

Coronavirus and long term lockdown – How HR need to be proactive and not panic

As the nationwide lockdown is extended, and uncertainty surrounding when it will end, a HR expert and digital transformation expert from the University of Salford Business School give their top tips for HR teams when supporting their staff with long term working from home.



Dr Jonathan Lord and Dr Alex Fenton have outlined their top 5 tips for managing through the pandemic.

The ongoing coronavirus outbreak carries with it several considerations from an HR perspective with employers being fervent to manage the risk in a sensible and proportion manner.

1- Stay compliant

All organisations say they are compliant, but are they? Careful steps need to be taken to avoid slipping into the realms of discrimination. High profile figures such as Donald Trump have blatantly labelled Covid-19 as a Chinese virus, this can encourage language and thought processes that breach the Equality Act 2010 as well as creating a discriminatory culture.

HR need to have a clear and consistent approach to communications, using a uniform language that addresses actions rather than people.

2- Adapt WFH and sickness policies

Most if not all staff will have to work from home, and although this is a benefit offered by organisations in a normal environment, forcing workers to stay at home and undertake their regular duties whilst also juggling caring responsibilities can be challenging. Even if the organisation has a working from home policy, this will need to be reviewed and updated to reflect the unique situation staff are asked to work in. Included in this review should be the levels of flexibility across the workforce, allowing staff to work from home at their own pace. Organisations should also consider utilising sick days or unpaid leave in a more flexible manner that will maintain the health and well-being of all staff.

Remote working brings obvious disadvantages, such as worker loneliness and burnout, so HR need to manage this mode of working. However, it can offer many obvious advantages, from lower overhead and flexible schedules to reductions in employee commuting and according to Bloom et al (2015) increases in productivity along with lower attrition rates.

3- Educate your employees

A vast number of workers believe social media is overhyping and shaping peoples response to the coronavirus crisis (Time, 2020). Organisations therefore can actually help ease fears about the impact of coronavirus by educating their staff about how they could fight the spread of the disease. HR in particular can assist in reducing the level of confusion and fear about not only the virus but also how the organisation is reacting in uncertain economic environments and what, if any, will be the impact

upon the workforce. HR are in the fortuitous position of being able to sift through the online noise and know what's real and what's just hype or fake news.

4- Enable your employees

Organisations are moving towards more flexible working and rather than view this as anti-business, it can provide a potential opportunity for employers to consider more effective, efficient and alternative ways of working such as home-working; using video or telephone conferencing facilities.

Organisations across the globe are understandably anxious about impact on turnover during the current scenario, but technology can not only help you maintain business as usual, it can continue in a virtual environment. Rapid digital technology adoption and transformation is being thrust on companies in order to maintain effective operations. Meetings and presentations that would have been conducted face to face have now shifted to video conferencing and other tools such as Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Other communication outlets can also take place via online chat channels and alternatives to email such as Yammer.

Organisations will have to increase their usage or upgrade existing systems to adapt to the changing modes of work. This may result in a trial and error basis of adopting new technologies in an agile manner.

Michael Alexis, CEO of Teambuilding for example launched a new wing of the business in less than 24 hours – enabling team building activities that can be facilitated virtually via online calls whilst providing opportunities for the workforce to connect and bond.

5- It's a marathon not a sprint

Covid-19 will reshape the world we live and work in, but lessons and best practice must be learnt so that organisations do not regress backwards into old, outdated employment practices.

We don't yet know when the crisis will end, so HR should be at the forefront of not only dealing with the changes now but also to plan for the future. Effective staff engagement and communication is therefore vital. Immediate strategic planning is required because staff have had to adapt quickly to starkly different working conditions, not to mention big changes to how they live.

Proactive planning as well as considered safeguarding and maintaining up-to-date communication channels with sensitivity are all key to managing the concerns COVID-19 presents. From an HR perspective, if staff welfare is at the forefront of this

planning then organisations will be in a more advantageous position to navigate through the crisis.