Organizations' Readiness in Protecting Their Workforce from the Health Challenges in the Post-COVID Era

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the traditional way of operations of any organization.

Before the COVID-19 Pandemic, most organizations paid little attention to employees' mental health, few remote working options (also known as the working from home concept), and extensive business travel (national and international).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have availed services virtually, purchasing goods and services through E-Commerence online portals.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has diminished significantly in India; specific health issues and medical emergencies are still growing among individuals.

As a precautionary measure, organizations may need specific measures to protect their employees' and their families' health. These measures would not only help maintain the well-being of the employee and their family members but also help the organizations keep their workforce healthy and ensure that health issues do not impact the business. Customer connections are used to get feedback; the organization can use electronic media for marketing campaigns and get customer feedback.

One should remember that these measures should be continuous, may require the definition of a new set of the organization's business policies, impact the organization's stakeholders, and may incur additional budget. The benefits can be tangible, and specific benefits are intangible.

As we learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations should keep their business plans ready to address any eventualities. Organizations should focus on the health and safety of their workforce.

In conclusion, the abstract positions organizational readiness as a dynamic and ongoing process, emphasizing the need for adaptability and continuous improvement to address any eventualities in the future.

Keywords

COVID-19 Pandemic, Human Workforce, Remote working, Work life balance, Business continuity

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Introduction

This article talks about the steps to be taken by Organizations to protect their employees from the Health Challenges in the post-COVID era. Because, for any Organization, their workforce is one of the primary backbones, Organizations should pay a particular interest to protect them.

In this article, a comparison is made between the pre-pandemic period Vs the pandemic period and the current state (post-pandemic period). Based on this comparison, what steps are required for organizations to look after the well-being of their employees?

This document may give a few pointers on the proactive measures that the organizations can consider in case of any future eventualities (similar to COVID-19) and/or the current health condition of the employees (after the COVID-19 impact).

Please note that the scope of this article mainly focuses on the organizations' readiness to protect their workforce. Even though the Organization's focus is spanned across multiple areas, those areas need to be described in this article.

Organizations' Behavior during the Pre-COVID-19 Pandemic Period

Below are some areas wherein the Organization and employee relationship and their behavioural aspects before the COVID-19 pandemic varied across industries, organizations, and regions. Please note that these are the general observations:

Job Market and Employment Stability: The job market was relatively stable in many geographic regions and business areas. The existing socio-economic factors influenced the respective regions' job market.

Employees had opportunities to explore new opportunities based on the demand for the job market. From the employee's point of view, the employment focus was not solely on job retention but also career growth and advancement.

Employee Engagement: Organizations invest in initiatives to improve workplace culture, enhance communication, and create a sense of belonging among employees to keep them engaged. To achieve this, organizations conducted training programs/workshops, gauging the behavioural aspects of the employees. Also, organizations have spent significant time and money on innovations and digitization and provided job-oriented training to their employees to improve their knowledge levels.

Work-Life Balance: Work-life balance was a key consideration for employees. Many organizations were adopting flexible work arrangements and offering benefits that supported a healthier balance between professional and personal life. Most organizations have implemented either fixed working hours for their employees/or provided paid time off and other facilities to ensure the employee's personal life is respected.

Professional Development: Employees were actively seeking opportunities for professional development and skill enhancement. Training programs, mentorship, and career progression were significant factors in attracting and retaining talent. That helped the employees grow in their career paths.

Technology Adoption: Organizations used to spend significant budgets on new technologies and specific business process improvements. At the same time, the employees are adopting new digitization tools and undergoing specific training to learn new technologies /skills.

Collaboration and coordination: Within the organizations, teams or employees collaborate to achieve specific shared goals. Similarly, employees are coordinating among themselves to address their customer issues.

 Diversity and Inclusion: There was an increasing awareness and emphasis on diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Organizations were taking steps to create inclusive environments that valued diversity of perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences. Organizations are maintaining such harmony among their resources.

Job Satisfaction: Employee satisfaction was a priority for many organizations. Companies recognized that satisfied and motivated employees tended to be more cooperative and contribute positively to the Organization's overall success. Organizations often change their employees' job roles and recognize and reward them appropriately to keep their employees happy and satisfied at the workplace.

Health and Wellness Programs: Organizations are used to conducting employee wellness programs. The primary objective is to focus on their employees' physical and mental health.

Commute and Workplace Location: Employees used to commute to the workplace regularly. In specific organizations, employees may need to visit customer places or other designated locations on a need basis.

