



The role of HR against the backdrop of COVID-19

We are living in a very different world and the impact in workplaces across Ireland has been significant. It is incumbent on every citizen of this country to fulfil his/her personal responsibility to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This duty also falls to every employer in Ireland. Every decision your business will make in the coming weeks must be consistent with the guidance of the HSE and the World Health Organisation. Every company is focused on contingency planning and protecting its business. But we also need to regularise this to some extent and achieve some degree of comfort in the weeks ahead.

New ways of working

Significant and sudden changes have occurred to the way we work. Companies have moved some or all of their workforce to remote working, others staggered work shifts and adapted work environments to ensure social distancing. For some companies, the impact has been harder felt, with staff facing reduced hours, short time working or periods of lay off. In all situations, it is anticipated that these measures are temporary. However, the impact right now is significant. Whatever the situation that your staff members face, they need support and regular communication from their employer.

Recommendations;

- The pandemic is impacting the entirety of this country and much of what is happening in your company right now is driven by this. Regardless, you need to ensure that you convey the link between the national situation and what is happening in your company. Explain how your company has been impacted and what changes and precautions your company is implementing.
- Where possible ensure that the changes implemented are in line with your company values. Consider how your company values can be espoused through your management of the business right now. For example, where customer service is valued, can the changed delivery of services put this to the forefront.
- Regular communication is key. Identify all the available communication channels to enable you to provide verbal and written communications to all your staff. Enable Q&A to occur. Where decisions are happening quickly, there is a risk of forgetting that your staff were present when these decisions were made.
- For people working in different ways, provide training and guidance wherever possible. You will likely have to identify new ways of delivering training. Conference calls, video calls, email guidance, links to websites and other online resources can be used. A simple phone call with a staff member will help.
- Consider the knock-on impact of changes across all roles in the business. Whether it is the manager who is now managing a remote team, the employee who now finds him/herself without colleagues to work through queries with, the security personnel who are working in almost empty buildings. Ensure that the challenges arising out of all these new working dynamics are teased out. Gather ideas and feedback from staff as the persons who are closest to the changes.

Communication challenges

The manner in which companies communicate to staff has significantly changed. Unless there was an existing practice of remote working, it is highly likely that the impact of social distancing, working from

home or not working at all, has introduced significant communication challenges. At a time when communication has never been so critical, the following may assist

Recommendations;

- Be a reliable and regular source of communication. All employees will have concerns arising out of the current situation and they need their employer to clarify what is happening within the business and to their individual roles. Commit to and plan for regular communications. Where these communications are delivered in new ways, ensure that you are helping employees with the adjustment. (e.g. practice conference calls, assistance with downloading apps or documents)
- Keep your communications simple and avoid speculation. Recognise that employees may be feeling overwhelmed with information right now. If you are unsure about the tone and language, look to the examples of strong communication from some of our large institutions and government. We are humans first and employees second. This situation is hugely challenging, and companies must acknowledge this whilst giving reassurance in as much as they can.
- Make sure you have up to date communication details for every staff member (phone and email at a minimum). Check the accuracy of the information on file now.
- Many businesses have centralised decision making and crisis management teams that are dealing swiftly with the daily challenges emerging right now. Clarify and issue frequent reminders of the points of contact for staff in the coming weeks; who to contact and what about. Managers will retain day to day management responsibility; however, businesses need a plan in place to ensure that critical information relating to COVI-19 gets to the key decision makers fast. An increase in concerns and health and safety queries can be expected so clarify what information goes where and who queries are to be made to. Managers are foot soldiers on the ground passing on key information. Consider putting in place regular mandatory briefings on key developments to this group.
- Preserving the culture and ethos of your organisation is key. With such dramatic change happening, there is a risk that the day-to-day interactions that fuel morale and exchange of ideas will fall by the wayside. Make a point of scheduling time for catchups within teams and one-to-ones. Conversations may not look and feel like they did before, but protecting relationships is important so businesses can return to a more normal way of functioning once this crisis has passed.

Supports

Employers can play a significant role right now to support their employees in appropriate ways. The impact of COVID-19 means that employees' regular sources of support may have significantly reduced. They may have limited contact with family members, friends and neighbours. Their hobbies and activities outside of work may be temporarily paused at this time. It is important for employers to be proactive and not to wait for an employee to raise their hands. It is safe to assume that this situation is a challenge for everyone.

Recommendations;

- Regular check ins are key and ensure that the question (*How are you getting on?*) is actually asked during these conversations.
- With such widespread changes happening, worry is a natural reaction and the only way to understand staff concerns right now is to ask. This is an unprecedented situation and we cannot presume to understand how it has impacted on individuals or groups. Take some time to identify staff concerns and to provide support where possible. This support may be in the form of adjusted

work arrangements, leave from work or the provision of information to reassure staff that risks are being managed and any negative impact on staff has been minimised as much as possible.

- Foster a community spirit wherever possible. Our work colleagues are a regular presence in our life and the goodwill that exists may have sustained the business through past challenges. Where your business has existing activities in place to encourage employee engagement, can you adapt these to the current situation. Staff activities such as walking groups, Bake Off challenge and charity days may be transitioned to an online version. Where the goodwill is already there, can you keep it alive?
- Highlight all existing supports to staff. This may include the EAP programme or online resources they can access.
- For further guidance on wellbeing please refer to the recent Ibec guidance document on [mental health and wellbeing in a time of COVID-19](#) and Ibec guidance booklet on [Mental Health and Wellbeing; A Line Managers guide](#)

Ongoing HR activities

Every effort right now is focused on managing the pandemic. However, there are ongoing HR activities that will continue throughout the coming weeks

Recommendations;

- Identify any vulnerable staff groupings and ensure that your crisis planning includes measures for these groups which may be needed at a future point. Identify staff members who may be particularly impacted by the change to business operations and travel restrictions. (For example, staff due to get married, avail of annual leave, other forms of family leave or study and exam leave, staff who are impacted by the closure of creches and schools). These staff may request accommodations in the coming weeks and consider what your business can do.
- Identify activities that need to be rescheduled and communicate to staff affected (e.g. recruitment activities, Objective setting meetings)
- Existing company policies and procedures will continue. Consider how your company will manage annual leave requests, sick leave (outside of COVID-19), timekeeping and working time records, return to work meetings, over time recording and payment, performance management. Where there are existing live issues under grievance, disciplinary or Dignity at Work policies, how will these be managed in the coming weeks.

There will come a point when this crisis ends and the steps that your business takes now to support and assist its staff will generate the goodwill that will be helpful for the return to normal operations.

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