Challenges for HR- practitioners during and after a pandemic

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Abstract: The advent of COVID-19 changed the working lives of all of us. Most of us switched to remote work, and those who remained in the office worked in shifts with few people. Measures for social distance, disinfection, etc. were needed everywhere. And if this situation is complicated for each of us, it is even more complicated for people who are professionally engaged in managing people in the organization. Their work role changed radically, as they had to deal with all the challenges of remote work, the worries and fears of the employees, the unclear horizon for future work, and so on. It has allowed the profession to stand out and take its rightful strategic role in companies, but it has also revealed many challenges that HR practitioners need to address in the future. The *purpose of this article* is to outline not only the difficulties that HR practitioners have faced during the 2020 pandemic, but also the challenges they will face after the end of the pandemic. This article contains the results of the author's research, but most of the data have been collected through secondary sources such as research articles, publications, journals, websites etc.

Introduction

COVID-19 has changed the way companies and employees work and will continue doing so. The declaration of a state of emergency due to the pandemic and all anti-epidemic measures affected the overall organization of work processes. Organizations around the world had to make quick and difficult decisions - to maintain the health and safety of their employees, but to continue to work and produce.

The idea of the workplace will never be what was expected before COVID-19. Once the pandemic restarts major work trends, managers and human resources leaders need to rethink their workforce and employee planning and management strategies. The situation will have a lasting impact on the future of work in several key ways. It is mandatory for HR professionals to assess the impact that each trend will have on the activities of their organization. It is necessary to identify activities that require immediate action in order to assess the extent to which these trends change the strategic goals and plans from before COVID-19.

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The article is structured in the following sections: introduction, Challenges for HR-practitioners during a pandemic, HR Challenges in the Post-Covid-19 World and conclusions, as it analyzes data from various studies and articles.

1. Challenges for HR-practitioners during a pandemic

The appearance of the coronavirus and the introduction of the state of emergency put business organizations to the test. Restrictions in daily life have led to the closure of many companies and the dismissal of staff - permanently or temporarily. Companies have faced important decisions on which their future development depends, both in the short and long term. In this situation, the work of HR has become especially important and even in smaller organizations they have become a strategic partner of senior management.

Organisations are relying on HR leaders to ensure economic viability and at the same time enhance employee experience and engagement to tide over this crisis. HR practitioners need to be the change agents linking employers and the workforce to provide the impetus for this transformation (Kaur and Shah, 2021).

HR practitioners have never been so valued by senior management. During the covid crisis, HR practitioners are the ones who maintain and manage non-traditional high-tech solutions such as e-learning and selection, online performance management, etc. They had to create adequate practices to deal with reduced profits for organizations by adopting appropriate recruitment schemes and helping employees to work from home. They were the ones who had to balance between the economic and core values of the organization and help achieve organizational goals through communication with employees.

The most significant challenges that professionals have to deal with during a pandemic are:

- **The transition to work from home**

One of the biggest challenges for HR specialists during the pandemic is to organize the transition to work from home. Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, organizations were not conversant with managing the workforce without on-site supervision, but with the onset of the pandemic, organizations had to go digital even though a number of jobs still requires physical attention. Besides, a number of staff was not equipped with modern technologies to cope with the sudden change. Organizations had to distribute technical equipment such as laptops and internet facilities to support them (Baska, 2020). A Gartner, Inc. survey of 800 global HR executives on March 2020 found that 88% of organizations have encouraged or required employees to work from home, regardless of whether or not they showed coronavirus-related symptoms (Gartner, 2020b).

In the conditions of remote work of the employees, the efforts of the HR professionals are focused on:

- Enhanced communication with employees;
- High level of employee awareness;

- Maintaining constant contact with employees;
- Increasing the team spirit of employees;
- Care for the health and well-being of employees;
- Maintaining employee engagement.

In addition to the well-known challenges, Mitrova (2020) believes that HR specialists in Bulgaria have faced a number of legal irregularities, in particular in the Labor Code (LC), due to the crisis with COVID-19. The lack of changes in it has put HR practitioners in a position where they cannot comply with the regulations on safe working conditions. In working conditions from a distance, it remains unclear at whose expense the additional costs of moving from the office to home.

- **Transformation of recruitment and training processes**

At the beginning of the pandemic, with the introduction of the state of emergency, many companies froze the hiring of new employees in order to reduce costs. When it became clear that COVID-19 would stay in our lives for a long time, the situation slowly began to return to normal.

Companies had to adapt quickly to the new conditions and change the way employees are recruited and selected. In order to preserve human health and safety, HR practitioners were forced to transfer the recruitment process entirely online in a very short time. Virtual interview processes have become the norm. Interviews with potential candidates have moved to platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, etc. Although the virtual interview was an exception until recently, saving both parties time and money in the process quickly made it a preferred practice. This was also the only possible way to conduct recruitment and selection processes during the lockdown.

A Gartner, Inc. poll of 334 HR leaders on April 2020 found that 86% of organizations are incorporating new virtual technology to interview candidates due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The most successful organizations provide candidates with the same level of information and feeling of connection with the organization as they would have with an in-person interview (Gartner, 2020a).

