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**PIN - 401 203, (MAHARASHTRA)**

**3.3.1 Number of research papers published per teacher in  
the Journals notified on UGC website during the Year**

**2019-20**

<b>Title of paper</b>	<b>Name of the author/s</b>	<b>Year of publication</b>	<b>ISSN number</b>	<b>Link to website of the Journal</b>
Human Resource Management Challenges of Post Covid- 19	Dr. Mohammad Khalil Ahmad	2019-20	ISSN -2229-3620	<a href="#">Shodh Sanchar Bulletin</a>



  
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## HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES OF POST COVID-19

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### ABSTRACT

As the Coronavirus takes over the world, can HR leaders help businesses manage the crisis? Will the improvised methods of managing business paves the way for better integration of human and digital workforce? These are unprecedented times, trying times and uncharted territory for all of us. COVID-19 has taken the world by storm and brought forth a new norm as to how organizations manage the business. Organizations worldwide are tackling immediate issues of keeping employees safe, ensuring optimal utilization of staff, and maintaining the continuity of business operations. Irrespective of the case, companies worldwide are going out of their ways and doing their best to ensure seamless deliveries and consistently improve productivity even during these extraordinary circumstances. Let us examine the immediate impact and the long-term effects of how the pandemic will forever change the way companies manage their business and the crucial role of HR to help mitigate the issues in its aftermath. Before even COVID showed up, India's economy had already started to show signs of weakening and growth appeared uncertain. With the advent of COVID, this has become a reality with leading rating agencies pegging India's growth rate very low for the year 2020. This coupled with slowing down of investments would invariably have a long-term effect on the industry leading to the consolidation of businesses, lower earnings which may well drive layoffs and recruitment freeze. An important significance here is that we currently foresee demand-supply disruptions.

**Keywords :** Coronavirus, COVID-19, HR, Challenges

#### Introduction

The ongoing Coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic swept the world in a matter of weeks, drastically changing the lives of millions. The United States declared a national State of Emergency on March 13th and citizens have been asked to shelter in place, restricting their outings to only the essentials.

In these difficult times, many businesses are struggling to keep their doors open and all must find ways to keep their employees safe, comfortable and productive. The days ahead will present some of the most important HR challenges of our time. Identifying and implementing effective employee policies and support may make or break businesses in the coming months of uncertainty. HR teams that rise to the occasion will be

integral in leading businesses through the storm.

The challenges managers face vary with their company's location, sector and size, but it is clear that many businesses will have to tighten their belts. Instead of laying off workers or slashing wages, companies are seeking alternate corporate strategies such as using technology to support work-from-home or reviewing costs to stretch the budget.

Companies have also been asked to offer more generous and flexible benefits packages.

#### HRM and COVID-19

Deemed to emerge into one of the most difficult global economic situations since the Second World War, the aftermath of the newly rampant and virulent strain of the Novel Coronavirus, (COVID-19) is soon going to

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change the way one looks at businesses as well as employment.

With the necessary lockdowns and travel restrictions across the nation, in order to contain the COVID-19 from becoming a full-blown pandemic, businesses across the globe have come to an abrupt halt, clinging closer into a global recession.

After the economic epidemic started in China and spread to the entire world, the damages to the world economy is set to witness repercussions like no other! Not having experienced anything like this in their entire lifetime, the majority of India's youthful workforce is all set to witness uncertainties. One could very well risk losing their jobs as businesses restructure employee workforce and many shut down operations and with the said layoffs, India could very well witness a domino effect!

In these trying times, corporations should vouch to look after the needs of the employees in distress. An HR professional should bring the humane back into the workings of the corporations. The decisions taken by Human Resources impact the livelihood of the employees, and the entire workforce in a nutshell. This includes their ability to earn money to pay for essentials like food and housing among other expenses. All of these are at a risk for a few months.

However, the question an HR professional should raise is for the future of the workforce. How long will the repercussions last? Nonetheless, the management need not leave their workforce hanging... One of the concerns that the HR department of every company is expected to fulfil, something that has lately been acknowledged as a grave concern, is the issue of mental health, the cause of which has almost always been looked away. Completely disregarded, with the layoffs, the not-so-headstrong employees, who are already troubled by the adverse effects of lockdown, might resort to extreme measures. They may commit suicides! To help the company and its employees during such hardships, the HR department can propose salary cuts instead of layoffs! This can be for a predetermined time period. For an instance, the management can announce reducing the staff salaries by up to 25% for a period of 3 months so that the company

survives and no staff needs to be laid off!

