



COVID-19: Workforce considerations

Managing disruption of productivity due to the coronavirus outbreak

The spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) places immediate demands on many Indian business leaders to communicate to stakeholders – with as much specificity as possible – even if the prospect of a direct impact on the business due to emergency public health measures feels remote. This is especially important for the workforce, who make up for the core of any business.

Ever since the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), questions are being asked about whether employees may still travel to attend meetings, the feasibility of working remotely for long time periods and how organisations can protect employees whose services are essential to keep physical operations running.

The answers can drive day-to-day operational decision making in ways that quickly turn into strategic junctures. Leaders set the tone in communicating information about contingency planning in a crisis, especially during a viral outbreak. Authentic messaging cuts through business uncertainties and inspires sound decision making, even if the company never has to shift fully into crisis mode.

Indian employers should consider a comprehensive plan of action to protect their employees and organisational productivity. The following three aspects must be top of mind:

Ensuring workforce safety: Organisations should stress on workforce safety as employees may face different health risks depending on the type and location/function of their work.

Strengthening remote working capabilities: This becomes important to keep people connected securely, and to keep projects documented and moving forward. It may not be possible to hire or let go of substitutes fast enough to replace sidelined employees or operations.

As the virus spreads, its impact across many sectors seems inevitable. There have been several high-profile warnings by leading Indian companies about sales disruptions, as well as early indications of industry-wide impact. For example, the aviation industry could face severe challenges due to cancellations as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Creating a strategy for communicating factually and effectively: Organisations should be responsible for factual and effective communication with employees, customers, partners and other stakeholders. The fear of the disease – and the contingencies that many companies have put in place – may result in long-lasting effects.

What to focus on now

Ensure employee safety

Organisations should test emergency contact systems to confirm that they have accurate contact information for all employees – particularly those from centralised functions like finance, human resources (HR) and information technology (IT). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has issued interim guidance for all employers and specifically for those in healthcare. The CDC has recommended steps for handling sick workers, employee travel and environmental cleaning.

Prioritise strengthening remote technology capabilities

Organisations that are ready to adapt quickly to changing conditions have tested and enabled technologies that

can support emergency communications and continued collaboration, as well as information backup and documentation. These processes are critical to continuity of operations when a crisis, such as a viral outbreak, can take business partners as well as competitors offline at the same time.

Assess the impact on global mobility and business continuity

Global mobility should be the foremost priority during a crisis, including issues related to the health of employees and business continuity with customers. Companies are developing their contingency plans quickly. While it is too early to fully understand the severity of this crisis and its long-term implications, there are several steps businesses can take now to improve the situation.

Where to focus next

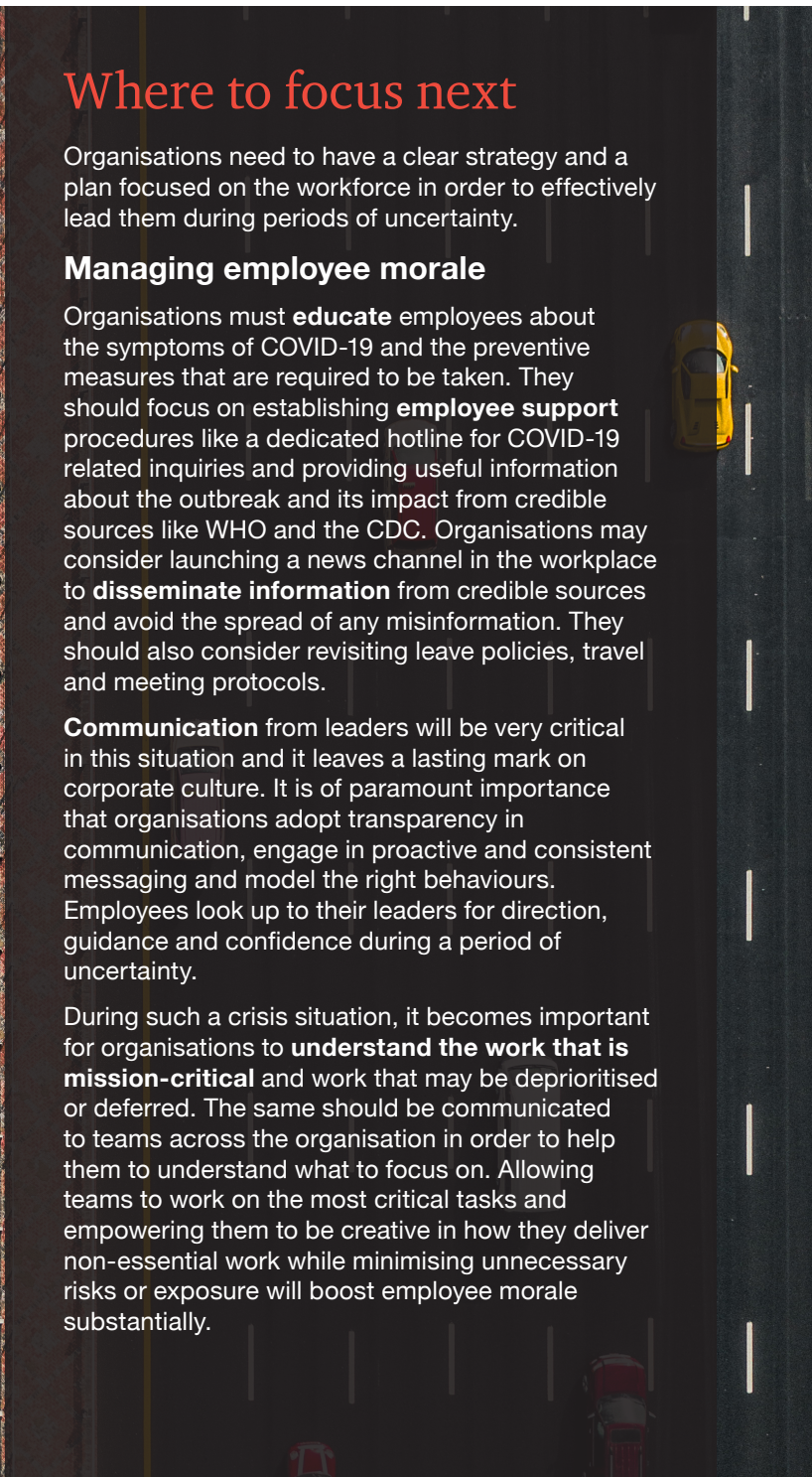
Organisations need to have a clear strategy and a plan focused on the workforce in order to effectively lead them during periods of uncertainty.