Organizations readiness during the COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown period

During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period, organizations worldwide implemented various strategies to navigate the unprecedented challenges and sustain their operations in the market. While the specific actions varied across industries and regions, several common steps were taken by many organizations:

Remote Work Transition: Remote work became a key strategy to ensure business continuity—organizations invested in technology infrastructure, collaboration tools, and cybersecurity measures to support employees working from home. Organizations have taken few safety measures for employees in offices or working with their customers.

Business Continuity Planning: Many organizations revisited and updated their business continuity plans to address pandemic-specific challenges.

This included identifying critical functions, developing contingency plans, and ensuring robust communication channels and escalation procedures.

Cost Reduction and Cash Preservation: Organizations implemented cost-cutting measures to preserve cash and navigate economic uncertainty. This included reducing non-essential expenses, freezing hiring, and sometimes implementing temporary layoffs or furloughs. On the other hand, daily operational and business travel costs are drastically reduced for most organizations.

Digital Transformation Acceleration: The pandemic accelerated digital transformation initiatives. Organizations invested in digital technologies to enhance online presence, improve customer experiences, and streamline internal processes to adapt to changing consumer behavior.

Supply Chain Diversification: Many organizations reassessed and diversified their supply chains to reduce dependence on a single source. This was done to mitigate the impact of the supply chain disruptions caused by global lockdowns and restrictions. So that there will not be any loss in production. That way, the organizations ensure that their employees are engaged optimally to meet the market demand.

Agile and Adaptive Leadership: Agile and adaptive leadership became crucial. Organizations with leaders who could make quick decisions, communicate effectively, and lead with empathy were better positioned to navigate uncertainties. Shifting the Agile helped the employees follow the dynamic instructions during the COVID-19 pandemic confusion period and quickly adapt to the new work style.

Employee Support and Well-being: Organizations prioritized employee well-being by offering mental health support, flexible work arrangements, and communication channels to address concerns. Employee engagement initiatives were crucial to maintaining a positive organizational culture. In many organizations, the senior or middle management interacts with their employees and checks the well-being of the employees and their family members.

Investment in Health and Safety Measures: Organizations invest in health and safety measures to protect employees and customers.

Community Engagement and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): Engaging with and supporting local communities became a focus for many organizations. During a challenging period, corporate social responsibility initiatives were heightened to contribute positively to society.

Organizations unprepared to tackle future situations like the COVID-19 pandemic may face various challenges and consequences.

Here are some consequences:

- Disruption of Operations due to unavailability of resources

- Employee Productivity

- Employee Well-being

- Challenge in Employee Retention

- Taking more time on the Recruitment

- Crisis Communication Challenges

- Organizational growth opportunities

- Impacted on the Innovation

- Impacted on Adaptability

- Supply Chain Vulnerabilities

- Financial Implications

- Losing the Customer and Stakeholder Trust

- Legal and Regulatory Compliance

Most organizations (in small or medium-range organizations) were unprepared to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic effectively because of the following:

- Financial condition

- Lack of awareness of the COVID-19 pandemic impact initially

- Negligence

- Unable to make quick decisions on their business execution

- Unable to find the alternate supply chain mechanism

- Not able to hold their customer base during the COVID-19 pandemic period

- Lack of trust and confidence between the Organization and its employees.

These are some of the core reasons the organizations are unprepared during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the reasons mentioned above, some organizations in India and worldwide are shut down permanently.

To prevent such debacles in the future, in the COVID-19 era, this article points out some of the recommendations that organizations may need to focus on protecting their employees. Eventually, that would boost their business and help the Organization sustain itself in the competitive market.

Organization's readiness to safeguard its employees

While focusing on the Organization's readiness to safeguard its employees, we can divide the employee's needs into four broad categories:

A. Employee Health Related

B. Employee Family Related

C. Employee Finance (Economic Conditions) Related

D. Employee Career Related

Now, we can analyse how organizations can implement their budgets/efforts to protect their employees by covering the above four broad categories.

A. Employee Health Related:

Organizations may extend their employee medical insurance coverage to protect their employees and their dependents from the following:

1. Long COVID or Post-Covid Side effects, Chronic Diseases due to COVID-19, and to protect the employees from the increased Medical Expenditure due to the illness.

2. Organizations should focus on training the workforce on basic first aid /and handling medical emergencies. This basic first aid training would help the employees protect their colleagues at work pace and their family members when they need basic medical help (like first aid).

3. Organizations can track their employees and immediate family members' vaccination records. The timely and required vaccination dose can prevent diseases, and employees can lead healthier lives.

