

HaRe Group newsletter: 24 June 2021

Subject: Remote employee engagement

Many recent COVID-related conversations with company leaders have acknowledged:

- Business success still comes with a solid commitment to engaging talented people;
- Effective remuneration management has been proved as a driver of talent attraction and retention;
- Overall employment costs will keep rising due to:
 - falling unemployment rates (now in the fives),
 - the 2½% increase in the minimum wage, and
 - the increases in the Superannuation Guarantee (to 10% from 1 July).

Of course, the pathways to market leadership are often different – but in our current situation, with COVID-19 a hovering wisp or a raging beast, many employers have found that operational agility and effective employee communication will help sustain business results.

While some employers have been reluctant to adopt physically disparate working practices – such as technology-supported working from home – many organisations have been successful in sustaining high levels of productivity. However, is WFH causing longer-term damage to employee engagement?

What is clear from many media reports is that the consequences of employee isolation can include a profound impact on personal wellbeing. While some employees have appreciated the added flexibility of WFH, others have suffered from the lack of personal development that often occurs when sharing a workspace. Most office workers know the value of casual “water cooler” chats, and the more serious knowhow-sharing conversations that can often fail on Zoom or Teams.

Another by-product of WFH could be called the “unprepared/ overload” syndrome, which is evident when managers pile work on employees who have neither the skills nor the support required to conduct the required tasks within the deadlines given. These managers may not see the evidence that some employees are struggling with the output expected and don’t appreciate that many additional hours are spent trying to keep up. Of course, these managers also have productivity targets to meet and may be suffering their own work overloads. So what damage is being done here to the employee-employer relationship?

Eventually (we hope), there will be a return to a more familiar work situation, where many employees will actually share physical office space again – however, it seems that we still have a way to go.

In the meantime, all organisations should expand their communication channels with WFH employees to ensure that there are plenty of opportunities for better work plans, skills training, personal development, feedback on all activities and outcomes, and confidential counselling. Individual financial recognition may also play a part.

It is also worth repeating that the COVID conditions we still face will present some innovation opportunities for some companies. Employers also need to evaluate the best method of rewarding their people for succeeding under these less predictable conditions. However, in the battle for productivity, it’s apparent that employees are too often casualties and employers could lose the long game – companies that don’t build and sustain effective performance management and communication programs may suffer a drop in employee engagement and begin to lose their best people.

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