




The Role of HR in COVID Times

A WHITE PAPER PREPARED BY

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We're now looking toward the end of an extraordinary year, one that none of us could have predicted. As we plan, as much as we can, for 2021, I wanted to offer my clients and colleagues a review of the key trends and predictions in HR I have found interesting.

Inside you will find research from global leaders including Gartner, Accenture, Sage, Deloitte, Mercer, PwC, McKinsey & Company, and World Economic Forum. You will also read personal anecdotes of 2020 Australian HR Awards Finalists on their year and initiatives moving forward.

I hope you find this a useful resource.

Sharon Mackie Goh

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Insights in HR from
leading global
organisations

Gartner

To reduce the friction of rigid processes, organizations should shift from designing standardized processes to designing them to allow for variation. Organizations should only formalize the no-go boundary; if a scenario doesn't cross the hard line established, employees can assume to proceed.

When organizations formalize how processes can flex, the default for new ideas or approaches is "go" instead of "no." As a result, fewer decisions require escalation and the barriers to reject a new idea are lower. This increases the speed of execution, promotes experimentation and enhances employee empowerment.

Accenture

- Seventy-six per cent of executives agree that organizations need to dramatically re-engineer the experiences that bring people and technology together in a more human-centric manner. Treat employees like customers, infusing a sense of purpose into the experience.
- Eighty-one per cent of HR leaders have already rolled out or are piloting various technologies to improve the employee experience.
- Eliminate functional silos
- Focus on what employees value most at a time when the cost and volatility of hiring had never been higher.
- Like with customers, the employee has primacy and teams are organized around the outcomes they value the most.

Sage

"Throughout much of history, HR professionals expected the organization to define business needs, and then HR would respond by designing and implementing competencies and capabilities," says Wayne Brockbank, Clinical Professor of Business at Michigan Business School. "HR leaders need to shift from away from being reactive to business needs, to being proactive."

'HR leaders can lead with courage in today's uncertain world – if they have the confidence to step up.'

Mercer Australia

With so many unknowns, how can companies, individuals, and society win?

By combining the left brain understanding of commercial realities and their knock-on effects, with right-brain skills such as intuition and creativity to find solutions, only then can we turn our insight and intelligence to inclusive prosperity.

Thriving employees are twice as likely to work for an organisation that effectively balances EQ and IQ in decision making - something less than half of companies get right today. Moving the needle on this agenda means putting human and economic metrics side by side, caring enough to place responsibility for long-term futures over short-term gains, and creating space for people to be their whole selves.

This is empathy, and it is needed for winning in an evolving world.

PwC's 23rd Annual Global CEO Survey

The PwC's 23rd Annual Global CEO Survey aptly titled: Navigating the rising tide of uncertainty, is reporting a record level of pessimism in CEOs.

But here's the thing about pessimism – it can make better leaders, particularly where there is a need to ignite social change. Further, having realistic expectations or even better, moderate optimism with a daily dose of pessimism, may be the recipe for good health and happiness that we all need.

- **80% of Australia's CEOs are concerned about economic growth in 2020**
- **78% of CEOs see a lack of key skills as a top threat to growth.**

These two points sitting side by side as part of the PwC data tell how Australian CEOs might be feeling right now. Still, it also shows the opportunity available with serious investment in developing local talent in needed skills.

World Economic Forum

Companies need to invest in better metrics of human and social capital through adoption of environmental, social and governance (ESG) metrics and matched with renewed measures of human capital accounting.

A significant number of business leaders understand that reskilling employees, particularly in industry coalitions and in publicprivate collaborations, is both cost-effective and has significant mid- to long-term dividends—not only for their enterprise but also for the benefit of society more broadly.

Deloitte

Design from the heart ... and the head

An essential focus in a crisis is to recognize the impact the uncertainty is having on the people that drive the organization. At such times, emotional intelligence is critical.

In everything they do during a crisis, resilient leaders express empathy and compassion for the human side of the upheaval—for example, acknowledging how radically their employees' personal priorities have shifted away from work to being concerned about family health, accommodating extended school closures, and absorbing the human angst of life-threatening uncertainty.

Resilient leaders also encourage their people to adopt a calm and methodical approach to whatever happens next.

McKinsey & Company


Step up execution excellence. Just because the times are fraught does not mean that leaders need to tighten control and micromanage execution. Rather the opposite. Because conditions are so difficult, frontline employees need to take on more responsibility for execution, action, and collaboration.

But this isn't always easy and requires that organizations focus on building execution muscle throughout the workforce. Leaders must assign responsibility to the line, and drive "closed-loop accountability." That is, everyone working on a team must be clear about what needs to get done by whom, when, and why.

Employees must also be equipped with the right skills and mindsets to solve problems, instead of waiting to be told what to do. And there must be disciplined follow-up to make sure actions were taken and the desired results achieved.

