

# ***Emerging Human Resource Challenges in a Pandemic World: The Survival Strategies and Future Roadmaps for Growth and Sustenance***

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered global workplaces, challenging traditional HR practices and prompting significant strategic shifts to support business continuity. This paper examines the various human resource challenges and strategies that emerged in response to the pandemic, focusing on critical issues like crisis management, remote work adoption, employee health and safety, and agile collaboration. Key strategies for navigating these challenges include enhancing remote work capabilities, implementing flexible work arrangements, and prioritizing employee wellness through proactive health and psychological support. By addressing these "new normals," the paper highlights a roadmap for HR functions to ensure growth, adaptability, and resilience in a post-pandemic world.

**Keywords:** Human Resource Challenges, COVID-19 Pandemic, Remote Work, Employee Wellness, Business Continuity, Agile Collaboration.

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*“As a leader, you have to be very intentional and deliberate with providing channels for your teams to connect and build deeper relationships virtually.” - Leslie Deutsch, Director of TEKsystems<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

As the Covid-19 virus swept through the planet it inflicted a progressive lockdown all across. Schools were closed, businesses were stopped and the cities had come to a standstill. There was no traffic on road, no activity at most workplaces – only emergency services such as medical care, police, banking and a few more were allowed to operate on certain standard operating norms.<sup>2</sup> The coronavirus outbreak – Covid-19 – as it was called, was the first serious outbreak ever since the deadly Spanish flu swept across the globe in 1918 killing no less than an estimated 17 million<sup>3</sup> people.<sup>4</sup> While the total number of confirmed Covid-19 cases worldwide was 580 with 17 deaths as on 22 January 2020, the cases had jumped to a staggering 2,480,503 with an equally huge death toll at 170,397 on 20 April 2020.<sup>5</sup> Covid-19 was declared a “pandemic” by Dr Ghebreyesus, the head of World Health Organization (WHO) during his afternoon address on March 11, 2020.<sup>6</sup> According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the virus was expected to severely impact the economy of more than 170 countries and trimming down the global GDP by nearly 3% by the end of 2020. This was something that was not seen even during the Great Depression of the 1930s.<sup>7</sup>

Considering the prolific growth rate with which the virus spread across the globe and the fact that the existing medical care had no vaccines and the wherewithal to cope with the pandemic, the governments all over the world realized the importance of lockdown and “social distancing” as the two most effective measures to temporarily halt the growth of the virus.<sup>8</sup> This gave the “corona warriors” – the doctors, the nurses, the policemen, the bankers, the people on ground working to provide the essential services (including the community volunteers) some more time to reinforce and buttress the preparations for a longer fight.<sup>9</sup>

The restrictions on the movement of people as a result of global lockdowns (for weeks together) had hit the agriculture, the manufacturing and the service sectors badly, and in particular, important verticals such as hospitality, tourism, retail trade, recreation and transportation, to name a few. Businesses lost revenue, oil prices kept falling, unemployment rose and as the world economy reeled under the lockdowns, there was a simmering fear that the short-term supply side shock would soon transform into a much bigger and wider demand side shock from the consumers.<sup>10</sup> The prolonged lockdown was beginning to show its spill-over effects across economies and it was apparent that a sharp decline in the consumer spending in the developed countries would have a more detrimental impact on the developing ones. The pandemic was also damaging the livelihood of millions of low wage workers in unorganized establishments and industries across the globe with lopsided or almost no protection of labour laws.

In the emerging downturn scenario, several companies such as MakeMyTrip, Cleartrip and hospitality chains like Fab Hotels imposed salary cuts on their employees. Layoffs were also commonly seen. For instance, a

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<sup>1</sup> TEKsystems, “Learning and development during COVID-19”, <https://www.teksystems.com/en/insights/article/learning-and-development-during-covid19#gdpr>, Accessed on 29 Apr 2020

<sup>2</sup> Sundria, Saket, “World’s Biggest Lockdown Brings Trucks to a Standstill in India”, <https://www.bloomberquint.com/business/world-s-biggest-lockdown-brings-trucks-to-a-standstill-in-india>, Accessed on 8 April 2020

<sup>3</sup> The actual figure is disputed with few sources even mentioning fatalities up to 50 million.

<sup>4</sup> TNN, “Why Covid-19 is Nothing Like the Deadly Spanish Flu”, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/why-covid-19-is-nothing-like-the-deadly-spanish-flu/articleshow/74623053.cms>, Accessed on 20 Mar 2020

<sup>5</sup> Worldometer, “Coronavirus Update (Live)”, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>, Accessed on 26 Apr 2020

<sup>6</sup> WHO, “WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020”, <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>, Accessed on 26 Apr 2020

<sup>7</sup> IMF, “The Great Lockdown: Worst Economic Downturn Since the Great Depression”, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/03/23/pr2098-imf-managing-director-statement-following-a-g20-ministerial-call-on-the-coronavirus-emergency>, Accessed on 22 Apr 2020

<sup>8</sup> ET, Janata curfew is the only way to halt the pandemic in its tracks”, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/janata-curfew-the-only-way-to-halt-the-pandemic-in-its-tracks/articleshow/74818673.cms?from=mdr>, Accessed on 18 Apr 2020

<sup>9</sup> John, T. Jacob & Tharyan, Prathap, “A shot of hope with a game changing vaccine”, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/a-shot-of-hope-with-a-game-changing-vaccine/article31383184.ece>, Accessed on 24 Apr 2020

<sup>10</sup> The Hindu, “Today's top business news: Over 80% of world's workforce affected by the 'Great Lockdown', China opposes India's new FDI rules, oil prices hit 21-year low, and more”, <https://www.thehindu.com/business/businesslive-20-april-2020/article31385585.ece>, Accessed on 28 Apr 2020

prominent insurance company Acko had laid-off nearly 50 employees from customer service, operations, sales and marketing segments. The company's founder Varun Dua said, *"These are unprecedented times and we have to be prepared for a situation where the world is not normal for a long time."*<sup>11</sup> While harsh measures were commonplace, there were also companies who despite all hassles resolved not to allow the trouble pass on to employees. Chairman and CEO of Visa, Alfred F. Kelly Jr. assured his employees that the company would not remove anyone in the year 2020. Kelly said, *"There is enough sadness in the world and already too many families impacted by job losses. I have no interest in contributing to that."*<sup>12</sup>

Amidst all these downbeat developments, there were companies like Zoho, Slack, GoToWebinar and many similar others that offered tools for collaboration and remote working. These companies witnessed an unexpected jump in the demand and usage of their services. While the lockdown had a deflating and a decelerating impact on most of the companies – it turned out to be a boon for these companies who offered employees new ways of collaborating over the internet and simultaneously establishing new corporate paradigms based on virtual meetings, web conferences and remote engagement. Zoom's CEO Eric Yuan in an earnings call said that his video conferencing software Zoom would dramatically change the landscape of future workplace.<sup>13</sup>

### **A Brief on Covid-19**

Covid-19 was a communicable disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The disease cropped up in December 2019 in Wuhan, the capital of China's Hubei province, a flourishing animal and sea food market, and had since spread globally, resulting in the 2019–20 coronavirus pandemic. An article published in CCDC Weekly (Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention) stated that the earliest group of patients suffering from "pneumonia of unknown cause"<sup>14</sup> arrived on and from 21 December 2019. The report further said that the disease had greater prevalence in older patients. On 31 Dec 2019 the World Health Organization was informed about this novel strain of coronavirus by the Chinese government and it was subsequently christened, SARS-CoV-2.<sup>15</sup>

