Employee Engagement: Probable Solutions to Challenges Posed by Covid-19 Outbreak with reference to Indian IT Sector

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Abstract

The last year have been really tough on the global socio and economic changes because on contemporary covid-19 outbreak. The lot has changed in terms of how employee and employer engage themselves at workplace. This change was triggered due to penetration of technology across the all industrial sector and around globe. The past few months of COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in companies' laying-off employees, remote working, work-life imbalance and in general increased employability uncertainty especially among IT employees. This has brought organizational focus back to their employee engagement tactics and motivation as employee morale has touched an all-time low. Though the concept of employee engagement first appeared in an academic journal in 1990's, it remained to be a matter of constant revival. The present study is based on secondary data sources such as review of various research papers from substantial online sources, articles, books, blogs and reports. In this paper efforts were made to study the recent trend of employee engagement in the ongoing covid-19 outbreak. It was observed that areas of employee engagement changed dramatically during the crisis, like: Leadership and Communication, Compensation and Benefits, Health, Wellbeing and Balance. Finally the paper draws attention to challenges posed viz. how to ensure business continuity for customers and how to ensure safety of their own staff. The reasons could be Lack of clarity, trust on employer, decline in spending on IT projects by companies in the U.S. and elsewhere, digital transformation, historic rise in unemployment level, amplified use of artificial intelligence and many more. Efforts were made to identify the probable solution and best practices followed to resolve them. Such study will act as a supportive hand for any organization in building effective employee engagement strategies in this trying situation. Organizations can reengineer their current employee engagement strategies and policies.

Keywords: Employee Engagement Strategies, Covid-19 Outbreak, Indian IT Sector, Challenges, Lay-off, Work-Life Imbalance.

Introduction:

The year 2020 will be recalled for ages to come and the credit is not because of any revolution that took place but due to the COVID-19 pandemic which led to the global crisis. India too couldn't escape the outbreak and had witnessed a spike increased number of cases starting from March 2020 and subsequently slide unto the pandemic. Soon after, our country India declared its lockdown,it was being witnessed for the first time ever in the history Indian economy was facing difficulty. Government of India was constantly involved in developing remedial and proactive measures. Organizations were facing tough time as they were forced to remain closed during lockdown yet need to manage their operations and feed their employees. The working pattern changed almost for all sectors.

Statement of Problem: The past few months of COVID-19 have resulted in companies' laying-off employees, remote working, work-life imbalance and in general increased

uncertainty especially among IT employees. This has brought organizational focus back to their employee engagement tactics and motivation as employee morale has touched an all-time low.

In the given scenario, the employees were forced to work from home and at the same time the organizations were fighting against their sinking operations, salary payments, absurd overheads and employee turnovers etc. This resulted in shutting down of many startups and companies and commercial activities. From big to small, everything came to a standstill. All this added up to low employee morale and disengaged employees. All organizations including the IT sector were thrusting towards virtual working environments to drive substantialoutcomes. Hence, it can be said that the Pandemic scenario was compelling all the organizations to call for more employee engagement with an aim to recover output with efficiencies.HR managers were constantly involved in devising new policies and processes to engage and enhance employees' performances. Employee engagement became the topmost priority issue for the IT-HR managers due to Covid-19 pandemic. Employee engagement is a behavioral attitude at workplace where the employees are committed to their organization and align their individual goals to the organizational goals (Nisha Chanana & Sangeeta , 2020). Organizations always keep track of the employees who are engaged in their work and earn profitability for the organization through their performance especially in IT sector.

Objectives: 1) To study impact of Covid-19 outbreak on employee engagement initiatives in Indian IT Sector. 2) To identify the challenges posed and probable solution for the same.

Need & Scope: The current study is limited to study of employee engagement trends during ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and study the impact of said pandemic on employee engagement. Functional scope is limited to identify the contemporary challenges while restarting workplaces and proposing potential solution to handle them. The study reveals the details on widely used top two trends viz. Leadership Briefing and Virtual Team Meetings for employee engagement. It also helped to identify concern challenges and related solution for employee engagement during crisis.

Research Methodology: This paper is a review paper based on secondary data. An extensive literature review was carried out to study employee engagement in general and trends during Pandemic. Also dig in the research papers, blogs, articles, companies report and online newspaper provided insights on the concept of employee engagement and the several initiatives adopted by the IT organizations during pandemic's lockdown. Though the content on Employee engagement is readily available but specific and relevant data pertaining to Indian IT sector is yet to be incited. This gave a direction to the researchers to conduct this study.

