

Ensuring Employee Engagement Amid a Pandemic

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Synopsis

This paper examines how organizations can ensure employee engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering practical steps for leaders to maintain employee involvement, wellbeing, and productivity in a remote work environment. The paper highlights key challenges such as isolation, job insecurity, and blurring of work-life boundaries, and provides 15 actionable steps to enhance employee engagement. These steps focus on communication, technology, trust, accommodation of personal responsibilities, psychological support, and employee voice, among others. By integrating these practices, organizations can foster a culture of engagement and maintain high levels of productivity even during uncertain times.

In a fast-changing and uncertain situation such as the coronavirus pandemic, many leaders are struggling not only in terms of organizational operations but also in terms of continued engagement and well-being of their employees. As someone who studies organizational behavior and people management, I regularly tell students, business leaders and policymakers that employee engagement is the key for organizational survival during a crisis.

To cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, countries and governments are resorting to extreme preventive and precautionary measures such as social distancing, home confinement, self-quarantine, lockdown and curfew. As a result, organizations across the world are forced to cease their normal operations and instead are exploring and experimenting alternative ways of work to ensure not only individual productivity and organizational survival but also individual wellbeing and employee engagement.

In this essay, I explain how organizations can ensure the involvement and engagement of their employees during this pandemic. Based on insights from human resource management literature as well as current organizational approaches to

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coronavirus, I offer a list of fifteen steps that may be considered by business leaders to enable or sustain employee engagement.

Employee involvement and engagement are closely interrelated terms². Employee involvement refers to the direct participation of employees to help an organization achieve its objectives, through their feedback, suggestions and efforts towards problem-solving and decision-making³. Employee engagement refers to the extent to which employees feel passionate about the work that they do, the level of commitment to their work and the level of effort, in addition to mandatory effort, which they put in towards accomplishing their job or organizational goals.⁴

Many employers have switched to remote working given that workplaces and government offices have been closed due to health and safety precautions. In many countries, people have been confined to their home, most of them resorting or expected to telework.

There are certain pros and cons associated with remote working, which should be kept into account. The obvious pros are as follows: saving in time, effort and resources on daily commute, individuals may have relatively more flexibility and control in terms of their work schedule, workstation and work style. Individuals also have a better opportunity to manage their family roles and work roles concurrently.

However, there are also certain cons. One major demerit is the blurring of boundaries between work and office, that is when individuals lose a sense of proportion in terms of how much time should be given to family and how much time should be separately allocated to work or office requirements. Moreover, there is a risk of distraction, when commitment in one domain is easily affected by the requirement in the other domain. Then, there is also a possibility of employee isolation and loneliness, resulting from a lack of teamwork and collaboration. So many of those formal and informal meetings and water-cooler conversations, which are a characteristic of daily lives at work, are not available while working from home. Further, there are logistical issues such as Wi-Fi or internet connectivity, technical glitches and machine failures. For certain confidential matters or departments, there may be an additional issue of cybersecurity. Even for non-confidential matters such as online teaching on Zoom, hacking could be an issue. For example, in April 2020, education ministry in Singapore suspended the use of Zoom by teachers after incidents of serious breaches into some online classroom sessions.

From an engagement perspective, the COVID-19 outbreak has had a significant impact on employees' personal and work lives. There are related issues of job insecurity and anxiety and the lack of basic commodities in the supermarket.

In these difficult circumstances, organizations cannot afford to leave their employees unattended. The feelings and experiences of frustration and anxiety can have

² Truss, C., Alfes, K., Delbridge, R., Shantz, A., & Soane, E. (Eds.). (2013). Employee engagement in theory and practice. Routledge; Banihani, M., & Syed, J. (2017). A macro-national level analysis of Arab women's work engagement. *European Management Review*, 14(2), 133-142.

³ Pyman, A. (2016). HRM, productivity, and employee involvement. In Syed, J. & Kramar, R. (eds), *Human resource management: A global and critical perspective*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 315-340

⁴ Syed, J. (2019). Work-life balance. In Syed, J. & Özbilgin, M. (eds), *Managing diversity and inclusion: An international perspective*, London: Sage, 291-314.

a negative impact on employee engagement and productivity, which may in turn have an adverse effect on organizational performance and survival.

Based on insights from the literature on engagement and current organizational responses to coronavirus, here is a list of fifteen steps which may enable employee engagement during this pandemic.

1. Communication

The most crucial enabler for employee engagement in the current situation is communication. Keeping employees informed is the first imperative. Technology may be used to develop a transparent flow of communication from employer to employee and vice versa. It is the responsibility of organizations to keep their staff updated, in terms of organizational response to the crisis, and employees should be involved by inviting their ideas and share their own experiences and insights.