An article published in the weekly medical journal, "The Lancet" on 24 January 2020 revealed that the earliest laboratory confirmed case of Covid-19 was in a man whose symptoms had already emerged on 1 December 2019. Further, from the initial group of 41 patients who were confirmed with Covid-19 disease, 27 had made a visit to the seafood market in Wuhan. While there was a lot of ambiguity in regard to the provenance of this disease, a report by the South China Morning Post on 13 March 2020 suggested that one middle-aged man could have been infected with Covid-19 as early as on 17 November 2019.<sup>16</sup>

With all these developments, the Hubei based Wuhan Institute of Virology remained at the centre of a raging controversy concerning its dubious role in the genesis of the virus. From various conspiracy theories ranging from lopsided operating procedures of the research lab to allegations of artificial reengineering, the institute invited volleys of criticism, condemnation and infamy all along the journey of the SARS-CoV-2. These charges, however, were repeatedly and vehemently denied by the virology centre and the Chinese government.<sup>17</sup>

Soon after the epidemic emerged and was noticed, the Chinese scientists started sequencing the genome and made the data available to researchers all over the world. This facilitated rapid collaboration on a global scale with several other research institutions teaming up to study the genomic sequence and explore the origins and

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<sup>11</sup> Kar, Sanghamitra, "Acko, Bounce, MakeMyTrip, others hardest hit by Covid-19 turn to layoffs, salary cuts", <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/small-biz/startups/newsbuzz/acko-bounce-vogo-drivezy-others-hardest-hit-by-covid-19-turn-to-layoffs-salary-cuts/articleshow/74940940.cms?from=mdr>, Accessed on 22 Apr 2020

<sup>12</sup> Choudhury, Ambika, "CEO of Visa Pledged "No Covid-19 Related Layoffs In 2020", <https://analyticsindiamag.com/ceo-of-visa-pledged-no-covid-19-related-layoffs-in-2020/>, Accessed on 29 Apr 2020

<sup>13</sup> "Coronavirus Outbreak Will 'Change the Landscape' of Work and Communication", <https://aisera.com/coronavirus-outbreak-will-change-the-landscape-of-work-and-communication/>, Accessed on 29 Apr 2020

<sup>14</sup> WHO, "Pneumonia of unknown cause – China", <https://www.who.int/csr/don/05-january-2020-pneumonia-of-unknown-cause-china/en/> (Accessed on 22 Apr 2020)

<sup>15</sup> Xinhuanet, "China publishes timeline on COVID-19 information sharing, intl cooperation". [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/06/c\\_138951662.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/06/c_138951662.htm) Accessed on 22 Apr 2020

<sup>16</sup> The Lancet, "Radiological findings from 81 patients with COVID-19 pneumonia in Wuhan, China: a descriptive study", [https://www.thelancet.com/article/S1473-3099\(20\)30086-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/article/S1473-3099(20)30086-4/fulltext), Accessed on 29 Apr 2020

<sup>17</sup> Livemint, "China's Wuhan Institute of Virology, the lab at the core of coronavirus controversy", <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/china-s-wuhan-institute-of-virology-the-lab-at-the-core-of-a-virus-controversy-11587266870143.html>, Accessed on 20 Apr 2020

evolution of the virus.<sup>18</sup> While the bats (cave species) were primarily suspected to be the reservoir<sup>19</sup> of the virus – the palm civets and pangolins were equally suspected to be the carriers by scientists. It was speculated that the palm civet could have served as an intermediate host between bats and the first human cases. On February 7, 2020, a virus verisimilar to SARS-CoV-2 was discovered in pangolin. Several epidemiologists conjectured that with 99% of genomic resemblance pangolins could be more likely reservoir of the coronavirus than bats.<sup>20</sup> However, Prof Stanley Perlman, a leading immunologist at the University of Iowa, while suspecting on Pangolins as a more likely cause cautioned that they were “*not proven to be the key intermediary*”.<sup>21</sup> Several scientists also refuted the idea of the virus being artificially reengineered in a lab. “*By comparing the available genome sequence data for known coronavirus strains, we can firmly determine that SARS-CoV-2 originated through natural processes,*” said Kristian Andersen, PhD, an associate professor of immunology and microbiology at Scripps Research.<sup>22</sup>

Fever, cough, shortness of breath, muscle pain, abdominal pain, fatigue, sore throat and diarrhoea were some of the common symptoms of Covid-19. Besides, a lost sense of smell and taste was also witnessed in several cases. While most cases exhibited mild symptoms, few escalated to viral pneumonia and multi-organ failure. The disease was declared a “pandemic” by World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020, subsequent to it being declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on 30 January 2020. The local transmission of the disease was witnessed in almost every country. As of 22 April 2020, more than 2.56 million cases were reported, with more than 177,000 deaths. More than 686,000 people recoveries were claimed by 22 April 2020.<sup>23</sup>

### The Impact of the Pandemic

On 23 January 2020, in an effort to control the sudden outbreak of Covid-19, the Chinese government imposed a lockdown<sup>24</sup> in the city of Wuhan (disgracefully hailed as the epicentre of the pandemic) along with 15 other nearby cities in Hubei. This later came to be universally referred to as the “Wuhan lockdown.” The lockdown in the Hubei cities affected nearly 57 million people – WHO called the move “*unprecedented in public health history*”.<sup>25</sup> In the subsequent weeks several countries such as Iran, Italy, Spain, UK, Switzerland and India imposed national lockdowns. Various other countries like US, Thailand, Philippines, Canada imposed localised lockdowns at various places in their country. By the end of March 2020, more than 100 countries had imposed a national or a localised lockdown impacting the lives of billions of people.

United States, Italy, Spain, France, UK, Belgium, Iran and Germany suffered more casualties than China as the pandemic progressed. US alone witnessed many times more casualty than that in China. Italy, badly mauled by the devastation caused by the pandemic had the second most casualties after the US. A nationwide lockdown was imposed on the country on 10 March 2020. This halted the activities of all businesses and institutions except hospitals, groceries and pharmacies and few other emergency public services. Even in such cities or places where strict lockdowns were not imposed and only official recommendations on preventive care and social distancing were issued – such as Stockholm (Sweden) – there too the movement of the public had reduced by more than a half.<sup>26</sup>

In India, the Indian government had imposed a nationwide lockdown on 24 March 2020, bringing the daily social and work lives of more than 1.3 billion population come to sudden halt. Approximately 500 people were

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<sup>18</sup> Cohen, Jon, “Chinese researchers reveal draft genome of virus implicated in Wuhan pneumonia outbreak”, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/01/chinese-researchers-reveal-draft-genome-virus-implicated-wuhan-pneumonia-outbreak#>, Accessed on 28 Apr 2020

<sup>19</sup> A **reservoir** refers to one or several animal species that are not very sensitive to a virus and naturally host one or several viruses. They have an effective immune mechanism which protects them from viruses and hence does not lead to any symptoms of the disease.

