



Easing the post-lockdown work life

What practices should human resource leaders and leading-edge companies implement to ease employees into post-pandemic life? There is actually very little difference between what good leaders and good companies do all the time, and what they are doing now

By Jeffrey Pfeffer & M Muneer



The coronavirus has seemingly changed everything. Working from home was fashionable at first, but turned out to be more stressful than ever with people trying to do their job while educating their children at the same time. People are thankful that they have a job. India's unemployment has risen

to an all-time high of 24 percent with reported 12Cr job losses, and this doesn't take into account the millions of daily wagers and migrant laborers. Over 20 million workers were laid off in the USA in April alone, which is its all-time high.

Multi-tasking is the new normal and 24/7 is no longer just a corpo-

rate customer service tagline—it is the reality for many people whose homes are their offices.

Expecting people to do their jobs with the same level of concentration and performance is insane. Not only are people taking on tasks in different work environments with changed interaction between bosses and colleagues, but they are also trying to do work even as bad, fabricated, or otherwise fake news bombard them via media and WhatsApp.

Amid all this, some organizations are working hard trying to make employees breathe easier, and what's most striking is how very sensible all these steps really are even in a COVID-less world. Here are the practices some global organizations are following at this crisis time, which in our opinion, should be continued post the pandemic to ease employee work-life, reduce turnover, and make people more productive.

Avoid layoffs

Job loss raises the risk of premature death by 63 percent, causes both physical and mental illness, and doubles the suicide rate. Is it possible to retain employees even in difficult economic times? Of course, because layoffs are in part a choice and a consequence of how leaders run their business. For instance, American Airlines spent U\$12.4 billion since 2014 buying back stock, loading itself with debt. The Whole Foods layoff in the 2008 bubble was fewer than Stanford University's. In the 9/11 aftermath, Southwest didn't layoff anyone, other airlines did.

In 2019, over 60 Indian companies bought back shares in the hope of maximizing shareholder value, but in a crisis like this, if they don't have cash reserves to support employees, massive layoffs are likely. Even now, media houses and retailers are laying off quietly. In most cases, the layoffs are effective immediately, with few people getting even 90 days severance and most getting nothing. Companies are using this extraordinary event as a panacea for their ills.

Meanwhile, Amazon has announced its no-layoff plan and promised fresh hiring. Tata

Expecting people to do their jobs with the same level of concentration and performance as before the pandemic is insane. Organizations need to follow practices that can ease employee work-life, reduce turnover, and make people more productive



Group has followed suit on layoffs by holding off all capex. Avoiding layoffs generates goodwill and extra effort from employees. People will find ways to save money and enhance productivity once they feel secure. Companies will build their brands among workers as well as with customers.

Prioritize and postpone tasks that aren't urgent

Too much of organizational life is filled with such busy work as unnecessary meetings, initiatives, and processes that don't add value. A crisis is a great time to redesign work. One reason for the crazy work hours that have become all too customary, and are mentally and physically unhealthy, is that "everything is equally urgent" even though, of course, it is not. Better prioritization helps people focus on those things that are truly the most important.

One of the most trusted groups in India, guided by values that

workers are part of an extended family, has immediately put all non-critical projects (for instance, completing 360-degree performance reviews) on the back burner so people can focus only on the most mission-critical tasks.

Provide back-up support

People need to know there are others to help on projects. A major source of stress comes from feeling under the gun because some critical task falls only on one person. No wonder that people often work even when sick. A leading software firm changed the system of individual accountability so that for critical projects, there were at least two people, and frequently more, with responsibility for tasks so people could cover for each other if they had other pressing issues, but the work would still be completed. Similar to the relay in sports, shared responsibility ensures that people have coverage and that important tasks get completed.

Recognize and embrace the connection between work and family

We all need to recognize that children are part of our working life now. The WFH experience has turned every day into bring-your-children-to-work day because that's what's on employees' minds. While they're at work, they're thinking about the daycare pickup, the fact that their child has a behavioral issue, and how they're going to create a nutritious meal.

In India, more women than men reported work-family conflict,



leading to greater absenteeism, more employee turnover, reduced labor force participation, and reduced productivity. The COVID-19 crisis is a perfect time to remediate family leave, paid time-off, and other policies that inhibit work-family conciliation.

Assess and support people to cope with the crisis

Without data, it is impossible to manage anything, including employee well-being and engagement. Gallup has published five “pulse” survey questions that any company could use to monitor changes over time due to interventions. IDEO, the design firm, instituted a people tracker so they could support employees in their work wherever they are—at home or locked-up in a remote location. Many Indian companies have partnerships with counseling organizations such as Pre2Doc and MHFAI. A few others do Zoom town hall sessions during the crisis and provide all support ranging from providing equipment at the company’s expense to social support and referrals to mental health professionals.

Unleash employee creativity

Companies like IDEO channel everybody’s energy into collectively designing what it means to work in this new way. They have taken pieces of their process and crowdsourced the answers to questions such as how design research methods can move to the virtual world. While this may be easier for such firms, it can be done by many others too.



Avoid layoffs, postpone non-urgent tasks, provide support, embrace the role of the family—these are all sensible practices. Not just for the COVID-19 crisis, but for all shrewd human resource leaders and leading-edge companies, all the time

From reducing economic insecurity and stress to unleashing employee creativity, these are all sensible practices. Not just for the COVID-19 crisis, but for all shrewd human resource leaders and leading-edge companies, all the time. In that sense, the current pandemic changes nothing about what good leaders and good companies should always be doing; it just makes those actions more imperative in the here-and-now. 

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DR. PFEFFER is chair professor of organizational behavior at Stanford Graduate School of Business and **DR. MUNEER** is Managing Director of CustomerLab and Co-Founder of the non-profit Medici Institute.