

The post-pandemic workplace - a look at key trends

 By Johan Botes

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A recent survey conducted by Fortune 500 of the CEOs of 2020's Fortune 500 list of companies, looked at how these companies dealt with the pandemic and how their CEOs are planning for the future. The majority of CEOs predicted that business travel and a continued physical presence in the office will never return to the levels seen before Covid-19. The accelerated technological transformation of their organisations, experienced by three-quarters of the CEOs surveyed, was cited as the main reason for this changing trend.



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Safety and productivity now, redundancies might come later

In the same survey, the number one concern of 60% of the CEOs was how they could keep employees safe and productive during the pandemic. But more than half of the companies also expected to employ slightly less employees in 2021 than they did in 2020, and there has been an increasing trend towards restructurings and redundancies in the last six months of 2020. This will continue to add pressure to the increasing global unemployment problem.

Exploring creative alternatives to job losses

The global pandemic has certainly brought focus to optimal staffing in any business. With production and services slowing down, employers were forced to critically evaluate headcount. Whilst redundancies abound, many employers are also keeping their gaze on the horizon to plan for the eventual upturn in business. To that end, creative solutions to job losses are finding favour. With a significantly diminished likelihood of securing alternative employment in the short term, many employees are forced to be more receptive to alternative work arrangements in an effort to stave off redundancies. Such arrangements include salary cuts, deferring bonus payments and other benefits, even agreeing to a period of unpaid leave in an effort to retain employment. Businesses that can unlock the solution to retaining staff at a cost suited to the business may find not only a repayment in employment loyalty when work starts streaming in again, but also trained and experienced staff at the ready to ramp up production in no time.

Work from home strategies

Working from home is one creative alternative that could assist struggling businesses - or those keen to stay lean and manage their profitability. The world has had to wrap its collective head around the virtual workspace when offices were shut, however, will this experiment continue post Covid-19? Even those who long for the camaraderie of the office, the joviality of the staff canteen and the recounting of the weekend around the water cooler are likely to remember the benefits of our enforced working-from-home scenarios.

Many businesses are now implementing full or partial work-from-home strategies, with the view to requiring smaller brick-and-mortar premises for shared office space as and when staff come to the traditional office. A small allowance to assist employees to set themselves up in a home office may make financial sense when contrasted with lease costs – typically one of the major cost elements in most businesses.

The employee's right to privacy

Employers have begun looking at ways to monitor their employees' productivity in the work-from-home setting. However, several laws govern the monitoring of employee communications and information, as well as their closely guarded right to privacy, and there are hefty fines for non-compliance. This year, several key provisions of the Protection of Personal Information Act also came into force in South Africa, with implications for employees with regards to the processing and storage of employee data. Regulations around data privacy and protection are expected to take centre stage across the continent in the coming years, as the world fully embraces the digital economy.

The rise of the flexible workforce

Post-pandemic, it is expected that fixed-term employment contracts will become increasingly valuable business tools that allow employers the flexibility to manage the impacts of a volatile business environment. Employers are increasingly using limited duration contracts to create certainty and limit legal risk in respect of staffing solutions. Appointing employees for a fixed period or defined project is allowing employers to plan for their employees' exits in advance. This is because the contracts will expire on a certain date or upon reaching a defined milestone, without the limitations of only being able to terminate the contracts for valid reasons, and after following a fair procedure.

Gender equality needs protecting

The long-term effects of the pandemic could have severe implications for gender equality. Employers seeking to play a meaningful part in protecting gains made for gender equality in the workplace have begun taking steps to ensure that roles occupied by female employees receive the required flexibility to telecommute, where possible. Progressive employers are already implementing equal parental leave provisions, irrespective of the gender of the parent. By allowing their partners to take time off to share the childcare duties, female employees should benefit from not only the shared workload, but also from being able to take up employment in roles where flexible working is not possible. Creating a malleable platform for women to equally participate in all sectors of the economy will reduce the disproportionate impact of the next crisis on those sectors of the economy with significant female workforce participation.

Dealing with violence and harassment at work

In dark times like these, with high rates of global violence against women, employers should take time to assess their current policies and consider whether they are fulfilling their common law and statutory obligations when dealing with violence and harassment in the workplace. Further, some employers are now going further and considering establishing workplace rules that make it a workplace offence to commit acts of violence against women, stating employees who are convicted of gender-based violent crimes may be dismissed, even if the crime took place away from the workplace and against a private person.

Diverse and inclusive teams

In the rapidly changing environment precipitated by the global pandemic, a successful diversity and inclusion programme is

an important part of any business's resilience and recovery strategy. Diverse and inclusive corporate cultures lead to increased productivity and meaningful employee engagement, which ultimately offer immense value to businesses. D&I fosters innovative participation, which gives rise to a confluence of creative ideas arising from the richness of different backgrounds and experiences, all of which work together in the formulation of solutions to business challenges and idea-generation. Simply put, diverse spaces ultimately lead to better outcomes than homogenous spaces. As such, conscious and forward-looking businesses consider D&I to be a measure of their success and indispensable to their overall sustainability. D&I is firmly on the agenda of most organisations and businesses around the world.

Stress management at work

According to a survey by mental health service provider Ginger, nearly 7 in 10 employees said that Covid-19 was the most stressful thing to happen to them in their careers to-date. Workplace stress has been increasing substantially for some time, but was made worse by the pandemic, where employees often felt isolated and anxious about the possible physical, social and economic consequences of the virus. The stress of coping with pandemic impacts has been bubbling to the surface, leaving us all wondering if life as we know it will ever be the same. This means that for businesses and team leaders, managing this stress via workplace health and wellbeing programmes has become a business imperative.

Attention capital is running dry

Attention capital – defined as employees' ability to focus on value-creating work - is suffering due to an 'always online' environment. Employees, now more than ever, are being continuously bombarded with information from which there is no escape. This never-ending distraction is having a detrimental effect on an employee's ability to get the job done. Businesses are beginning to look at ways to protect staff from the constant bombardment of information, which drastically contributes to fatigue and burnout. Such protection might include limiting unnecessary communications, implementing mindfulness programmes or setting aside days for staff to focus on special projects.

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