In this era of social media, where there is an immense flow of information, there is also an immense flow of misinformation, rumor and gossip. Organizations should seek to create channels where information and guidelines from credible sources such as NHS in the UK, CDC in the US and World Health Organization at a global level, may be disseminated to employees in an easy and accessible manner, such as with the use of infographics, checklists and brief videos, to educate them about prevention and management of risk.

Communication may also be directed at educating employees about relevant organizational policies, for example, health insurance, health care coverage, and employee assistance programs by the organization, government or local community. Organizational policies about working from home and travel may be revised and disseminated.

Organizations may create platforms for their employees to contribute ideas and share their concerns and suggestions. One example is Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), which is doing live sessions known as 'LUMS Live', led by the Vice Chancellor and other administrators, for virtual interactions with students, faculty members and other stakeholders.

Communication may also be directed as informing and educating customers and other stakeholders. For example, Target sent out a note from the CEO to customers, providing details of enhanced cleaning procedures and additional staffing for order pickup and drive up services. In Noida, India, a private factory informed its staff that over 700 employees working at the factory's premises were kept under watch after a person was tested positive.

2. Technology

A two-way channel of communication may not be possible in the absence of technology. Reliable technology including robust and useful software and physical infrastructure are crucial to enable a reliable flow of communications. An impoverished infrastructure, e.g. in terms of laptops, smartphones or obsolete apps, or in terms of Wi-Fi and internet connection, may inhibit employees from making a meaningful and timely contribution to work, or from engaging with their co-workers and other stakeholders.

In other words, organizations should seriously consider investment in upgrading their technology. For example, Twitter has provided home office setup expenses to the

employees who are working remotely. Similarly, Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) is paying for internet connection expenses for the students facing financial hardships. LUMS has also provided subscriptions for video-apps to its faculty members.

Several banks across the world have made IT and internal communication resources available to their employees, to help them adjust to working from home and have provided a variety of channels for employees to stay well-connected to their work teams.

Companies such as Nestle and Tetra Pack Limited have arranged various third-party apps, such as Zoom and Teams, to allow their employees to work from home. Furthermore, they have changed their attendance and reporting policies in accordance with the needs of the organization.

3. *Trust*

Another key step for employee engagement in a remote working environment is the development of a culture of trust. This will depend on whether managers trust their employees in the absence of direct or immediate visibility of their work. Any managers, who previously were in a habit of continuously monitoring or micromanaging their employees, will need to be more trusting and respectful, when it comes to managing their team members in a remote manner.

In contrast, some organizations are holding daily online meetings and are trying to keep a tab on employee performance through apps like Asana and Slack. They have made custom procedures to monitor individual and teams, including digital time logging techniques for employees. In a remote working environment, such micro-management measures may have limited efficacy.

4. *Accommodation*

Employers should be cognizant of the fact that in the current era, schools and daycare centers are closed. This means that employees with caring responsibilities and children are not only expected to perform their work from home, but also at the same time have to take care of their children in terms of their education and well-being, everyday life, and food and hygiene of their dependents. Employers need to be more understanding and accommodating of these dual responsibilities when specifying tasks and timelines for their employees. This will in turn enable organizations to remain competitive, by virtue of their engaged and productive employees. For that to happen, employers need to be cognizant and considerate of individual circumstances of their employees. For instance, organizations may consider paying for education (or educational games) or caring expenses of children for their employees working remotely.

In April 2020, Microsoft announced three-months paid parental leave for its workers as schools were shut and parents had to cope with children taking online classes at home. The tech giant gave two options to its workforce: Take a 12-week leave at one go or few days in a week. The "12-Week Paid Pandemic School and Childcare Closure Leave" initiative is meant to give employees "greater flexibility and time off as they face extended school closures".

Furthermore, organizations may take into account gender differences and individual circumstances of their staff. For example, female employees are generally

more likely to be struggling in terms of a 'double shift', that is, managing household needs along with job requirements⁵. This diversity ought to be taken into account in task allocations and timelines.

5. *Visual interactions*

Remote working during a pandemic may result in feelings of isolation and loneliness. Virtual meetings and interactive tools of collaboration can help organizations address these issues. Although it may not be made mandatory as individual circumstances or comfort levels may vary, yet where possible, employees should be encouraged to keep their webcam on when using video tools such as Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp and Facebook for their regular meetings. Such visual interactions may bring life, color and interactivity to an otherwise dry and mechanical meeting. This may also address the issue of a lack of collaboration amongst employees.