A photograph of a modern office interior, showing a corner with light-colored walls and a dark wood-paneled wall. A teal rectangular box is overlaid on the image, containing white text. The text reads: "We asked Australian HR Awards 2020 Finalists about thier work through the pandemic."

We asked Australian HR
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the pandemic.



Covid19 has forced many organisations to shift their long term and short term HR priorities.

Organisations are now shifting to new normality of working arrangements, interaction with external and internal stakeholders but more importantly, like our organisation, adopting a stronger emphasis on Mental Health Awareness than ever before.

Backed by our company Strategic Plan and HR Strategy, we have altered our critical initiatives as customer demands vary and internal stakeholder priorities shift to determine this new normality of working.

Robert Feltrin
General Manager
Organisational Development

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What worked best for your people with your wellbeing program? How has that focus changed as a result of COVID?

At Johnson & Johnson, our goal in 2020 is to be the healthiest workforce in the world, and our approach to wellbeing is multifaceted and focused on healthy eating, healthy work, healthy movement and healthy mind.

The values that guide our decision-making are outlined in Our Credo. Put simply; our Credo challenges us to put the needs and wellbeing of the people we serve first. In particular, within our Credo, we spell out that 'we are responsible to our employees who work with us throughout the world'. 'We must support the health and wellbeing of our employees and help them fulfil their family and other personal responsibilities'.

With the impact of COVID, our Credo values and our wellbeing approach remained strong, albeit with a pivot to virtual and remote offerings and platforms.

We are offering virtual exercise classes, mindfulness sessions, educational webinars, and our highly recognised 'Energy for Performance' course has also gone virtual. A course where we focus on energy management strategies in order to foster an overall sense of resilience and life satisfaction.

We recognised the need for increased mental health support and have offered mental wellbeing webinars and training sessions addressing various areas.

Partnering closely with our EAP provider, we proactively setup 'critical incident' calls for teams as needed. We also extended our support to providing a 'care pack' of our products to all our employees across Australia and New Zealand, along with other initiatives to support them and their family.

Ultimately what has worked best is recognising, through our approach, that each person must be considered as an individual.

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Katrina Symons

Head Of Human Resources
ANZ at Johnson & Johnson
Family of organisations

How has the technology you have embraced enhanced the services you provide to the business?

The benefits that our digital ecosystem has provided both our team and business has been immeasurable, particularly over the past couple of years.

From being previously quite a traditional HR team and technology averse, and grappling with external business factors that required a new approach, it was essential particularly from myself that a change in mindset was needed around how we could embrace technology to support our business strategy moving forward.

Through the adoption of key technology pieces we have not only been able to transform the way we work as a People & Culture team but also it has gone a long way in reinvigorating the employee experience for existing and new employees.

There have been many great outcomes from our new approach; we are delivering a recruitment experience that encompasses AI and an interview onboarding process that has enhanced our employer brand, we have saved significant time in removing manual and time consuming process so that we could reinvest that time in more value adding and face-to face activities like HR business partnering.

We have improved our onboarding experience for new employees (NPS sits in the top quartile), which has contributed to a high staff retention rate. Using AI has resulted in leaders being able to be better informed in making hiring decisions around key attributes & behaviours required, which has ensured a greater cultural fit of the new hires joining and we have been successful in creating a technology based employee lifecycle process that caters for all those moments that matter for an employee, which has enhanced EX and engagement survey scores.

Technology has been a key enabler for us to deliver on one of key strategic pillars, employee experience however I would say technology should never replace human touch points. If you strike the right balance no matter how big or small your team or organisation is or what your budget is, the benefits will be realised.

Have you
had to
further
adapt your
technology
due to
COVID?

COVID presented us with new challenges; however, we were able to adapt the technology we had already in place and be more tailored in our approach.

As recruitment and onboarding new employees were placed on hold during the COVID period, our main focus was on how to best manage a predominantly remote workforce.

A couple of ways we supported this change was to use a remote-working workflow through our existing onboarding platform that allowed us to support our team members by providing key information, support and direction during that period. This resulted in improved advocacy of our employer brand and investment in our employee's wellbeing.

Through embedding MS teams as our communication platform, it provided a more enhanced way of working and communicating, building greater agility across our workforce in being able to deliver key messages remotely ie CEO briefings sessions, giving teams clarity and focus during that time.

Generally, as an organisation, our ability to adapt to this crisis was very good, but nothing is ever perfect. There were lessons learnt along the way that we can take and adapt as we continue to evolve our technology footprint across the whole employee lifecycle.

Matthew Thomas FAHRI
General Manager People & Culture
rwwa.com.au | tabtouch.com.au

How has Covid19 changed HR priorities? Have key initiatives altered for the next 12 months?

