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# The role of HRM in the Era of Covid'19

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## ABSTRACT

*As COVID-19 continues to spread around the globe, Human Resources (HR) teams in all organisations are working hard to bring together a thorough and people-first solution to the pandemic, all while reacting to difficult questions, minimising everyday organisational disturbances and quenching the concerns of their anxious staff. When there is an overload of anxiety and confusion amongst the employees, who can manage the answers better than an organisation's "people centre" i.e., the Human Resource Department. The primary objective of this conceptual research paper is here to recognise the crucial role of Human Resources in the current crisis. The research will focus on How can companies/HR ensure physical and mental safety of their employees, Why employee well-being and engagement is important at this point in time, How are organisations/HR ensuring business continuity, How is HR across organisations managing the training, learning and development of employees as they work from home and, Importance of recognition and appreciation during work-from-home. The analysis of the situation and the research will be based on Secondary resources.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

### Problem Statement

The fear of corona virus is increasing day by day amongst employees, employers, leaders, managers and the general population also. By way of this research paper, I wish to understand the role of Human resource management (HRM) in times of COVID'19. Why employee's metal and physical well-being is important, why their active engagement is necessary and what measures are different companies/ entities/ organisations are taking regarding the same. For understanding these aspects I have used secondary data relating to this topic.

**Hypothesis is** to study the Importance of HRM during outburst of corona virus

## II. ROLE OF HRM IN THE ERA OF COVID-19

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has created tremendous pressure on countries to deal with its

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consequences.

The fear of contracting the disease and unpredictability of not knowing when the pandemic is going to end and life will come back to normal is taking a heavy toll on people and employees - mentally, physically and emotionally. It is irrefutable that mental wellbeing is as important as physical wellbeing for productivity. While in the past, companies may not have given due consideration to the possible emotional side-effects of employees who are not used to working remotely, who do not have the adequate infrastructure at home to function productively or struggle communicate remotely, this is the need of the hour. Such employees may find themselves demotivated and nervous. Moreover, stress and anxiety about lack of work, job security, lack of face to face interaction with their managers and lack of direction also affects easy fulfilment or completion of work. Hence, mental well-being of employees should not become an act of negligence.

This work from home situation is unique in the way that people are forced to work from home, rather than by choice. The culture of remote working is not as widespread in India as compared to the developed countries like the US or the UK. Most employees in India are not habitual to working from home (an exception here would be the IT industry), and are not comfortable with 'telecommuting' which is ultimately leading to confusions, a continued feeling of disconnection amongst their company and team, leading to more time consumption and less work completion. Moreover, employees are also burdened with personal chores that they need to do on their own and many times are juggling child and elder care issues and responsibilities which can be additional stressors that can affect an employee's emotional and physical wellbeing.

Poor mental health adversely affects the work in the organisation. It becomes difficult for stressed employees to focus, they work in an unhappy state of mind, loss of efficiency and degradation of work quality. Some employees are struggling with the non-availability of resources for telecommunication, teleconferencing and video conferencing.

Hence, employees are expecting continuous guidance about work models and assurance of job security from their employers/Leaders/ managers.

Managers can contribute to and ascertain this mental well-being of their subordinates to a large extent. Calmness, empathy and trust are the requirements from managers and leaders. They are expected to have an understanding nature towards their employees, who are looking up to them in such turbulent times.

There are various other measures that different organisations are now adopting to maintain

leadership and integrate mental wellbeing as follows:

- **Emphasis on Communication:** Firstly it is most important that the companies trust their employees that they are working hard and are trying their best to get used to the new ways of working. Organisations are taking care of the same by connecting through online modes and reducing the stress and the anxiety amongst them by investing time to communicate regularly with each of them at a personal level. They are encouraging teams to meet up and talk in general to get a hang of the same and so that they feel connected to their colleagues. HR is trying their best to make the communication as transparent as they could when it comes to the financial health of the company and the future of jobs.
- **Ensuring physical safety of their employees:** Companies are informing employees about best hygiene practices such as washing hands regularly at least for 20 seconds, restricting yourself to stay in the house, sanitising all items like groceries, couriers from the outside etc. They are also encouraging them to seek COVID-19 information from reliable sources and not just follow or share each and every message that they receive. They are also asking employees to get a check-up done if they or their family member show any kind of symptoms of COVID'19 and require such employees to get self-quarantined. There are many industries that produce essential commodities/services. For example, the medical industry (includes medical devices companies, pharmaceutical companies, pharmacies), the banking industry, hospitals, food manufacturing industries. To reduce the risk of employees contracting the disease, employers are following staff rotations, focusing on reducing the number of people who actually need to be present in the office and are also trying to arrange a facility to work from home at least for those who are comfortable in working from home. They have also taken additional steps to temporarily discontinue biometric attendance systems and sanitise workplaces on a regular basis. The employers along with the Human Resource department in many companies are ensuring paid leave to those suffering from COVID'19 symptoms without insisting over medical certificates as it is known that arranging medical certificates especially at this point of time has become very time consuming and troublesome. They are doing their best efforts to prevent such employees from coming in contact with other employees and are ensuring immediate reporting to the relevant government authorities. Organisations have suggested their employees use helpful strategies such as taking sufficient rests between shifts, eating healthy self-made food, make exercise as an essential work of the day and stay connected to their loved ones since there are some of the workers who are going through ignorance by their family due to fear of getting infected which is leading to increased stress to an already stressed person. Leaders have suggested to

talk to their family members through digital platforms and contact their colleagues or other trusted people for support as their colleagues may be having the same or maybe much more stressed.