<sup>20</sup> Hassanin, Alexandre, “Coronavirus Could Be a ‘Chimera’ of Two Different Viruses, Genome Analysis Suggests”, <https://www.sciencelert.com/genome-analysis-of-the-coronavirus-suggests-two-viruses-may-have-combined>, Accessed on 28 Apr 2020

<sup>21</sup> Contreras, J., How did coronavirus start and where did it come from? Was it really Wuhan’s animal market?, <https://covid19data.com/2020/04/28/how-did-coronavirus-start-and-where-did-it-come-from-was-it-really-wuhans-animal-market/>, Accessed on 1 May 2020

<sup>22</sup> Scripps Research Institute, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/03/200317175442.htm>, Accessed on 22 Apr 2020

<sup>23</sup> WHO, “WHO Timeline - COVID-19”, <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/27-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19>, Accessed on 22 Apr 2020

<sup>24</sup> A **lockdown** refers to an emergency decree by a government that prevents people from leaving an area.

<sup>25</sup> Baird, Robert P., “What It Means to Contain and Mitigate the Coronavirus”, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/what-it-means-to-contain-and-mitigate-the-coronavirus>, Accessed on Apr 20, 2020

<sup>26</sup> Pancevski, Bojan, “Inside Sweden’s Radically Different Approach to the Coronavirus”, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/inside-swedens-radically-different-approach-to-the-coronavirus-11585598175> 21 Apr 2020

suffering with the virus at the time of imposition of the lockdown. The initial lockdown of 21 days was to end on 14 April 2020 and on the same day the government announced extension to 3 May 2020, with conditional relaxation after 20 April 2020 for such places and regions where the spread was adequately contained.<sup>27</sup>

The purpose of national or localised lockdown was to contain the growth of the virus that had spread exponentially through person to person and surface to surface contacts. Many observers believed that the lockdown was effective in tapering the growth curve of the virus and allowing the state machinery of various countries to acquire some time and prepare for emergency medical care. In India, for instance, the growth curve of the virus slowed down from a rate of doubling every three days earlier to rate of doubling every six days by 6 April. *“In January, we had just one lab for testing coronavirus, today we have over 220 such labs. The global experience shows that for every 10,000 patients, around 1,500-1,600 beds are needed. In India, today we have an arrangements for over 1 lakh beds,”* remarked the Indian prime minister in a widely televised public address.<sup>28</sup>

The lockdown in Wuhan was officially lifted on 8 April with certain local caveats. However, as May approached more and more countries were contemplating to lift the lockdown partially or completely. The countries had a Hobson’s choice. While the lockdown was a necessary evil, the global economy was faltering and the governments had to take firm decision to bring the same back on track. More than 100 countries had closed their national boundaries and stopped almost all kinds of trade and commerce. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs opined that the virus was disrupting the global supply chains and estimated that the global economy could shrink by nearly 1 percent due to the pandemic. The disruption to the manufacturing and the services sector, enhanced use of resources to fight the pandemic together with the disruption in transportation and logistics raised concerns not only about supply side issues but also caused anxieties in regard to the fallen global demand. There were widespread reports about supply disruptions in pharmaceuticals and grocery. The stock markets witnessed steep declines that were never seen after the 2008 financial crisis. The pandemic had an adverse impact on several industry verticals excluding a few such as online education and training. Several stock exchanges around the globe saw drastic declines in their market capitalisations. Unemployment hit high records in almost all countries, including United States, the world’s largest economy at the time.<sup>29</sup>

The economic impact of the pandemic in India was no less disruptive and disturbing. India’s growth forecast for the fiscal year 2021 was downgraded by World Bank and other credit rating agencies with the lowest numbers since the country’s economic liberalization in the 1990s. The imposition of the lockdown resulted in a daily loss of nearly US\$4.5 billion. Only a quarter of the country’s economy was operational during the period and nearly 53% of the businesses were significantly affected.<sup>30</sup> Low-pay and daily-wage workers in the informal sectors suffered severe hardships. Similar threat loomed before millions of farmers who grew perishables and faced severe difficulties in finding markets for their produce. Hotels, airlines and such companies in the travel and tourism segment were badly mauled and were cutting salaries and laying off employees. Well entrenched companies in India such as Larsen and Toubro, UltraTech Cement, Grasim Industries, Aditya Birla Group, Tata Motors and Thermax had temporarily suspended or significantly reduced operations. Amazon and Flipkart stopped sale of non-essential items in India so that they could focus on essential deliveries only. Raghuram Rajan, the former RBI honcho remarked that it was the *“greatest emergency since Independence”*.<sup>31</sup> With all the negative developments, the International Monetary Fund’s projection of GDP growth for India for the financial year 2021-22 stood slightly optimistic at 1.9%, which plausibly was the highest among G-20 nations.<sup>32</sup> According to a survey conducted by the

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<sup>27</sup> BBC News, “Coronavirus: India enters ‘total lockdown’ after spike in cases”, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52024239>, Accessed on 23 Apr 2020

<sup>28</sup> DD News, <https://twitter.com/ddnewslive/status/1249927742784565248>, Accessed on 27 Apr 2020

<sup>29</sup> Aaronson, S. & Alba, F., “The unemployment impacts of COVID-19: lessons from the Great Recession”, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/04/15/the-unemployment-impacts-of-covid-19-lessons-from-the-great-recession/>, Accessed on 23 Apr 2020

<sup>30</sup> Wikipedia, “Economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in India”, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic\\_impact\\_of\\_the\\_COVID-19\\_pandemic\\_in\\_India](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic_impact_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic_in_India), Accessed on 29 Apr 2020

<sup>31</sup> Sheth, H., “Covid-19: India faces greatest economic emergency since Independence, says Raghuram Rajan”, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/covid-19-india-faces-greatest-economic-emergency-since-independence-says-raghuram-rajana/article31267555.ece>, 22 Apr 2020

<sup>32</sup> Kumar, C., IMF’s projection of 1.9% GDP growth for India highest in G-20, says RBI Governor Das, <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/imf-projection-19-gdp-growth-for-india-highest-in-g20-rbi-governor-das/story/401295.html>, Apr 21, 2020

World Economic Forum (WEF) retail, mining, manufacturing and automobile industries had the worst impact due to the global lockdowns.<sup>33</sup>

While the growth of coronavirus was proliferating – though at a slower rate by the end of April, it was expected to survive and flourish until suitable vaccines were developed for prevention. While several research labs worked on the development of a suitable vaccine the pace of research was unprecedented. Seven vaccines were already in human clinical trials. In the existing order of things, the workplaces across verticals envisioned the dilemma of a new normal that prioritised additional workspace, better sanitation measures and flexibility with remote engagement.

### **The New Normals at the Workplace**

The term VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) was often used to depict the highly competitive global scenario all around where unpredictability was rampant and business decisions had to be taken with lot of due diligence, insight and competitive research. This term was brought in by the Army War College of United States during the Afghan War in 1987 to describe the unpredictable and volatile scenario that existed in the war region. However, the sudden onslaught of Covid-19 in the end months of 2019 gave an entirely new dimension to global VUCA and brought a sudden disruption not only in business activities but in several other concerns like working environments, processes, routines, work policies, operating procedures, leave rules, travel guidelines and so on and so forth. Drastic transformations were being anticipated as regards how people worked, exercised, shopped, learned, communicated, and none the least, where they worked. According to a Gartner research report released on 19 March 2020 around 88% of the organizations world over encouraged their employees to work from home.<sup>34</sup> *"Covid-19 has effectively become a tipping point for remote workers,"* said Shawn Dickerson, senior vice president of marketing at KeyedIn<sup>35</sup>. *"Many of us in the tech industry were already familiar with the tools and techniques for working outside an office, such as video conferencing, social messaging, cloud file sharing, etc. But this pandemic has forced workers in almost every sector to adopt those tools and techniques, which I believe has forever changed the dynamic of work,"* he said.<sup>36</sup>

