Jawad Syed explains how organisations can ensure the involvement of their employees during a crisis and suggests 15 steps to enable or sustain employee engagement

Ensuring employee engagement amid a pandemic

In a fast-changing and uncertain situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic, many leaders are struggling not only in terms of organisational survival and operations but also in terms of the continued engagement and well-being of their employees.

As someone who studies organisational behaviour and people management, I regularly tell students, business leaders and policymakers that employee engagement is the key for organisational survival during a crisis.

To cope with COVID-19 , countries are resorting to extreme preventive measures such as social distancing, home confinement and lockdown. As a result, organisations are forced to cease their normal operations and instead are exploring and experimenting with alternative ways of work.

In this article, I explain how organisations can ensure the involvement and engagement of their employees during this pandemic. Based on insights from human resource management literature as well as a survey of organisational approaches to COVID-19 , I discuss 15 steps to enable or sustain employee engagement.

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1. Communications

The most crucial enabler for employee engagement in a crisis is communication. Employers must keep their staff updated and involved in terms of organisational response to a crisis.

In this era of immense flows of information and misinformation, organisations should create channels where information and guidelines from credible sources may be disseminated to employees in an easy and accessible manner.

Communication may also be directed at informing employees about existing or revised organisational policies such as health coverage, employee assistance programmes and working from home.

For example, Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) in Pakistan is offering online sessions known as "LUMS Live", led by the Vice Chancellor, for virtual interactions with students, faculty members and other stakeholders.

Communication may also be directed at informing and educating customers and other stakeholders. For example, Target's CEO has sent a note to customers, providing details of enhanced cleaning procedures and additional staffing for order pickup and drive-up services.

2. Technology

Robust technology is crucial for a reliable flow of communications. An impoverished infrastructure in the shape of outdated laptops, obsolete apps or poor internet connection may inhibit employees from making a meaningful and timely contribution to their work or from engaging with their co-workers and other stakeholders.

Organisations should regularly invest in information and communication technology.

For example, Twitter has provided home office setup expenses to employees who are working remotely. Similarly, LUMS has committed to provide free-of-charge internet access to all students fully dependent on financial aid. Companies such as Nestle and Tetra Pack have subscribed to third-party apps to enable their employees to work from home.

3. Trust

Another key factor for employee engagement in a teleworking context is a culture of trust. This will depend on whether managers trust their employees in the absence of direct or immediate visibility of their work. Those managers who previously were in the habit of continuously monitoring or micromanaging their employees will need to be more trusting and respectful of their teams working remotely.

4. Accommodation

Given the COVID-19 situation, schools and day-care centres in many countries are closed. This means that employees with caring responsibilities not only have to do their work from home, but are also dealing with education, well-being, and the food and hygiene of their dependents.

Managers need to be more understanding and accommodating of these circumstances when specifying tasks and timelines for their employees.

For example, organisations may consider paying for educational games or online tutoring of children for employees working remotely.

In April 2020, Microsoft announced three-months paid parental leave for its workers as schools were shut and parents had to cope with children taking online classes at home. The tech giant gave two options to its workforce: take a 12-week leave at one go or a few days in a week.

Furthermore, organisations may take into account gender differences and individual circumstances of their staff. Female employees are generally more likely to be struggling in terms of a "double shift", that is, managing domestic duties alongside job requirements. This diversity may be taken into account in task allocations and timelines.

5. Visual interactions

Remote working during a pandemic may result in feelings of isolation and loneliness. Virtual meetings and interactive tools for collaboration can help organisations address this issue. Although it may not be made mandatory, employees, where possible, should be encouraged to keep their webcam on during online meetings. Such visual interactions may bring life, colour and interactivity to an otherwise dry and mechanical meeting.

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6. Training

Home confinement during a crisis may be used as an opportunity for training. In some instances, remote working may not be an option but if it is, employers may encourage and support their employees in attending online training courses to develop skills, not only relevant to their current job but also useful in future assignment.

Training opportunities may be provided to develop employees' understanding of digital technology, which may assure employees' future career paths. Many universities and other providers are offering online courses on a variety of topics at a minimal charge or free of cost. This opportunity should be taken up.

7. Sense of community

A sense of community may be developed through an intelligent use of technology. For example, dedicated web pages on intranet or private groups on social media may be created to celebrate employees' birthdays, wedding anniversaries, work anniversaries or to showcase any awards.

Team members can share fun or creative activities such as healthy cooking, a picture of a finished game of Scrabble, fitness and well-being challenges, gardening or anything else that could encourage a healthy lifestyle and a feeling of belonging.

