

# Covid-19 & Employee Related Challenges for The Corporate

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*Sudden lock down and changing norms of workplace has given rise to a challenge to the Human Resource (HR) departments of the organizations; they are required to facilitate the adaptability and coping with the sudden changes warranted because of pandemic. HR needs to identify the employee related challenges during and post-pandemic and have to review their strategy to cope with the uncertainties. This paper first, explores the employee related challenges that organizations faced due to pandemic; secondly, identifies the strategies followed by organizations to mitigate the effects or respond to the challenges and thirdly, examines the perception of HR regarding the preparedness of the organizations and employees to resume work.*

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## Introduction

Novel Corona virus spread which began in Wuhan in China has been declared a pandemic by World Health organization (WHO) as its outbreak has threatened the whole world. This is an infectious disease and can be transmitted from the infected person to those who come in contact with the carrier of virus. Covid-19, as it is called has taken lakhs of lives across the globe and has affected the social, economic, personal, professional and other spheres of life (Nicola et al., 2020). In various parts of the world the administrators implemented different norms to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Some countries responded to the situation by announcing Lockdown to counter Covid-19. All institutions were closed down except essential services (as defined by the respective governments). Social distancing and quarantine became the prevention measures. The measure of social distancing and the quarantine time kept changing as the research on the novel disease progressed. In order to abide by the norms, all economic activities were staggered. OECD (2020) predicted the weakening of economic growth of the world. On the one side economic

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slowdown and on the other fear of uncertainty, in terms both of health and finance, would impact the employees negatively (Brooks et al., 2020; MacIntyre, 2020; Shigemura et al., 2020). The weakening of economy would lead to furloughs and layoffs of employees (World Economic Forum, 2020). The uncertainty around health, job, finance and also the work overload would increase the anxiety and stress among the employees (Li et al., 2020), which would reduce the employee productivity. Social isolation has added to the agony. The employee and his/her family's physical as well as mental well-being become important. The pandemic has thrown open a challenge to the Human Resource (HR) departments of the organizations; they are required to facilitate the adaptability and coping up with the sudden changes warranted because of the pandemic. HR needs to identify the employee related challenges during and post-pandemic and have to review their strategy to cope up with these times of uncertainty. The objective of the paper is to explore first, the employee related challenges that organizations faced due to the pandemic; second, the strategies followed by organization to mitigate the effects or respond to the identified challenges and third, the perception of HR regarding preparedness of the organization and employees to resume work.

Different researchers have studied Covid-19 and its impacts on different stakeholders (Brooks et al, 2020; MacIntyre, 2020; Shigemura et al., 2020; Li et al, 2020). Brooks et al (2020) discussed about the distress caused due to the lockdown, social distancing and quarantine. This is affecting the mental well-being of people (Alradhawi et al, 2020; Li et al, 2020; MacIntyre, 2020). Uncertainty (Gao et al., 2020), threat to safety and security (Xiang et al, 2020), isolation (Brooks et al.,2020; Wang et al., 2020), threat to job and income (Zhou et al., 2020) are some of the factors that cause anxiety and stress. The anxiety increases with the repetitive announcements of the precautions to be taken (Shigemura et al, 2020). Those who are quarantined are distressed due to loneliness and boredom (Xiang et al, 2020).

The workplace related issues need attention both during and post-lockdown times (Carnavale & Hatak, 2020). Employee is affected both at the personal and professional fronts and the impact of one on another is difficult to avoid. So, the employee experiences anxiety and distress in their personal sphere due to the reasons mentioned above. But professionally also he/she is grappled into uncertainties like job continuity and salary disbursements. Due to economic slowdown and the lockdown, many organizations are laying-off the workforce as they either do not have work for them or they cannot afford to pay regular salaries. Besides that, the lockdown being sudden, there has been no plan of technological upgradation, which is essential as the 'Work from Home' (WFH) is the

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norm of the lockdown period. Lack of planning again added to the problems. The network connectivity issues, the capacity of devices like mobiles and laptops to add the applications facilitating WFH and emaciating line of demarcation between work and family life (Chawla, MacGowan, Gabriel & Podsakoff, 2020) affected the employees adversely.