Managing employee morale

Organisations must **educate** employees about the symptoms of COVID-19 and the preventive measures that are required to be taken. They should focus on establishing **employee support** procedures like a dedicated hotline for COVID-19 related inquiries and providing useful information about the outbreak and its impact from credible sources like WHO and the CDC. Organisations may consider launching a news channel in the workplace to **disseminate information** from credible sources and avoid the spread of any misinformation. They should also consider revisiting leave policies, travel and meeting protocols.

Communication from leaders will be very critical in this situation and it leaves a lasting mark on corporate culture. It is of paramount importance that organisations adopt transparency in communication, engage in proactive and consistent messaging and model the right behaviours. Employees look up to their leaders for direction, guidance and confidence during a period of uncertainty.

During such a crisis situation, it becomes important for organisations to **understand the work that is mission-critical** and work that may be deprioritised or deferred. The same should be communicated to teams across the organisation in order to help them to understand what to focus on. Allowing teams to work on the most critical tasks and empowering them to be creative in how they deliver non-essential work while minimising unnecessary risks or exposure will boost employee morale substantially.



Managing employee productivity by developing a remote working model

Organisations would look to tackle the concerns and constraints associated with productivity impacts in the longer term. The rapid advances in technology tools that enable remote working are reshaping what the workplace will look and feel like in a not-too-distant future, especially in the services industry. A crisis like the COVID-19 outbreak can reveal immediate infrastructure gaps and extend the timeline for more work activities as they take place outside of a shared physical workspace.

Many organisations have not addressed the conditions required for working remotely. The shift towards a remote working model can be bigger than many companies realise, and productivity impacts are possible in the short term as teams learn how to collaborate with co-workers and connect with the company in new ways.

Implementation of a remote working model also requires organisations to look at smaller, tactical matters, such as how often employees need to check in and which remote tools are appropriate to execute distinct tasks. For example, there are differences – cultural as well as technical – between emails, chats and virtual meetings that may be underappreciated. What is the preferred method to collaborate on activities that need to be documented and/or take place in a secure environment? Which tools foster rapid, collaborative learning and on-ground decision making for the management before a team is prepared to execute a project?

In the longer term, many companies are likely to require more practice in transparent knowledge sharing, distributed authority, and encouraging active experimentation and diverse perspectives. Employees often make connections while working in a physical work environment and it is difficult to replicate this in a virtual environment.

Workforce planning

In a period of uncertainty, workforce planning needs to be looked at differently. All critical contributors to a business need to be included in the workforce plan. Identification of critical roles and preparing temporary succession plans for these identified critical roles becomes very important.

Organisations need to formulate short- and long-term plans for scenario-building, succession plans, decision rights in case of revised accountabilities and escalation matrix for urgent decisions. They need to be prepared with plans for reduction in workforce requirement on account of a slowdown, increased absenteeism and work refusal.

Compensation and benefits

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 outbreak, a lot of companies have made provisions for sick pay benefits to account for time spent away from work due to potential illness or self-quarantining. The specific policies vary, but many companies are offering up to two weeks of paid leave to employees who are absent from work on account of being sick. While sick pay benefits exist for full-time employees in most companies, these policies are also being formulated for non-full-time employees.

Maintaining agility around growth plans for the future

While the short-term focus is essential, organisations cannot afford to lose focus on the longer term. Common areas where businesses would require more planning are capital access/cash flow management, workforce planning, inventory and supply chain, changing market demand, marketing strategy and facility remediation/clean-up costs.

While companies are by and large pursuing the right set of responses across multiple areas, the longer-term dimensions are even more critical. Leaders need to dedicate adequate time and effort to responses focused on the longer term, and their alignment on these aspects is very critical. Organisations should look at setting up a cross-functional team (including leaders) to develop a robust plan that enables business continuity which focuses on growth and is in line with the agreements of both key accounts and vendors and, at the same time, ensures employee well-being.

COVID-19 may fundamentally change the ways of working and how companies engage with their people. In the longer term, it can also present them with opportunities to think about how to create a more agile workforce, build rich connections over virtual communication modes and increase focus on employee health and well-being.

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