6. *Training*

Many employees, who are forced to telework during a pandemic, also face home confinement. This situation may be used, in a productive manner, as an opportunity for training. In some instances, remote working may not be an option. Even if remote working is an option, employers can encourage and support their employees financially and logistically to attend certain online training modules or workshops, in order to develop and enhance their skills, not only relevant to their current job, but also useful in their future assignment. Training opportunities may be provided to develop employees' understanding and mastery of digital technology in the current era. This may help employees develop themselves and be more self-assured about their career path in the future. Many universities and other providers are offering online courses on a variety of topics on a minimal charge or free of cost. This opportunity may be availed and incentivized by organizations.

7. *Sense of community*

The suggestion about a sense of community is an extension of the point about visual interactions. This sense may be developed through an intelligent use of technology. For example, video chats within groups, dedicated blog sites or web spaces on intranet or private groups on Facebook could be created. Such forums could be used for various purposes, e.g., to celebrate employees birthdays, marriage anniversaries, work anniversaries, or to showcase any awards, which they have won as a result of either internal or external competition.

From a social side, team members can share highlights from their weekends, fun or creative activities which they did in their own homes. For example, something to do with healthy cooking, a picture of a finished game of Scrabble or another board game,

⁵ Banihani, M., Lewis, P., & Syed, J. (2013). Is work engagement gendered? *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 28(7), 400-423.

fitness and well-being challenges, gardening or anything else which could encourage healthy lifestyle and a feeling of belongingness amongst team members. Such activities may also be highlighted on the organization's intranet, electronic newsletter or Facebook page.

8. *Psychological support*

Employers may organize and provide online therapies and psychological counseling for their employees in the current era of anxiety and uncertainty. For example, Starbucks employees can use therapy sessions and meet with a counselor in person or via video chat. Similarly, communities of support may be established in which mature members of an organization can proactively act as mentors and a source of comfort.

9. *Office time*

A major issue affecting employee engagement is the failure to honor the boundary between office and family. There is a need to emphasize organizational responsibility as well as individual responsibility to refrain from blurring the boundary between work family. This may be enacted by honoring actual office hours, usually between 9:00am and 5:00pm on a weekday. Respecting and keeping this boundary intact will ensure sanity and psychological satisfaction of employees.

It is common observation that many people who work from home usually keep their smartphones with them 24/7 and some of them consider it their responsibility or have an urge to check and respond to messages or emails within a matter of minutes. This may lead to burnout and must be avoided.

As a matter of policy, organizations must avoid the always-on working environment. For example, there should be no work-related communication outside the normal working hours, and while there may be exceptions, the boundary of office hours must not be violated.

10. *Alternative work patterns*

Depending on national and local regulations and situation, organizations may also explore alternative work patterns to keep their employees engaged, safe and productive. Here are a few examples.

Khyber Teaching Hospital has allowed its doctors to practice telemedicine OPD in order to ensure that patients are not deprived of healthcare while ensuring the safety of their medical and nursing staff.

Habib Metropolitan Bank in Pakistan is operating with only 30% of the branches opened in Sindh province. Employees are divided into two teams working on alternate days and those above 55 years of age are advised to stay at home, till the situation improves.

In several organizations, regular weekly meetings are being conducted across functional departments to ensure communication and engagement between employees who are also advised to maintain a work life balance. For on-site workers, strict safety measures have been specified. For example, ICI has implemented a 6 foot distance policy for its staff working on its plants.

Some organizations such as the Coca-Cola have restricted visitors to their facilities, split manufacturing plant shifts to minimize contact, reduced the number of people in a shift, and provided their employees, in production and distribution facilities, with sanitizers and alcohol wipes. Moreover, the company assists employees regarding any necessary isolation or sanitization protocols in case they are infected/potentially infected.

At Unilever, sales team can only have virtual connection with customers, and office based employees can have office meetings, only after country's general manager permission, else they are expected to work from home. Moreover, the company has offered up to three months' additional pay to employees (with safety protocols in place) who work to keep facilities secure, premises clean, or run cafeterias.

PepsiCo is providing enhanced benefits to all US based employees and additional compensation to the frontline employees, who are the people involved in making and moving the products in the current situation. In the production and distribution area of PepsiCo, strict hygiene policies are being followed: increase in frequency of cleaning, providing hand sanitizers and emphasizing hand washing.

LUMS has provided Zoom subscriptions to its faculty members to enable them to deliver their lectures from home. Moreover, the university has provided online lectures and other resources to train faculty members for online teaching.

