CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC:
HR DIRECTORS AND EXPERTS DISCUSSION FORUM

Over a series of two Zoom events in the week commencing 23rd March, CRF hosted HR Directors and experts in discussions on the coronavirus pandemic. We looked at HR policy actions being taken during the crisis, the question of how to support the workforce during a crisis, issues around remote working, and how to help leaders lead effectively during this time. This summary shares some of the key insights from the discussions.

Specific HR Policy Actions Being Taken During the Coronavirus Crisis

How to Support the Workforce During the Crisis

Issues Around Remote Working

How to Help Leaders Lead Effectively Through the Crisis

Specific HR Policy Actions Being Taken During the Coronavirus Crisis

- Policy trends of note include a strong bias toward people's pay being protected and individuals being given trust / the benefit of the doubt about what they're saying (i.e. that they need to self-isolate, etc.), a bias toward the suspension of rules around leave (sickness, holiday, etc.) during the crisis period and trusting employees to do the right thing (with an expectation that there will be new rules post-crisis), and strong messaging around what's available to support employees worried about money, families, and so on, for example through Employee Assistance Programmes.

- Many companies want to protect pay. It is a primary goal. But long-term sustainability is an issue – a balance must be struck. It was agreed that businesses can learn from their counterparts around the globe who are in similar situations, but further along in dealing with this issue. It was suggested that staggered pay cuts may go over better than applying the same percentage cut to everyone – that is, senior leaders should take a larger cut, the lowest-paid employees should have the lowest percentage pay cut, and those in the middle should be somewhere in between. It was broadly acknowledged that how businesses treat people in this moment will be remembered for a very long time, and that the best people will always have options.

- There was consensus that things have developed very, very quickly, and so the issues capturing HR attention are constantly evolving. Different geographies are at different stages of policy and leadership challenges in tandem with the progress of the coronavirus. For example, questions about leave and work from home policies were big in APAC, but now this region is shifting toward questions about restructuring, pay reductions across the workforce (typically 10%), and deferral of bonuses.

- In Europe, two weeks ago the focus was on how to stay safe in the workplace and data privacy issues. There was also evidence of rapid movement across industries to cost-cutting measures of various types

(part-time working, compulsory holidays, layoffs, pay cuts, postponing bonus payments), with some industries (hospitality, for example) much harder-hit than others. But now, we are seeing emergency measures come through from governments, and HR is now trying to understand these measures and their implications. This is no easy task as the measures have been rushed out and are often poorly drafted.

- There are many questions, but few answers as yet. For example, what if people no longer satisfy immigration requirements to be in the UK (i.e. because a pay cut drops them below the minimum salary threshold)? How does traditional employment legislation operate in this new environment? What are the consequences if an organisation decides to take some risks in this fast-changing environment?

- In particular, there are many questions around the UK's announcement of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, which offers employers support to continue paying part of their employees' salary for those that would otherwise have been laid off during the crisis. There are questions around the programme's scale and eligibility criteria. Generally, employers would like to take full advantage of the scheme and hold back on other cost-cutting measures. But clarity is needed. While the intention of the programme is clear, its application will be much more nuanced. What does £2,500 gross mean exactly? Can businesses claim for someone on sick pay? What if the organisation has already started laying people off – can they still avail of the programme?

- There was consensus that the government has put statements out quickly in order to try to stabilise the situation and stop employers immediately downsizing. For those businesses that would prefer to hold onto their employees if possible, the message is to hold on a little longer to see what the detail is. Details will become clearer in the coming days. How useful the scheme is will likely depend on sector – for example, the hospitality sector may judge it easy to recruit employees later and so may not be eager to hold onto them.

- There was discussion of whether consultation periods will be removed. There is some evidence that some organisations are prepared to argue that collective consultation rules do not apply because of the special circumstances of the coronavirus situation. While there was some speculation that the government might indicate norms don't apply in

these circumstances, businesses are cautioned not to move away from normal advice until the government says otherwise. We simply do not yet know what issues will be serious going forward, and where employers might be granted some leeway.

- There are many questions around business immigration, and employers foresee future problems in this area. For example, what are the tax implications for people who are stranded and end up working for too long in the country that they are currently located in, rather than their usual tax domicile?

