



Research Article

Sustaining Employees' Engagement and Well-being in the „New Normal“ Times

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Abstract

In today's dynamic and disruptive world, COVID-19 crisis added a number of additional challenges, including those that effect the workplace. Employees have been dealing with anxiety, due to a threat to physical health but also related to the difficulty in maintaining a work-life balance, additionally imposed through a new working model(s), expanded and accelerated digitalisation of work, accompanied by the economic uncertainty. All mentioned harshly affect workplace and employees physically through social distancing and restrictions as well as mentally and emotionally. An adequate response to these challenges calls for a company to transition from a "new normal" to a "new future" by keeping employees engaged and productive as well as ensuring the working environment remains a positive one. The critical role in facilitating such a response should be assumed by HR department. However, paradoxically in challenging times HR is very often seen as a "luxury" and thus the first to be hit by the budget "cuts". The aim of the paper is to present a framework of company's measures, facilitated by HR, created to support employees in the "new normal", by generating a positive impact on their well-being, engagement and eventually company performance. The backbone of the article is an illustrative case study that stresses actions in the field of HR, its effects on employees, their engagement, and accordingly, on the organization. The findings can help and encourage organizations to adopt novel ways to support their employees in enhancing resilience and maintaining commitment towards their work in "new normal" times.

Keywords: employees' engagement, well -being, HR, "new normal ", "new"future"

Introduction

The first decade of our century brought with it a whole new set of challenges for organizations and their leaders. Besides the fourth industrial revolution and a large number of disruptive changes, which in themselves represent a crisis, COVID-19, firstly reported in China at the beginning of 2020, was declared as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization. These severe challenges consequently have had important multiple implications on the business, including the most important resource - people, primarily employees.

By today, there are nearly 129 million people worldwide that have been infected with COVID-19, with over 2,8 million dead (World Health Organization, 2021). To prevent the further spread of this disease, many countries decided to implement lockdown and take many other measures to limit physical interactions. Yet, these restrictions have disrupted the regular daily activity and routine of individuals and organizations. Many people have had to perform their work from home while at the same time have been challenged with homeschooling and 24/7 care of their children. Some have had to continue working from the company's premises despite the serious reduction of transportation or child care, while others have had to cope with pay cuts, unpaid leave, or even job losses. For instance, only in 2020, due to COVID-19, 114 million people had to lose their jobs over 2020 (World Economic Forum, 2021). As the infection curve seems to have ups and downs, the likelihood of insecurity, including job insecurity, and a reveal of COVID-19, have become the new normal.

It has been impossible not to see the suffering the employees have been going through. On the one hand, understanding and genuine concerns in regards to well-being and safety while working during the stay at home or work are two opposite directions that many companies have had to juggle at the same time in order to give employees positive engagement

opportunities as key for flourishing in this time. Thus keeping employees motivated in such circumstances have simply pleaded for revisiting many practices that are in their essence under the conducting baton of HR.

On the other hand, companies have faced tremendous pressure to continue to perform and keep up the business, top and bottom line. In such a context, it is particularly interesting to consider human resources (HR) in organizations, as it is well known that in good times when things work normally, there is quite a readiness of organizations to spend on "HR" matters, such as training of employees, their encouragement and engagement. Yet, when an organization faces serious challenges with a potential threat to its business, it is not uncommon for HR to be seen as a "luxury" and thus to be the first to be hit with the budgets "cut".

In such an ambivalent moment, as we are in now, HR department needs to come out with contemporary strategies, practices and activities that will address many challenges at the same time. Without mentioning them in the ranking order, the first one is to reconcile the different and very often opposite needs of employees, those who work from home as well as those who come to work. The second one is about the well-being of employees, their health, both mental and physical, as well as revisiting employee engagement strategies with a new perspective. The third one is related to a financial perspective, where HR has been urged to create more with less. Finally, and perhaps the biggest challenge is that HR has to take a key role in paving the way for the business in the new reality. This should be done by answering the question - how to prepare for the future of the workplace?