### **Methodology**

The data was collected through online survey which included both qualitative and quantitative questions. The five qualitative questions like: “List the employee related challenges faced due to pandemic”; “What steps are taken for the physical as well as mental well being in times of isolation and social distancing” are included in survey. The qualitative responses were validated through interviews. The quantitative questions were based on Likert scale of 1 to 5 where ‘1’ denotes ‘low’ and ‘5’ denote ‘High’. The quantitative questions were related to ‘preparedness to adapt’ ‘preparedness to resume work after lockdown’ of both the employee and employer to adapt the new normal. Data was collected from two hundred and thirty Human Resource professionals of corporate in the sectors of IT, textiles, consulting, heavy machinery, pharmaceutical, oil and gas, chemicals and metal, automobiles etc. The average work experience of the respondent was 20.8

years with the lowest being 7 years and the highest 40 years. Qualitative data was analyzed through ‘Thematic method’ and for quantitative data the independent sample ‘t’ test and means were calculated.

### **Challenges Faced**

The responses to the question on listing the challenges faced by the organization due to the pandemic and thereby the lockdown were classified broadly under four categories: business, operations, infrastructure and employee. Under the ‘business’ category the sub-themes that emerged were: issue of continuity of business and financial crunch which are both related. The continuity of business was difficult to manage due to lockdown. Primarily those which were into non-essential services were not allowed to function during lockdown times. Besides, even if some were allowed on the basis of being essential services, they faced issues related to logistics and lack of labor. The transportation was on halt and therefore both procurement and sale were affected. This increased the cost of production of any good or service but the clients were not willing to bear the cost and on the other side the vendors were not making payments quoting the closure of work as a reason for non-availability of finance. Hence, the small

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companies found it difficult to continue operations and also disburse the salaries in time or at times less salary or even no salary. This financial crunch aggravated the situation and employees who were already anxious due to Covid-19 and the uncertainty because of it, started moving towards their home-towns.

Generally, the laborers are the migrants from other states. Due to the pandemic and close down of the workplaces, they were facing problems related to the fulfillment of their basic requirements. So, these laborers managed to leave for their native places on their own or waited for government machinery to make the arrangements. In either of the cases the labor was not available for work, when the companies got approval to operationalize again. This led to the second category 'operation'. As mentioned above, the companies were closed down as part of lockdown norm but even if they got government permission to begin production or services, it was difficult for them to work in full capacity as most of the employees were not available due to their movement to hometowns or because of the employees' families pressurizing them to stay home to be safe. Besides, social distancing, safety and hygiene became the key norm of the workplace. It was difficult to get them to work also because of the means of commutation as the public transport was not available. Canteen facility, regular beverages and even common lunch time was not provided to the employees in these times and according to the new norms for workplace, this would continue to remain so, to avoid gathering of em-

ployees and to provide the arrangement for social distancing.

The companies where employees followed 'Work from Home' norm, the HR professionals have challenges like attendance; monitoring and team connect of the employees. The employees seem to lose their concentration and have lower productivity. 'Infrastructure' the third category adds to the Work from Home blues and affects the productivity of employees. The unpreparedness of the companies and the inability of employees to manage online working required immediate action then by the HR professionals. The employees faced network connectivity problems which disrupted the work reducing the productivity.

