**COVID -19 Pandemic. A challenge for human resource managers: How should we support remote workers and their mental health?**

The COVID-19 pandemic is transforming our society. Human Resources will also be changed. It must manage, among other challenges, the increase in remote and teleworking. This even though there are few if any precedents in the area and little research. One important challenge that faces human resource managers is how to support remote workers and their mental health.

Human Resource Management seeks to recruit the best candidates for an organisation and retain qualified employees. However, its main role is to develop the employees of a company to give it an advantage, based on the human capital theory. This involves training and providing opportunities for professional development. Traditionally HR professionals have been concerned with the physical wellbeing of individual workers as seen in their implementation of health and safety training. Increasingly they are playing a role in promoting the mental wellbeing of members of an organisation (Houghton, 2020). Mental health issues are now seen as a major cause of a loss of productivity in many businesses.

This is at a time when many believe that our society is facing a ‘mental health pandemic’. HR departments now implement companies’ health and safety policies that now include measures on mental health. This can involve training and referrals for support. A good example of this is Microsoft’s CARES, that provides a range of social and counselling supports (Microsoft, 2020). It is accepted that HR professionals are faced with great challenges when it comes to supporting mental health initiatives.

The COVID 19 pandemic has greatly complicated HR departments and professionals’ strategies to support those with mental health issues in an organisation. The pandemic has caused a great deal of anxiety and the lockdown has exacerbated many with conditions such as depression. The pandemic has speeded-up the adoption of remote working and it appears that this will be a long-term change. However, this will vary from sector to sector.

HR practitioners must help remote workers with their mental health needs in the interests of all stakeholders in the post-COVID period. Because of the nature of remote working, its lack of social contact etc, there are fears that it could exacerbate the current crisis in mental wellbeing in the UK.

There have been higher levels of anxiety and stress reported by remote workers and these are predictors of mental health issues. Some 38% reported more stress and 78% stated that their mental wellbeing was being impacted while working at home. Many find that work spills into private time and this is adversely impacting on their work-life balance. However, some research disputes the notion that remote working is negative for our psychological wellbeing (Reynolds, 2020). Some claim that remote working offers them a better work-life balance, and many appreciate not having to work in offices that have a toxic environment (Crawford, et al, 2020).

Some 80% of those working remotely during the pandemic expect it to continue according to an Oracle study (2020). This is either as a full-time remote worker or a hybrid model, working at home and in the office. Many workers now demand the flexibility of working anywhere and many companies see it as offering them advantages such as reducing office space. HR departments will now have to adapt their mental health strategy (Oracle, 2020). In essence, they will have to implement the company’s policy, identify those with issues, offer supports and resources to those with issues. Human Resource managers need to develop new strategies and policies. Among the first step is to convey the problems associated with remote working. Too often senior managers are only concerned with productivity and costs and as a result, they are too eager to encourage remote working. HR managers need to persuade them of the importance of implementing mental health policies specifically for remote workers. The old policies are no longer as relevant. Without ‘buy-in’ from senior leaders, any supports offered to workers may be ineffective. The link between mental health and productivity is strong and this can be used to persuade senior management to support remote workers mental wellbeing.

An HR team needs to define the goals of its policy to support the mental health of remote workers, both full-time and part-time. The aim should be two-fold to maintain the psychological wellbeing of those who have good mental health. This involves building up their resilience and allowing them to cope with stress and to effectively manage their wellbeing. Resilience is the ability to manage one’s mental state and manage stress and anxiety and is crucial for those who work remotely. The second aim is to help those whose mental health is being negatively impacted or whose lives are being disrupted by some disorder. This may involve supporting them to seek professional help and strategies to promote their resilience. HR managers need to ensure that health plans provided by companies can assist those with conditions such as depression. It is recommended that HR departments help companies to establish long-term relationships with professionals, such as psychiatrists and counsellors. They can provide invaluable assistance in the drafting policies and strategies. Tele-health options and virtual counselling sessions should be arranged and offered to those who have self-reported some issues. HR practitioners could also use technology such as meditation and therapy apps to help people to become more psychologically resilient.

