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Focus will be on business continuity, productivity and managing employee morale

How do you visualize the new normal of work and workplace beyond covid?

CC The outbreak of corona virus worldwide has fundamentally shaken up the business landscape and changed the way we work. A big challenge that seems to be ahead of us in the near future is rethinking work as it embraces a new reality. This means looking at the new normal that the pandemic will define for us and designing ways to respond to it considering the success factors. As the business goes for a reboot mode, almost all the facets will undergo changes at some level or the other but a broad set of trends that, according to me, would constitute the new normal would be:

◆ **Rethinking work arrangements:** Open offices and collaborative work spaces that once used to be the norm are now being re-examined. While the 'work from home' has been adopted as the new arrangement by many companies, it may not be a feasible option for all. Other companies have started renovations to provide greater worker isolation to prevent transmission. For the manufacturing companies like

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ours, we are focusing on the strategies to enable social distancing. For inevitable cases where employees need to work close to each other, we are providing personal protective equipments with strict adherence to the safety norms. Rethinking work arrangements is one of the many 'what' that will change and 'how' it will change will simply depend upon the organizational context.

◆ **Putting people first:** While building workforce capability has always been mission critical but in the present context it has received an unprecedented attention. Businesses have switched gears from 'business first' to 'people first' realizing that in order to successfully navigate the new normal, it must be ensured that our workforce is reskilled and relevant for the times ahead.

◆ **Putting technology and people together:** The technological advancements have been increasingly accelerating the speed and scale of development; it is one subject that has been dominating the boardroom conversations and seminars for the last few years. Interestingly, the human factors and technology have often been viewed on parallel paths if not in conflict with each other. This crisis presents a unique opportunity for the organizations to work at the intersection of human and technology to design an organization that maximizes human contribution in the world of machines. They are more powerful together than either can be on their own.

What may be the stark differences between pre and post covid work and workplace?

CC Companies across the globe have become more sensitive to workplace safety and issues arising out of the pandemic. This battle, however, seems to be long drawn which calls for some definite change to the aspects of work. This might involve a combination of short term fixes along with some long term strategies to combat the threat, ensure safety and instill confidence in employees and other stakeholders. It is evident that the workplace post Covid would be different from what we have been experiencing so far. Some of the differences quite visible are:

◆ **Changing perception about the role of office:** Our deep rooted belief that offices are critical to productivity had made us go really creative about office spaces. Offices, so far, have been designed with an intent to promote collaboration, engage employees and create a conducive environment for maximizing productivity. This whole idea has seen a complete turnaround in view of safety and social distancing. The new role of office is defined differently in different organizations as per the suitability. There is no one size fits all approach here.

◆ **Shift from 'agility' to 'resilience':** While agility and resilience are critical sides of the same coin, both of them happens to be quite a buzzword in today's time. We all have spent last few years witnessing and understanding the different waves of disruptions and practicing agility in order to thrive. The belief that we must innovate and disrupt ourselves to stay ahead of the competition has made agility as of one the critical success factors. But in today's crisis struck world, importance of resilience is unprecedented. Any such crisis has typically three phases- respond, recover & thrive. It takes resilience to blunt the extreme impacts of such events and look for opportunities that can be leveraged in order to bounce back and thrive.

◆ **Taking reskilling to the next level:** Another stark difference that can be realized is that how the quest for survival during the crisis has shifted the focus from optimization to creating value for tomorrow during uncertain times. This goal needs to be articulated in our efforts to reskill our workforce and build capability. We must look beyond our understanding of how our people have been contributing so far in terms of their roles, skills and knowledge and actually work hard to be at a level where employees are being encouraged and offered opportunities to learn, grow and evolve based on their potential.

Beyond covid, HR professionals will be responsible to create and nurture a work culture that drives mutual trust, empowerment, productivity and inclusion. Can technology help achieving this or HR will have to explore other innovative ways?

CC As I mentioned earlier that working at the intersection of human and technology is the need of the hour. The HR leaders are well positioned to support their workforce through the recovery and play the role of a business integrator to drive their organizations to success. Of course, the role of technology in this regard is pivotal but it must be complemented with other critical factors such as speed, designing new ways of working that are organization relevant, being digitally savvy and also coming up with a blend of short and long term strategies in response to the current requirement.

HR function right now is at a very critical juncture. The choices it will make today, the value it will create and the way it will lead its organization during these times of uncertainty will go a long way in defining its role in the future.