An adequate response to the challenges above should facilitate the company's transition from a "new normal" to a "new future", as a sustainable response to COVID-19 or any other pandemic that could occur. Although many studies highlight the importance of employees' engagement and resilience in the light of COVID-19 (Ojo,

Fawehinmi, Yuzliza, 2021; Kumar 2021; Jung, Jung, Yoon, 2021), or outline HR role with regards to coronavirus at a broad and conceptual level (Delloite Workforce strategies for a post-COVID-19 recovery, 2021), there are no many that tackle and elaborate more in detail how HRM can play a crucial role in facilitating organizations and their workforce to cope with and adjust to a newly transformed work environment. Even fewer studies are focusing on practical contemporary HRM practice(s) created to foster employees' well-being and engagement in an altered work environment. Accordingly, the paper discusses and presents thoroughly, through a case study, specific and practical innovative interventions undertaken with the intent to preserve the well-being of employees and reinforce their motivation and commitment in the light of new reality. In this way, practical activities, their operation, as well as key learning, are considered.

Theoretical background

According to Harter, Schmidt and Hayes (2002), employee engagement "refers to the individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work" (p. 269), while Fleming and Asplund (2007, p. 2) defined employee engagement as: "the ability to capture the heads, hearts, and souls of your employees to instil an intrinsic desire and passion for excellence". However, no matter which definition is used, even before corona time, academics, as well as practitioners, placed the spotlight on employee engagement. And rightfully, as there are many reasons for that. One of the first is a strong link between employees' engagement and productivity, so no wonder that profitability, productivity and customer satisfaction is higher in the companies with high employee engagement than in those with low engagement (Hanaysha, 2016). Secondly, as research indicates, engaged employees are less likely to leave their job (Wesley & Krishnan, 2013), they have significantly lower absenteeism rate, as well as higher safety incidents (Sorens, 2013). Also, highly engaged employees feel important, enthusiastic (Harpaz and Snir, 2014), happy

about the work, and valued, and have a perception that working time passes very fast (Truss, Alfes, Delbridge, Shantz, Soane, 2013).

All the above mentioned highlight the importance of creating an environment that reinforces and drives employee engagement. However, the recent changes, brought by the worldwide pandemic, have imposed organizations to transform in many aspects by utilizing, in accelerated manner, new technologies. The pandemic, along with an acceleration in using new technologies as a business, enables radical changes in jobs, workplaces, and tasks (Gigauri, 2020). Namely, in order to adapt to digital work, new ways of collaboration etc. it is essential for employees to acquire new skills that enhance their employability (Sheppard, 2020) and there is a huge role of HR in it. However, all these rapid changes and uncertainty have stressed employees physically, emotionally and financially. So, if before the pandemic, employee's emotional and financial well-being were concerns for businesses now, as companies continue to adapt to changing pandemic conditions, workforce health, resilience and well-being are even more critical to business. Namely, as it is shown, employees were more engaged in their work, satisfied with their careers, and felt a greater sense of well-being in their lives when they had higher perceived organizational support and psychological capital defined as hope, resilience, optimism and self-efficiency (Beak-Kyoo, and Insuk, 2016). Again, HR department has a critical role in crafting such an environment that is more likely to be perceived by employees as supportive. Specifically, engagement and performance can be influenced by 5V (Kumar, 2021) i.e., five elements: value, voice, variety, virtue and vision. Values include an optimistic workplace, respect at work, interaction and recognition. While the element voice stands for feedback and supervisor's support, variety refers to autonomy, the significance of work/task, task variety and challenging jobs. Finally, virtue assembles important affection such as caring for each other, justice, trust, harmony, while the fifth element stands for e.g., vision, clear goal(s). Namely, it is a well-established fact that

people are engaged i.e., ready to go above and beyond what is expected if they see themselves as a part of something bigger and/or more important (Kahn, 1990). Therefore, the responsibility of management is to set and clearly communicate vision and at the same time (re)work methods that will nurture links between employees and their work - thus motivate them to remain committed and engaged. In the presented case study below, some proposals and recommendations about how to improve employee engagement in the new reality are outlined and discussed in detail.