One cannot stress on infrastructure enough! The Human Resource department should ensure that all the employees have capable work laptops to complete their day-to-day tasks. It is during such times that traditional old-fashioned set ups including those of our Governmental department structures, face trouble as their operations are crippled. This move saves the employees from risking their lives to reach office amid lockdown as they can now work from home, a concept that is increasingly being accepted in India!

### **HRM challenges of post COVID-19**

In such a scenario, the role of HR is very crucial in how they will handle the ongoing crisis and ensure smooth operations of their organizations. Today, HR is no longer working behind closed doors and is a crucial part of driving the company's success. During these unprecedented times, the role of HR leaders becomes all the more important and they are expected to respond quickly and comprehensively, considering immediate, short-term, and long-term consequences of this global crisis.

1. **Safe Harbor-** with the kind of crisis that is expected to be handled, HR is expected to play the role of a safe harbor. There will be a disruption in the areas of demand and supply - be it in manufacturing, telecom, travel, airlines or other sectors. A key role of HR will be to keep the workforce engaged, involved, and committed to the success of the enterprise. Particularly in challenging times like these, HR needs to double its efforts in making sure every employee appreciates the challenge, participates voluntarily without any tear, and stays motivated. At the same time, HR should make sure all required assistance or measures are taken to ensure employee healthcare, well-being, and provide ways to a new workspace of remote working.
2. **Policy Management-** In the long-term repercussions, there are going to be strong changes to policies as earlier, WFH (Work from Home) was never given weightage for organizations to adopt. This will lead to policy changes to put into place to



adopt WFH. But this in turn is sure to throw up another challenge. WFH will come with its own set of challenges – one has to ensure continuity of the business operations; ensure productivity is addressed, how to create a positive work environment for employees when working from home while keeping them motivated.

Cultural assimilation of WFH into the organizational culture - Work from home is not culturally accepted for certain industries. HR, therefore, has to ensure that all the sensitivities involved are taken into consideration while crafting a policy.

3. Virtual teams working from home- HR leaders need to understand the challenges of working from home in a virtual environment- connectivity, sensitivity from a culture perspective, from risk perspective, etc. Until now few employees or a set of employees when needed alone were asked to exercise this option of WFH and was not a common practice. Now that this becomes inevitable given the social distancing being advocated by Governments, making this transition to a virtual team who stay engaged without huddle meetings and fun gatherings is not easy and puts an onerous responsibility on HR.
4. Information security and Data Privacy: Most of the information technology industry were hit by Data Protection Regulations across the globe and need to keep not just the process but also practice new standards. While technology has evolved significantly and enabling WFH is not a serious concern including the end-point security, data privacy in an unknown and uncontrolled workspace is still a challenge and educating employees in observing there is a major responsibility of the Infosec teams, but the onus is on the HR teams to make it work.
5. Internal Communications: Company leaders and HR heads should ensure that communication channels with employees are active, open, and transparent and share insights about the operations, development within and outside organization. Encourage employees to stay engaged and

identify their roles and contributions to the organization.

6. The aftermath of the Pandemic: How businesses will relook at the way, they manage the business and the role of HR. Businesses need to ensure that when employees come back to the workplace, post lockdown, they implement long-term measures. Every enterprise needs to ensure completion of all its contractual obligations or delivery obligations or service level commitments. All of these form the crux of the business mandate. There is pressure because of this mandate and no business would like to compromise on their service levels.

**Therefore, there is pressure on HR from the perspective that it takes into account the following:**

- The demand-supply disruption, productivity or profitability challenges
- Being able to deal with the new paradigm of recruitment freezes
- Bringing on board new methods and practices for Virtual work zones
- Formulating policies for managing culture and productivity in light of the current disruptions
- Powering e-learning as a key tool for learning and development practices in the organization
- Since the workspace is virtual, capturing time and powering employees to project manage independently through an effective tool or mechanism
- Adopting technology that will quickly power these practices and enable a collaborative workspace

The silver lining is that organizations quickly responded and dealt with the unprecedented fallout. Many companies had initiated work from home, implemented travel restrictions, and formed crisis management teams, which helped them, continue their operations cohesively.

While this situation was unforeseen and unanticipated by everyone, the ones who were prepared in advance were able to transit smoothly. Amongst these, the large technology firms stood ahead of others and immediately switched to remote working for all their staff. They worked around their pre-existing





structure like data on the cloud, office chat groups, remote access to critical tools, enterprise CRM solutions could easily function remotely. Imagine how easy the transition to remote working would have been if every organization was well-prepared in advance! That is the update and policy change challenges that we foresee for HR leaders and the industry to ensure that their organizations are prepared for every eventuality.