Many industry observers felt that the impact of the pandemic on future workspace would have both positive as well as negative ramifications and it was imperative for organizations to stay agile and adapt to the changing requirements and needs of the future. There was perceptible feeling that the future workplaces would be highly supple and agile in nature and the inflexibility of an office-only based environment would not hold ground any more. Organizations would need to prepare for a significant and nearly permanent transition to more remote working environment. *"We'll definitely see some shifts in attitudes and workplace culture that will ultimately result in organizations being more flexible and accommodating of different work styles,"* Chris Kozup, CMO at Aruba Networks.<sup>37</sup>

While remote working was emerging as a new norm, in certain cases it was making employees stay glued to laptops and desktops for relatively unstructured – long, staggered hours from their homes. This raised serious health concerns by counsellors and fitness experts. Work at home – as a novel paradigm – required a sound balance between the obligation towards the family and the obligation towards the job. The anxiety of being “always available” raised serious concerns about health and wellness. Remote work did permit reduction in stress related to commuting; but it had to be used more wisely and productively without affecting the subtle balance between work time and family time. Agile collaboration and agile teams emerged as another trend in the pandemic era. Collaboration over the internet made it easier for people and teams to cross connect beyond the rigid boundaries of product line or sales function and form more agile groups to solve problems and help one another. In a way it made collaboration more democratic and organizational hierarchies more informal and flatter. Agility allowed formation

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<sup>33</sup> WEF, “How companies and employees can make their best coronavirus comeback”, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-covid-business-resilience-preparedness-skills/>, 2 May 2020

<sup>34</sup> Gartner, “Gartner HR Survey Reveals 88% of Organizations Have Encouraged or Required Employees to Work From Home Due to Coronavirus”, <https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2020-03-19-gartner-hr-survey-reveals-88--of-organizations-have-e>, Accessed on 19 Apr 2020

<sup>35</sup> **KeyedIn Solutions** was a business software company headquartered in UK.

<sup>36</sup> TechRepublic, “5 ways the future of work is changing, due to coronavirus”, <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/5-ways-the-future-of-work-is-changing-due-to-coronavirus/>, 21 Apr 2020

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

of self organizing teams with greater independence emerging out of people from across departments and specializations. One more aspect of the contemporary workplace, particularly in the service sector, was that it had workers from different generations – the traditionalists, baby boomers, Gen X, Gen Y and Gen Z. For the older generations that had more experience than the younger ones, the emerging order of things such as work at home, enhanced leave, staggered schedules etc. had wider significance than higher pay packages.

While the new-age service oriented companies were increasingly adopting remote working and flexible work culture the economy did not run with only software. The manufacturing and the agriculture based businesses that had strong linkages with production of perishable and non perishable products the physical presence of employees at workplace was an essential requirement which could not be replaced with “work at home” rules. For the workers in these sectors there were several challenges which could not be overcome simply through a virtual private network. Rajeshwar Tripathi, the chief HR officer at Mahindra & Mahindra, said “*Work from home is not actively encouraged and only if an employee is found to be sick, is it allowed.*”<sup>38</sup> Shilpa Kabra Maheshwari, the country head (HR) of Siemens India said that functions like assembling electrical parts and ensuring stringent quality checks on shop floor required controlled environments in which physical human intervention was indispensable and non-negotiable.<sup>39</sup> The pandemic had refrained several companies from engaging in any kind of production forecasts. The future seemed highly volatile and challenging and the leaders felt that the best strategy they could adopt in the existing scenario would be the one based on down-to-business contingency and scenario planning, for the short as well as the long term. For the employees on the other hand, their health, family, career plans, children’s education, financial resources, workplace safety etc. became even more important.

## HR Challenges

In a survey conducted by the online web portal Human Resources Director and published in the month of April 2020, it was revealed that 70% of the HR leaders considered “crisis management” or “business continuity planning” as their primary challenge during the outbreak of the pandemic. 42% of the leaders said that they were only somewhat prepared to face the HR challenges while only 8% said that they were suitably ready. 5% respondents conveyed that they were poorly equipped. Covid-19 had effectively demonstrated how HR still had to learn many new rules of the game in downsizing risks and charting effective course of survival. The **Exhibit – 1** shows the relative importance of several challenges faced by the HR during the outbreak.<sup>40</sup>

In the difficult times businesses strove to find ways to keep their employees safe, comfortable and productive. Many HR leaders felt that the pandemic gave them a reason to conduct a thorough health check of their organisations and better assess the risks and opportunities. In the months of uncertainty that was to follow it became imperative on HR function to identify and implement effective employee policies that could get the best of the both worlds – employee welfare and business continuity. Many observers felt that businesses needed to carefully perform a SWOT testing and communicate closely with suppliers, customers and their employees. The challenges were not only based on several parameters such as company’s location, size, sector and industry but also had varied ramifications and contexts depending upon the individual positioning of the business (**refer Exhibits 2 and 3**). Communication was considered very vital at this point of time and a test of true leadership. Those in leadership roles were expected to clearly communicate to their employees, customers, partners and suppliers leadership roles their short term and long-term plans and evince a clear commitment to employee health and business sustainability. Some of the questions that emerged were:

- ❖ *What policy changes need to be made to align the business with new realities?*
- ❖ *What new communication strategies should be followed?*
- ❖ *What new paradigms for appraising the performance should be brought in considering the remote-work rules?*
- ❖ *How to describe the new job structures considering part-time and full-time work?*
- ❖ *How would the organization monitor and enforce attendance?*

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<sup>38</sup> Philip, L., “Covid-19 Impact: For manufacturers, work from home doesn’t work”, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/company/corporate-trends/covid-19-impact-for-manufacturers-work-from-home-doesnt-work/articleshow/74569188.cms?from=mdr>, Accessed on Apr 20, 2020

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> HRD, “COVID-19: HR’s main challenges revealed”, <https://www.hcamag.com/us/news/general/covid-19-hrs-main-challenges-revealed/218599>, Accessed on 22 Apr 2020

- ❖ *What would be the new dimensions of discipline?*
- ❖ *How shall the HR adapt to the new needs in talent acquisition m, benefits and compensation?*

While challenges were universal across sectors, they were more pronounced for production and manufacturing intensive companies. In Mumbai, for instance, automobile, textile and engineering industries, and several similar others, depended primarily on outstation employees for working at their factories many of whom had returned to their native places or were stuck during the lockdown. There was also a looming fear that the return of these migrant workers would not be welcomed by the local landlords during the course of the pandemic and this might further impact the local industries. The chairman of the Mahindra Group, Anand Mahindra, grumbled about the disrupted supply chain which he said was primarily due to lack of loaders and unloaders who were primarily migrant workers. *“This pandemic has shown us that they are key elements of our ecosystem,”* Mahindra said. *“We never paid them much attention; we now need to respect them as key support pillars of society.”*<sup>41</sup>

Many experts from the manufacturing and production feared that work from home policy would not be easy to adopt in their functions due to various kinds of infrastructural and operational bottlenecks. K.E. Raghunathan, past president, All India Manufacturer’s Organisation opined that the paradigm of work from home was irrelevant for the micro, small and medium enterprises sectors.<sup>42</sup> Aditya Narayan Mishra, CEO of staffing firm CIEL HR Services, remarked, *“Work from home is not an evolved model and organisations do not have monitoring IT tools. Since the concept is not widely practiced in non-IT sectors, the change may take some time.”*<sup>43</sup>

### **The Survival and Sustenance Strategies**

While the cataclysmic spread of Covid-19 hampered life and businesses all around, the corporate leaders from across verticals, markets and regions unanimously gave top priority to employees' safety and wellness – physical, financial, psychological, social and emotional. Several companies in India and outside had come up with checklists, safety guidelines (**refer Exhibits 4 and 5**) and other compassionate initiatives ranging from “work at home” to “doctors on call” to keep their employees motivated and engaged.

