

Covid-19 calls for overhaul of HR, workplace practices and the need for chief health officers

Corporations and government organisations have responded to the global pandemic and fresh lockdowns with a mash-up of temperature checks, sanitisers at the lobby, social distancing, contact tracing and split shifts between the office and working from home. And a lot of Zoom calls.

As the dust settles on how best to hasten economic recovery, one of the major questions raised is how to ensure the safety of essential workers needed on-site, such as in factories, e-commerce and warehouses, and that of employees working from home who still have to return to the office intermittently.

Worldwide, human resources (HR) and workplace practices need to be urgently redesigned to revive business activity and promote work culture while adhering to social distancing and other health measures to protect employee health.

Such an overhaul must draw heavily on technology that can yield life-saving data on how we live, work, travel and socialise. Organisations, especially multinational corporations with many offices worldwide, must embrace processes that capture data related to the potential or threat of pandemic infection across all locations.

This data must be rapidly analysed by artificial intelligence and machine learning (AI/ML) to provide a comprehensive dashboard that can monitor safe distancing. Business leaders must be able to know which work locations have experienced breaches. Real-time data is needed to pinpoint those who risk infection. Over time, transparency of such a digital dashboard will build trust in the employer and provide assurance that the workplace is safe to operate from.

As HR and C-Suite leaders navigate this uncertain environment, they may well see a major revision not just of management processes but also leadership roles. Indeed, the urgency of the situation calls for these leaders to consider taking on the role of — or appointing — a chief health officer.



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Such a guardian of an organisation's most valuable asset — its human capital — will need to harness technology to address at least four critical areas:

1. Workforce planning and scheduling

Staff segregation and split shifting — supplemented by ubiquitous video conferencing — are becoming the norm. New processes are needed to combine these with solutions to manage social distancing and privacy. For the enterprise, the outcome must include how best to improve productivity, both for essential and non-essential workers.

Until now, the response to these multiple challenges has been patchwork at best. Planning and scheduling must be rolled in and combined into platform. It must yield health-related trends, grant workplace access only to essential workers and other employees with permission of entry, highlight possible problems and prompt better decisions — all in real-time.

This crisis is unprecedented in form and complexity. Practices that worked in the past must give way to the promise of true organisational transformation. Leaders equipped with new skills, data and responsibilities are needed to save the enterprise, protect the jobs and ensure health and cohesion at the same time.

2. Safe entry pre-screening

As prevention is better than cure, the former can be achieved by combining and automating facial recognition and temperature scanning at all entry points to a workplace. Such screening of staff, visitors and gig workers must be integrated with updated medical tests and easy-to-answer, digitised, self-declaration questionnaires. In turn, such data must be crunched by algorithms that can learn on their own to avoid the tedium of redundancy, which can lead to lapses.

3. Safe distancing and contact tracing

Beyond marking seats and staggering queues at

the water cooler, how can an organisation configure the office or factory more intelligently and map employee movements to reduce the risk of infection?

Real-time location tracking and crowd-sensing — whether through an app, a dongle or an access card — can be combined with Internet of Things sensor gateways as well as real-time location systems to enhance safe distancing. If employees breach safe distancing measures, alerts can be sent to the employee as well as the chief health officer or HR manager.

Automated contact tracing will yield relevant data on an infected employee: which workplace areas he or she has visited, which colleagues he or she had contact with, and which areas need to be disinfected.

4. Testing and Covid-19 proofing

The coronavirus can manifest as an innocuous and mild illness but can have a high rate of infectivity. Up to 70% of infections can be asymptomatic, making it a challenge to swiftly and accurately track those who are infected and where the infection started. As a result, Covid-19 carriers can misjudge the severity of their illness, and continue their work activity while spreading infection unknowingly.

In such an uncertain environment, how can an enterprise determine if the workplace is really safe? Regular testing of employees is already fast becoming the norm — airline crew are tested before each flight; staff at food outlets, pharmacies and banks are tested daily or weekly; and so forth.

The existential threat of Covid-19 calls for an overhaul of work and safety practices that must combine technology and a new thinking that challenges the HR conventions we have accepted for decades worldwide. ■

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