- There was discussion of whether businesses that were due to downsize before the coronavirus are going ahead as planned. There is evidence that those operations are going ahead, and in some instances, numbers are being increased (which has implications for how the consultation is carried out). There is no evidence as yet of anyone shelving plans because of government support.

- One big lesson is that everybody's situation is different, and so policies applying the same rules to everyone are not going to be effective. There must be a flexible response to reassure and support people.

- There was acknowledgement that the challenge is about HR policy, but equally it's about company culture. For example, a strong policy response will be needed to discourage people from coming in if they are sick in a culture where presenteeism is rife.

- HR must not only put in place processes to deal with the current situation, but also keep its head up to see what's around the corner.

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How to Support the Workforce During the Crisis

- Organisations are taking many actions to communicate with and support their workforces during this crisis. Examples include: using Workspace to host live conversations and surgeries on the issues; leadership calls, virtual townhalls, and Q&A webcasts with CEOs; using the intranet to push out messaging and host discussions; the development of company-wide wikis (tailored by market) to signpost to EAP support, clarify working patterns, and so on; dedicated email inboxes for specific concerns/queries.

- There was broad consensus that messaging from CEOs is very important. People appreciate hearing from the CEO, but messages need to be simple and reinforced locally. Messages themselves need to strike a balance between acknowledging that we are all in a tough spot (authenticity) and offering a strong sense of reassurance (what reassurance is varies by organisation). 'No jobs will be lost during the crisis' is one example of a message being frequently seen; 'Business goes on' is another (though again, how the business goes on varies by context).

- Some organisations are using short, quick pulse surveys to get feedback on how things are working; they are pushing these surveys out as frequently as possible in order to monitor and respond more effectively to emerging needs.

- There was concern about how employees' mental health will be in a couple weeks' time, when the novelty of the situation wears off and as the crisis continues to deepen. What about younger people living in house-shares and cramped spaces? What about the pressures placed on employees with children? Many organisations reported a spike in people calling into EAP helplines with varying levels of distress; social isolation has been identified as a huge issue over the long-term. Some of the ways that employers are approaching mental health include: opening up access to private medical mental health services to all employees, offering unlimited remote counselling, organising Mental Health First Aiders to see what proactive actions they can take, and looking for ways to take pressure off managers (which is essential to helping them cope).

- One organisation is evaluating help line calls. They have found that most callers are concerned about the financial implications of the crisis, and so have dialled up provision in this area.

- There was general agreement that the most angst is being seen among segments of the workforce that still have to be physically present at work. People are feeling very exposed. However, some employers expressed a reluctance to use positive incentives (extra pay, holiday) to get essential people to stay in work, as this may be coercive. One innovative incentive is that of paying for transport so that key workers can avoid public transport and its risks. Those that are using positive incentives are finding that they are appreciated.

- Organisations are paying attention to shifts in what's on their people's minds, and responding accordingly. For example, initial concerns about the coronavirus and the practicalities of working from home have given way to concerns about family. Expats workers are especially anxious about family members in other countries; some companies are trying to support expats to facilitate connects wherever possible. Emotional wellbeing is a concern for everyone, but again this may be especially an issue for expat employees.

- A developing concern among employees is around job security and performance - will I still have a job a month from now? What about promotion? What about my objectives? There was general consensus that organisations need to be proactive and transparent about these issues.

- Support for managers emerged as a major concern. There was discussion of how organisations are supporting managers to engage their people and manage remotely. It was agreed that mangers need to communicate clearly and consistently, and show genuine concern for their people's mental wellbeing. Group check-ins are one tool for achieving this. Some organisations are offering group coaching sessions for managers, in which they have space to talk about what they're facing, specific challenges, and to support, share, and talk to one another. Generally, there is an emphasis on getting managers to talk about emotions, perhaps using word clouds or polls, and to reassure people that their feelings around this crisis are commonly shared with others.

- There is a shift from a blanket pushing out of content to see what sticks, to more curating of content, recognising that different groups are facing different challenges. Content is increasingly being organised around key challenges or themes, such as working remotely with children.

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Issues Around Remote Working

- Many organisations are pushing a 'staying connected' concept. They are encouraging teams to hold virtual coffee mornings, turn on their cameras, have chats about non-work-related issues, share pictures of their work-from-home space, and hold virtual social events/meetings such as virtual pub quizzes and drinks hours. There was broad consensus that this is working really well and enabling teams.