The training specialists in the organizations also faced a number of challenges. The need for social distancing made face-to-face training impossible.

Although emigration from the physical classroom had actually begun years ago with some remote workforces experiencing travel cutbacks, the pandemic caused companies to adopt solutions overnight rather than over a few months. A huge challenge was maneuvering the intricacies of designing and deploying effective virtual training systems that do not compromise the original goals of face to face training programs (Sangtani, 2020).

Companies with older or low-skilled staff have experienced serious difficulties in implementing online training. On the other hand, well-prepared organizations, which even before the advent of the coronavirus had begun work on introducing learning in a virtual environment, were able to quickly reorganize their processes and reap the benefits of online learning: it's more economical than face-to-face training; more flexibility in program design; reduced travel costs; increase in diversity and inclusion; enablement of work/life balance due to less travel and time away from home, etc.

- **Employees' motivation and well-being**

According to Collings and Sheeren (2020) COVID-19 pandemic has elevated the discussion on employee health and well-being to a level never seen in the past. The crisis is first and foremost a human crisis and corporate boards and leaders were forced to put employee needs front and centre in early decisions in responding to the crisis

In the current extreme situation, many companies have quickly switched to work from home. This has led to many changes in the workplace that have affected teamwork, productivity, collaboration and communication, and made us think about how effectively we used the potential of virtual technology before the crisis. HR professionals had to come forward to care of both physical, mental as well as emotional wellbeing of the employees during the pandemic.

While some employees experienced the fear of losing their jobs, others were faced with the fear of increasing workload and reduced wages. New survey of ManpowerGroup Bulgaria (2021) among 185 companies and 366 employees from all business sectors and regions of Bulgaria shows that in case of a new lockdown 31% of employers plan to send part or all of their teams to forced leave, 10% would lay off staff and only 6% are considering a reduction in monthly salaries and additional benefits. At the same time, as many as 43% of respondents believe that new measures related to the spread of COVID-19 will affect their income in the form of lower wages or fewer benefits, a third of them fear that they will be put on forced leave, and 30% fear losing their jobs.

Majority of the workforce, working for home, suffered perplexity as a result of poor communication from supervisors, demotivation and constant stress. Some were inadequately supported as a result of limited or no contact with other colleagues, with the agitation to be efficient and productive, supervisors and senior managers frequently demanded for deadlines to complete a specific work with online supervision (Onwuegbuna et al., 2021)

Employees experienced a blurring of the line between work and personal life when working from home. This does not necessarily affect productivity, but poses a threat to cooperation and communication if left unattended. Therefore, actively investing in the well-being of employees is something that HR-practitioners should pay attention to.

In the context of remote work, HR practitioners had to take care of employee engagement, health and well-being using a variety of flexible tools to support employees. According to an author's research, conducted in June 2020 among 142 employees in organizations of different sizes and profiles in Bulgaria, their employers have introduced the following initiatives to support employees (see tab.1):

Tab.1: Tools used by Bulgarian employers to support employees during lockdown and remote work

	%
Providing protective equipment and disinfectants in the office	79,5
Introduction of rotational work	37,4

Regular online meetings between managers and employees to maintain a sense of community of employees	30,6
Supporting employees in reconciling workers with their family commitments	23,1
Organize mental health webinars with psychologists to advise employees on how to deal with stress	7,0
Additional financial remuneration	3,4
Methodical and resource support	1,4
Distribute only reusable masks	0,4

Source: Author's own research

It is important for companies to keep track of employee sentiment during the rollout of the remote working. Company leaders and HR practitioners should pay attention to the impact a lack of physical contact has on people. When employees work remotely do they fully realize the added value of physical contact. HR leaders need to stimulate cooperation between colleagues and monitor togetherness.

2. HR Challenges in the Post-Covid-19 World

Gandhi (2021) says that HR practitioners have to shift to a more human-oriented approach in the post-pandemic period, during which people have to adjust their way of working. The coronavirus situation has made conventional means of work a thing of the past. HR must overhaul the policies in congruence with the new normal. Human resource managers will also need to have innovative ideas for maintaining a high level of organizational culture - both for existing and new employees. As HR professionals look to the upcoming years, they will understand that a lot challenges and changes are ahead, redefining their roles.

It is mandatory for HR professionals and leaders to assess the impact that each trend will have on the activities and strategic goals of their organization. It is necessary to identify activities that require immediate action in order to assess the extent to which these trends change the strategic goals and plans from before COVID-19.

The dramatic changes in work and work environment that occurred during the covid pandemic are likely to have a lasting impact on the future of work in several ways:

- **Flexible work options**. According to Gandhi (2021) strategic or long-term plans need to be flexible, as recessionary times can open new growth possibilities and pave the way for new opportunities. Therefore, the company must be warned to capture the potential to reinvent and move forward in its business struggle.

It seems that remote work will not end with the end of the pandemic. More and more employees around the world state they would like to continue working remotely after the pandemic.