4. Organizations may recommend that their employees undergo periodic precautionary medical tests to detect any anomalies in their bodies at a very early stage. That would help them get proper medical assistance in the initial stage itself.

5. Organizations can keep a few medical response Kits available at the workplace so that in case of emergency, there will be no rush to the nearby medical pharmacy or suffer due to the shortages of supplies.

6. Providing Periodic updates to the employees on the health emergencies in the local areas would increase awareness of what is happening in their local community in advance. Accordingly, the Organization or the employees can take some preventive measures.

7. Provide good workplace hygiene and encourage employees to maintain Personal hygiene. Also, organizations can inform about the hygiene practices among employees' families.

8. Organizations can introduce inclusive policies that cater to the diverse needs of their employees, considering factors such as gender, age, and individual circumstances.

9. Organizations may provide necessary assistance to their employees while working remotely, including guidance on setting up a comfortable home office and access to necessary equipment.

10. If an employee is sick, organizations should impose restrictions such as not allowing that employee into the Organization's premises. This step may be harsh, but the

Organization can help society by preventing the spread of the virus/infection to others.

B. Employee Family Related (Work-Life Balance)

1. Work-Life Balance - Employees prefer more family time: Due to the work-form-home culture extensively implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, most employees would like to spend time with their family members. With the employees, mental health improved significantly. This would create a positive impact in the workplace.

2. Providing Work from Home Option or Working in Hybrid Mode: Post COVID-19 Pandemic, most organizations have implemented the 'Return to Office' and asked their employees to work from the office locations. However, the majority of the workforce prefers to work from home. A hybrid working culture is ideal for balancing the Organization's demands and the employees' preferences. This way, one can protect the employees' preferences and the Organization's mandate. Here, one should understand the nature of the Organization's business and ensure that the Organization's goals/targets are not affected due to work from home or returning to office mandates.

3. Facilitating remote working options by providing proper infrastructure: As part of the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, organizations can provide basic infrastructure to their employees. So that in case of any need, employees can immediately shift their work location to a removed area or from home without any hassles. This helps ensure that the work is maintained.

4. Providing Paid Time Off: Employees can be given paid time off to take a break, spend free time with their families, and explore new places. This would rejuvenate their energy levels.

5. Organizations should encourage their employees to stay closer to the workplace. This way, they can get exposed to the public, or the rush hour traffic would be minimal. This would help them not only in the polluted environment, but they could help the environment by emitting less carbon!

C. Employee Finance (Economic Conditions related)

1. Medical assistance program: Nowadays, medical and preventive health bills are soaring. If the employees and their dependents have proper health insurance plans, they may avoid paying these bills from their pocket. Organizations may extend the employee's medical insurance plans to avoid such conditions.

2. Providing floater medical insurance policy to the impacted employees

D. Employee Career Related Aspect

1. Encourage the employees to upskill in their day-to-day activities: Organisations should strive for the employee career aspect. During the pandemic, most of the job

roles were altered or vanished. Organizations should focus on providing alternate or additional job roles to keep the employees on the rolls. This way, the employees may gain experience in the new roles or learn new activities.

2. Please encourage them to learn a new skill different from their experience: Organizations should encourage their workforce to learn a new skill unrelated to the Organization's line of business. For instance, a medical professional (doctor or a surgeon) can focus on content writing, or a salesperson can focus on cooking (Preparing high-calorie food or juices that diabetic patients can consume). This would give an alternate job opportunity; if there is a problem and the current job position is closed, this alternate skill will pave the way for their earnings.

3. Innovation of new ideas: Organizations should focus on having innovative ideas to run their business operations effectively even if a COVID-19 pandemic occurs shortly. Most small- and medium-scale business operations had dynamically shifted to the new technologies and found the channels to connect to their customer base and sustain the business.

4. Organizations can foster team bonding among employees by socializing events, team-building activities, and specific get-togethers. This would have a very positive effect on the mental health of the employee.

5. Organizations should ensure that the employee workload should be balanced effectively. Ensure that all the employees have more or less similar workloads to avoid any comparison between employees.

6. Organizations should encourage, recognize, and support employees who are caregivers by offering resources, flexible schedules, and an understanding of their unique challenges. Include such employees in the Organization's CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) activities.

Conclusion:

Organizations need to protect their employees from the post-COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations should follow the local government health updates and accordingly give directions/suggestions to their workforce. Organizations may need to collaborate with local health authorities to tailor their strategies to the specific circumstances of the pandemic. Organizations should always have precise communication mechanisms, make proper shift arrangements to move their employees to safer places, and maintain a healthy work environment during challenging times.