REMOTE WORKING AT CROSSROADS: TO BE OR NOT TO BE?!

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ABSTRACT

Work-from-home is an arrangement that many companies worldwide had to adapt to due to the lockdown of 2020 and continued risks post lockdown as well. While many companies had adopted it comfortably, given the kind of job roles employees have, many companies are still struggling with the policies and process-related aspects of work-from-home. This article deals with a situation where work-from-home is a new phenomenon thrust upon them due to the pandemic. This company TPS is dealing with how to manage a mix of work from home and work from office mix, due to reasons that include, a lack of uniform company values and a common binding culture, absence of protocols to deal with this kind of a crisis, and very little exposure to remote working tools and applications. In addition to the complexities posed by the external environment, TPS is facing workforce morale issues and lower productivity. Quite a few high-performing employees are exploring opportunities in other companies. The article concludes with a few questions on how to get to a situation where the challenges can be tackled and a better future can be envisaged for TPS. The answers to the questions would probably help so many such companies which are facing similar challenges. This case-based article would be useful for classroom discussions in a strategic human resources management subject, particularly in recent developments and challenges. In the same subject/course, this can also be taken for discussions on creating newer organizational structures, systems, and designing of roles.

KEYWORDS

Work from home, Remote work, Employee morale, Workforce challenges, Trust

PROLOGUE

Kamini Prajapati, the VP-Operations of TPS India Ltd., looked out of her office window and looked at the horizon. The beautiful view of the dusk made her ask the CEO of her company Abhay Karan, "What do you see at the horizon?" Abhay wondered if TPS, the company he and Kamini, very painstakingly led to a high growth phase in the last couple of years, is also at a setting phase.

INTRODUCTION

Working from home, for years has been considered a benefit/perk/welfare that some of the companies used to give. For most companies, this idea of employees working from home had remained something that has to be avoided at all costs. The reasons behind this aversion to allowing work-from-home (or remote work, as it is also popularly called interchangeably) can be a matter of debate. Still, the truth is, before the Covid-19 pandemic, as per a Mercer study conducted in 2020, only 1 in 30 organizations would have employees working remotely. However, as per the same study, in August 2020 it was 1 in 3 companies.

It seems the earlier fear of business owners and managers that remote working could result in productivity decline. To state here, as of today, in 2021, productivity and other concerns turned out to be unfounded. The same Mercer study (as mentioned above) quotes that 94% of the employers surveyed said that productivity has remained the same or increased since employees began working

remotely". Across the globe, a large shift to work-from-home or remote working spurred during and after the first wave, especially, and it is now being called as "the new normal". The pandemic brought a new social order as well and had its impact seen across all kinds of industries – good to some and not so good to others.

BACKGROUND

Having said all this, this transition to remote work is not as seamless as it seems. Many organizations, do not encourage remote working. The nature of their work may be one of the reasons, such as, in manufacturing, hospitality, healthcare, banking, and financial services industries. For many, there could be a resistance to change which is hampering this shift to take place. Whatever the case may be, today, almost all organizations have either adopted remote work or are gearing themselves to build/design remote work strategies.

Abhay and Kamini, both pass-outs of a premium business school and experienced investment bankers, founded TPS consultancy services private limited in the year 2015. The company which started from a small office in Mumbai, grew up to become a 500 strong team of employees in 2020. The company is an integrated one-stop consulting firm engaged in investment banking and strategic management consulting. TPS provides its clients, with end-to-end integrated financial services consulting, knowledge process outsourcing, and financial services. The company deals with clients right from pre-transaction, and transaction to post-transaction stages, taking care of the client company's growth while considering implications at every stage for promoters and stakeholders.

PRESENT SCENARIO

Due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, TPS consultancy services decided to allow employees to work remotely. With a present workforce of around 500 employees, this decision is not so easy for TPS, though most of the companies in this consultancy industry are doing the same. Remote work was rare and even considered weird for most companies, especially the startups before this Covid-19 pandemic. TPS consultancy services had to initiate work remotely before having any structured planning for the employees and task distribution, as it became a matter of survival. As they shifted to this remote work, they started facing challenging issues like handling the client's queries, managing the workforce, engaging their employees, difficulty in team management and team projects, and many other issues like these. All these resulted in decreasing productivity. Although the investment made by the company in the remote working situation was almost the same as when they were operating physically, for Joya, the HR manager of the company, the main problem came with the realization that office-based jobs are not being effective in a remote work arrangement. It doesn't work for everyone and remote working is not a panacea to all the problems.

Despite various challenges in a remote working system, for this Covid-19 led situation it is a compulsion as well as desirable with so many benefits for the organization as well as for the employees. In TPS, the lack of uniform company values and a common binding culture, even not enough protocols to deal with this kind of a crisis, and very little exposure to remote working tools and applications, it is a very hard time. Few peripheral factors such as – the trustworthiness of employees, willingness and ability to learn new skills, lack of understanding of the company's business objectives, and also the workforce communication, added to the woes of TPS.

This has led to many undiscovered problems also. HR manager Joya with her team was trying to build seamless routes and strategies to overcome the challenges that remote working brings. Strategies are no more designed periodically or in advance but in real-time. The focus on overall employee productivity and employee engagement has shifted to immediate responses, fire-fighting, and diagnosis. Providing employees with the right tools and also gathering real-time updates from them from time to time to untangle the intricacies and offer support, is today the biggest challenge for TPS.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

As of now, the company is unable to get big projects from the other firms. Joya, the HR manager, is not sure that they will be able to meet the expectations of the clients and complete the projects remotely. She had already asked Abhay and Kamini to put on hold the Learning and Development program for their employees due to these unforeseen situations. The company is performing on average and is getting smaller projects from clients with low benefits. Workforce morale is getting impacted by the chaos and lower productivity. Joya hears from her team that quite a few of her valued employees have started looking for jobs in other competitor organizations. She knows that it is high time to communicate with the employees and boost their morale. Joya knows that she has to decide urgently on how to deal with the problems of decreasing productivity and also come up with some solutions to retain her employees. She has to present a definitive plan for remote working, in the next two days, to Abhay and Kamini.

QUESTIONS

Q1. What are the three first actions you would suggest Zoya, the HR manager, initiate immediately?

Q2. Do you feel that TPS should take a look at aspects that are not directly linked with the remote working issue, but needs the attention of Kamini and Abhay? If yes, please discuss these aspects.

Q3. Based on the various links provided at the end of the article and your additional research, share your inferences on issues, challenges, and probable solutions companies may adopt while facing similar challenges.

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