- **Awareness over the approach of working:-**Companies are now more focused on identifying problems which could not have been identified in a normal routine. Some are also trying to work further as small groups with small tasks to be achieved in a given period. Problem-solving of issues related to Quality of work, coordination among the different levels of management. They are concentrating on increasing gratitude exercises, suggestions and evaluation of the same. Organisations are now understanding the importance of control and coordination as a major part of management primarily dependant on human behaviour.

Moreover, companies (especially small and medium enterprises – MSME's) are ensuring each of their employees is covered under some health insurance scheme. Organisations are also conducting live health webinars on how their employees can boost their immunity - eating healthy food, emphasising on physical as an essential work of the day the types of work-outs people can do from home.

Companies all around the globe are finding out different ways to ensure business continuity and therefore work from home has now the new normal. Daily meetings, team meetings, conferences are all now taking place through online platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Organisations are now rethinking the strategies on people and work.

Along with business continuity and slowed operations, it is a good time when companies re-evaluate their short-term and long-term priorities, improve and innovate upon processes which could not have been identified in a normal routine. Some are also trying to work further as small groups with small tasks to be achieved in a given period. Problem-solving of issues related to Quality of work, coordination among the different levels of management. Organisations are now understanding the importance of control and coordination as a major part of management primarily dependant on human behaviour.

“The non-separation of work and private life can lead to self-management needs that employees didn't have before”. – Ashwin Yardi, CEO, Capgemini India

Capgemini, India has come with:-

- Series of wellness initiatives for its employees, keeping this aspect in mind and has arranged counselling service for employees who need emotional support through corporate's empanelled counselling service provider, The CEO adds to it “at this time that leaders need to define objectives collectively with their teams so that employees are

invested in the goals. While this will be critical to building leadership legitimacy in a virtual environment, leaders also need to show empathy for employees wellbeing”.

- Capgemini has also initiated a leadership podcast series wherein every leader will talk about working in a virtual world, keeping client centricity, high morale and motivation as well as health and safety as a focus area. “With the COVID-19 outbreak, organisations need to take a more assertive and longer-term approach”, he added.

KPMG India is another great example that can be mentioned here. KPMG India is putting policies in place to help their employees and ensure their well-being in time of COVID-19. The company has put in place the following initiatives to ensure the wellbeing of its 10,000+ employees:-

- Specialised counselling services for colleagues and their immediate family members in association with a leading employee assistance programme providers.
- They also arranged for a webinar by a renowned personality which was relating to Hurtfulness is mindfulness.
- They have also established a Game on: Fun competitions in an intra-team set up to keep the momentum of their employees positively going.
- Medical help and consultation: KPMG India has engaged with an independent medical website where doctors can be consulted by the employees on cell and are COVID compliant as well.
- Insurance is Assurance: They have established new Medical policy for employees which has an inbuilt COVID protection cover with it. They also have the option of tapping up to secure their immediate family.

Termination of employment is again a big issue of stress nowadays for employees. They may have gotten some relief after the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India released an advisory on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020 to all employers to refrain from terminating the employment or deducting wages of their employees. Certain state governments have also advised the same. But this is not enforced and is merely a directive. There is no law that prohibits companies from down-sizing their employees in times of financial crisis.

By the time this pandemic comes to end a lot of people could be out of work across industries around the world. To prevent this, some governments like the British government and Singapore government, are supporting private sectors with the coronavirus job retention scheme, to support hard-hit businesses.

Another noteworthy example that should be taken into consideration is that of Canada. Canada has announced to offer temporary wage subsidies during the uncertain times to help the small business sail through the same. In Canada, a company can be fined if its employees break social distancing regulations, and its directions may also be held liable for individual penalties imposed on the employees. Unsurprisingly, some companies have resorted firing employees who knowingly break such rules. This is legally permissible under most countries' employment laws. Such laws in many countries contain various clauses that give workers the right to ask about whether their workplace is, to at-least request to make it safe or simply just leave the job due to the same reason. Employers in some countries are legally required to provide health care facilities and medical benefits to their employees. Also depending on the orders by the court employees may be entitled with paid sick leaves and accommodations and other benefits in such a situation.

