

Thriving in the Next Normal: The Pandemic Revisited

It has been two years since the coronavirus pandemic began. As we started to sense its profound impact, many talent professionals offered guidance into what it might mean for the world of work. At that time, few of us could predict how quickly the virus would propel organizations into a transformative future state where digital ecosystems have become the norm, industry lines have blurred, and the very definition of work has changed. It is clear that the long-anticipated Future of Work (FoW)—dissected at length in research studies and articles— is *Now*. More importantly, the workplace metamorphosis is permanent. Given that, we wanted to share observations from the beginning of the pandemic, with the benefit of hindsight, and give practical guidance on what HR needs to do now that we have more findings and information.

Altered the Definition of Work

Work is no longer somewhere you go, but something you do—and the doing can be from anywhere. Employees understood this much earlier than many senior leaders, but the pandemic forced organizations to quickly get on board. Employees who never had the option to work remotely prior to the pandemic and have done so since, eagerly embrace the flexibility afforded by hybrid work. Most employees are not looking for a full-time-in-the-office role, and the concept of ‘face time’ may finally be relegated to the past.

Going forward: In order to attract and retain top talent, organizations need to ensure their employee value proposition (EVP) clearly articulates a commitment to flexibility, wherever possible. HR can help guide organizational leaders to determine which roles and work processes lend themselves to remote or hybrid work. Additionally, HR needs to ensure that the EVP translates into an authentic employee experience (eX) with a talent philosophy, processes, and programs that support the flexibility workers now crave. Should there be a disconnect between the two, organizations will have difficulty finding—and keeping—high performing, highly valued employees. Finally, HR should monitor potential unintended consequences of remote work, including decreased exposure to senior leaders and lessening of development opportunities that could end up stunting career progression for some.

Fast-Tracked the Adoption of Technology

Communication, information, and collaboration platforms have become thoroughly embedded in how we live and work. In the early days of the pandemic, many employees were challenged with the applications

required to perform their jobs. Without the benefit of the traditional months-long setup and implementation curve for new technology, the rate at which individuals and organizations acclimated to and learned how to navigate the digital ecosystem was nothing short of impressive.

Going forward: Digital fluency is now an essential competency for employees, regardless of title, level, or function. From job descriptions to sourcing strategies and training curricula to performance criteria, HR professionals need to ensure talent and people processes reflect the ubiquity of digital technology and that digital fluency is a competency incorporated throughout the talent strategy and workforce planning efforts.

Elevated AI and Automation to the Forefront of Strategy

Companies continue to invest heavily in AI, automation, and data analytics. During the pandemic, companies began to identify opportunities to augment, streamline, or modify work with technology. Concurrent with this came an understandable increase in anxiety around job security and career viability, particularly among administrative and operational roles. The fear of robots replacing workers moved from a meme to a reality.

Going forward: In the next normal, advancing and scaling internal digital and technology capabilities means nothing less than building and reinforcing a new culture in the organization. Scores of jobs will continue to change with many morphing into hybrid or augmented man-machine arrangements. HR can play a significant role in guiding organizations in researching and identifying those roles which lend themselves to such transitions. In addition, being clear on how, where, and when technology will impact employees calls for an intentional focus on change management and communication. Beyond the traditional practices and principles which promote end-user adoption and integration of new technologies, HR will need to help organizations think through the cultural and workforce planning implications of any proposed changes to structures, roles, responsibilities, and skillsets.

Revealed the Supremacy of Execution

Whereas supply chains and logistics were once considered less than interesting, the pandemic highlighted the importance of producing and delivering positive results-oriented performances. The value of manufacturing ventilators and N95 masks or getting groceries on the shelves of local supermarkets triggered a re-examination of what constitutes performance.

Going forward: On an organizational level, there will be more than a heightened interest in examining work processes to identify opportunities to remove inefficiencies and searching for places to introduce reliable technology and decision-making tools. HR professionals will need to raise their skills and sensibilities in the process improvement space, as well as their knowledge of various available FoW technologies that could be leveraged to assist in delivering flawless execution. On a more micro-level, HR should revisit performance management strategies, processes, and metrics to ensure employees understand the performance outcomes they are accountable for delivering.

Confirmed the Value of Effective Management

For employees working in a remote or hybrid situation, their direct supervisor or manager is increasingly the primary—if not sole—link to the broader organization. The benefit of having a manager with strong, basic skills, including task delegation, performance feedback, and concern for employee well-being, became especially pronounced during the pandemic. Many managers recognized the need to enable workers to contribute their unique skills and talents and share ideas and opinions in a way that

empowered them. Many also understood that flexibility in work arrangements does not equate to around-the-clock employee availability. Setting boundaries and maintaining clear communication lines became paramount.

Going forward: HR can play a role in helping organizations identify the critical skills required to successfully manage virtual/remote teams and provide robust training and development opportunities for managers to hone these capabilities. Performance management and other processes and protocols should also be revisited to reflect this move toward more expansive virtual management. Finally, potential shifts in normative behavior or the overall company culture should be examined through the lens of this 'virtual' 24/7 world mentality, while being balanced against the well-being of employees.

Positioned Data as King

The need for accurate data to provide a line of sight into critical strategic, people, and operational issues and decision making was heightened during the pandemic. As more companies embrace AI, big data, and machine learning, we will continue to see a relentless search for data scientists, machine learning experts, programmers, and statisticians. With the seemingly limitless availability of data, the need for evidenced-based decision making—both from within and outside the organization-- will continue to increase.

Going forward: If HR wants to be viewed as more than overhead or a support function, the profession must continue to evolve from rudimentary metrics and static scorecards to real-time predictive analytics to showcase its value. Enabling organizations to engage in scenario building and data driven people decisions will finally put HR on equal footing with other functions, enhancing its trust and credibility among leadership.

Prompted an Examination of Purpose and Value

The early days of COVID-19 brought into sharp focus what work was essential and non-essential to sustain some normalcy, save lives, and prevent economic collapse. The level of commitment demonstrated by essential workers was a striking reminder of how important clarity of purpose is to one's life and work. More than ever, employees want to know that their work matters, that their companies provide valuable products and services, and that they contribute to society. People want to feel connected to something larger than themselves, as evidenced by the spike in voluntary turnover and, in some cases, leaving the workforce entirely.

Going forward: From diversity and inclusion to Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG), organizations recognize the competitive advantage of highlighting their mission and purpose. Now is the time for HR to work closely with leadership to refresh the company employment value proposition (EVP) to address the growing expectation by current and potential employees that companies are not only profitable, but virtuous. This will need to go beyond a catchy new tagline and require a deep dive into the employee experience (eX), ensuring it delivers what is articulated by the company mission, vision, and values. Alignment between organizational purpose and employee passion will win the day, attracting, inspiring, and engaging the talent needed to succeed.

How Centri Can Help in the Next Normal

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- Expertise in designing, developing, and implementing people programs that engage and enable your talent
- Expertise in process improvement and systems implementation
- Design of a service delivery models that best match required HR service objectives with technology delivery vehicles
- Experience in designing and implementing HR shared services and workforce self-service solutions

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