1. *Lessons from Singapore:* This country had shown proactive planning and response mechanism in its fight against the pandemic. After the SARS outbreak a decade ago, the country had learnt an important lesson and several companies based in the country had effective risk management and mitigation plans in place. Emergency meetings and discussions had started taking place even when there were no cases in the country. For instance several companies had started issuing personal thermometers to employees, ensuring no log-in into the system without reporting of body temperature, mandatory travel declarations, physical barricade plan for health screening before entry into the premises etc. Several companies had centralized communication systems to effectively communicate to the employees and other important stake-holders important messages without any conflict or ambiguity. Another initiative in Singapore was that the companies proactively used the best technologies in contact tracing. Most companies used a combination of manual tracking (for instance sign in to meetings, restaurants, etc.) along with digital tracing (such as badge swipes, security cameras with facial recognition, etc.). This made it easy to call people instantly and let them know that they were potentially exposed and that they should self-quarantine until the testing results are confirmed.<sup>44</sup>
2. *Employee Upskilling* - The pandemic made several forward-looking companies scale up the employee upskilling activities and provided them deeper engagement through online courses and certifications. It was one of the several ways to make the employees stay engaged and feel appreciated. This not only made the employees feel valued but was also instrumental in bridging the knowledge gap. According to a report by

<sup>41</sup> Chaliawala, N., “Manufacturing sector anticipates severe workforce crunch post Covid-19”, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/company/corporate-trends/manufacturing-sector-anticipates-severe-workforce-crunch-post-covid-19/articleshow/75084233.cms?from=mdr>, Accessed on 23 Apr 2020

<sup>42</sup> Kotteswaran, C. S., “Job loss threat looms over MSMEs, say industry sources”, <https://www.dnnext.in/News/TamilNadu/2020/03/20022757/1220951/Job-loss-threat-looms-over-MSMEs-say-industry-sources-vpf>, Accessed on 20 April 2020

<sup>43</sup> Vijayakumar, S., “COVID-19: Work from home, a difficult strategy for non-IT companies to adopt”, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/covid-19-work-from-home-a-difficult-strategy-for-non-it-companies-to-adopt/article31098241.ece>, 23 Apr 2020

<sup>44</sup> Dewey, S., “From Sars to Covid-19, what lessons has Singapore learned?”, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3052120/sars-covid-19-what-lessons-has-singapore-learned>, Accessed on 24 Apr 2020



Deloitte, the “inability to learn and grow” was one of the principal reasons behind employee disenchantment and attrition.<sup>45</sup> Axis Bank, for instance, offered online courses and virtual meetings of team members. Similarly, Air Asia offered 2,42,500 hours of learning in the month of April 2020 averaging 4 hours per employee every day. Anjali Chatterjee, head-people and culture, remarked, “*Engagement has always played a big part at AirAsia, but during the lockdown it has become a higher priority for us.*”<sup>46</sup>

3. *Personalisation* – Another emerging area was the offering of more personalised benefits to employees by way of customised courses, personalised financial suggestions, HR self service, psychological counselling, medical advice etc. The idea was that providing a wide array of options would suit the unique needs of employees from any background and in any stage of their careers. It permitted deeper level of engagement with employees and was instrumental in building trust and confidence. Moreover, many employees wished to keep a degree of privacy and personalisation in the multitude of interventions around. The primary assumption to personalisation was that every employee’s voyage was unique and a “one-size-fits-all” approach did not produce great results.<sup>47</sup> For instance the Virgin Group had extensively used personalisation as a tool to ensure that through its behaviour change technology the employees developed positive habits, better engaged with colleagues and improved their health on an ongoing basis.<sup>48</sup>
4. *Corporate Wellness* – The arrival of the pandemic made the employers focus more on the holistic health of the employees. Several companies attempted to mitigate employees’ concerns and anxiety by proactively talking about good health practices and sharing the government guidelines for precaution and prevention (**refer Exhibit 6**). Many companies kept constant communication with their employees as regards their mental and physical health. Empathy and concern for safety was the new buzzword that symbolized several companies during the pandemic. Online psychological counselling, doctor-on-call, health and nutrition tips were some of the many services that were offered by a plethora of companies.
5. *Emergency Response*: Well entrenched companies endeavoured to ensure that they had proper emergency response systems in place where each and every employee was aware of the exact role to be played and the standard procedures to be followed at all appropriate levels. Few companies like Tata Autocomp came up with detailed standard operating procedures for the guidance of employees and other important stakeholders. Several companies had introduced intensive checklist to ensure foolproof response to the pandemic and safety and security at workplace.
6. *Location-independent Workplace* – A flexible workplace landscape was not uncommon even before the onset of the pandemic. However, Covid-19 redefined the significance of a flexible workplace and made several employers have a relook at their existing work at home policies. “*We’re being forced into the world’s largest work-from-home experiment and, so far, it hasn’t been easy for a lot of organizations to implement,*” said Saikat Chatterjee, Senior Director, Advisory at Gartner.<sup>49</sup> While remote work reduced physical and mental stress it was also showing significant impact on environment due to reduced commute, reduced transportation, reduced pollution, reduced in-office energy consumption and reduced carbon footprint.
7. *AI-driven Technology* – In their bid to reduce costs, employers looked towards artificial intelligence as an upcoming trend that would significantly impact how HR operates and functions. Few employers had AI systems in place to autonomously screen candidates and move prospective hires through the application process. Although organizations had inexhaustible employee data they often struggled to identify important insights for improving engagement. “Sentiment analysis” was among the emerging applications of AI wherein the leading companies endeavoured to understand the overall sentiment and feeling of employees based on

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<sup>45</sup> Deloitte, “Introduction: Leading the social enterprise—Reinvent with a human focus”, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/human-capital-trends/2019/leading-social-enterprise.html>, Accessed on 21 April 2020

<sup>46</sup> HRKatha, “Air Asia India employees together clock 2.43 lakh hours of learning in April”, <https://www.hrkatha.com/features/learning/air-asia-india-employees-together-clock-2-43-lakh-hours-of-learning-in-april/>

<sup>47</sup> Kumar, C., “Emerging Paradigms in Corporate Wellness”, Human Capital, Vol. 2, No. 11, April 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Virgin, This is the secret to activating your organisation’s potential, <https://www.virgin.com/entrepreneur/secret-activating-your-organisations-potential>, Accessed on 28 Apr 2020

<sup>49</sup> Martello Blog, “Is Your Organization Ready for Remote Work?”, <https://martellotech.com/blog/ready-for-remote-work/>, Accessed on 29 Apr 2020

various transactional interactions with them. Google had voice and facial analysis tools in place, and IBM had implemented sentiment analysis to gain a better understanding of the employees and their needs.