**'Employee burnout' was the first sub-theme. The second theme was 'work-life balance'.**

'Employee' the fourth category was under stress and anxiety causing burnout. The employees were stressed due to work overload and work overlap. The anxiety about the uncertain times and lot of caution notifications are pushing them in the dungeon of burnout. Earlier research has already proven that burnout decreases the employee productivity (Ghavidel, Fallahi-Khoshknab, Molavinejad & Zarea, 2019). Hence 'employee burnout' was the first sub-theme. The second theme was 'work-life balance' (WLB). The employees found it difficult to manage the WLB as both the 'work' and 'life' were disrupted. At work, they were adapting to the norms of 'new

normal' and at home, they had no help available for domestic chores. Also, they were involved in maintaining the hygiene of their homes. If both the spouse are working from home and the children also have online classes, they have to facilitate the child's learning also. So striking a balance between requirements of 'work' and the needs of the 'family' became another task for the employee and could also lead to the burnout. 'Employee well-being' was the third theme which is important because of the health concerns due to the pandemic and also because the out-patient departments of hospitals were closed down for some time. Hence, providing support to employees in the times of health issues was a challenge for the companies. Anxiety and burnout are also affecting the mental well-being of the employees which requires immediate attention and hence the counseling services need to be provided to the employees. Companies also conducted online zumba sessions, yoga and meditation to fight the lockdown anxiety. Next theme relates to 'employee engagement'. As discussed above about WLB, burnout etc. the situation raises concerns about employee engagement. The employers tried some online games, fitness sessions, spiritual talks to seek employee engagement. They were encouraged to get involved into organization's future planning and also in their own career development programs.

The 'employee attitude' which includes the working style of employee, his/her adaptability of new normal and attitude towards work overload due to the crisis is another cause of concern. Be-

sides, it is important to boost the employee morale and build the trust among employees. The Managing Directors, CEOs or other management heads addressed employees to communicate the companies' support to the employees and to re-assure their safety during the crisis. The department heads connected to the individuals directly to enquire about their well-being and concerns.

Other concerns included the daily requirements of the employee even when they were working from home. They had issues in buying essential commodities like groceries or medicines. The employees who were staying alone in the town (i.e. not with family), had problems because of closing down of food delivery services. The employers had to provide food services to the employees in such cases. One of the HR professionals of an IT company shared, "We stay in-touch with employees for checking their well-being. If they are having any issue in regard to food for outstation employees, helping them with the same by providing viable options".

Talent acquisition has also been stalled, rather there is lay-off by many organizations like Uber, Zomato.

### **Steps Taken by the Organization**

In the times of social distancing and isolation, employee well-being was a major concern for the organizations. In order to build trust and provide assurance the companies are focusing on regular communication. They circulate all government notifications regarding

the pandemic to keep all employees aware. Some companies which have the internal newsletter provided periodic updates to the employees. Senior management connected with the employees periodically to strengthen their faith in the organization. President HR of one power transmission company mentioned, "Trust building by Managing Director through different communication mode".

**Employers have provided the online medical consultation links to the employees.**

Physical well-being of the employee is critical during the pandemic. Employers have provided the online medical consultation links to the employees. There were teams to regularly update the health data of the employees. Also, for regular fitness zumba sessions, yoga and other fitness sessions were conducted and the timely notifications were sent as reminders. The companies where employees were on duty, workplace sanitization and hygiene were followed to provide safe and secure environment.

Engagement activities like sharing of bright spots; trivia quiz; online meetings like walk ins where employees connect with each other for socializing were part of the regular company activities which also affected the well-being of the employee. Employee development activities like functional trainings and skills training like NLP were imparted to the employee for value-addition

Organizations believe that for future exigencies like this it is important to reduce the fixed cost. They suggest that there is need to be opex heavy and not capex heavy. Cash flow optimization especially through Opex monitoring and rationalization is the lesson to be learnt from these uncertain times. Few respondents strongly believe that the contingency funds should be reserved for such unforeseen lockdowns. Remote-work enabling infrastructure needs to be strengthened. The Information Technology (IT) infrastructure should be the priority of the companies.

Employee related policy like goal-setting, compensation and health insurance and well-being policy would require revision to accommodate the health concerns due to the pandemic and WFH norms. Besides all this, the pandemic has been a reality check on the leadership qualities and it has been realized that leaders lack the skill to manage a crisis. Hence there is the requirement to train for crisis management.

