



Viewpoint: Post COVID - 19 Workplace - The new order is here!

By Vikram Shroff April 20, 2020

Our world has come to a screeching halt in a most dramatic way that none of us could imagine. But every cloud has a silver lining, this COVID-19 cloud shall soon pass. Until then, we should all follow government guidance, remain strong and hope for the best. We are all in this together and together we shall overcome it.

During these difficult and unprecedented times, we can only wonder as to how much from before will truly remain relevant for the future.

Will organizations remain the same and act in the same manner?

Will everything go back to the way it was prior to COVID-19?

Will there be a new way of working?

Will the leaders' role dramatically change?

Will handshakes and office parties be a thing of the past?

Only time will tell.

The lockdown has just been extended in India until May 3, 2020. The Ministry of Home Affairs of India has issued a [comprehensive Order on April 15, 2020](#) which includes important guidance for the workplace. Progressive organisations meanwhile are already thinking of what could be the new normal - the new workplace situations that will surface as we all look forward to going back to our usual lives. Businesses will need to be more agile and responsive to make up for the lost time and simultaneously address the workplace challenges that will come up. Leaders can use this opportunity to lead by example, making sure the organisation stays workplace ready.

Here are some new considerations that leaders will need to anticipate and plan for, once the lockdown ends and the workplace resumes.

1. More than ever, will there be a need to ensure the employees' health, safety and well-being, especially in light of the employer's duty of care obligations. Leaders will need to ensure that infected employees make prompt disclosures and do not come to the workplace, to not risk the other workers.

2. Leaders will need coordinated efforts to ensure the safe return of employees and their families who had travelled abroad on work assignments, especially in high-risk countries, and were unable to come back to the country on time. They may also need to be quarantined or self-isolated upon their return, depending on the countries where they stayed during the lockdown period.

3. Urgent measures will be needed to manage and reduce the overall risk to the organisation. For example, travel disclosures, mandatory temperature testing, requiring unwell employees to go back home, obtaining medical / fitness certificate, etc. can be some new HR processes to be incorporated.

4. Employee work arrangements may be revisited to introduce work from home guidance and telecommuting policies, especially those who prefer to continue to work from their 'home office'. Confidentiality and data security considerations will become paramount in such situations.

5. Innovative leave policies may be considered to allow for unpaid special time off for medical care for employees and their family members, like the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA) of the USA. Health insurance policies may be reviewed to include COVID - 19 type coverage. Employee vaccination and access to better medical facilities, may also be some value-add initiatives for employee care.

6. Commuting in crowded Indian cities while using public transport may continue to be a challenge. Not all employers can manage or afford to provide employee transportation. Leaders may introduce flexible and innovative work schedules to avoid rush hour traffic.

7. Training and sensitization on cleanliness and hygiene standards may form part of the overall code of conduct training and could soon be the new normal at the workplaces. Best workplace competitions should include new criteria on the organisation's approach and focus towards health and safety.

8. Employment contract and HR policies may also need to be revised to account for greater flexibility for both parties, should such an unprecedented situation occur again in the future! Provisions on mandatory leaves and lay off will need to be introduced, in addition to a clause on force majeure. Inhouse counsels will need to be involved to help implement these changes.

9. Leaders will need to sensitise their team members to maintain confidentiality - an employee's health information and medical records in electronic form is protected under Indian data privacy rules. Any such leaked information, such as past medical history of an employee could also lead to employee discrimination as other employees may start avoiding him.

10. Compensation and benefits structures may also need to be revisited. Some of the traditional allowances may give way to newer and innovative allowances, for example a hygiene allowance, to enable employee to claim reimbursements for purchasing masks, basic hygiene and health related products for themselves and their family. Employee performance awards could include employee's ability to stay healthy and happy!

This may just be the ideal opportunity for leaders to demonstrate their leadership. They should come together and exchange important information and best practices with their peers. They will need to think beyond their daily routines and introduce innovative ideas focusing on worker welfare. They can help form core groups to help prepare and front-end their organisations well in time to be ready to respond to the new workplace challenges, thereby creating a long-term and positive impact.

This time in our lives will never be forgotten. We need to make the most of these moments and ensure we emerge stronger on the other side. We do not fully appreciate something until taken away, especially when it comes to our family or health. We will all undoubtedly appreciate our life, our freedom and each other, even more after this crisis. It is nice to see how our families, neighbours, colleagues and strangers are all sharing and caring. It will hopefully, make a lasting positive social impact on all of us and help build a new trust-based workplace.

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