8. *Office Hygiene* – Creating and maintaining a healthy working environment was one of the top concerns for HR leaders and the pandemic gave them several reasons to reorient their energies in ensuring safe and healthy workplace. For instance, in the hospitality industry the hotel staff was more vulnerable to the disease because of frequent travelling visitors. “*The training for the line managers has scaled up. As a matter of fact, there is a session every day. The hygiene manager is actively involved in keeping the employees aware and developing mechanisms to stay safe, in line with the guidelines from WHO,*” remarked Rishi Tiwari, cluster director-HR, Hilton Hotels.<sup>50</sup> Several other companies offered training and development to establish better hygiene regulations.
9. *Strong Communication Mechanism* – The pandemic also made HR leaders realise the importance of effective communication strategy that used multiple channels and sent across a single, unified and unambiguous message to all important stakeholders. “*You are looking at bulletins, sticking posters on the wall, emails, chat groups, town hall, infographics, videos, and any mode of media that could help to effectively communicate the message to all employees,*” said Adrian Tan, a veteran HR practitioner and APAC leader of PeopleStrong, an India-based Enterprise HR SaaS platform.<sup>51</sup> Policies concerning confidentiality, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) documents became more pronounced.
10. *Security and compliance* – The workplace disruption and the ongoing work at home gave tremendous loads on the Internet infrastructure. While remote work had its own advantages it also raised heightened concerns on cyber security and safety. “*Cyber criminals are exploiting the COVID-19 outbreak as an opportunity to send phishing emails claiming to have important updates or encouraging donations, impersonating trustworthy organisations,*” the Computer Emergency Response Team of India (CERT-In) observed.<sup>52</sup> Many companies formulated well defined and structured security and compliance policies so as to ensure risk free operations.
11. *Inclusive Culture devoid of Bias, Discrimination, and Exclusion:* The pandemic aside, the world simultaneously witnessed varying degrees of xenophobia, religious bigotry and racism at various places. Several events occurred that had parochial and racial overtones. In such a delicate scenario it became exceedingly important for the HR leaders to stay attentive, empathetic and impartial towards their co-workers and fully ensure professional camaraderie and equity. An environment free from mistrust had become much more important than anytime in past.

## The Way Forward

The scale and size of the disorder and disruption was unprecedented. Covid-19 had emerged as a “black swan” – an abrupt event whose arrival, growth, scale and even departure was unpredictable. Its impact was beyond the comprehension and scope of any disaster management model – no one had foreseen that a seemingly localised virus could proliferate so fast globally and could so severely impact the global economic and social order.

Nitin Nohria, the dean of Harvard Business School and also the George F. Baker Professor of Administration, in his article<sup>53</sup> published in the Harvard Business Review opined that the most successful businesses in a VUCA world would be the ones that had “continuous sensing and response capabilities”. He compared two different types of organisations (refer **Exhibit 7**) and suggested that just like Darwin’s theory of the survival of the fittest, the second type of organisation with more agile response would be better able to deal with and thrive in the complexities created by the pandemic.

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<sup>50</sup> Bothra, P., “Superior employee practices can keep Coronavirus at bay”, <https://www.hrkatha.com/employee-health/superior-employee-practices-can-keep-coronavirus-at-bay/>, Accessed on 24 Apr 2020

<sup>51</sup> Saxena, A., “Coronavirus Outbreak: Best Business Practices to Implement Right Now”, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/345759>, Accessed on Apr 30, 2020

<sup>52</sup> ET, “COVID-19: CERT-In says spurt in cyberattacks on personal comps since 'work from home' protocol began”, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/internet/covid-19-cert-in-says-spurt-in-cyberattacks-on-personal-comps-since-work-from-home-protocol-began/articleshow/74849119.cms?from=mdr>, Accessed on 29 Apr 2020

<sup>53</sup> Nohria, N., “What Organizations Need to Survive a Pandemic”, <https://hbr.org/2020/01/what-organizations-need-to-survive-a-pandemic>, 30 Jan 2020 (Accessed on 1 May 2020)

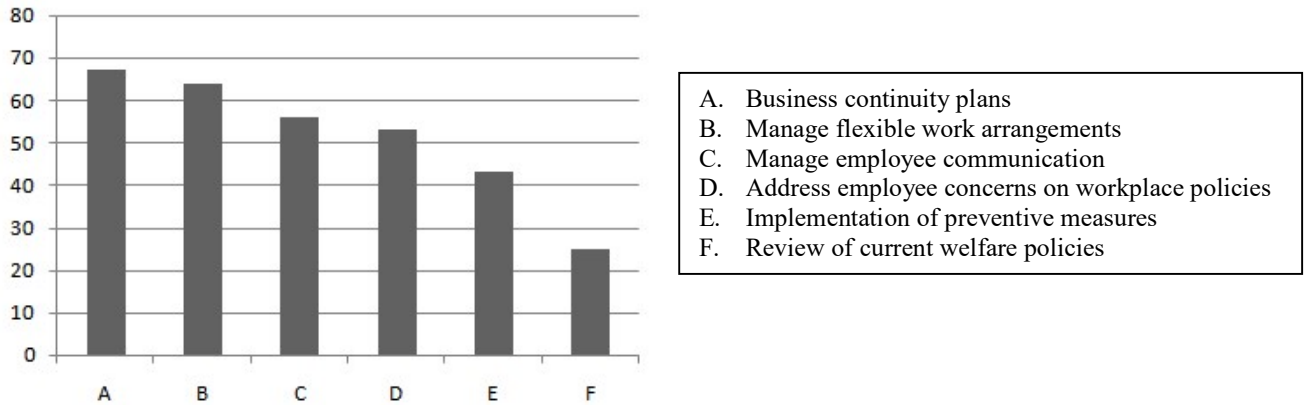
Despite all the bad news, gloom and despair, there was also a small crowd of positivists who felt that the pandemic would bring constructive changes in the world. Josh Bersin, a prominent HR thought leader commented, *“The CEO is now the Chief Empathy Officer. And this is really happening. 63% of HR professionals believe their organisational culture has improved, 59% believe their employee wellbeing has improved, and 55% believe their employee experience has improved.”*<sup>54</sup>

It remained to be seen how the global pandemic would redefine and reshape the global economic, social, cultural, political, business and cognate ecosystems in the longer term. Will the world be able to see cleaner environment, greener practices, empathetic leadership, better governance, greater respect to flora and fauna and more sustainable and humane ways of living and working? The broader ramifications of the pandemic stayed under the veil.

