

Why the Emotional Well-Being of Your Employees Should Be a Top Priority During COVID-19

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Abstract

As nations around the world deal with managing the COVID-19 crisis, the immediate physical safety of the entire human race is the primary objective right now. While the community transmission nature of the virus has forced most countries to declare a “shelter-in-place” lockdown to assure physical health, leaders in governments, businesses and education must also consider how to protect the mental health and emotional well-being of their constituents. For most citizens at home, school and in the workplace, this pandemic is unlike anything previously experienced and is creating unprecedented levels of fear, uncertainty, isolation and mental distress, in no small part caused by the social distancing mandates in place.

As large enterprises across every industry vertical attempt to adapt to the economic impact of this crisis, the productivity of employees matters now more than ever. In this blog, we explore why it is important to be forward-thinking and consider the adoption of new, innovative policies that support immediate business challenges that are likely to become the “new normal”—including the needs of a larger remote workforce and greater dependency on digital technologies.

Unprecedented Events Impact Employee Focus

Fear, the unknown, and the unpredictable abound right now as the lockdown, social distancing and search for a cure for COVID-19 appears to be ongoing. COVID-19 is an extraordinary event fostering an atmosphere of uncertainty with many CIOs rushing to implement new business continuity measures and migrating business applications and data to the cloud. The pandemic has also created other dependencies, such as the need for a remote workforce, with many employees now working from home for the first time. This combination has created unpredictable work conditions that can accentuate the personal and professional stress level of employees already experiencing anxiety about health and the overall well-being of their families as well as concerns about work, finances, trust, low morale and feelings of isolation.

Even for your most highly motivated employees, moving abruptly from a social office environment into an unfamiliar remote environment can cause stress and anxiety. It's also important to not lose sight of the fact that human beings are social creatures who typically thrive in a group environment. Working remotely has created a new appreciation of the significance of the office as a collocated workspace with the physical presence of colleagues, where facial expressions, body language and face-to-face interactions subtly boost mental health.

Here are suggested strategies to help organizations alleviate the stigma associated with these unprecedented mental health challenges and to create a more productive and effective workforce.

Helping Employees Manage Uncertainty

Many large corporations, with guidance from behavioral scientists, are implementing various measures through innovative employee engagement programs to ensure that employees are empowered to manage stress. These programs are designed for short- and long-term employee emotional well-being and include:

- Well-designed and transparent communications plan for critical messaging and sharing of accurate information
- New leave policies
- Real-time collaboration using various online communication tools

- Emotional and professional coaching via industry leaders and life coaches
- Mental health support with the help of counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists via dedicated helplines
- Use of digital technology like AI chatbots, which are designed to help employees focus better on work when away from the normal workplace
- Engaging, empowering and energizing the workforce via motivational speakers, experts from various walks of life through webinars, and dedicated organizational communications channels
- Online learning to help employees stay updated and acquire new skills using various online teaching applications and platforms
- A continuous employee awareness campaign to promote hygiene across multiple organization communication channels

Finding New Opportunities in Today's Workforce Challenges

This health crisis presents employers and human resource executives with an opportunity to reassess their priorities in the bigger picture, including building a culture that encourages physical exercise, nutrition and mindfulness, along with updated definitions of work-life balance.

In this defining moment, global leadership and corporations are also being challenged to add more value in their social, cultural and organizational responsibilities, which means new measures must continue to evolve to bring increased cohesion among remote employees to keep them motivated and maintain productivity levels. This means using a multifaceted approach to help employees feel energized, enthusiastic and empowered by:

- Promoting their work online
- Allowing flexible working hours
- Helping them upgrade their technical skills and identifying relevant work along with achievable goals

To break the monotony of working alone, employers need to bridge the digital and physical gap with a focus on staying connected via online video-conferencing tools with activities like:

- Virtual online "coffee breaks" that help lighten up the mood of the employees through informal discourse and knowledge-sharing sessions

- Daily “immunity booster” yoga sessions to make working as a team more fun and to foster a sense of oneness and community feeling

When business and other leaders embrace the message behind the adage “Every problem is an opportunity in disguise” and combine it with Benjamin Franklin’s immortal words “An investment in knowledge pays the best interest,” their organizations will emerge stronger. This approach will enable companies to reap the benefits of the increased knowledge base of its employees, wherever they are located, and become truly “future-ready” in a post COVID-19 world.

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