Research Methodology

The study covers the FH company (the name is fictitious and known to the author) with over 3000 employees that operate as a part of a global company in the pharmaceutical domain. It covers all functions, including commercial, administration and production. The FH company is located in few countries in South-East Europe and from the very beginning of corona times, it was required to shift some employees to virtual and remote working while keeping in working premises those that were attached to the production line.

The research deals with how the company has been juggling between remote work for the part of population, and non-remote for others, while taking care of the well-being of both and keeping them engaged throughout corona time. Secondary, data from FH company were used as a source of information i.e., existing official reports and documents, including previous activities, their types and number, number of participants, evaluation/survey forms and other existing relevant records.

From the perspective of the methodology used, this research is a descriptive-analytical study. Namely, qualitative research provides a deeper understanding of the topic (Veal, 2006), and thus the chosen qualitative method was seen as the best fit for attaining the goal of this study.

Case Study of FH Company

It is well known that fostering connections of employees with the company requires a commitment from senior management who should rethink their current working culture and adopt the styles accordingly. Therefore, in addition to the all-important health-related measures from the beginning of Covid period, the FH company has decided to carry out a series of activities that would address the reduction of stress and anxiety of employees, promote their well-being, maintain a commitment to work and employee engagement. At the same time, it was of critical importance to be equally appealing for white collars (i.e. office jobs and management) who were forced to work remotely and blue collars (i.e. those that perform manual work) who worked on-site. It was well recognized that they have had different challenges, for instance, while white collars suffered due to imposed dramatic change of work environment, blue collars struggled with difficulty to travel and thus be additionally exposed to the potential virus. However, the company wanted to look at and address what the two groups have had in common when it comes to encountering new pandemic reality. By doing that, management wanted to prevent any animosity between employees, to reinforce the spirit of the company, and show that the company is equally taking care of each and every employee. The project has been composed of the following elements:

- "Where do we stand?" – covers inputs, information and discussion coming from top-level related to the various topics, including business and company's performance shared via different channels. One of the illustrative examples is an online live top management session with employees that covered topics related to last outlook, forward look to the business, targets and challenges. It was set as a two-way street communication, where employees could ask questions, comment, suggest.

- "Super story" – was launched as a platform where employees could praise colleague(s) and recognize them for something special they did. The super story platform was designed with the intent to give voice and full power to employees to recognize what is important and valuable for them. It also helped to facilitate and to promote key values in the company via real examples/stories that employees shared like agility, integrity, collaboration. Those stories were shared on corporate Intranet as well as externally via social media.
 - "Coffee with a psychologist" - organized as a set of group sessions and was meant for internal use but also for the public, and it had live events that covered some key challenges people were facing. Those include the following topics: How to maintain mental health at the time of coronavirus? How to avoid depression due to (self) isolation? Life in a "new normal", how to achieve a balance between business and private life? Emotional health - Just be gentle with yourself
 - "Together we can achieve everything" – has been a project that incorporated three streams. The first included webinars and workshops, facilitated by professionals and subject matter experts, work-life balance, time management during pandemic times, burn-out. The second included free 1-2-1 anonymous sessions with a psychologist. The third was related to professional texts that were published on Intranet: Time management challenges during the pandemic times, Methods and techniques to care about yourself, Time for presents – holidays in pandemic times and how to handle them all, Practical advice on how to be more resilient in crisis, Be a support to each other – how colleagues can help each other in crisis times?, How managers can support staff members during crisis – we are together in this, Life in line with your values, Burnout syndrome – focus on what is giving you strength and enables you to last, Constructive reactions in crisis, Plan and routines – secret for self-efficiency, Techniques of how to manage fear and worries, Work-life balance, Getting back to the office – how to get prepared, Anxiety and depression – how it impacts the lives of our staff members, What is that burns in the burnout?, How is stress evaluated at work?, Life in a new reality, (Self)isolation – risk for mental health, Crisis and your brain – what are we made of?, How to manage the fear of something unknown and threatening, Family in Covid19 times.
 - Motivational messages – as part of communication present on various channels, like Intranet or TVs in halls. The examples of messages are: Care about mental health – it is important; It is OK that you feel worried; Focus on the things you can change; Together we change reality; Stay focused on the things that are still under your control; Use the weekend smartly – for physical activity outdoors.
 - Support for people managers - psychologists and coaches assigned to people managers with the assumption that they are leaders, role models and thus can strengthen resilience and motivation of other employees. Sessions organized covered topics like "Crisis situation and mental health", "How to lead a team in a crisis situation".
- The company has been constantly monitoring the employees' perception of introduced activities as well as their engagement. For instance, the number of views per each text corresponds to around 20% of employees. Namely, the number of

