

The role of the HR department in the Coronavirus pandemic

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The coronavirus has forever changed the way the world operates without a doubt. This is also true for the workplace. The pandemic has affected everybody regardless of role, location or industry in one way or the other. The human resources department is by no means insulated from the effects of the virus and will also have to adapt to the new way of work.

The Harvard Business Review has it that the Human resources function in organisations, then known as Industrial and labour relations, started taking off in the early 1900s. The steel and oil industry boom of that era led to the formation and need for people management.

Before the virus, the work of the human resources department was almost clear cut. The general function of Human resources specialists were; recruitment, administration, industrial relations management, training and development for staff amongst other duties. The sudden shift in work culture has brought about new challenges to HR.

Supporting Employee productivity

The Coronavirus has meant that most employees are now working from home. Productivity can no doubt become a problem after a while. This can be attributed to a combination of both fatigue and lack of constant oversight as was the norm in the workplace. A survey conducted by Forbes showed that work from home burnout doubled between March and April. Most employees are struggling to balance domestic life with work as they are conflicting priorities. The result is that the quality of work produced visibly goes down and some hours are unaccounted for.

The challenge of HR is then to figure out custom methods to keep employees motivated and in most cases, there is no precedent. All this has to be done whilst also mindful to not push employees too hard as this can take a toll on their mental wellbeing.

Recruiting the right candidates for the organisation

The success of recruiters and employment specialists generally is measured by the number of positions they fill and the time it takes to fill those positions. In reality, however, the lifeblood of an organisation comes down to the quality of its employees. Do they have the right people in the right job as opposed to just adding another employee? One of the key responsibilities of HR is staffing. That is; advertising job postings, sourcing candidates, screening the applicants and coordinating hiring efforts with the relevant managers to make the final selection of candidates.

Despite the current global recession and coronavirus, some companies haven't slowed down in terms of hiring. This has meant that HR has had to revamp recruitment processes to comply with recommended

safety measures. Hiring managers across the board have had to transition to a virtual recruiting and hiring process for most roles. Social distancing guidelines have meant that face to face interviews and subsequent back and forth travel of potential candidates are undesirable.

Some popular applications that are being used for interviews are Zoom, Skype and Microsoft teams amongst others. The disadvantages to virtual interviews that HR has to work around include; network failures on the part of the candidate and also not being able to read body language as with face to face interviews.

After identifying the candidate of choice, HR managers also have now had the added burden of virtual onboarding for the successful candidate. Most organisations are still conducting work from home. Traditionally, onboarding would have meant a walk around the office with brief introductions of the new employee and a chat on policies and procedures. Virtual onboarding processes mean that HR now has to have digital employee handbooks and individualized remote onboarding plan with video check-ins.

Employer-Employee Relations

Employee relations is the HR discipline concerned with strengthening the employer-employee relationship through; measuring job satisfaction, employee engagement and resolving workplace conflict. Labour relations functions may include developing management response to union organizing campaigns and negotiating collective bargaining agreements. This also extends to rendering interpretations of labour union contract issues.

The guardian has pegged job losses in America alone since the virus started at 40 million. The resulting unemployment figures have not been seen since the great depression in the 1930s. Job losses have not only been confined to the American economy alone. Globally there is an ongoing bloodbath of jobs.

The unfortunate reality is that communicating retrenchments falls in the job description of HR. Laying off employees is difficult in normal times. The task of having to layoff a fellow workmate amidst the Covid-19 global health crisis emotionally and cognitively overwhelming. HR is now tasked with finding a compassionate way of remotely informing employees that their job will be terminated without sounding cold. This could also potentially mean unprecedented paperwork and negotiations with unions.

Maintaining a Safe Environment

Occupational safety and health have come a long way since the first industrial movement. There is a more concerted effort to recognise the wellbeing of employees as opposed to seeing them as just another replaceable cog in the wheel. An important function of HR is to support workplace safety training and maintain federally mandated logs for workplace injury and fatality reporting. Also, HR safety and risk specialists often work closely with HR benefits specialists to manage the company's worker's compensation issues.

In the age of the coronavirus, workplace safety has become a top priority. As lockdown is starting to get more relaxed, more and more employees are to return to work. This means that HR will need to draw up

policies and procedures on safety and health in the workplace. Employees are the lifeblood of any company and as such it's necessary to have an airtight strategy in place for providing a healthy work environment.

Human resources personnel have been often looked at as the enemy by the employee body whilst also equally misunderstood by management. However, in such trying times, the human resources department will be found to be the one to keep everything together in organisations.

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