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<sup>54</sup> Bersin, J., “COVID-19 May Be The Best Thing That Ever Happened To Employee Engagement”, <https://joshbersin.com/2020/04/covid-19-may-be-the-best-thing-that-ever-happened-to-employee-engagement/>, Accessed on 29 Apr 2020

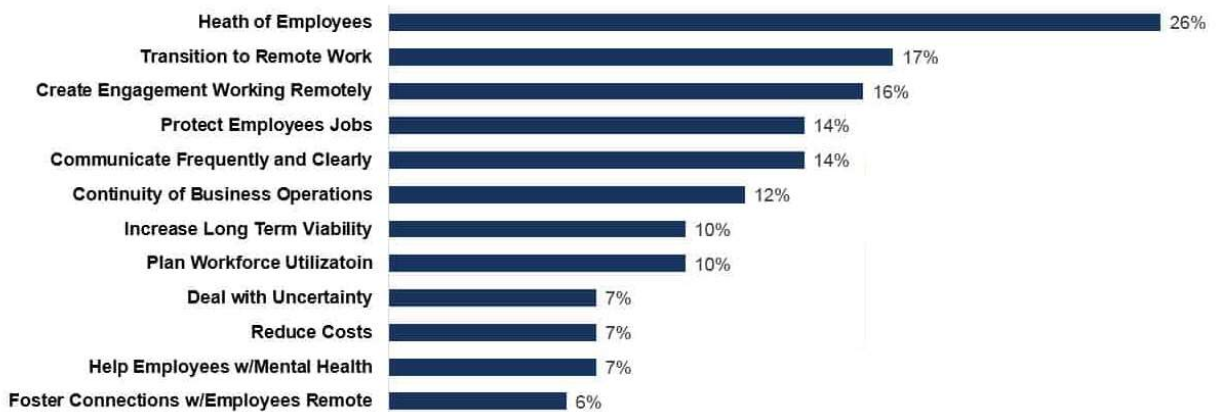
**Exhibit 1 - Relative Importance of Several Challenges Faced by HR during the Pandemic**



Source: HRD, “COVID-19: HR’s main challenges revealed”

<https://www.hcamag.com/us/news/general/covid-19-hrs-main-challenges-revealed/218599>, Accessed on 22 Apr 2020

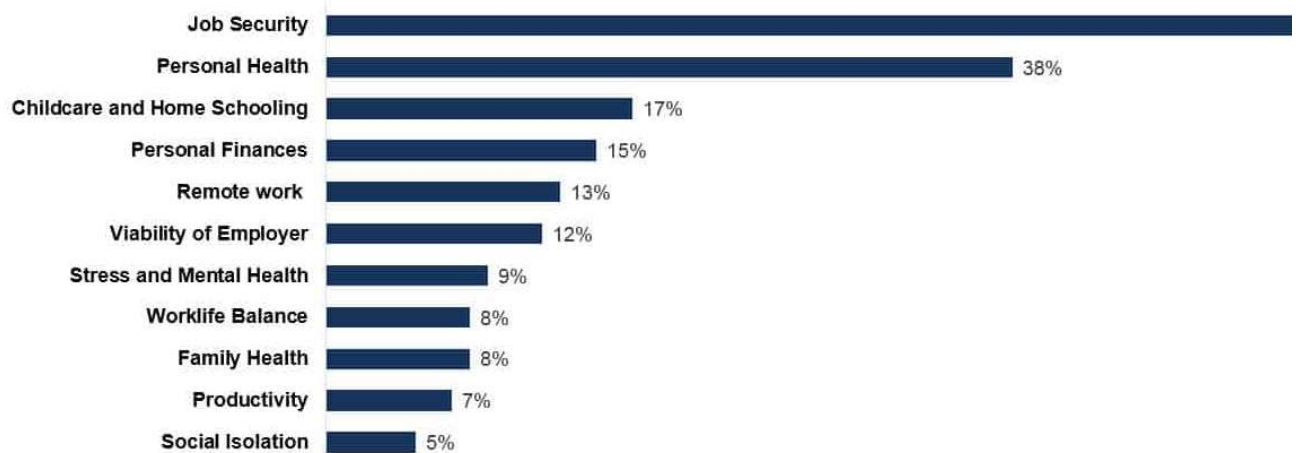
**Exhibit 2 - Top Concerns before HR Leaders (as on 7 Apr 2020)**



Source: Bersin, J., “COVID-19: The Pulse of HR – What Is HR Doing Now?”

<https://joshbersin.com/2020/04/covid-19-the-pulse-of-hr-what-is-hr-doing-now/>, Accessed on 1 May 2020

**Exhibit 3 - Top Issues in Employees Minds (as on 7 Apr 2020)**



Source: Bersin, J., “COVID-19: The Pulse of HR – What Is HR Doing Now?”

<https://joshbersin.com/2020/04/covid-19-the-pulse-of-hr-what-is-hr-doing-now/>, Accessed on 1 May 2020  
**Exhibit 4 – 6-Step HR Checklist with Critical Actions for “Crisis Leadership”**

Immediate	Near-Term	Long-Term
<b>(1) Maintain business continuity</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Review, update and implement a business continuity plan</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Set up a dedicated cross-function response team to monitor all developments</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Identify critical roles and stakeholders for response communications.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Start conducting “what if” scenario planning to have mitigation plans ready and available if needed</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Consider leadership’s focus, caring and commitment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Monitor external and internal developments; model impacts on the workforce</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Review effectiveness of initial actions and correct course if needed</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Develop recovery time and recovery point objectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Conduct a post-crisis review of policies and actions taken</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Modify business continuity and risk management plans to incorporate lessons learned</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Update workforce planning models</li> </ul>
<b>(2) Deliver clear, frequent communications</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Test emergency communication channels</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Identify key resources top monitor credible sources of information; identify and communicate updates about issues that impact the workforce</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Arm employees with information they need to keep themselves safe now and as the situation unfolds</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Provide any new working guidelines (e.g. travel restrictions, take laptops home every night)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Provide additional guidance to support line managers communicating directly with employees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Provide a channel for real-time updates as the situation progresses</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Point to relevant programmes, tools and benefits already in place to support employees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Conduct a post-crisis audit of communications effectiveness</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Institute changes as needed</li> </ul>
<b>(3) Maintain employee health at work</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Institute enhanced work-site hygiene practices (e.g., social distancing, extra workplace cleaning measures)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Provide guidance to employees on what to do if symptomatic</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Modify travel policies</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Modify visitor policies at all places</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Evaluate potential facility closures, staff rotations, and temporary reassignments</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Provide quarantine guidelines</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Specify return-to-work policies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Assess impact of shutdowns</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Review policies to identify opportunities for permanent changes to employee health and wellness programmes</li> </ul>
<b>(4) Review employee paid time off policies</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Assess existing paid time off (PTO) and time off policies</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Refer to country / state / local regulations to ensure that changes to time-off plans are compliant</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Define alternative provisions, i.e. adding or extending sick leave, enabling time off to care for sick family members (if not already allowed)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Model various staffing scenarios, including reduction in work hours, furloughs and layoffs</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Develop contingency plans to prepare for possible alternative solutions</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Where possible, consider paying employees for completing training if unable to work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Assess impact of policy changes and adjust as needed</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Closely monitor ongoing changes in staffing needs</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Determine feasibility of permanently modifying absence and PTO policies.</li> </ul>
<b>(5) Expand virtual working</b>		

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Evaluate the feasibility of remote work arrangements</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Determine any role-specific restrictions</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Expand policies for those who can work remotely</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Assess payroll tax implications</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Determine collaboration / productivity tools required and work with the IT organisation to ensure such tools are available</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Document a formal policy for approvals and any eligible expenses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Plan communication protocol and policy for work from home employees</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Provide guidance for managers leading newly remote teams</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Monitor closely for productivity issues and provide needed support</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Stay on top of employee engagement</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Review / adjust policies as needed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Assess results</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Identify opportunities to update policies and practices</li> </ul>
<b>(6) Maintain essential HR/payroll operations and legal compliance</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Provide mobile access to pay and time and attendance information and functionality</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Review electronic payment capabilities for the organization</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Implement a mandatory electronic payment policy , where allowed by law</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Use technologies such as optical scanners and robotic process automation (RPA) to digitize manual processes</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Encourage employees to sign up for electronic payment</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> For employees without bank accounts consider pay-cards or on-demand pay</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Institute permanent changes to payment methods and polices to address gaps made visible during the crisis</li> </ul>

Source: Boulineau, M., DiRomualdo, A., & Osle H., “6 steps to protect employees, manage business risk and maintain engagement” <https://www.thehackettgroup.com/blog/an-hr-checklist-for-dealing-with-the-coronavirus-crisis/>, Accessed on 29 Apr 2020

#### Exhibit 5 – Workplace Safety Guidelines (Illustrative Chart for Employers)

### Keeping the workplace safe

Encourage your employees to...

