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'Corona has shown a good number of administrative workforce can operate from home'

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NEW DELHI: Workplaces will no longer be an indispensable social necessity as social distancing norms force organisations to decongest offices.

Accordingly, HR will have to reinvent itself by enhancing focus on empathy-based interventions and leaving HR functions to technology, Ranjan Kumar Mohapatra, director (HR) at India's largest oil refiner and fuel retailer IndianOil.

What is the biggest HR challenge from the Coronavirus pandemic?

COVID-19 has not spared any sector. For the energy sector, the main challenge has been to not allow the pandemic affect supplies, be it of electricity or automotive and kitchen fuels, and keep the workforce engaged. For example, being in an essential service, about 60% workforce at IndianOil is in the field operating refineries, pipelines, distribution and marketing.

The remaining 40%, which supports these activities from administrative offices, was suddenly locked up at home. Managing expectations and motivation of both these groups in a way that ensures there is no divide between them, while at the same time ensuring the country's energy requirement is met fully can be a challenge for any HR person. Especially when the population is spread far and wide.

How will the pandemic change the way people work or energy companies function in future?

The fundamentals will not change. But approach to work, workforce and workplace will change. The concept of the workplace is undergoing a transformation. COVID-19 has confirmed our belief that a good per cent of the administrative workforce can operate from home.

Social distancing norm will make organisations switch to work from home, staggered shifts and timings. This will result in revised working models and procedures. The crisis has compelled people to multitask – managing work and home at the same time. Different faculties of people will have to be unlocked. Sequential decision-making will give way to a dexterous approach. The mental rigidity will have to go.

Even at such a well-structured organisation as IndianOil, I have witnessed a silent transition to an almost flat structure while handling emergency situations. Quickly taking actions that had no precedence enabled our people to fight through COVID-19. Instant decisions on work from home, collaborative processes, technological interventions such as new apps for attendance, and tele-consulting have ensured business continuity and well-being of people. These shall stay for long not just in IndianOil but across sectors.

Will the pandemic redefine the traditional role of HR?

Undoubtedly. The people function attains increasing significance in the wake of widespread distress, uncertainty and need for change prompted by revised processes. During Lockdown 1.0 itself, the Indian Psychiatric Society reported that mental health concerns had escalated by an alarming 20%.

With a virtual operating environment that COVID-19 has created, one may tend to lose sight of human sentiments. It is in these situations that empathy takes the forefront. When social distancing is the new norm, the HR (department) has to reinvent itself by enhancing care and empathy-based interventions and leave the HR operations to technology.

People-centric policies have to emerge. Look at China. They have decided to stop the numeric GDP growth figures for this year and decided to focus on employment and care. If a country can do it, why not HR fraternity. Our Prime Minister, through his

'candles and claps' in the balcony has already spread the message of empathy loud and clear.

In our case, when our COVID warriors such as LPG delivery boys and customer attendants were out in the field, we displayed empathy in each of our actions – providing insurance, ex-gratia, PPEs or facilitation through travel, food and shelter or support for families.

In one of my several interactions, touching nearly a thousand people through video-conferencing, I did see a glint in the eyes of participants when asked about the well-being of their parents or children.

Do you see the pandemic changing the migration pattern of labour as they would perhaps prefer to work nearer home? How will it impact labour mobilisation for energy projects which are mostly in the hinterland with poor access or connectivity?

This is an issue that cuts across sectors. Definitely more so for the energy sector. But there are several silver linings as well. With over 100 million or so undergoing reverse migration and no clarity on how many of them will return to their current place of engagement, it is for sure that HR is staring at a daunting task of sourcing of manpower for projects.

The situation will be clearer once normal travel resumes and the movement of people commences. But as I said, there are some silver linings as well. I definitely see this as having a twofold impact – one, on the rise of the local workforce and two, an exponential rise in skilling industry in India. With a well-structured skill infrastructure in place as a part of Skill India Mission, the pace and variety of skilling/reskilling interventions will have to take an upward path for labour mobilisation.

How will future recruitment change? Which is that one additional capability, besides the pertinent qualifications for a particular job, that HR will look for in a candidate from now on?

Adaptability and Agility. Who doesn't love status-quo? But COVID-19 has definitely shaken us all out of that comfort zone. As an example, it has suddenly made us an expert in using virtual technologies, which one would not have learnt in normal circumstances. While we have been deploying multiple assessment modes in recruitment, the focus now onwards shall be on hiring talent that is agile and willing to adapt in any situation.

Managing internal or external relationships for IndianOil, which is also the government's public interface, during the lockdown; which was more challenging for you as the Director (HR) of India's largest oil refiner and fuel retailer? How did you address it?

You just can't differentiate and pick one. Addressing both the challenges in a more balanced way was the biggest challenge. While empathy has been our guiding principle in all our endeavours, for handling the organization, which has over 33,000 employees, and more than four lakh business associates, a focused, centralised and authentic communication was relied on so that there was no panic or misinformation.

An empowered committee was set-up under my leadership with senior executive directors as members. The committee has been meeting every day, though through virtual mode, and the summary of discussions, developments and decisions are being conveyed appropriately across different levels.

We relied on all forms of media and issued regular advisories, based on the government guidelines. Besides the advisories, the employee connect was expanded to bring in resilience and behavioural change. Specific outreach measures were taken to build a 'positive' narrative around COVID-19; and also connect with every employee and their families. This included sensitisation on COVID preparedness by sports and media celebrities. Our officers reached out to all retired employees to inquire about their well-being.

At the same time, sincere efforts were made to support all our external stakeholders, be it the declaration of ex-gratia, new health insurance policies or awareness at retail outlets and LPG distributorships, connecting with them directly. As an HR person, I can tell you it was trust, which was in full display, both for internal and external stakeholders.