The companies believe that some of the challenges are psychological. Employees would have anxiety and fear in coming out for work. Ensuring safety would be an important aspect. Since the employees have been working from home for a while, they might demand to continue so. Further the companies which have laid off some proportion of their workforce, face the challenge of building trust amongst the other employees as they might experience 'Survivors' syndrome'.

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## **Challenges of Resuming Work**

The infrastructural challenges would be high fixed costs and poor receivables. The employers would have to make arrangements for maintaining social distance at work and hence would require additional cost to revamp the workplace layout. This also makes it mandatory for the organization to work with less labor. Working with less labor in times when there could be backlog of work would put work pressure on the workforce and could cause stress and burnout.

**The employers might have to revisit their annual strategies and make changes in the norms and policies to accommodate the ‘new normal’.**

The employers would have to change the workplace layout to maintain social distancing. The safety gears like mask, gloves and regular sanitization are the norms for the workplace post-lockdown. It would also be a challenge to screen the employees because of the suspected infection. One pharmaceutical company which was allowed to be functional during lockdown, had to close down its operations in one of its plants as some 26 workers were found Covid positive. Such situations need to be handled and the regular monitoring of the employees would be the protocol for work. The employers might have to revisit their annual strategies and make changes in the norms and policies to accommodate the ‘new normal’.

## **Strategy to Combat Labor Crunch**

Most of the respondents accepted that the labor shortage would be the obstacle in regularizing the work. However, a few believed that the productivity of current workforce could be increased to combat the challenge of labor’s non-availability. Few others suggested that taking care of all basic requirements of the labor and clearing their unpaid salaries, could also help the organization to get the labor to work. For the employees who could still continue to WFH, the companies are strengthening the technological infrastructure and are enforcing the strategy of digitalization and automation. The health insurance for all employees is another safety net.

## **Change in Policy**

The ‘employee well-being’ policy would require a change and for approximately sixty percent of respondents it’s the first priority. On the second rung is the policy of ‘compensation, performance and reward’, which is on the first priority of approximately 23 percent respondents; for all others it is second important on the priority list. The others felt the need to change the talent acquisition and development policy to cope with the changed scenario.

## **Quantitative**

Based on the items which were responded on the scale of one to five, the mean value (M=3.59) of preparedness of employer to adapt to the new normal and employees’ adaptability is slightly above average. The

**Table 1 Mean & Standard Deviation**

	Mean	SD
Preparedness of the company to adapt to the new normal	3.59	1.008
Preparedness to resume work in the changed scenario	3.86	1.037
Employees adaptability to work from home	3.64	.902
Provide support to the employees and their family in challenging times	3.64	1.255
Provide support to society	3.77	1.193

HR professionals perceive the employees' preparedness to resume work to be high with the mean value of 3.86. Similarly, the respondents believe that they have been good at providing support to the employees, their families and society.

**Table 2 Group Statistics**

	Steps taken	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Preparedness of the company to adapt to the new normal	1	3.47	.990	.256
	2	3.86	1.069	.404
Preparedness to resume work in the changed scenario	1	3.60	1.056	.273
	2	4.43	.787	.297
Employees adaptability to work from home	1	3.47	.915	.236
	2	4.00	.816	.309
Provide support to the employees and their family in challenging times	1	3.53	1.356	.350
	2	3.86	1.069	.404
Provide support to society	1	3.67	1.234	.319
	2	4.00	1.155	.436

The qualitative data was then coded for 'steps taken by the organization for employee related issues.' Broadly, two categories were formed based on the themes identified. As mentioned above four themes were identified under this category: employee wellness, employee communication, employee engagement and employee development. Since, almost all the respondents used employee wellness and employee communication, those organizations which used only employee wellness and employee communication were coded '1'. Along with employee wellness and employee communication, some organizations also used employee engagement or employee development. Hence, the next

category which was coded '2', comprising those which along with employee wellness and employee communication used any other step like employee development or employee engagement. Group '1' had 150 respondents and group '2' had 70 respondents. The Independent Sample 't' test showed that the difference between means of 'Preparedness of employee to resume work' was significantly different between group '1' and group '2' ( $t = -1.842, p = .05$ ) (Table 3). Other variables did not show any significant difference between the two groups. However, mean value of group 2 was observed to be more than group 1 for the other variables (Table 2).

