

Employee Well-being during the Pandemic: Creating the Right Support Structures

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The coronavirus pandemic has had a major psychological impact on public health and has raised serious concerns for those infected or at risk. Isolation and reduced social contact to contain the contraction of the virus onto the population have restricted people to seek out support from their family and their social networks which in turn elevated the risk for increased anxiety and depression symptoms among individuals. Businesses have experienced disruptions in operations and tremendous financial losses have been reported. Specific for the employment context, workers are at risk to develop high stress and anxiety due to job insecurity, reduced autonomy, unfavorable 'work-from-home' conditions and they experience concerns for future employment. Both individuals and organizations are affected: Excessive occupational stress, if not managed, can lead to employee burnout, an 'occupational phenomenon' recognized by World Health Organization. This article highlights how stress associated with Covid-related changes for global work affects well-being in employees and provides recommendations for organizations and individuals to face the adversities more successfully.

Well-being and work stress during the pandemic

The World Happiness Report argues that the unemployed are significantly less happy than those who are employed in a cross-section of countries. Workers experiencing hardship associated with the pandemic and facing extreme unhappiness at their job are also more likely to resign from their positions or at the risk of losing their jobs. This will further decline the sense of well-being associated with job loss making it a vicious cycle of labor economics.

The above challenges have pushed organizations and scholars to explore new ways to achieve similar outputs as expected from traditional forms of global work were born, prompting the use of global virtual teams and possibilities of implementing 'hybrid' international assignments ideas. The working lives for employees during the current pandemic crisis have been uniquely characterized by working in isolation, dealing with additional job-specific demands due to working online, lacking guidance/advice from peers and challenges to maintain regular communications with work teams. This might be especially pertinent for expatriates as these often have less extensive local networks. These specialized working conditions have created immense reliance on usage of information and communication technologies which often times triggers 'technostress'. Technostress leads to negative psychological responses such as feelings of anxiety, fatigue, and skepticism. Concerns can also be raised that the use of these modern tools have allowed employees to meet their job expectations at the cost of putting in longer working hours and blurring work-personal life boundaries for many. Especially expatriates are more likely to work across many time zones which leads to a higher chance of work – life conflict and spill-over effects.

The effects of the pandemic on the well-being of global workers

Expatriates work in high-pressure environments and they experience more organizational demands (e.g., new job roles, longer working hours & enhanced stress, strong performance pressure). In addition, due to living in a host country they also face more *expatriation-specific environmental demands* (e.g., living environment, security risks, language barriers) and enhanced *private pressures* (e.g., work-life conflict, work-life balance). It can be assumed that expatriates might need to tackle these multiple demands created by the complex and stressful conditions in the expatriation process simultaneously. Expatriates face profound changes in both work and family situations, which is especially true if the expatriate has a partner and/or has children. These leads to an increased risk of conflict in expatriate's work to non-work life spheres. These inherent hardships coupled with the challenges brought up by the pandemic threatens the well-being of expatriates and their families like never before.

Research done by GLOMO – an EU-funded global mobility project – shows that expatriates job performance and willingness to continue working in the international capacity is negatively affected by all these pressures. But there is a ray of light: GLOMO research has also found that organizational support can help in maintaining work-engagement among expatriates. So, what can be done to successfully tackle these challenges?

How should organizations respond to the crisis to help maintain employee well-being?

While adjusting to the changes in work-styles and increased workload, many employees need to establish better strategies to make the most out of their 'work from home' opportunity. Even though the physical safety and comfort of working from their home can be beneficial for some, the reality of it comes with some set of challenges. This includes additional responsibilities for the working parents who have young kids at home to take care of. It can be difficult for these employees to find a balance between their job responsibilities and childcare without affecting their emotional and mental wellness.

Numerous research suggests that the failure to implement workplace well-being provisions can affect the psychological needs of employees thus creating concerns for their well-being. Employers around the globe are putting in efforts to tackle their employees' well-being risks. There are increasing emphasis on staying connected with co-workers beyond the requirements of work through arrangements like virtual pizza lunches, coffee breaks, extra time during regular meeting for non-work-related chats etc. These activities designed to improve the climate and to further team cohesion and understanding are often proven to be beneficial for individuals, teams and work effectiveness.

All interventions addressing employee well-being are commendable but more structural solutions with long-term plans need to be in place. It is imperative that employers around the world recognize the risks associated with work-related stress and take on some responsibility for their employees' mental health and well-being. Responsible employers are expected to develop and adopt 'employee-friendly' work practices that might aim to limit any unnecessary stress at workplace. These developments could promote policies encouraging employees to stay connected and feel bonded with their peers while allowing flexibility at the same time.

The challenge for global organizations is even stronger as some of the extra demands on expatriates and their complex situation have to be factored in. The GLOMO research has shown that for global roles the additional workload demands and the spill-over effects between work and home needs to

be mitigated by relaxing workload expectations, setting realistic goals and encouraging better work-life balance. In a post-pandemic era, organizations have to work towards rebuilding the social contracts with their employees through creating a new culture of care, trust and transformative, people-centred leadership. Mutual trust across country borders will encourage employees to share their mental health challenges and can be used to prepare an effective crisis management plan to ensure the well-being of employees wherever they work in the organization. These strategies will have strong implications for the future of businesses, global staff and, by extension, their families.

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