people who participated in the organized session was rather limited due to the nature of the sessions, organized under the principle "first come first served". They were always well-populated but a number of them were not full. Irrespective of how crowded they were, all of them that were recorded were viewed to the extent that corresponds to approximately 20% of employees. This could be seen in the light that many employees preferred not to be in the spotlight of group sessions, but rather to take their time and go over the content when it works for them, with no distraction in a private corner. Another illustration of the company's monitoring activity is the conducted evaluation of "Together we can achieve all" 4 months after its launch. Although the timing for completing the questionnaire was quite short (5 days), over 600 of employees responded out of which 87% heard about the program. Those that were informed about the program rated its importance at 4.37 on the Likert scale of 1 (not at all) – 5 (highly). Many participants indicated the value of the entire project, for instance, one stated: "... in several ways, it helped employees get through this period". Some went a step further by proposing new topics or giving suggestions such as: "this is a great initiative ... In addition to the problems, we also need to address the factors of our undeniable success". Needless to say that suggestions are important not only because employees were bringing what could be done differently, but more importantly, because they showed they cared to make things better, which is a significant indication of engagement. Another indicator of engagement is that 1/3 of employees' accounts joined the mentioned session with top management. Finally, results of the pulse survey that is designed to measure four areas (Culture and engagement; Covid-19 business results and safety measures; Leadership; Health and well-being) and run every 4 months showed a very slight decrease over the months of corona period versus the period before it, and stayed very high, over 8.4 out of 10 per each part in each business function with participation rate higher than 80%, (for both blue and white collars), which again is an indication of employees' engagement. Namely, the more employees

are engaged, the higher is their response rate (De la Rocha, 2015).

Conclusion

In the situation of announcement of corona pandemic, different companies have reacted differently, some quite dramatically with cost reductions, including reduction of the number of employees, others, like a company whose case is presented, have undertaken the opposite strategy and focused on the fundamentally different way - transforming the way things were done before crisis.

The attempt of this paper is to outline the specific efforts of HR department that nurture links between employees and their work in challenging new times, during and post Covid, and therefore drive their commitment and engagement. The results of the presented case give clear indication that such efforts, via usage of various methods, techniques and tools, helped employees to stay engaged. The presented specific case provides some significant insights for practitioners and can help as well as inspire them to adopt novel ways to support their employees in adapting and staying committed towards their work in „new normal“ times.

One of the limitations of the study lies in basing the findings on exclusively secondary data. Thus, future studies should put the effort to obtain even more detailed input via primary data. Also, new studies in the area of exploring how to drive employees' engagement in the corona pandemic, with a focus on statistical testing, are needed. Additionally, data should form various industries and geographical location.

From today's perspective, it seems that there are a number of areas that need to be (re)considered as organizations move forward into this new reality. For instance, it calls for a more agile approach to talent as new skills and expertise are needed. It also calls to consider all elements that are needed to enable staff to continue working flexibly, as it seems that remote work is here to stay. For example, one could expect that

the shift to working long-term outside of the office may impact the workforce productivity, engagement and absenteeism. How organizations will manage these will define them and their business in the years to come.

Therefore, management needs to ensure that the right frameworks are in place and that well-being strategy and activities sufficiently address employees' concerns and needs to drive their engagement and performance, and at the same time minimize the company's risk and deliver business results. Consequently, the key question is what and how HR professionals, including those in leadership positions in human resources, should be doing differently to support the organization's sustainable business in such turbulent and uncertain circumstances.

The author of the article strongly believes that the presented case study and concepts in the paper outline original approaches of responsible managing of human resources and provide some useful insights for those who would like to exercise how organizations can ensure a smooth transition into a "new reality" and create a framework for maintaining, or even developing, employees in these challenging times.

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