**Table 3 Independent Samples Test**

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
								Lower	Upper	
Preparedness of the company to adapt to the new normal	Equal variances assumed	.058	.812	-0.841	20	.410	-.390	.464	-1.359	.578
	Equal variances not assumed			-0.817	11.01	.431	-.390	.478	-1.443	.662
Preparedness to resume work in the changed scenario	Equal variances assumed	1.043	.319	-1.842	20	.050	-.829	.450	-1.767	.110
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.054	15.59	.037	-.829	.403	-1.686	.028
Employees adaptability to work from home	Equal variances assumed	.760	.394	-1.314	20	.204	-.533	.406	-1.380	.314
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.372	13.163	.193	-.533	.389	-1.372	.305
Provide support to the employees and their family in challenging times	Equal variances assumed	.923	.348	-.554	20	.586	-.324	.584	-1.543	.895
	Equal variances not assumed			-.606	14.81	.554	-.324	.535	-1.465	.817
Provide support to society	Equal variances assumed	.305	.587	-.601	20	.554	-.333	.554	-1.490	.823
	Equal variances not assumed			-.617	12.574	.548	-.333	.540	-1.505	.838

## Discussion

Lockdown and social isolation have brought the economy to a standstill. Neither the organizations nor the employees (including labor class) were not prepared for the sudden stoppage of the work. 'Employee well-being' became the major challenge for the organizations. Such situations of uncertainty in the past witnessed anxiety, distress and burnout, which is evident in the current scenario as well. Physical health was definitely the cause of concern but the mental health was also affected adversely. Due to stressful situation and under social isolation norm, the cases of suicide could also be noticed. This was primarily due to depression either because of loneliness or financial problems owing to lockdown. Jobs which could be managed by remote working required strong technical infrastructure, which was the problem for most of the people as the network connectivity interfered the smooth working. 'Work from home' added to the anxiety of employees as firstly, the work and family life boundaries got blurred and secondly, due to school closures, non-availability of child care centers and also the domestic help, the responsibility of the employee towards the family increased manifold.

**Jobs which could be managed by remote working required strong technical infrastructure.**

Organizations also found it important to keep the trust and boost morale of their employees. The management took

to different communication mediums to maintain contact with the employees as the communication could facilitate in restoration of employee trust which is important for resuming the work.

Wellbeing and awareness sessions helped the organization to be in contact with the employee and also monitoring the health of the employee. This would also build the positive attitude towards the organization as the employee feels cared and not left-out.

The comparison of means shows that some organizations follow only employee wellbeing and communication strategy. Employee development and employee engagement along with employee wellbeing and communication shows that along with wellness and communication organizations adopted steps to make the employee sustainable by providing learning and development opportunities and engaging them with the organization. The resilience of employee to resume work increased in such cases. Resilience is important to overcome the crisis times.

## Conclusion

The uncertainty surrounding Covid-19, leaves the organizations and employees in a state of dilemma and confusion. It is important to devise long-term strategies to combat the pandemic effect. The human resource policies would require revision to incorporate the changing requirements of the workforce. The employee well-being and adaptability policies should be given utmost importance. Adaptability and agility would be the im-

portant competence for the employees. The organizations need sustainable HR policies to prepare itself for reviving from current situation and prepare itself for future uncertainties. The Director (HR) of the organization acknowledging the increased significance of people functions during and post pandemic stated, “In the times when the operating systems have become virtual, ‘human sentiment’ might be overlooked. Empathy would be at forefront. Social distancing being the new norm, HR needs to redefine its role by providing care and empathy-based interventions and let technology handle the HR operations. People-centric policies are essential.”

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