8. Psychological support

Employers may organise online therapies and counselling for employees experiencing anxiety and uncertainty. For example, Starbucks employees can use therapy sessions and meet a counsellor in person or via video chat.

9. Office time

Another major issue is the failure to honour the boundary between office and family. It is crucial to refrain from blurring this boundary. Many people who work from home keep their smartphones with them 24/7 and some of them tend to check and respond to messages within a matter of minutes. This may lead to burnout and must be avoided.

As a matter of policy, organisations must avoid the always-on working environment. For example, there should be no work-related communication outside the normal working hours and, while there may be exceptions, the boundary of office hours must not be violated.

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The crowdsourcing platform 'NASA@work' is an internal website, where employees can provide ideas and come up with solutions in response to certain urgent global requirements, such as personal protective equipment ventilators and forecasting models

10 Alternative work patterns

Depending on local regulations and guidelines, organisations may explore alternative work patterns to keep their employees engaged, safe and productive. Here are a few examples.

Khyber Teaching Hospital has allowed its doctors to practise telemedicine in outpatient departments so that patients are not deprived of healthcare while ensuring the safety of their medical and nursing staff.

Coca-Cola has restricted visitors to its facilities, split manufacturing plant shifts to minimise contact, reduced the number of people in a shift, and provided their employees, in production and distribution facilities, with sanitisers and alcohol wipes.

Engro Foods has given its employees the option to work from home using Microsoft Teams and other apps. Work deadlines have been made flexible, and the company has added new clauses in its health insurance policy.

Procter & Gamble is taking actions such as temperature scans, shift rotations, queuing avoidance, physical distancing and work from home if an employee is unwell.

Habib Metropolitan Bank is operating with only 30% of the branches during the COVID-19 lockdown. Employees have been divided into two teams working on alternate days and those above 55 years of age have been advised to work from home.

For the organisations still recruiting such as those in superstores (Walmart), food delivery (Domino's) or online shopping (Amazon), recruitment drives are taking place through virtual screening and interviewing.

11. Generosity

Organisations may engage in social responsibility initiatives for their employees and wider community. This may reinforce individual pride in organisational identity.

For example, Google has established a COVID-19 fund that allows all temporary staff and vendors globally to take paid sick leave if they have potential symptoms of the virus or cannot come into work because they are quarantined.

While Apple's initial policy was to only guarantee its full-time employees paid leave, it has now stated that contractors and daily-wagers such as cleaners and drivers who are not required to work from home, will also be paid.

McDonald's has promised to donate one million N95 masks across Illinois as the state battles a growing number of COVID-19 cases.

Unilever has donated 12 million rupees to provide PPE kits for medical and paramedical staff in hospitals in Pakistan.

12 Employee voice

To enable two-way communication, organisations may create structures and channels for employee feedback. For example, virtual "town hall" meetings of senior management with an entire department or workforce may be organised.

Similarly, virtual continuous improvement groups may be formed to gather ideas for problem identification and resolution. Employee surveys may be conducted online to assess and refine organisational intervention and policies.

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N95

McDonald's has promised to donate one million N95 masks across Illinois as the state battles a growing number of COVID-19 cases

13. Crowdsourcing

Employers may use the crisis and remote working situation as an opportunity to develop a sense of civic responsibility and innovation. For example, in April, 2020, NASA announced a new project to develop ideas for how the organisation could assist in the COVID-19 pandemic. The crowdsourcing platform 'NASA@work' is an internal website, where employees can provide ideas and come up with solutions in response to certain urgent global requirements, such as personal protective equipment ventilators and forecasting models.

14. Time zones

Another factor to ensure engagement in a remote working context is the understanding and respect for different time zones. In scheduling meetings or assigning deadlines, employers should consider different time zones. Within one time zone, meetings may be scheduled within working hours while for different time zones, meeting times may be kept as convenient as possible for all team members.

15. Cultural diversity

Diverse religious and cultural traditions, rituals and festivals should be considered in scheduling meetings or specifying timelines. For example, the Ramadan timings of meals (Suhoor and Iftar) or Ashura rituals in Islam, Hindu rituals of Diwali and Holi, or Judaic traditions of Yom Kippur and other cross-cultural sensitivities should be accommodated as much as possible in scheduling projects and meetings.

To summarise, while individual, organisational and national circumstances may vary, the steps above, with some customisation, may help organisations and leaders ensure employee engagement during a crisis. As Malcolm X once said: "The future belongs to those who prepare for it today".

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About the Author

Dr Jawad Syed is Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Leadership at Suleman Dawood School of Business, Lahore University of Management Sciences, Lahore, Pakistan jawad.syed@lums.edu.pk