

Preparing Your Employees To Return To The Workplace In A Pandemic

Author: Takudzwa Vanessa Machingauta . May 2020

The arrival of the coronavirus has demanded that we shift the way we interact with each other and our environment. The onus, for now, has been on governments and health care institutions to persuade citizens to change their behaviour to minimise the spread of the virus. However, with relaxing regulations and industry opening in the stipulated stages, it is now also up to organisations to play their part in influencing behaviour.

Influencing people to change their behaviour is by no way an easy feat. Most people are so entrenched in their daily routines that even governments are struggling as it is to make people comply with regulations of staying home and social distancing. Some citizens from countries such as New Zealand, South Africa and Zimbabwe have gone as far as challenging their governments in courts for mandatory lockdown measures imposed on the population. It then should be the expectation that businesses will also face an uphill task in influencing their employees' behaviour so that it is in line with what this new world requires both in terms of hygiene and operations of the organisation.

In light of this, businesses need to understand the aspects of people that make them resistant to change so they can come up with change management plans so that transition to the new way of conducting business will be smoother. Some of these are;

Misunderstanding reason or need for change

In this regard, businesses have fortunately have had a bit of a head start in terms of information dispersion as this has been done at the national level. Employees will still need to be informed about the new protocols in the workplace and most importantly, the link with the current operational environment. This will enable more buy-in and cooperation from your employees as everything is coming from a place of transparency.

Fear of the unknown

Everyone will have a hard time adjusting in the new workplace no doubt and old habits will die hard no doubt. One of the most common reasons for resistance is fear of the unknown. People will only take active steps toward the unknown if they genuinely believe – and perhaps more importantly, [feel](#) – that the risks of standing still are greater than those of moving forward in a new direction.

Seeing change as a temporary fad

Most conversations around the virus are people who can't wait for life to go back to normal. A study

from the University of Minnesota, however, shows that the virus could peak only 2 years from now meaning that it is not going to business as usual for a while. When people believe that the change initiative is a temporary fad, they will resist any change that comes with it. Alerting and sensitising employees to the long term impact of the disease can aid in them taking initiatives more seriously.

Not being consulted

By now most management teams have made provisional plans on how operations will take place given the current pandemic. Whilst these measures have no doubt been well thought out to map the way forward, it is also important to include non-managerial employees for their input. Directives aren't particularly effective in driving sustained behaviour change because we all like to feel as if we are in control of our choices. If people are allowed to be part of the change there is less resistance. People like to know what's going on, especially if their jobs may be affected.

As the world slowly re-opens again to life past quarantine, it will no doubt be a very challenging time for all in terms of adjusting to this new world. Organisations are by no means exempt from this but in making the necessary adjustments, they should make sure that no employee is left behind.

Takudzwa Vanessa Machingauta is a consultant at Industrial Psychology Consultants, a Business Management and HR consulting firm.

<https://thehumancapitalhub.com/articles/Preparing-Your-Employees-To-Return-To-The-Workplace-In-A-Pandemic->