Different organisations are taking different steps (based on their economic situation and the impact of this pandemic on their business) when it comes to paying wages/salaries to their employees. Some organisations have decided to give salaries on a deferred basis depending upon the work quality of the employee, their role and their level/seniority in the organisation (junior level, middle level or senior management). Some companies, for example the well-known HR consulting American firm Aon Hewitt and India's Reliance Industries Limited have already announced pay-cuts to the order of 10-20%. Companies are also evaluating who they want to keep as their continued staff and who they want to lay off. While this is demoralising for the employees, I feel it is definitely better than laying-off.

On the other side, there are companies which are just the opposite of the above mentioned, who believe in one policy i.e. 'No business, No cash inflow and hence No payment of salaries'. Restaurants, bars and cafes are a relevant example. They have thought of a different way out to remove the burden from their shoulders - They've told their employees to use up their saved Provident Fund. Even the Government of India, with the help of the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) has made removing the Provident Fund a relatively simple process for those who need immediate cash. If we talk about human behaviour here, according to practical thinking a person can make use of the money in the provident fund for a limited period of time, say for 2 months or so. And hence such employees are facing major financial, emotional and psychological issues.

But there are some companies having HR departments which force us to see this situation in a bit positive way. They are focusing on paying full salary/wages to their employees. Such organisations thinking and working on a humanitarian basis. These entities believe in a truth

that it is only because of their workers/employees that they can run a successful business, can maintain reserves regularly and can at-least think of continuation of their business after a year or so even when the whole world has come to a switch-off or a stop mode.

As we observe that employee engagement is one of the most important aspect that needs to be taken care of, especially by the HR department. Entities/organisations are coming up with different way outs for continuous learning and development of their employees, the amount of work that they do in a normal routine is certainly more than what they are trying to do virtually. As I mentioned before, there are many distractions in every domain and it is actually very challenging to complete as much work. The workers or the employees are now getting plenty of free time. Half of the day many of them are sitting ideal, doing no work and just finding way outs to kill time. To overcome this obstacle, HR department and the organisations as a whole have come up with new online courses which are free of cost, for example:-Technical training including those are into engineering, they are easily finding free online courses that are available on different portals. Courses related to Leadership, communication, public speaking training courses come into non-technical training are also easily available. All these facilitate training.

Due to COVID-19 renowned Universities like Harvard University have converted some of their expensive courses free of cost for the students/learners across the world. Companies are sending relevant training materials to their employees so that they get much more aware about what they are practically doing.

Free webinars are being set up for all the levels of workers on a regular basis to improve knowledge, efficiency and their effectiveness while working.

Some of the online portals which offer free courses in every domain are: UDEMY, COURSERA.

Culture of appreciation needs to be maintained. Appreciation and recognition is important as its one of the positive ways to motivate the employees to give their best, perform as well as they can and achieve what they are aiming for. Acknowledgment can be given through different ways i.e. through perks, vouchers, setting up small challenges, appreciation in front of superiors and colleagues and by continuing their up-skilling programmes by using virtual methods of learning. For example: Capgemini has taken over an initiative to set up Capgemini BigBoss Challenge, where employees along with their family or friends can take upon exciting series of tasks or contests like online quiz contest, 21 days habit challenge etc. to participate. These are great ways to help employees stay connected virtually with the

organisations and it also brings fun element while working.

Different companies suggest different ways to recognise the work of their employees. Some of the ways of acknowledging is as follows: Continuous support through recognition is an easy way to keep the remote workers engaged. Use of online meeting and conferences to recognise its employees individually in front of other is one of the ways through which all the employees work on the same terms.

Recognising those staff who are attentive, active and are working as hard as they can and are also attending all kinds of meetings with no excuse need to be appreciated. Hence, recognising on such specific efforts can make them feel motivated and also leads to improving their efficiency even when they are working from home and they will continue to work in the same manner.

Motivating a person who is already at the right path leads to a person think positive about the kind of work he is doing and builds up self-confidence and self-awareness about their own performance.

Recognising the employees on a portal where there are more number of people or maybe on a platform which is much recognised where views of each member whether he/she is a superior or a subordinate is visible leading to encouraging the workers to participate willingly further leading to an increase in motivation and having a positive and a focused environment. Recognition can be more meaningful if the employee is appreciated or acknowledged at the same point of time. The effect of it remains for a longer time and also feels apt, and the impact of it is greater. All this makes the work of a leader a bit easy.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

From this recent move to remote work there is plenty to be learnt. This is an opportunity to determine the willingness of the entity to assist workers/employees during a time of unforeseen situation and isolation. Our regular routine has been changed. We are no longer in a position to talk to our colleagues in real face to face who are there in the real work place. We're spending long hours typing and are talking less. After this pandemic gets over, we will have to keep in mind the importance of the improvements that are done, and do what we can so as to act more efficiently even when working virtually. We are in the mid of this crises which has adversely affected the whole world and it is very important to appreciate and honour our workers/employees who are working for us and are trying their level best to reach heights. People as such are social creatures and this is the perfect time to come together and use these online tools at-least to remain linked. Hence, we all should aim to maintain digital

societies to remain connected.

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