The pandemic has changed the role of CHROs for good. Here is why

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Coronavirus has changed the reality of C-suites all over the world. But in the case of CHROs, the crisis has revolutionized their role in organizations. Going back to where we were will not be an option. So how do we find our feet in the new reality?

During coronavirus pandemic, the role of CHROs could't be overestimated. At a time when new risks and second thoughts have emerged practically overnight, they had to create a new work culture, maintain morale, and empower their employees. And this was a massive task. The CHROs who dealt with it while avoiding harming staff performance have gained not only a new set of skills but also new responsibilities and duties.

Studies by Alexander Alonso, Ph.D., SHRM-SCP showed that CHROs who focus on the results, reconnaissance, resourcefulness and reimagination succeed and manage to prepare the company for inevitable changes. As a result, the role of HR teams has increased and transformed, reaching a new status quo. However, to maintain the performance at the high level, CHROs need to stay focused and be especially aware of changes in these key areas:

The organizational model

Remote work was a growing trend well before the pandemic. According to Gallup's "State of American Workforce 2017" report, the number of people working remotely rose between 2012 and 2016 in all studied groups. A similar study from 2019 showed that 43% of all U.S. employees work off-site at least part of the time.

Nevertheless, Covid-19 forced leaders to create organization models based on working from home. Social isolation has proven that many duties may be carried out from home without harming quality or efficiency. And not all employees are missing the office. As a result, for some organizations, remote work might remain as a permanent feature. For this reason, CHROs need to develop and implement new rules. As Tim McElgunn noted in "HRMorning", there are many burning questions to answer right now. For example, how will managers translate existing work rules, meeting schedules, and communications strategies to the new reality? Who will pay for remote workers' connectivity and any required equipment? And even more important: how should an organization build and implement a long-term employee recognition strategy for remote workers?

Of course, not all workers will want to stay at home. Some of them will be happy to be back in the office. Nevertheless, that makes the situation even more complicated. When we all shake off the pandemic shock rules, HR teams will need to create new procedures, to find a balance in new normal.

Hiring and talent management

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many companies have halted their recruitment processes. In an earlier article on the IMSA Search blog, board member Lizette Ibarra explained why this was not the best choice (link). Nevertheless, some organizations have decided to freeze hiring. Now they must unfreeze their search, which is not without difficulties, especially if the company went through some fundamental changes and staff cuts.

Head-hunting was never a piece of cake. The task of a recruiter is to find a perfect talent who possesses knowledge and experience but also shares company values. The process is always complicated and time-consuming. And now it becomes even more challenging. Candidates are cautious about their choices, and post-pandemic company structures are just developing. This means that, in some cases, it may be difficult to predict who might be the best fit for the organization.

As if it was not enough, HR team members need to remember about top talents already working at their company. Not only talent acquisition but also retention remains a critical task. Employees need to be recognized and engaged, no matter if they are working remotely or dreaming of going back to the office.

How can we achieve this? Sarah Kirby, Group Head at Zurich Insurance Group has shared some advice for the World Economic Forum. She encourages leaders to:

- Build a culture of trust, transparency, and openness. "This period has required us all to be supportive of one another, as we all face uncertainty. Control has to some extent given way to trust. People are learning how to do work disparately and with far less oversight: they are learning 'on the job' what works and what doesn't work at home". HR teams should support this process and assure good practices inside the company.
- Maintain individual and social wellbeing. "The pandemic and lockdown are putting pressure on employees in ways that not only test their wellbeing and private lives, but also that of our society. The World Health Organization recently found that 45% of health workers in China are suffering from anxiety" points out Kirby. Caring for the workers' wellbeing is one of the most important challenges for HR teams right now. After the pandemic, they need to stay focused and pay attention to the employees' emotional health.

Meeting all these needs and challenges is an exhausting job. To avoid chaos, CHROs need to be creative, decisive, empathic. And they probably should find their own work-life balance, too. "You need to walk. You need to sleep," said Arianna Huffington, founder of news site The Huffington Post. Especially now.

Rebuilding a corporate culture ASAP

If CHROs have so far failed in preserving their business culture, they should act right now. The corporate culture needs to be rebuilt as soon as possible. And as Tim McElgunn noted: "Employee engagement, constant communication and demonstrated commitment to your culture by leadership are the only tools that will work."

A well-defined organizational culture is critical for long-term success. This is easy to say, but how you turn it into practice in (post)pandemic, volatile times is another matter. And as last months have shown, culture is vulnerable in times of crisis. With financial problems on the one hand and structural changes on the other, it is easy to put organizational values, mission, and identity aside.

Nevertheless, Covid-19 crisis seems to have some positive outcomes. It has forced leaders to operate in a more agile way, which will probably benefit in the future. As Kirby points out, "Business leaders now have, in some sense, been gifted with a better idea of what can and cannot be done outside their companies' traditional processes, and COVID-19 is forcing both the pace and scale of workplace innovation. Many are finding simpler, faster and less expensive ways to operate."

Agile management may be the new norm, which will promote and value human communication and feedback, adapting to change, and producing working results,. The ability to identify a problem and act proactively will be the hallmark of the top talents in this industry.