An Adecco Group (2021) study, conducted among 14 800 respondents from 25 countries, shows that the business world is ready for a new "hybrid" model of work- over half of workers (53%) want to work remotely 50% of their time. Parents and younger

generations want more office time. 8 in 10 believe that increased flexibility around hybrid working will benefit both employers and employees. Workers want the complementary benefits of work/life balance and focus provided by remote alongside the office as a nice environment to collaborate and connect. Flexibility is the new standard. Workers don't want to give up the flexibility gained. More than three quarters want to retain flexibility over their own schedule. 72% of the respondents call for employers to revisit the length of the working week and hours people are expected to work with over half (57%) believing the job can be done in under 40 hours. With flexible working becoming the norm, the 9 to 5 hour-based contract is outdated. More workers and leaders call to be measured by outcomes and results rather than hours spent working, a trend that was already strong in 2020.

Grigorova (2021) believes that gradually there will be more and more people who think that the time of the 4-day working week is coming. The idea finds people in different parts of the world - as a means of increasing productivity, improving the mental health of workers and combating climate change. This opportunity is gaining new importance as the pandemic highlights the problems of work burnout and work-life balance.

In their report on the future of work after COVID-19 McKinsey (2021) assess the lasting impact of the pandemic on labor demand, the mix of occupations, and the workforce skills required in eight countries with diverse economic and labor market models: China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. They find that about 20 to 25 percent of the workforces in advanced economies could work from home between three and five days a week. This represents four to five times more remote work than before the pandemic and could prompt a large change in the geography of work, as individuals and companies shift out of large cities into suburbs and small cities.

In the process of moving the majority of employees to work from home, it is crucial to explore the critical competencies that employees need to have in order to collaborate digitally. Consideration should be given to whether and how to change the definition of performance criteria and evaluation of employees in the context of remote work.

Location no longer limits the talent pool. Location no longer limits the talent pool. With many employers planning to continue remote or hybrid work even after the pandemic ends, geographic barriers to recruiting top talent are breaking down. The search for the perfect candidate used to be limited by geography or relocation budgets before the pandemic. Now companies have the opportunity to tap into a much bigger talent pool. This will not only make it easier for companies to find talent, but it's also a boon to their efforts to build a more diverse workforce.

Role of Artificial Intelligence. McKinsey (2021) reports that COVID-19 may propel faster adoption of automation and AI, especially in work arenas with high physical proximity. In McKinsey global survey of 800 senior executives in July 2020, two-thirds said they were stepping up investment in automation and AI either somewhat or significantly. Production figures for robotics in China exceeded prepandemic levels by June 2020. Many companies deployed automation and AI in warehouses, grocery stores, call centers, and manufacturing plants to reduce workplace density and cope with surges in demand.

According to Gandhi (2021) AI can help recruiters identify promising applicants from megabytes of necessary files and help companies not only meet their recruiting process

diversity targets but also retain the best people and connect with employees across smart apps. The remote work will entail digitalization and greater technological integration, and the resizing and transformation of physical workplaces into virtual ones that are technologically enabled. A major advantage of this model is that after obtaining a higher number of work applications from all around the country, HR managers would now be able to identify the most accurate applicant, as recruitment will become location neutral.

Employee engagement. According to Kumar (2021) the world created during the COVID-19 pandemic has characteristics of stalling business growth, uncertain business environment, and anxious and unhealthy workforce. The deleterious effects of COVID-19 are manifold. In such a gloomy and depressing environment where workplace system has turned murkier, employers need to ponder upon the employee engagement strategy scientifically. Gandhi (2021) claims that companies can make a big difference in creating a more active workforce if they concentrate on the right stuff. The HR practitioners have a key role for creating an engaged workforce and keeping its talent highly productive. The employer should really understand the engagement gap: the distinction between the extrinsic rewards required by employers for of organizational objectives would help them win in the competition.

The pandemic has changed the way employees maintain their efficiency and commitment to their work responsibilities, especially when teams are dispersed - some working fully or partially from home and others in the office. In order to gain a real idea of the employee experience, HR professionals need to consider three main issues that affect the company: trust in the company, engagement to colleagues and the necessary skills.

Conclusion

HR managers need to avoid the mentality of sticking to previous procedures and plans to bear the odds of post-Covid challenges. They have to take some possible efforts after this pandemic situation by counseling their employees to ensure communication efforts help engagement and also offering proper counseling sessions with employees to help them offload their isolation anxiety. In the current global crisis, the role of HR managers and practitioners had become extremely important. Challenging times are ahead, but with many opportunities. This is a good time for HR professionals to start playing a key role in shaping the future of organizations. It is incredibly important for human resources professionals to have the eyes and ears for the strategy in order to partner with the changes made, to learn to quickly navigate the emerging talent market and to deal with the lack of talent in relevant organizations. New plans and techniques that are more agile need to be developed to meet the volatile market times due to Covid-19. HR professionals need to focus on the mental health and overall well-being of employees.

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