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HR's Compelling New Role In Response To The Coronavirus



Tracy Brower

Contributor



Careers

I write about the changing nature of work, workers and the workplace.

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HR has a new role amidst the coronavirus—to drive business success and the work experience. GETTY

The coronavirus pandemic has caused tremendous disruption in lives and in business, and human resources (HR) is key to supporting companies and catalyzing changes in the workplace. Organizations must rethink, reimagine and reconsider how they foster talent, deliver services and strengthen their organizations through a forward-thinking HR strategy—how they deliver the most compelling work experience.

The issues are complex—including employee support, leadership development, pay and benefits and shifts and strategic partnerships across the organization. Here are some of the most important ways HR can lead, partner and drive for the best in their organizations.

Reimagining The Organization

Systemic thinking. To survive, businesses must adapt to the [future of work](#), and the capability to move with speed and [agility](#) is a critical capability HR can influence. HR is in arguably the best position to see overall processes, communication and collaboration across units, functions, business groups and silos. HR can facilitate dialogues that help ensure the right amounts of reinvention, re-proportioning and re-prioritizing of business goals to adapt to shifting customer demands and markets in response to the crisis created by Covid-19.

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Company culture. [Organizational culture](#), too, is a critical contribution area for HR. With employees who have been sent home, culture is context for decisions and work ethic. It guides choices and actions—and must be managed intentionally. Julie Stich, CEBS, Vice President, Content, at the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans (IFEBP) agrees, “As we create a working environment—be it in the office or home offices—employers need to consider how the company culture is impacting their teams.” HR can conduct culture assessments and close gaps between current culture and desired culture—helping to manage the myriad variables that affect culture. They can help prioritize where to focus and how to sustain culture through disruptive times. Change is significant, and HR is in the best place to catalyze transformation and motivate shifts that will reinvent organizations.

Leadership. [Brilliant leadership](#) will ensure success for organizations and there is no room for mediocre leadership during difficult times. HR has a key role to play in developing leaders, ensuring they are successful and holding them accountable. According to Amy Leschke-Kahle, vice president of performance acceleration at The Marcus Buckingham Company, an ADP Company, “As stewards of the organization’s talent, HR has a responsibility to create the practices that maintain focus, create connectivity and ensure continuity between the most critical partnership in the world of work: that between the team leader and the team member.” Leaders require new and enhanced skills in managing from a distance, motivating employees toward a vision in the midst of ambiguity, providing calm and clarity, aligning work among team members and building community.

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It’s All About Talent

Talent strategies. An organization’s success is based on having talent in the right roles at the right times, and HR is integral to this process. A [recent study](#) of 600 executives across 20 industries found when companies’ talent and business strategies were aligned, they were more likely to retain top talent and achieve superior performance. Managing talent through the pandemic requires fundamental shifts. At the same time some parts of the organization may be shuttering, other parts of the organization are ramping up. This dynamic requires strategic redeployment, flexibility, reskilling and tapping into the gig economy with speed and effectiveness. As companies re-open or accelerate their journey back to a fully operational state, every company is a start-up in some way. Start-ups require employees who can invent, solve problems and experiment. Systems to tap into these skill sets will be advantageous. The employee value equation is shifting, and HR is in the best position to ensure robust employer branding, creating a compelling case to attract talent. HR helps ensure talent contributions and based on this, it is nothing less than an engine for the company’s success.

Social capital. People need to feel a sense of community, common purpose and camaraderie. [Social capital](#) is the goodwill, fellowship, linkages and shared understanding that allow us to work together most effectively. HR has a role to play in helping the organization build, maintain and sustain social capital among employees. Establishing mentorship programs and affiliation groups, developing teams and ensuring thorough onboarding are ways HR can make a difference here.

Engagement. Engagement is tough to ensure when people are working from home because the physical workplace cannot bring people together, contribute to their focus or create camaraderie. “Managing fully or partially remote teams is a skill that will transcend the pandemic, and organizations will need to adjust how work gets done in response,” says Dave Garrett, Chief Strategy and Growth Officer, Project Management Institute (PMI). HR can recommend best practices for engagement—through all kinds of creative approaches. HR can also keep a finger on the pulse of engagement through quick surveys and the creation of feedback loops that provide leaders with a barometer of where they need to double down on checking in, motivating and keeping people on board.

Diversity, equity and inclusion. The pandemic has disproportionately affected diverse populations and HR has a role here as well—ensuring [diversity](#), [equity](#) and [inclusion](#).

This includes educating the organization, understanding the realities of diverse experiences, and taking proactive steps to equalize the playing field. HR can bring diverse voices to the table, to decision-making processes and provide equal access to opportunities. A combination of dialogue and action is important. Michele Meyer-Shipp, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer for KPMG says, “It’s a critical time for organizations to proactively engage with employees and discuss these important issues—but it’s equally important to demonstrate that actions are being taken to drive real change.” HR can enhance empathy, foster civil discourse and help ensure organizations to take action for what is right.