**Supporting employees’ mental wellbeing**

The need to create a virtual working environment that supports the mental wellbeing of employees is vital. Work-flexibility is a way of ensuring that people are not at risk from factors that can lead to mental health issues. HR must ensure that remote working does not become too stressful. It can train workers on how to maintain a good work-life balance even when they are at home. Crucial to this is the establishment of boundaries. For example, not feeling obliged to constantly have to answer e-mails. A survey by Nuffield Health of British workers found that some 30% found it difficult to separate their home and work time and this could have negative consequences for their relationships and social life, which can lead to psychological problems (2020).

Employers need to be informed that they need to provide employees with reasonable workloads and targets (Bernstein et al, 2020). By de-stressing virtual working environments, this can help workers to be more productive and innovative. This is important as a company that supports its employees is more likely to retain staff and to win the ‘battle for talent’. HR should help workers to identify a dedicated workspace. This can help to provide a routine that helps workers to keep their work life and private life in balance. This could have immense long-term benefits for individuals and their productivity.

Conflicts emerge in any work setting, even in virtual settings. These can contribute negatively to people’s pre-existing problems and also result in new issues (Sull et al, 2020). HR managers must develop appropriate mediation protocols and services. Video conferencing has brought its own problems. A survey by Nutfield Health in the UK showed that some 19% felt pressure to look good in meetings (Nutfield, 2020). Protocols for video meetings need to be developed by HR so that people do not feel conscious which can be stressful. However, any strategies that seek to bolster the psychological wellbeing of staff face a major barrier. Many people are reluctant to engage with their employers on the issue. A survey in America showed that some 21% only felt able to discuss their emotional and other problems with HR (Reynolds, 2020).

Remote working may bring its own health challenges. HR departments currently take a holistic approach to the wellbeing of employees. They focus both on their mental and physical wellbeing. The research has established a link between good physical wellbeing and psychological health. Remote working can provide an unhealthy sedentary life that leads to issues such as obesity. It is crucial the HR departments help remote workers to stay fit and active. They also need to provide education on the link between activity and psychological wellbeing. Webinars on mental and physical health are one option.

Humans are social animals. They need to feel that that they are part of a group and have interactions that met their emotional and psychological needs. Concurrent with our society’s mental health pandemic there is the so-called ‘Loneliness epidemic’. Remote working could exacerbate the loneliness of many people. Some 14% of the home workers report feelings of isolation and loneliness another predictor of psychological problems according to an American survey undertaken by FlexJobs (Reynolds, 2020). A British survey reported even higher levels with 20% of remote workers feeling social isolated (Nuffield Health, 2020). If people feel lonely, they are more at risk of being anxious and depressed. HR departments need to ensure that people stay connected. Virtual meetings are not enough. Organisations need to hold regular physical meetings. Moreover, they need to boost the number of social opportunities available to their employees. This is important not only for the mental wellbeing of individuals but can help to maintain the culture of the company, which in turn can help to promote productivity and efficiency. Promotion of virtual team working can also be beneficial and can also enhance productivity. Some platforms may increase collaborative working cooperation and may be more beneficial than others.

These measures all focus on prevention. There are times when mental health issues will emerge. HR departments are obliged to support those with issues but yet they also need to respect the privacy and autonomy of individuals. If an HR manager is deemed to be intrusive, this could be counterproductive and could even raise legal issues. Great caution needs to be taken when dealing with workers who have mental health issues. Most of those with some condition do not seek support. HR staff need to recognize the signs of mental health issues. These include absenteeism, inability to meet targets, anxiety and conflict. HR should seek to be understanding and reach out to people. This needs to be done in a very sensitive manner. One strategy would be to provide employees with a screen or a test that measures mental health. These can be completed anonymously and may encourage individuals to seek supports and helps.

**What needs to change in HR departments**

At present HR departments are in transition as they try to cope with both the pandemic and the rise of remote working. Initial research has shown that HR departments need to adapt their communication strategies. They need to engage in a combination of online and offline communication strategies. Human Resource practitioners need to communicate more with remote workers. They need to communicate virtually and also by telephone. These can help to develop a personal relationship, and this can have enormous benefits for staff who work remotely. HR departments need to adopt an ‘open door’ policy. They need to encourage staff who work remotely to contact them regularly. The physical office needs to be a place where remote workers have space where they can find a range of supports. It may be advisable that a dedicated HR practitioner be appointed to support the mental health of teleworkers.

In conclusion if remote working is to succeed, which is something sought by many employers and employees, HR departments need to support the resilience of virtual workers. This requires new strategies. Innovation and new thinking are critical if they are to succeed.

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