

## Human resources management in the age of 'adapt, evolve, or die'

In South Africa, the resilience managers developed in previous crises may have made their responses to COVID more robust, write Shaun Ruggunan, Ashika Maharaj, Jonathan Naicker, and Linden Singh



Prior to the pandemic, the Republic of South Africa was already dealing with a largely stagnant economy, an almost 26% official unemployment rate, high HIV and TB infection rates, national power cuts and economic downgrading by various international rating agencies. Ironically, the resilience developed in dealing with these significant issues by organisations and human resources (HR) professionals may have made responses to the pandemic more robust.

Our preliminary data indicate that while there is considerable anxiety about “unknowable unknowns”, there are also pockets of resilience and hope for new ways of practising HR. Most businesses allowed to operate under lockdown scrambled to adapt to new ways of working, that is, remote work, and to implement the government’s stringent lockdown health and safety protocols. Arguably, COVID-19 compelled organisations to implement digitalisation and re-engineer work processes and protocols that were on the back burner. Rather than “new ways of working” being a futuristic concept, many businesses were now forced to “adapt, evolve or die”.

We have uncovered six insights from studying the case of South Africa:

First, given the strict social distancing and sanitisation protocols implemented by the government’s lockdown policy, HR professionals have had to rethink and reimagine their workspaces. While many organisations that participated in our study have adopted remote working practices, others in the manufacturing sector have had to adopt shift work and short time in order to continue their operations with reduced capabilities. They hope to return to normal operations once the pandemic is over.

Second, sectors such as finance, communication, and knowledge production have adopted remote working. Many of the participants who were interviewed spoke of these changes being considered as part of the new way of doing business, post COVID-19. Most call centre and sales agents are now working from home, and most businesses are reporting that productivity has not been compromised. Support from the IT division has been critical and of paramount importance not only in setting up home offices, but also by providing online technical support, in terms of learning how to use the myriad of communication tools available to keep in contact (Zoom, MS Teams, Skype). While connectivity has proven to be a challenge in some areas of South Africa, it has not significantly affected productivity, as these workers were allowed ‘special leave’ or restricted access to the office.

Our research has highlighted the inequality in South African society, where even though spotty connectivity may not be such an issue, the conditions under which work can take place at home have been. Many employees find themselves at home with spouses, children, elderly parents, etc., where a suitable workspace such as a study or even a table and chair is a challenge.

Third, employee wellness is a crucial concern during this pandemic that has forced businesses to explore the humanitarian aspect of doing business. Putting employees first, while conducting a profitable business is now paramount. HR professionals have to create a new range of employee wellness programmes, such as mindfulness, meditation, stress management, crisis management, grief counselling, physical fitness programmes etc. to help employees to effectively deal with current conditions, aggravated by social isolation. Increased communication from HR professionals, CEOs, managers and colleagues helps employees to keep in touch. HR professionals themselves have learnt how to cope with their stressors by engaging in activities such as baking, gardening, meditation and physical exercise.

Fourth, the role of the state in providing a range of social benefits such as special COVID-19 unemployment insurance, and Temporary Employment Relief (TERS) for employers and employees mitigated large scale economic distress. Strong social partnerships amongst the state, organised labour and employers assisted this process. However, there have been challenges in accessing these funds, and some employers have become innovative by creating their own "hardship" funds. For example, executives have taken a 10-15% pay cut, created special COVID-19 leave and offered advances on commissions payable.

Fifth, two types of flexibility emerged from the data. The one is flexibility of work design and practice, that involves reorganising work and production physically, spatially and temporally. The other form of flexibility that emerged is the mental or cognitive flexibility of HR professionals that allowed them to reimagine ways of managing, working and viewing their own professional identities. The tempo of change was unprecedented and required situational responses in uncharted territory. Reimagining what it meant to be an HR professional from caring for others to self-care and new ways of organising work and production is a fundamental theme that participants reflected on.

Sixthly, trust emerged as a critical component in remote work. For some organisations, new technologies were able to monitor and control employees' work remotely, for example, by logging the amount of time spent online, keystrokes and other metrics. For others, trust was established simply if employees met outcomes and deadlines and the process followed to get there was not significant. Performance management systems are one area that will have to be overhauled post COVID-19.

What is clear is that there is no homogenous change in HR functions or roles as a consequence of the pandemic. Rather, it is sector and role specific. The most profound changes will be around organisational agility and resilience. Conventional organisational change models do not resonate or apply given the rapidity of the change that HR management has experienced in the past few months. As we enter the Anthropocene age and the world becomes increasingly susceptible to changes wrought by climate change, significant and rapid adaptations will become the norm.



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