- Some organisations are finding success in over-emphasising the social. Meetings start with time – however long is needed – for social check-ins, free discussion of the general situation or personal challenges, and so on. The emphasis is on keeping it fun, being supportive, and then moving to discuss business.

- There was a consensus that people are talking much more about themselves than they otherwise would. We are all seeing more of each other's families, personalities, situations, homes, and so on, and this seems to be on balance a positive thing.

- Some organisations are offering employees access to virtual workouts, mindfulness sessions, workshops on sleep, nutrition, and so on to encourage employee wellbeing. These are garnering a very positive response and high take-up from employees.

- Companies are testing the resilience of their IT systems (mostly so far, so good) and working hard to develop work-from-home solutions for essential staff such as those in call centres (a bit slow-going to find solutions).

- Organisations with strong face-to-face cultures face a steeper learning curve on remote working. While content is being quickly created to address this, there is a challenge around getting managers to engage with content through virtual platforms rather than ringing up to ask questions.

- There was some concern that once employees get into the rhythm of working from home and feel safe, it may be difficult to get them to come back to work in-person post-crisis.

How to Help Leaders Lead Effectively Through the Crisis

- It was broadly acknowledged that the role of the leader is crucial in the current situation; leaders and their day-to-day interactions with people are critical to keeping them on board and engaged. Leaders need to be candid, show their human side, and show they care. What leaders do now will impact how people see the organisation in the future.

- Some organisations are having success getting leaders from countries that are ahead in the timeline of the coronavirus crisis to communicate their learnings to leaders in countries that are behind the curve.

- It's useful to remind leaders that this challenge is about leading through uncertain times; the idea is not to normalise, but to simplify.

- Leading through uncertainty is about leadership, not management. Leaders need to keep their people informed, and provide sufficient space in virtual spaces for people to connect. The key is to show leadership to your people, provide guidance, and move to unite them. Be clear about priorities, where people should be focusing, and what concrete steps they should be taking.

- There was agreement that leaders should be paying attention to anxiety – how to manage their own and that of their teams. It's important to meet your people where they are – acknowledge each other's emotions and don't feel like you have to present a rosy picture.

- Other advice for leading during a crisis includes making sure leaders manage their own psychological state and how and what they communicate; being clear about what success looks like today, tomorrow, this week and managing the balance between the short-term and long-term; building strong support networks, both internally and externally; being clear on roles and responsibilities; collaborating effectively; and not waiting to make decisions by consensus, but making decisions quickly as needed.

- There is a sense that this is going to end, so leaders need to start thinking forward to what happens when it does? How will they bring people back, particularly when some may be traumatised and don't want to come back? How will they re-normalise?

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- There were questions about how to continue leadership development without a budget. Action learning, cohort learning, asking the right questions of each other, and after-action reviews were practices that some companies are using. It was agreed that there are opportunities for development during this time of crisis (after all, it's in the toughest times that we tend to learn the most), but the tone must be set correctly. For many companies, it is a bit too soon – many organisations are still in survival mode in terms of protecting the themselves and their people.

- There was discussion of whether organisations might discover that leaders who are good when it's 'business as usual' are not equipped for 'business in crisis', and how to cope with that. There were few clear answers, but speculation about how the coronavirus crisis might radically alter how we define and develop leadership going forward.

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Further Insights

- Astronauts Know How to Handle Isolation: Here are Tips from Scott Kelly, Peggy Whitson and More.
  https://www.space.com/astronaut-tips-for-handling-isolation-coronavirus.html

- Coming Together to Combat COVID-19 (a good example of CEO communications from Microsoft).
  https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/coming-together-combat-covid-19-satya-nadella/

- Employment COVID-19 Briefings.
  https://www.twobirds.com/en/in-focus/coronavirus-covid-19/employment

- Pandemic Resilience in Focus.
  https://www.mmc.com

- Staying Informed: Navigating the Coronavirus.
  https://www.mercer.com

- Video-meeting with the COVID-19 Response Team (a Q&A webcast with 2,000 participants).
  https://indico.cern.ch/event/898276/