

The 'New Normal' of Employee Well-being

THOUGHT PAPER

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A company, whom I consult for, had organized a three-way conference call to discuss status update on recruiting/onboarding between its managers, its recruiting team and its IT team. In the discussion, they realized that the bottleneck was at the onboarding stage. There was a considerable amount of pressure from the hiring managers on the recruiting team for onboarding quickly as the business was getting impacted (one of the few sectors which are doing good even during these times!). While discussing, the recruiting team pointed towards the dependency on the IT team for laptops and technological set up to take the process further. In the face of the lockdown and closure of all non-essential services, the IT team on its end was struggling with procuring new laptops and getting them delivered to the new joiners. As the call progressed, confusion reigned, tempers started to fly loose, and each team ended up accusing the other of laxity toward their role.

Despite being connected through phones / internet, the isolation and long confinement has started taking its toll. People are on the edge and ready to lose nerve at the smallest of issues – something in ‘normal’ times they could have easily resolved.

This live incident, co-related very well with two issues that I was recently reading about:

- According to a survey by the Indian Psychiatry Society, there has been a 20% increase in patients suffering from mental well-being issues since the COVID-19 outbreak¹. What it effectively means is that the workforce in ‘new normal’ times consists of an increased number of people dealing with mental well-being issues due to new stressors like loss of human connection, financial insecurity and economic instability amongst others.
- Studies show that loneliness has the same impact on mortality as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, making it near-fatal². This becomes a graver issue in light of the fact that globally the number of people living alone today is highest ever in the history of human civilization³.

Therefore, while organizations are building seamless WFH processes so that the business continuity remains, they need to focus on the employee well-being too with the same rigor. Though few large organizations have stepped up their health benefits to strengthen and support employees’ mental well-being, leaders and HR managers of others, especially small and medium-sized businesses need to address the issue urgently and introduce long-standing solutions.

Here’s what can be done:

Everything’s digital, why not mental well-being resources

In a scenario where everything from booking groceries to buying clothes has gone digital, a digital mental health package can make up for some of the loss in human connection.

- Corporates can tie-up with online well-being program providers, including stress management and resilience training. Free and confidential online therapy sessions with counselors can be offered to employees to discuss anything that is causing them stress.
- Expert webinars can be organized regularly to understand the importance of self-care in the new world.
- Emotional support can be given to employees through free mobile apps on guided meditation, breathing exercises, relaxing and soothing music.

Alone but not lonely

Employees who live alone do not necessarily have to feel lonely. This is more so true for employees who joined the workforce in the last few years straight from campus and are living away from their families.

- Dedicated well-being teams that communicate regularly with employees, even with a simple everyday text like “how are you doing”, can help alleviate loneliness for an employee forced into lockdown.
- Community building activities like a virtual happy hour can bring some semblance of normalcy to a disrupted routine.
- Online community portals can be developed where employees can sign up for events of their interests like book clubs, movie groups, music clubs and gaming clubs.
- Individual and team fitness challenges are few fun ways to engage employees cooped up at home.

Help them be able to demarcate between work and personal time so that they get enough time to unwind and relax and don’t get bogged down by work all the time.

Upskill employees to deal with a VUCA future

The current scenario is a true example of a VUCA environment! While everybody has been talking about it for long, we have been caught un-prepared.

- Regular training and workshops which prepare employees to meet current and future business

needs can aid mental agility and prepare them to be relevant in the future too.

- A financial planning expert to help provide financial literacy online is a simple but effective way to assist employees in adept handling of financial insecurities they are bound to face now and in the future.

Do not let communication get lost in translation

Somewhere in between 79% of companies globally offering mental well-being benefits and a dismal 10% utilization rate amongst employees⁴, the communication of these benefits seems to be getting lost in translation. It is one big elephant in the room which no-one is ready to talk about for all the social stigma attached to it.

Having clear communication protocols would ensure clear and reliable dissemination of information in times of distress. Daily or weekly updates about changes in workplace policies, facts about the virus and clear internal guidelines, could prevent fear borne out of misinformation.



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Here's what I suggest

When leaders worldwide urged their citizens to clap from their windows and balconies for well-being of care workers and deliverymen, the intention was not only to express appreciation but also to invoke a sense of physical camaraderie. Given that depression and anxiety cost the global economy an estimated USD 1 trillion each year in lost productivity⁵, in 'new normal' times companies which extend the same sense of camaraderie towards employees will unleash and benefit from the full force of their productivity, just like we did in case of our front line caregivers.

With psychological effect of quarantine being linked with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms which can still be detected months or years later⁶, companies must roll out these measures as permanent offerings available even after the pandemic ends and not just as short term combative methods.

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About the author



Mainak brings over 20 years of experience spanning business and HR roles across geographies. This has given him a unique understanding of the link between HR and business strategy. He also holds a patent for HR capability development.

Mainak's experience includes human capital strategy, culture, talent development (performance, leadership development, career pathing, competency, learning, engagement, diversity), and talent acquisition (including on-boarding and background check). He has also implemented HRIS platform and HR metrics to improve performance.

Recently he has been helping startups set up efficient and effective HR teams and processes. In addition, Mainak is a recognized Executive Coach and Leadership Development expert.

Mainak's previous work experience includes stints/projects with Accenture (Consulting and HR), Hewitt Associates, AbsolutData, Heidrick & Struggles, Evalueserve, Sterlite Technologies, and Upstox.

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