#### Practice good hygiene



- Stop handshaking – use other noncontact methods of greeting
- Clean hands at the door and schedule regular hand washing reminders by email
- Create habits and reminders to avoid touching their faces and cover coughs and sneezes
- Disinfect surfaces like doorknobs, tables, desks, and handrails regularly
- Increase ventilation by opening windows or adjusting air conditioning

#### Be careful with meetings and travel



- Use videoconferencing for meetings when possible
- When not possible, hold meetings in open, well-ventilated spaces
- Consider adjusting or postponing large meetings or gatherings
- Assess the risks of business travel

#### Handle food carefully



- Limit food sharing
- Strengthen health screening for cafeteria staff and their close contacts
- Ensure cafeteria staff and their close contacts practice strict hygiene

#### Stay home if...



- They are feeling sick
- They have a sick family member in their home

Source: Smarp, “The Ultimate COVID-19 Crisis Management Checklist for Employers”, <https://blog.smarp.com/ultimate-coronavirus-crisis-management-checklist>, Accessed on 30 Apr 2020

**Exhibit 6 – Measures adopted/carried forward by companies during the pandemic**

<b>Company</b>	<b>Employee Welfare Measure (illustrative only)</b>
Accenture	Disability Support
Apple	Activity Tracker / Tools / Apps
Axis Bank	Online Learning
Centillion Solutions	HR Helpline
Comcast	Leadership Calls
Eastman Chemical Co.	Personalised Financial Advice To Employees
Essar Group	Learning TV And Learning Radio
GoJek( Indonesia)	Crisis And Risk Team
Google	COVID-19 Fund
Harvard University	Updated HR Policies
IBM	Sentiment Analysis
Infosys	Doctor On Call
Johnson & Johnson	Revising EAPs And Health Plans
Malta Public Transport	Fumigation of Buses Everyday
Microsoft	Extended Paid Leave
Multi Commodity Exchange	Group Cover Covid-19
Philips India	Sleep Awareness
RPG	Nutrition Advice
Salesforce	Virtual Meditation
SAP Labs India	Online Fitness Sessions
Starbucks	Therapy Sessions
Tata Autocomp	Detailed SOP
TCS	Online Education
Tyson Foods	Temperature Screening
Vedanta	Psychological Counselling
Walmart	New Hiring during the Pandemic and Extra Bonuses

**(Source: Compiled from online resources by the author)**

**Exhibit 7 - Which Organisation Will Fare Better?**

<b>Organisation 1</b>	<b>Organisation 2</b>
Hierarchical	Networked
Centralised Leadership	Distributed Leadership
Tightly coupled (greater interdependence among parts)	Loosely coupled (less interdependence)
Concentrated workforce	Dispersed workforce
Specialists	Cross trained generalists
Policy and procedure driven	Guided by simple yet flexible rules

**Source: Nohria, N., "What Organizations Need to Survive a Pandemic",**  
<https://hbr.org/2020/01/what-organizations-need-to-survive-a-pandemic>, 30 Jan 2020 (Accessed on 1 May 2020)



# **Teaching Notes**

## **Summary of the Case**

The case discusses the coronavirus outbreak or Covid-19 that emerged in the end of the year 2019 in China and subsequently spread across the world creating havoc everywhere. There were a staggering 2,480,503 patients suffering with the virus with 170,397 fatalities as on 20 April 2020. The numbers kept increasing every day. Covid-19 was declared a “pandemic” by WHO on March 11, 2020. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the virus was expected to severely impact the economy of more than 170 countries and severely impact global GDP by nearly 3% by the end of 2020. This calamity was not seen even during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The virus was growing rapidly and the existing medical care had no vaccines to cope with the pandemic. The governments all across the globe enforced “lockdown” and “social distancing” as the two most effective measures to temporarily halt the growth of the virus. The restrictions on the movement of people as a result of global lockdowns had hit the agriculture, the manufacturing and the service sectors badly, and in particular, the verticals such as hospitality, tourism, retail trade, recreation and transportation. The case in its second part, “Brief on Covid-19” provides a brief discussion on the origins and growth of the coronavirus pandemic. It subsequently discusses the impact of the pandemic in the third section. The fourth section, “New Normals at the Workplace” discusses the sudden disruption the pandemic brought not only in business activities but in several other concerns like working environments, processes, routines, work policies, operating procedures, leave rules, travel guidelines etc. Remote work, agile collaboration, social distancing, enhanced concern for wellness, lifelong learning emerged as the new paradigms in the changing order of things. The fifth section discusses the challenges being faced by the HR leaders in the changing landscape. The sixth section discusses some of the survival and sustenance strategies adopted by the companies to stay relevant and competitive.

## **Learning Objectives**

The case is targeted at corporate executives, academicians and students. It will fall under the category of an illustrative or a business environment case study. The Covid-19 pandemic emerged as a “black swan” event about which no one had any inkling about. The management executives could use the case to better understand the difficult and unpredictable extraneous situations that may arise and may lead to a complete topsy-turvy of the existing business model. The business leaders must understand that certain scenarios in business are totally unpredictable and it is always safe to have a worst-case scenario disaster management plan. The case brings forward some of the best practices adopted by HR leaders in ensuring sustenance and survival of their businesses. The academicians and students can discuss the various ways in which a company could frame employee friendly strategies that are sustainable and profitable. The case provides an overview of the existing business environment across the globe, in general, and in India in particular, and how companies could devise employee friendly policies to stay competitive and relevant.

## **Target Audience**

Corporate Leaders and Managers, Officers, Consultants, Teachers and Students

## **Case Questions**

1. What is a “black swan” event? Why would you consider this pandemic as a black swan event?
2. Enlist some of the industries that were adversely impacted by the pandemic. Provide suitable reasons.
3. Enlist some of the industries that were favourably impacted by the pandemic. Provide suitable reasons.
4. Do you think that “work at home” would continue to remain an important paradigm in future employments? Substantiate your answers.
5. How do you see the manufacturing industries adapt their work processes in the changing business landscape?
6. Share some of the HR good practices you know that have perennial relevance across industries.

## **Suggested Assignment**

1. Suppose you are the HR head of a mid-size plastic factory. Provide some of the initiatives you would take in the event your company confronts the same scenario as discussed in this case study.
2. Prepare a disaster management checklist for your organization.

### **Additional Reading**

1. Taleb, Naseem Nicholas, "The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable", Penguin Randomhouse
2. Business Pandemic Influenza Planning Checklist prepared by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), USA, <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/pdf/businesschecklist.pdf>
3. KPMG, "Workforce, Workplace and HR Reshaping during Covid-19 pandemic", <https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/in/pdf/2020/04/workforce-workplace-and-hr-reshaping-during-19-pandemic.pdf>
4. Kentucky Association of Manufacturers, Covid-19 Human Resources Checklist, <https://www.foundationshr.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/FHRC-KAM-COVID-19-HR-Checklist.pdf>
5. SHRM, "COVID-19 Back-to-Work Checklist", <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/pages/covid-19-back-to-work-checklist.aspx>

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