Wellbeing And Work-Life

Holistic wellbeing. Wellbeing is not just about physical wellness, but also about cognitive and emotional health. “As an employer, you have a profound impact on your workers’ well-being,” says Stich. Millions of employees are reporting [mental health issues](#) based on the pandemic and HR can offer expanded support in everything from employee assistance programs to programs for mindfulness, exercise, nutrition and financial counseling. Andy Ellner, CEO and co-founder, Firefly Health, a virtual primary care provider agrees, “This is a profoundly stressful, uncertain time for employees and we are seeing a major surge in panic, depression and anxiety among the patients we serve. Employers need to step up to ensure easy access to care and, ideally, proactive screening for mental health conditions.” The care companies provide in these areas is good for people, but also good for the business since people with a greater sense of holistic wellbeing can contribute more fully and bring their best to their work.

Work-life. Work is a part of life and a full life includes the opportunity to contribute to worthy endeavors through work. The pandemic has expanded empathy for work-life and this view renews the opportunity to offer flexible working, child care and additional work-life options. “At this time, it’s critical we also consider work-life balance alongside mental health,” says Chris Port, COO of Boomi, a Dell Technologies business, “No one’s life is the same, and what balance means to each person and how to achieve it is different.” Most companies report they will continue some level of working from home and HR must support options for where people work, when they work and even the extent to which they are supported in their home offices with furniture or ergonomic solutions. Says Port, “It is time we recognize the difference between working from home and being at home during a crisis trying to work.” HR can be instrumental in catalyzing new and expanded approaches to the support of work-life.

Administering HR Systems

Employment, compensation and benefits. HR is also the keeper of employment, pay and benefits systems. HR departments can ensure empathy and equitable processes when layoffs are unavoidable. In addition, the best HR departments have implemented plans to offer increased flexibility, giving employees the chance to change elections or work status (part-time to full-time for example) or shift retirement plans. They are addressing compensation needs for all employees—including unemployment, workshare programs, commission-based plans and more. The seamless administration of these processes with perfect quality is critical to employee financial health and employee trust.

People analytics. With data at their fingertips, HR can be especially helpful to organizations in making sense of the employee experience and recommending responses. Understanding how people are working and the demographics of the organization make HR a primary source of information for the most robust leadership decision making.

Policy development. The typical HR department may write a couple policies a year, but the pandemic has necessitated a new approach to the rules and practices that guide the organization. Many organizations have had to establish regulations based on federal or state mandates and have had to formalize their approaches. Whether it is new policies or written FAQs which provide for consistency and clarity, HR must respond quickly to develop these with the broad input from stakeholders.

The Office

Office reentry. Welcoming employees [back to the office](#) following stay-at-home orders is new territory for companies. HR, in partnership with facilities, will need to ensure safe, efficient workplaces. According to Stich, “As you bring your workforce back to the office, know that nothing will be the same. It’s okay that you don’t have all the answers, but do be prepared to ask questions of your employees. How can you help them feel safe and secure to come back to work? Be prepared to listen, and act.” Everything from entering the building to circulation patterns and elevator usage will be important to consider. All of these will need to be administered with sensitivity and as much employee choice as possible. Liability will also be a consideration as companies seek to provide a safe work environment, and one in which employees may demand some “guarantee” of cleanliness to ensure their wellbeing.

Overall, HR is in a fundamentally influential role to ensure success of organizations through and beyond the pandemic. Taking the lead in reimagining the organization, developing talent strategies, addressing wellbeing and work-life, administering HR systems and facilitating reentry to the office are all critical and uniquely skilled contributions HR can make.

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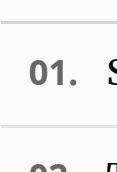
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Tracy Brower

I am a Ph.D. sociologist exploring perspectives on work-life and fulfillment. I am the author of [The Secrets to Happiness at Work](#) and also [Bring Work to Life by Bringing...](#) [Read More](#)

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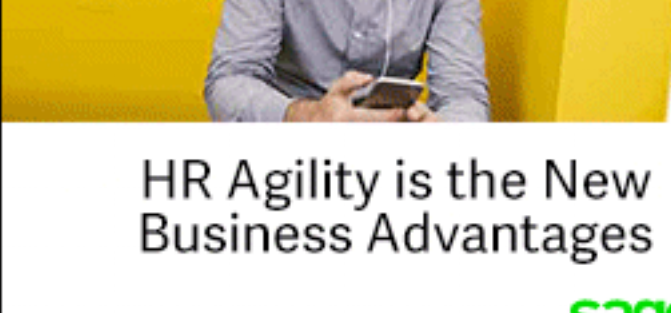
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