At Fauji Fertilizer Company, most of the management is supervising from home online, but the plant site workers, who are close by and are not burdened by families, have been called into longer shifts and are quarantined at the plant site.

In Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA), the staff strength in office is decreased to less than 50%, while majority of employees are required to work from home. The head of a particular department prepares the goals for a time frame and assigns work to teams or individuals.

Engro Foods has given its employees the option to work from home, using Microsoft Teams. Work deadlines have been made flexible, and the company has added new clauses in its health insurance policy as well.

Procter & Gamble (P&G) is taking actions such as temperature scans, shift rotations, queuing avoidance, physical distancing, and work from home if an employee is unwell. Moreover, the company ensures that recognition messages and other communications are sent out to all employees personally by managers, to keep their morale up.

Benson Pharma is communicating with its employees and distributors through mobile phones. Orders are taken on the phone, the distributor takes the medicine from the warehouse and provides it to the relevant pharmacy.

The First Women Bank Ltd (FWBL) has limited the number of on-site staff to 5 per day, alternating work routines between some senior members of the management. Most of the junior staff is working from home but are called on-site when needed.

For the organizations still recruiting such as those in superstores (Walmart), food delivery (Domino's) or online shopping (Amazon), recruitment drives are taking place through virtual screening and interviewing methods.

11. Generosity

Some organizations are also engaged in social responsibility initiatives for the well-being of their employees and wider community. For example, while Apple's initial policy was to only guarantee its full-time employees paid leaves, it has now stated that

contractors and daily-wagers such as cleaners and drivers who are not required to work from home, will also get paid.

Google has established a COVID-19 fund that allows all temporary staff and vendors, globally, to take paid sick leave if they have potential symptoms of the virus or can't come into work because they are quarantined.

McDonald's has promised to donate one million N95 masks across Illinois as the state battles a growing number of coronavirus case.

Unilever has donated 12 million rupees to provide PPE kits for medical and paramedical staff in hospitals in Pakistan.

12. Employee voice

Earlier in this essay, the importance of two-way communication was discussed. Organizations should intentionally create structures and multiple channels to enable employee feedback and voice. For example, virtual town hall meetings of senior management with an entire department or workforce may be organized to welcome employee feedback and suggestions. These may be conducted on a monthly or fortnightly basis given the intensity of a crisis. At the same time, virtual continuous improvement groups may be formed and encouraged to gather suggestions and new ideas to identify problems and their resolution.

Employee surveys may be conducted online to assess and refine organizational intervention and policies, and also to gauge and improve employee satisfaction.

13. Crowdsourcing

In the current crisis, some organizations are using employee voice in a socially responsible manner. Employers may use the isolation and remote working situation as an opportunity to develop a sense of civic responsibility and innovation in their employees.

For example, on 1st April, 2020, NASA announced a new online platform to encourage their employees to contribute ideas for how NASA could assist the US and the global community to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. The crowdsourcing platform 'NASA@work' is an internal website, where employees can provide ideas and come up with solutions in response to certain urgent global requirements, such as personal protective equipment (PPE), ventilators and the forecasting models in terms of the future spread, containment and the possible causes of this pandemic.

14. Time zones

Another factor to ensure employee engagement in a remote working context is the understanding and respect for different time zones. In scheduling meetings or assigning tasks and deadlines, organizations and employers should consider different time zones and cultural differences. Within one time zone, meetings may be scheduled between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. while for different time zones, managers should seek to keep meeting times as convenient as possible for all team members. If within one time slot, convening of meeting is not possible, then more than one meetings may be convened.

15. Cultural diversity

Diverse religious and cultural traditions, rituals and festivals should be considered in scheduling meetings or specifying timelines. For example, the Ramadan timings of meals (Suhoor and Iftar) or Ashura rituals in Islam, Hindu rituals of Diwali and Holi, or Judaic traditions of Yom Kippur and other cross cultural sensitivities should be accommodated as much as possible in scheduling projects and meetings.

In summary, while individual, organizational and national circumstances may vary, the foregoing steps with some customization may help organizations and leaders ensure employee engagement during a pandemic. As Malcolm X once said: 'The future belongs to those who prepare for it today'.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the main challenges to employee engagement during a pandemic, and how can organizations overcome them using the strategies outlined in the paper?
2. How does the shift to remote work impact employee engagement, and what are the pros and cons for both employees and organizations?
3. What role does trust play in ensuring employee engagement in a remote work environment, and how can managers foster a culture of trust when direct supervision is limited?
4. In what ways can organizations integrate cultural diversity and respect for different time zones into their employee engagement strategies during a pandemic?

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