physical and mental wellbeing the HR professionals ensures quick and easy adaptability of employees into this "new Normal". Some other measures adopted by HR are- making essential purchases easier, and extending disposable income on everyday purchases through an employee discounts platform, providing employees with helpful resources including hundreds of expert-led videos, articles, tips that enable employees to stay physically active even if they can't get outdoors or to the gym, and help keep anxiety and stress levels in check. Creates a sense of belongingness with the organization.

7.4. Re-charge

Recharging employees by giving them paid holidays to re-freshen and come with a renewed mindset. Encouraging games-day with employees and their families online. Introducing new tools and techniques for greater fun and flexibility. All these measures create a sense of returning to normal times and thus help generate the original feeling of oneness with the organization.

Thus, the pandemic has forced us to break the mold on how we work. We all need to redefine and reimagine novel ways to reconnect and realign our employees in this new work culture.

8. Conclusion

The coming of Pfizer corona pills, vaccines and many other measures taken by the world governments tells us that coronavirus threat will eventually fade, as did the Ebola, Zika, and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) viruses. But even if it does, the structural changes in the work atmosphere that came in the wake of Covid-19 shall remain forever. The unthought-of, unsolicited Covid-19 has changed the way people live, their attitudes, their behaviors and their thought process. The temporary measures adopted during Peak-Covid times such as, work from home, restricted travelling, no face to face interaction, has now become acceptable as a part of life, making the return to

the previous normal, all the more challenging. The onus of providing a safe, informed and well-managed work structure in this Covid-19 era has fallen upon the HR professionals. During these extraordinary times, HR professionals need to ensure continuous connection with employees, identifying and recognizing their efforts, providing adequate tools and support, realigning the individual goals with organizational goals and keeping employees energized and motivated to help them to work with renewed interest. The events of the peek covid times have led companies to focus on employee health and well-being on many levels—how workers feel, where they sit and whether they are vaccinated, among other things. Although HR professionals have long tended to employees' physical and mental health, but now they're being more proactive about it, that means noting how employees feel as well as developing skills to detect problems early. HR professionals are increasing their emotional quotient to be able to deal with new and varied issues for example, employees hired in the past year may have never come into the office or met their boss and co-workers in person this reality is calling out for new kinds of mentorship programs. HR has also become responsible for where people work as well as how they do that work, especially at home. [11,17] This includes coaching them on how to minimize distractions and work more effectively. It also could include providing guidance on how to set boundaries so employees don't end up working too much, which could lead to mental and physical problems.

HR has become the key participant in figuring out how people can function best in their new post-pandemic environment, be it onsite, hybrid or 100 percent remote. Thus, we can say that, the pandemic has renewed the emphasis on the people part of HR's job. It has put the 'human' back into human resources.

9. Source of Funding

None.

10. Conflict of Interest

None.

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