What should be the short term and long term strategies and initiatives for employees in this respect?

CC The challenges faced by the organization and the priorities they have in front of them vary with the location, sector and size. However, business continuity & productivity and managing employee morale happens to be the top challenges everywhere. Therefore, having the right strategy will go a long way in determining how HR function plays out during this crisis which will leave a legacy behind in the years to come.In the short term, thekey focus areas can be-

- **Revisit HR operation and human capital priorities:** Managing talent through crisis to optimize productivity requires significant shift in the talent strategy. The way business dynamics are playing out today requires strategic redeployment, reskilling, providing a robust L&D infrastructure and a mechanism for managing performance.

- **Automation & infrastructure support:** Meetings, classroom trainings & sessions etc have all been disrupted to ensure safety and social distancing. Processes like training & development, career development etc. are way too important to take a back seat, in fact, now they are more important than ever. Migrating to online modules and automated platforms wherever appropriate would help HR professionals provide the desired continuity and business support

- **Engagement:** With remote working becoming a norm in many organizations, businesses facing unforeseen challenges, priorities being changed, ensuring an engaged workforce is critical for the organizations to thrive. At this historic moment, the engagement would happen if there is role clarity, effective communication and working relationships that lead to co-creation and creativity. The role of leadership today is also one of the important determinant of engagement during these turbulent times.

These short term strategies must be rightly blended with the long term strategies to get the desired results which according to me are sharp focus on productivity, production & upskilling, managing culture of the organization and change management.

What one major trend you foresee as new normal for organizations and how HR will make it for smooth transition?

CC Having experienced the HR function for more than three decades now along with an understanding of current state of affairs, one thing I strongly feel is that the 'new normal' isn't something that new. Whatever changes covid has brought about isn't some absolutely new set of trends. In some capacity we were preparing for the future since long and now 'the future is here'!

Talk about automation or digitization, business process reengineering, manpower cost & capability optimization, remote working etc. None of them is absolutely new to us. What new is the pace at which their implementation has been accelerated during the covid crisis and the nature of business we are in.

While the most popular new norm such as remote working may not have its applicability across sectors, one trend that I see as major one is 'Technology & Innovation'. This trend seems to be ubiquitous and will lead us to a fundamental rethink of where and how we work. Covid has already spurred rapid technology adoption. It's evident from what we experience in our daily life nowadays. We dread exchanging cash due to fear of infection, social distancing has made us more comfortable with videoconferencing and other virtual connectivity than in person meetings. As the rage of this pandemic aggravates, it will accelerate development of next gen remote working technologies such as augmented and virtual reality. This presents an excellent opportunity for the HR professionals to raise the bar of their tech game and partner the business with its new tech enabled ecosystem of HR practices.

How you are looking at covid crisis from HR perspective and what are the areas HR cannot afford to overlook?

CC Covid crisis has put a lot of pressure on HR leaders and their teams. This function has been playing a critical role in organization's efforts to keep the workforce engaged, productive and resilient. The current crisis will not end suddenly and even worse, there are multiple waves expected. With these facts in mind we need to prepare ourselves accordingly because as much remains uncertain, the way we handle our journey from response to thrive will establish our reputation and competitiveness for the years to come.

While there are several areas to look at from the business standpoint, ones that are extremely critical are:

- **Partnering business in recalibrating business operating model and work design:** As the priorities are being reshuffled, there would be lot of changes in the business with respect to ensuring continuity, changes in the work design, changes in job roles and organization structures etc. HR needs to work as a knowledge partner with the business and advise the business on such critical fronts that has a huge impact on the business performance and people.

- **Managing employee welfare and well-being:** Concerns around health &well-being, social distancing and remote working might potentially lead to stress and anxiety in employees. As much as it is important to keep the workforce completely informed about ways to being physically fit, it is equally important to provide adequate support around professional and emotional well-being.

- **Engagement & employee experience:** The current scenario has redefined employee engagement by taking into consideration contemporary factors. The employee engagement model must be curated based on essential components that include stable & secure work experience, individual purpose & contribution, role clarity and communication.

- **Up skilling:** The covid crisis has significantly changed the learning landscape. It is high time HR professionals revamp their learning ecosystem and build digital training programs and content. It is equally important for the business to do an analysis and identify the skills that they would need in the immediate future as per the new planned business model and thereafter, build those skills by providing specific and tailored learning programs. **B**M

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