

COVID-19: What's keeping HR leaders awake at night?

We spoke to some of the leading CHROs across industries and asked them some of their concerns and what keeps them awake in this crisis. There were multiple reasons shared by them, read below to know some of their major concerns.



“All I need is a night of sound sleep and want to forget what is happening around me, but unfortunately there are things that are keeping me on my toes and awake at night”, replied one of the HR professionals when I asked, what is keeping you awake in this crisis?”

Well, sentiments are similar to all the leading CHROs in the industry. Last year, articles were published about what's the future of HR, surveys were conducted to find out if AI will replace HR. But, people indicated that machines can't replicate the human touch. And, COVID-19 proved that right!

All CHROs are on the speed dial of their CEOs nowadays because managing people is not an AI's job or an easy job.

The last few months have seen a whole raft of problems that HR professionals are facing in terms of keeping everything on track. Before this pandemic, people leaders were worried about things such as production, attrition and upskilling. But, the circumstances have changed everything, now these leaders are stressed about things such as employee safety, health, etc.

We spoke to some of the leading HR leaders across industries and asked them some of their concerns and what keeps them awake in this crisis. People leaders are finding it difficult to manage such crisis but they are not leaving any stone unturned to make the employee experience better. There were multiple reasons shared by them, read below to know some of their major concerns.

Health risks

With more than 74,000 positive cases of coronavirus in India, organizations are scared about their employees because they are prone to risks. Companies are working from home but there are many sectors working from offices during the lockdown and providing facilities to the consumers, and organizations that come under the essential category are among them. All these employees are meeting new people every day and they are prone to risks.

Rahul Pinjarkar, CHRO at Trent Hypermarket, said, “I am having sleepless nights because I am in the business where my people are completely prone to risks. What will happen if anyone gets infected?.” He is taking all the necessary steps to make sure that employees are safe at the stores, during their commute and boosting their confidence that the company is with them.

CHRO of Tata Power, **Himal Tewari** echoes the same thought on health risks, he said, “Yes, I have sleepless nights and for us the health of our workforce comes first and it is crucial to deliver the care they require in the current situation. I am keeping a positive frame of mind in order to motivate and support the team working at the plant.” He is taking care of the employees by good planning, monitoring & execution of all health & safety measures for the workforce.

Workers in the manufacturing plants, neighborhood retail chains, people working in banks are out in the field with high risks. People leaders of these sectors are always awake, trying to find an equilibrium between smooth functioning and a risk-free environment.

Job security & salaries

Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged all public and private companies to ensure that they do not cut the salaries of their staff or resort to layoffs of their employees. But, things didn't turn out that way. It is hard to say how many jobs were lost and salaries of how many people have been stopped due to this crisis.

Companies across the sectors have fired people from all the possible roles and have also asked to take pay cuts or go on sabbatical. People leaders are finding it difficult to manage anxious employees, given job security and salary have an upper hand over anything else.

Deepa Chadha, CHRO, Vistara feels that the organization's concern is to make sure that the livelihoods of all our employees aren't affected. She added, “We are also concerned about preserving jobs because we want people to come out of this challenge as winners and it shouldn't dampen their spirit.”

In the current scenario, the bigger picture is to do everything that will keep the employees positive. **Ajay Kumar**, Country HR Head, Continental India is worried about preserving and protecting the employees and managing through the current uncertainty. “We have to understand that our entire life has changed and we have to do whatever we can, for example- counseling services, job security, salaries on time,” he added.

Employers will be remembered by the decision they take during this crisis because even the smallest of the things count. Going forward the talent ecosystem will pay a premium to organizations who demonstrate resilience, authenticity & transparency in their people decisions during times of crisis. **Amit Das**, Director HR, BCCL shared, “As an HR leader, what keeps me awake is the effectiveness of “how” part of various business & people decisions that we make today, which will be the yardstick to measure the attractiveness of our employer brand in future”.

Emotional and mental well-being

Employees are following a prolonged work-from-home operating model for the first time, which is causing behavioral and attitudinal change. All the leading organizations are advising employees to adopt simple health measures during this prolonged shutdown to be physically and mentally upbeat.

Aditya Kohli, Chief HR Officer, Clix Capital said, “I am worried about the mental stress and anxiety that surrounds my people. At the end of the day, if you don't know something then your anxiety level goes up. That's what keeps me awake and I am finding opportunities to support them proactively.”

Further, working under the challenging situation of a nationwide lockdown is quite stressful with a negative impact on employees and their family members emotional and mental wellbeing. It is necessary for the companies to engage with them and keep them motivated. Talent leaders are organizing virtual sessions with counselors, yoga and meditation with techniques for dealing with anxiety and stress to help ensure that the workforce is safe, healthy, and motivated at this difficult time.

Post-COVID culture

When the lockdown will be over, we will not be going back to the same offices that we have left. Not only infrastructure wise but from the culture perspective too. Things will be different, staff will need to transform themselves digitally, be prepared for remote work and a drastic change in the office culture.

The new emerging world brings enormous opportunities as well as challenges. Raymond Ltd CHRO, **K Narayan** feels that the new consumerism and spending habits would have changed by the time the new normal emerges. He is worried about the new code of leadership and what is the new culture that will make companies succeed.

Dinesh Ramamurthi, Global CHRO, OYO said that the safety and security of all colleagues are of utmost importance to the firm and also his personal priority. He is focused on building capabilities that will help the company emerge stronger, leaner and more resilient from this crisis. This will put the organization in good shape to take on the opportunities that the post-COVID world will have to offer.

Remote employee engagement

Working remotely puts a strain on an employee's ability to build bonds. Creating employee engagement remotely is still a task for the people managers. With the lockdown being followed everywhere, companies are finding it more difficult to engage with the employees. They are coming up with virtual coffee sessions, DJ sessions and Tambola but these are not enough to keep them engaged.

The physical engagement has no replacement, virtual sessions are optional and it comes up with validity. CHROs are feeling the pressure of keeping the staff engaged. **Renu Bohra**, CHRO, DB Schenker mentioned that she is worried about health and safety but employee engagement during social distancing is a major concern.

In a recent report, the World Health Organization has said that coronavirus may never go away. Getting sleepless nights is natural for people managers, but it is also important to re-configure the organization with new wiring. Changing mindsets are not easy but one has to bite the bullet at some point.

It may take some time but hopefully, everything will come back on track, and HR heads get that sound sleep until a new crisis comes knocking at the doors.

What's keeping them awake?



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Trent Hypermarket



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Himal Tewari
Tata Power



I am anxious about the health of our workforce.



Deepa Chadha
Vistara



I am worried about livelihoods and preserving jobs.





Amit Das

BCCL



I am thinking about today's decision that'll impact the brand in the future.



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