### **Top priorities for HR leaders**

One of the immediate steps that employers took since the outbreak of the virus is encouraging employees to work from home (WFH). However, a low level of preparedness for WFH amongst many companies has been exposed, as companies struggle to cope with the technological and behavioural challenges of implementing seamless WFH experience.

This and many such related challenges have brought to the fore the critical role of HR as businesses try to protect their number one asset - people. Keeping in mind the stress that employees are having to endure, employers need to urgently review their policies and implications on employee health and safety, business continuity, productivity, performance management and rewards. Here are the top recommendations for employers in India.

#### **1. Review HR policies and practices**

Companies need to assess their overall HR policies and procedures, especially with reference to communicable disease management and disaster management. If companies do not have a business continuity plan to deal with such exigencies, COVID-19 should be taken as a serious reminder to put one in place.

#### **2. Business continuity plan**

The seriousness and uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak has exposed the vulnerabilities of businesses like never before. Now is the time for organisations to review the efficacy of their business continuity plan.

The first step is to identify mission-critical operations and business functions. A formalised method is needed to separate the essential from the non-essential functions that can be suspended during a major business disruption.

#### **3. Insurance plan for employees**

Enable the employees to understand their insurance plan benefits, specifically the coverage and exclusions. Employers need to provide access to a support mechanism and communicate it in a simplistic manner covering Third-Party Administrators, brokers, hospital network and HR personnel most equipped to handle queries on insurance. In case of planned procedures of the employee or their dependents, ask them to consult their treating surgeon to confirm whether it can be postponed without risking the health condition.

#### **4. Employee Communication and change management**

With flexible working arrangements, employers are faced with the task of keeping in constant touch with employees to help them navigate through the challenges and keeping them engaged in a meaningful way.

#### **5. Remote Working, employee productivity and engagement**

Work from home is the new reality. This is the first step (involuntary training) in the Future of Work journey. Companies are reviewing their working arrangements and its implications on business outcomes and productivity. Global studies by Willis Towers Watson on this subject, have highlighted that 70% of the companies have introduced flexible working arrangements in their workplaces, most common being work from home policies (some other are split team arrangements, shift-working, etc.).

Employers should consider collaboration platforms like Skype, Teams, Blue-Jeans, Zoom, Google Hangouts among others should be considered to facilitate remote working.

Managing remote productivity will define how well business will come out of this situation. Managers should learn to adjust their mindset and trust employees while consistently focusing on clear goal communication and regular work output review. The most simple and best way for employees is to start the day as you would in an office environment.

#### **6. Performance Management, Compensation and Rewards**

We expect compassionate short term and realistic



term implications on pay and compensation. Despite the negative economic outlook for the year, most companies across the region do not have plans to adjust their annual salary increase budget. While ~20% of companies are expecting a downward adjustment of the annual salary increase budget, we do observe that a small portion of companies (<5%) plan to take more intense measures such as salary reductions and lay-offs to contend with the impact from the continuous epidemic outbreak. Employers should take an informed wait-and-see approach on variable compensation amid continuing uncertainty. That said, if the situation does not change for the better by mid-May, then there is a possibility of employers in hard hit industries considering selective salary cuts and rationalization in teams.

### Suggestions

Organizations' first priority in crisis response has been ensuring the health and safety of workers. Now, as organizations begin to emerge from this phase, leaders are focusing on the next set of workforce challenges as they plan for recovery.

The biggest challenge organizations will likely face in recovery is the tension between getting back to work and rethinking work as they embrace a new reality. How leaders and organizations handle the recovery may define their brands for years to come, and ultimately whether they are truly operating as a social enterprise.

We believe workforce-related strategies in the recovery are best orchestrated through five critical actions: Reflect, Recommit, Re-engage, Rethink, and Reboot. These can help bridge the crisis response to the new normal by laying the foundation to thrive in the aftermath of the crisis.

### Conclusion

The recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, given the human dimension of urgent workforce challenges and the uncertainties facing business leaders,

will require workforce strategies that focus on both short-term recovery priority actions—Reflect, Recommit, Re-engage, Rethink, and Reboot—and reaching toward the future and a new normal. By anticipating and orchestrating these five priorities in the context of a future directed toward Purpose, Potential, and Perspective, organizations can lead, prepare, and support their workforces through the recovery phase while positioning themselves for the next phase: thriving in the new normal.

In the current situation, companies/HR heads should use next-gen HCM (Human Capital Management) solutions to ensure such disruptors do not impact work and build in systems and strategies to ensure work productivity is not hampered while taking into account employee well-being. It is time HR understands what keeps people engaged, what drives productive workplaces, and what enables a true merging of human capability with technology.

It is rightly said that the future of HR is here, and it is now! 'Change is the only constant' and companies who will adapt according to this global change will survive and the rest will be history!

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