

HR CONSULTANCY

GUIDANCE IN THE DARK

For HR consultants in a world rocked by COVID-19, guiding people through tremendous uncertainty has become normal.

BY SUSAN MULDOWNEY

Shortly after the federal government announced further restrictions and business closure measures to curb the spread of COVID-19, Annabel Rees, managing director and CEO of Melbourne-based HR consultancy Businessary, saw a distinct shift in the questions coming from her clients.

In early March, queries had related to transactional matters, such as business continuity and leave maintenance, as organisations sought to nail down the basics during the crisis. Following the government's announcement on 23 March, the focus shifted to strategic workforce planning as the longer-term consequences of COVID-19 began to hit home.

"We began to receive a lot of queries about engagement and retention," says Rees. "How can we present our employer brand in a way that is compelling and really shows how we are looking after our people? How can we keep them feeling like part of a bigger family and that they've received the support they wanted when they wanted it? Clients are now looking for tactical advice."

Like Rees, Emily Jaksch, founder and director of HR Gurus in Melbourne, says employers are becoming increasingly aware of employee wellbeing, and they are calling on her expertise to help during the crisis. Her advice to clients at this time is simple: communicate, communicate, communicate.

The viral threat is creating a heightened sense of vulnerability and uncertainty. While people are managing the emotional toll of health risks and social distancing, many are also feeling a growing sense of job insecurity.

"The reason people are so fearful right now is because they have no certainty," says Jaksch. "So the more certainty that you can give them, the better."

She has been draughting employee communications for clients and recommends transparency, empathy and reinforcement that "we're all in this together".

"People are feeling vulnerable. We recommend a genuine, empathetic tone, such as, 'I get that this is going to have an impact on you and your family. This is how I'm going to try to bridge that gap, but I understand that it may not be enough.'"

Building teams remotely

Fostering a team environment can help employees to feel more motivated and engaged during a crisis. However, the threat of COVID-19 throws up the added challenges of widespread changes in working conditions.

Research from Gartner HR indicates that 88 per cent of organisations across the globe have encouraged or required employees to work from home. Leisa Messer, managing director of HR business direction in Brisbane, says employers have had little choice.

"It's interesting how so many employers have pushed back on flexibility and working from home in the past, but when it becomes essential to business continuity, they just make it happen," she says. "I think it's one positive thing that will come out of this unsettling time. Employers can see that it works."

Some employers have been more prepared for remote working than others, says Jaksch.

"In preparation for [wide-scale remote working], one of our clients gave employees \$1000 to go out and buy all the equipment they would need to work from home. They've also bought everybody an iPad, and they use a program called Starleaf where >



RECRUITING IN A CRISIS

Despite widespread stand-downs and business closures, recruitment in Australia has not ground to a halt.

Retail giant Coles recruited 9300 people in the last three weeks of March to help meet customer demand at supermarkets and liquor stores. Roles varied from casual and part-time to management positions. At the beginning of April, it was recruiting for an additional 3000 positions across the country.

It has been the fastest recruitment drive Coles has ever undertaken, says people and culture general manager Tammy Ryder.

"We streamlined our recruitment processes and assigned a dedicated team to fast-track applications sent by corporate partners such as Australian Venue Company and Virgin Australia. We also accepted recommendations and local in-store walk-ins to fast-track applicants into positions available at their local store."

While much of Coles' recruitment drive is for in-store roles, managing director and CEO of Businessary Annabel Rees says other employers are facing the challenges of onboarding new recruits who are restricted to working from home during the COVID-19 outbreak. "Clients are asking about the best ways to induct a new recruit to make them feel engaged with the business, even though they may have never stepped into the office."

She says an employee's experience in the first three days can shape their opinion of an employer. "The really smart employers look at ways to onboard in the first two days."

For new recruits working remotely during the current crisis, Rees suggests sending a "care package" of company-branded items that would normally be on the new recruit's desk, such as stationary and a branded stress ball.

"This can help them feel attached to your brand and show that you're thinking of them. Schedule a video team meeting as well as a one-on-one on day one, so they can meeting the team virtually.

"Also, make sure they are set up for work. There is nothing worse than arriving in a traditional work environment on day one and your computer isn't set up. It's the same in a remote setting. Ensure they have all the IT they need and then support them in their setup, so they're not sitting at home with a new job and a computer that doesn't work."

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they can see all of their team throughout the day. It's like they're working in the same office because they can see each other's faces and can talk to each other."

Not all companies have the resources to let staff work from home, but most of Jaksc's clients are using video technology with their remote teams to foster teamwork and reduce the sense of isolation.

Data from analytics company App Annie shows that business apps topped 62 million downloads worldwide during the week of 14-21 March. This was an increase of 45 per cent from the previous week and a 90 per cent lift from the weekly average of business app downloads in 2019. ZOOM, Hangouts Meet and Microsoft Teams were among the top downloads.

Rees says effective team video calls during COVID-19 can be generally covered in four questions: How are you feeling healthwise? How are you feeling emotionally? What do I need to know? Do you need anything from me?

"From there, you can each discuss what you're doing for the day."

Home health and safety

The sudden influx of remote working has also prompted questions about workplace health and safety responsibilities.

"When people are working from home, their employer is still responsible for them, and I wonder how many WorkCover or compensation claims will be made during this time," says Messer.

"I've had employers asking me what they can and can't insist on," says Rees. "Can I insist that my people don't go out of the house? No, you can't do that. But you can ask them to avoid things like public transport, for example, which is obviously a high-risk area.

"I know companies that are giving employees a travel allowance to get to or from work by Uber or taxi, or to pay for parking so they can avoid public transport," adds Rees. "They are also providing

instructions about hand washing and were saying, 'Please don't go to the pubs or cafes on the weekends' [when they were still allowed to be open]."

Redundancies done right

Mass stand-downs and redundancies may be inevitable as organisations seek to manage the economic impact of COVID-19.

Jaksch has advised her clients to remain calm and focus on financial modelling to help determine their options.

"When this all blows over, you're going to need your employees to start your business as quickly as possible, and the way you treat people now is a symbol of the care factor that you have for them."

Messer, who works mainly with SMEs, says redundancies are the last thing they want. "They are all seeking to do the right thing by their employees, and I think that's comforting. My advice is that it's so important, now more than ever, to take the consultation process seriously. If someone is about to lose their job, they may come up with some innovative ideas for how they can continue working with you. There may also be other options, such as reduced hours. Consult with your employees, and not just because you have to tick a box."

For employers facing the prospect of redundancies, Rees recommends providing outplacement options for affected workers. She adds that the timing of redundancies is also vital at this time.

"Nothing can be more disabling for a workplace if there are lots of little cuts. It's best for employers to take a six-month view at the least, look at workforce capacity and, if changes need to be made, look to make them once, rather than leaving the workforce unsettled by expecting the next wave of cuts.

"Be genuinely open and empathetic. Clear and transparent communication that is linked to your values can really help to reassure people at a time like this." ●●●

THE NEW NORMAL

AHRI has released a range of COVID-19 webinars to help keep you informed. Free for AHRI members.

ahri.com.au/webinars