I left my role as General Manager of People and Culture for Sureway Employment and Training in January 2020 to commence as a Human Resources Development Specialist in the Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI) working for the Ministry of Finance as an International Consultant on a World Bank funded Project to Strengthen Budget Execution and Financial Reporting Systems. I am excited to have been nominated and announced as a HR Awards Finalist for my contributions and initiatives to both organisations.

I initially planned to deliver my objectives through a combination of remote and onsite initiatives. However, RMI closing their borders in March 2020 and Australia's border restrictions have seen me remain onsite since Jan.

The RMI is one of the world's smallest, most isolated, and vulnerable nations. The country consists of 29 atolls and 5 isolated islands (24 of which are inhabited) and has a total landmass of just 181 km² set in an area of over 1.9 million km² in the Pacific Ocean. The population of the RMI is estimated at 53,0661 in 2016, of which the two largest urban centres, Majuro (the nation's capital) and Ebeye, have populations of 28,000 and 9,614, respectively. RMI suffers from gender inequalities in terms of access to economic opportunities and markets, women's voice and agency, and vulnerability to emerging risks.

My project objective is to increase the capacity and knowledge of Public Financial Management (PFM) RMI Government Employees and address project-specific gaps in relation to the participation and progression of women in the workforce. Therefore, HR priorities and initiatives have not altered; however how we deliver them has.

Although RMI is one of the few countries which has not experienced a C19 case, they have felt the impact of border closure. Prior to Covid, International Consultants and training partners have been heavily relied on to address knowledge and experience gaps, as well as some of the challenges of being a small, isolated nation consisting of 29 atolls and five isolated islands in the Pacific Ocean, already battling health emergencies such as a severe dengue-fever outbreak. With these organisations and individuals unable to come on island or employees able to travel, I have had to identify other methods of accessing these skill sets and services, such as through utilising video conferencing technology and online training.

An area where my initiatives have expanded is through supporting planning to prepare for COVID-19. This has involved activities such as identifying how to overcome challenges such as some employees working remotely with limited/no access to home internet, personal laptop or phone and a communication plan that takes this into account.

If COVID-19 comes to RMI, it will highlight the importance of capacity development, but present significant challenges on how to deliver key initiatives.

Maintaining our focus on learning and development at all levels of the organisation to foster personal and career development.

Jessica Ciccozzi
General Manager
People & Capability

QINETIQ
qinetiq.com/en-au

Given the challenges Covid19 has brought to leadership, what are your top 3 priorities for the next 12 months?

With the Defence Industry being less impacted by the COVID19 crisis than other sectors, our priorities remain largely similar to what they were pre COVID, but with a couple of refinements.

We remain focused on executing our strategy to support our business growth agenda, this includes:

1. Strengthening our employee brand and value proposition to remain an employer of choice and attract the industry's best talent.
2. Focusing on our engagement and retention initiatives to ensure our employees remain highly engaged and maintain high levels of performance.
3. Maintaining our focus on learning and development at all levels of the organisation to foster personal and career development.

The adjustments we have made to our strategy centre around:

- supporting employees and business affected by COVID by opening up employment opportunities for them or their employees particularly in adjacent industries like Aviation & Aerospace, and secondly in
- adjusting our learning and development, engagement and communications plans to better support our leaders and teams who are now working within more remote and distributed working environments.



Summary

In taking the time to review the key issues presented in the various reports, it seems to me all agree on a 'people first' approach and I was reminded of a point made on the Gartner webinar discussing business impacts from Coronavirus, cost optimisation, and the top priorities for Human Resources.

“Organisations are competing for key talent and skills, and so an investment in the 'whole' employee experience is integral. The benefits of upskilling programmes; stronger corporate culture and employee engagement, higher workforce productivity, improved talent acquisition and retention, differentiate organisations out in the marketplace”.

Creating employee ownership strategies means shifting leadership behaviour that ultimately leads to cultural change. It will take time and effort to develop trust and authenticity - something that can't be earned with a friendly internal newsletter.

It requires a trusting mindset to be agile and innovative which includes getting out of the way and letting people closest to the problem work on the solution - like our HR teams.

Thanks for reading.

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Resources

- Accenture-Strategy-Reimagining-the-Employee-Experience
- <https://www.mercer.com/content/dam/mercer/attachments/private/global-talent-trends-2020-report.pdf>
- <https://www.sagepeople.com/face-of-change/hr-skills-ebook/>
- <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/ceo-agenda/ceosurvey/2020.html>
- <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/business%20functions/strategy%20and%20corporate%20finance/our%20insights/what%20now%20decisive%20actions%20to%20emerge%20stronger%20in%20the%20next%20normal/what-now-decisive-actions-to-emerge-stronger-in-the-next-normal.pdf>
- <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/economy/covid-19/heart-of-resilient-leadership-responding-to-covid-19.html>
- <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020>

Thank You

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