

HR in Time of Crisis: A Catalyst for Change

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The HR/People function has always been the driving force to identify, organize, develop, and retain talent in an organization. Even prior to the current acute challenges of the pandemic, the function was already in a state of disruption progressing from a more compliance-oriented administrator, into a strategic and proactive advisory arm to business leaders. The current Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the social context of Black Lives Matter, have created a new set of challenges and opportunities for the People function. Employees are now confronted with embracing the demands of a new digital culture, while simultaneously balancing life in the home, and the impacts of isolation within their respective communities. In order to weather these crises and to also prepare for the future, HR organizations will be facing new pressures and opportunities. Through our interface with senior HR leaders, we've collected some of the key themes below.

Learning & Development:

Outside of the HR function, the concepts of education and learning are rapidly evolving. New technologies and tools, have become further available to organizations making asynchronous, and personalized learning more accessible than ever before. The Covid-19 pandemic has enhanced the need to focus on an expanded learning framework more acute, concentrating not just on functional skills and compliance training, but also on opportunities for “soft” skills like mindfulness and inclusion. The current environment is forcing a quick pivot to online learning tools, when in-person trainings are proving to be impossible. There are also opportunities to think about cost effectiveness/allocation for training, during what might be a tight budget period for many companies, relying more on apprenticeship and peer-to-peer coaching models vs. third party paid services.

Talent Acquisition:

In some ways Talent Acquisition may be the most disrupted discipline within the HR function. First and foremost, hiring needs have dramatically changed based on the measures some companies have had to take, such as furloughing staff and/or pivoting into more relevant and responsive products and services. Second, for ongoing hiring needs, TA teams have needed to quickly move to virtual formats that have presented a variety of opportunities and challenges. While these mediums can make interviewing more efficient, they have also surfaced new requirements regarding training and tools, to enable increased human connections during a virtual discourse. Some are re-calibrating to more practical exercises, such as case studies, written plans, and sample products, as a way to better vet candidates, when in person meetings are not possible. Third, with the establishment of a productive remote workforce, many TA teams are broadening their “geographic aperture” when contemplating future hiring needs. Some organizations are no longer dependent on local market talent, allowing for revamped talent strategies to consider a broader talent base than previously possible. While this provides a great opportunity to tap into new talent pools, the effort also raises new compliance requirements, placing the onus on hiring teams to become more knowledgeable regarding local market employment laws and practices. On-boarding has also needed

to be re-addressed, and in some cases fundamentally redesigned. Many companies have successfully completed this endeavor virtually, with careful planning in terms of logistics, tools, and training processes.

Performance Management:

Performance management processes and systems, have been an extensively debated and evolving topic across industries and organizations. Fundamentally, the challenge remains that there is not, and cannot be, one universal unit to measure performance. In many circumstances, the varying scope of levels and responsibilities that make-up an organization, make it difficult to capture outcomes tied to strict metrics and timing. Prior to the pandemic, companies were already considering, and in some cases remodeling, the application of a variety of transformative frameworks. The aim being to increase and maintain engagement, efficiency, and productivity within the workplace. Following the impacts of COVID, the format with which organizations can accurately capture, and cultivate productivity has required an abrupt shift, or even total revamp, of these processes. In many organizations, up until now, managers relied on the visible presence of their teams as a barometer for work being performed. While it has been acknowledged, that just because someone is physically present does not indicate they are performing, nor being productive, it has been a reliable visual cue. Given the uncertainty, as to whether workforces will be expected to return to a shared office space in the near future, flexible working has made it evident that while people may not be visible, it is imperative that performance expectations remain intact. This shift has required leaders to further expand strategic performance management metrics, to include clarity of milestones, defined feedback procedures, and potential for career progression. The importance of relying on sophisticated technology platforms to achieve this, has also become paramount. Increased pressure for performance measurement systems to be more real time, rather than “once a year” processes, and outcomes be systematically captured for review, have become essential for managers and their teams.

Rewards & Benefits:

Total Reward and Benefits structures have undergone significant pressure, and review in the wake of the pandemic. Organizations have had to: re-evaluate strategies to create value for employees; provide meaningful support systems; and generate cost savings to uphold their businesses financial well-being. Benefits that were previously valued by employees, such as commuting costs, gym memberships, etc., have become temporarily or permanently irrelevant. Additionally, various policies and procedures, including sick leave, un-paid leave, remote working, etc., have required re-consideration. Short-term actions have included temporarily furloughing staff, reducing working hours, and reducing pay for leaders and exempt-level employees. Some companies are doing their best to maintain benefits, even while staff is furloughed, to support them during the crisis. Offerings to voluntarily take un-paid time-off to safeguard colleagues' roles, and preserve business operations have also been implemented. Adjustments to incentive

compensation models have additionally needed to be reassessed. Organizations have had to reexamine the viability of achieving certain performance objectives within the current environment. The expectation that short-term incentives may need to be deferred, or eliminated altogether, this year is a possibility that has been communicated across various workforces. Companies have also been creative in offering “responsive” benefits – like access to online educational subscriptions for kids, telemedicine subscription offerings, and discounts on meal kits, etc.

The current environment has created a fever pitch in terms of crisis management; however, has also served as an opportunity to accelerate the change that was already underway, within the people function. It is clear that in order to weather this crisis successfully, companies will be required to embrace more nimble and proactive mechanisms, in order to successfully develop and support their organizations. While the Covid-19 crisis will hopefully soon pass, the current climate has also highlighted significant societal changes that require review. The #blacklivesmatter movement, following on the heels of #metoo, is finally bringing to the forefront decades of missed opportunities and inequity on topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Companies across the board can and need to do better, with many rising to the occasion. Examples include setting open and ambitious targets for board diversity, offering new and more generous family benefits, investing directly in chronically under-represented and marginalized communities, and being deliberate about diversity in vendor and partner selection. These initiatives present novel demands on HR organizations, coupled with tremendous opportunities, to further the transformation in evolving towards becoming a more proactive, strategic, change agent within organizations.



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Covid-19 Micro-Website

We have launched a micro-website where this and other informative pieces are posted. This site will be regularly updated: [click here](#) for further details.

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