

The influence of Covid-19 on SA's work environment

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16 Apr 2020

In the last week prior to and during the lockdown, the number of people working from home increased, while some were sent home on unpaid leave. This has distinguished companies that have started adapting to the 4IR through proper systems from those that haven't adapted at all. Jacques du Preez (IOA) says, "Those quickest to utilise the new technologies that come with the 4IR will reap the most benefit. Some estimates place the profits reaped by early-adopting firms at almost 120%, with a measly 10% for those who only adopt the new technologies later on."



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It is obvious that for those continuing to work from home, there is some kind of productivity and business continuity, although it might not be the same. Decisions are being made, customers are being engaged and provided reasonable service, employees are also engaged and still feel part of the business. Employees can log in from wherever they are, have access to company information and respond to emails. There's also that ability to function seamlessly as if the person is sitting in the office; sign and share documents online and make the necessary approvals and decisions. All of this talks to aspects such as systems integration, the internet of things and cloud computing, which are some of the platforms of change in the 4IR.

Struggling back into gear

On the other hand, those that are not working are going through a "mini shut down", which has a significant effect on operations and organisational culture/human capital. Imagine how long or the amount of effort it will take to get everyone back into the working mode, considering the urgency of recuperating from the effects of the pandemic (high operating costs and low productivity). There is a saying that it takes 21 days to form or break a habit. The lockdown is now longer than that; thus, companies will have no choice but to get employees back to the working and performance mode.

Will they remember what they were working on before the lockdown, how critical the projects were and whether they still are, who was or has to be involved i.e. who are the key stakeholders, where the process was, etc? Was all the information on those projects stored or saved properly in a safe place or will there be parts missing or lost? Will the performance measures (KPIs) have to be reviewed? Depending on the financial year-end, how will this affect the salary adjustments and payment of bonuses, if these will be paid at all? Will employees be able to function together as teams, or will the leadership have to implement initiatives to bring teams together? All of this raises a question: How do companies build a high-performance culture after this, especially for those employees that have not been engaging in any kind of work whilst at home?



How to boost your business while working from home

15 Apr 2020



So, how has Covid-19 influenced the working environment? Simple, the pandemic has fast-tracked the 4IR... corporates, and everyone for that matter, have no choice but to adapt to it.

Business is about making money, and that can be achieved by getting people aligned and performing at their optimal level. Considering our economic status as a country, we want our business community to flourish and take advantage of the innovative ways posed by the 4IR. From a Human Capital point of view, this talks to how the Chief Human Resource Officers (CHROs) usher businesses into this unfamiliar, scary yet resourceful world of technology...

A different skills set

Covid-19, the same as 4IR, has forced organisations to have employees that are technologically inclined, systems that accommodate virtual working style, flexible working environment, different employee engagement practices, a different leadership style, a different culture, etc. First and foremost, Covid-19 is the same as the 4IR calls for different skills set. Du Preez alludes that 4IR will inevitably lead to the redundancy of labour-intensive production and place a far bigger premium on technical and analytical skills. The World Economic Forum has produced a report on which skills will be less in demand vs those that companies will fight for. What does this mean for Human Capital Professionals in organisations? Firstly, reskilling and resourcing.

Companies have to invest in the training and development of their current staff to align with the demands of the technologically demanding period/4IR. Other initiatives might include graduate development programmes sponsoring the skills required by the business/industry in which the business operates; for multinational organisations, consider global job rotation especially with operations in countries where the business has advanced, as well as partnering with tertiary institutions to produce the right skill to fill the leadership pipeline.

Where there are gaps, companies have to engage in thorough and innovative resourcing initiatives to procure the right skill

into the business. Considering the generational gaps and diversity in the workplace, companies have to bear in mind that some of the people in the market may not want to be permanently employed - they might prefer contract work or freelancing. That will lead to war for talent, and winning the war will depend on things like organisational culture, leadership, remuneration, benefits, career growth, exposure, as well as what the organisation stands for.

Culture driving success

Leadership is another critical matter in this, i.e. what kind of leadership is required to drive the business to succeed in this disruptive period? We have learned about different leadership styles e.g. multipliers vs diminishers, transformational, coaching, T leadership, creative vs reactional, etc. So, what combination of or unique leadership style would be suitable in this period characterised by innovation and a diverse workforce with different ways/opinions of achieving success? Could it be that those organisations who managed to continue working during Covid-19 got the leadership recipe right i.e. that the leadership had already adjusted to a different style? That is a question to be debated, but it is obvious that Human Capital professionals have to assist the business in equipping the leaders with the right competencies to take advantage of the opportunities posed by the 4IR.



Keeping company culture alive in a time of coronavirus

Marno Boshoff 3 Apr 2020



I cannot stress enough the importance of organisational culture in driving success during this period. The Covid-19 and the lockdown period favoured organisations whose culture encourages innovation, accountability, performance, risk-taking, trust, integrity and teamwork. This is in line with the demands posed by the 4IR on organisations, and it is vital for organisations to shape their cultures/DNA to be accommodative of the period we are in. Of importance is to explore various employee engagement initiatives given the generational gap in the workforce, as the traditional ones may not be suitable anymore.

Increased inclusion

The great news is the realisation of the possibility of more inclusion as we have seen that an employee doesn't need to be at work or physically in the plant or underground to do his or her job, they can operate the machines in a reasonably accommodative working environment. This talks to the inclusion of people with disabilities in highly technical jobs that may have previously limited them. Companies now have no excuse but to practice equitable employment across the board.

The big question is how do organisations take advantage of these innovative systems when we come back to normalcy so as to recuperate from the effects of the pandemic? Are organisations ready to walk into such a space? How do we, as Human Capital Professionals, engage effectively in the technical and business discussions so as to usher our organisations into this period and guide change? What inclusion policies do we need to fully take advantage of this opportunity? These are questions that require debate at various levels.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nomhlali Nisunguzi, the founder and director of NISSI: Human Capital Solutions. Having worked in the Human Resources field for more than 18 years, she is motivated to see people succeed by helping them make a positive impact in their work environments. Before founding NISSI, Nomhlali held executive HR positions at Aveng Trident Steel, the De Beers Group, the Department of Trade and Industry, and Lonmin.