Literature Review: According to Adhitama and Riyanto (2020), employee engagement is defined as one of the essential issues that each association endeavors to keep up among their workers and to ensure that workers put their hundred percent of effort in their duties.

COVID-19 Pandemic: A Global Issue: The COVID-19 pandemic can be defined as a global health crisis of time and one of the greatest challenges that we ever faced since World War Two. World Health Organization (WHO) declared novel Corona virus as a pandemic on 11th March 2020. WHO has given a call to all nations to take immediate actions and scaling up responses to treat, reduce and detect transmission to their citizens. Although, China was the first country to face the crisis since Dec 2019, rest of the world has been facing a fast and wide spread of novel virus as of now. More than 90.3 million

cases in 185 countries are confirmed as on 11th January, 2021 with approx. 1.93 million deaths. But the pandemic was much more than a health crisis; it's also an unprecedented socio-economic crisis.
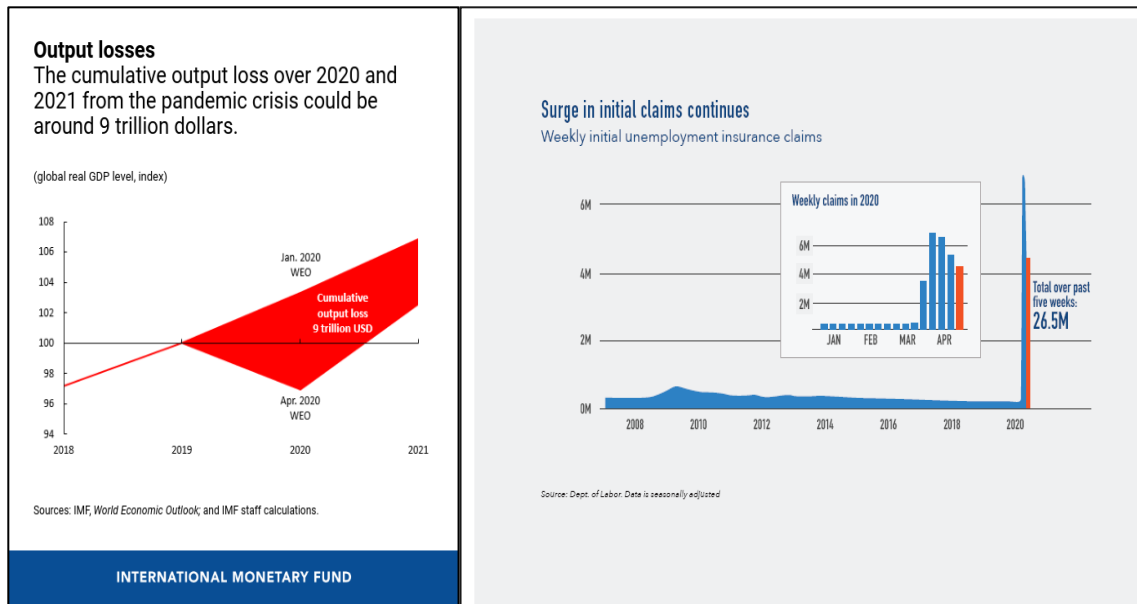

Source: IMF Blog- International Monetary Fund   Source: quantumworkplace.com

Unemployment Levels, Historic Rise- During the COVID-19 crisis and subsequent lockdown guidelines, the unemployment rate rose to over 16% – levels not seen since the Great Depression. More than 26 million workers filed for unemployment.

COVID-19 Pandemic impact in Indian Context: According to JHU CSSE COVID-19 Data update as on 8th January, 2021, there were total 10.5 million cases of Coronavirus Covid-19 in its 32 states and union territories. This includes 151k deaths and around 10.1 million people recovered. Indian prime minister had announced country wide lockdown from 25th March 2020 and extended till August 2020.Though the partial lockdown phase was imposed on certain states, the India Government machineries were constantly on toes for the preparedness and safety measures including tracing the suspected cases, setting up diagnosis facilities, prevention of social engagement, hospital logistics, control and containment plans. In nut Shell, India has responded with determination and shown urgency to overcome this unprecedented challenge.

Employee Engagement: Products and Process cannot help organization to sustain loyal customers. They also need highly motivated, dedicated and involved employees who are very passionate about their work and organizations. To conclude there is a need of 'engaged employees'. Nurturing engaged employees requires a lot of effort and skill by HR Professionals and calls for different HR Philosophy in the organization.Employee Engagement is the new buzzword. A business success is directly linked to the commitment of the employees.Organizations that constantly keep themselves aware of their employees needs with the help of employee satisfaction surveys will have competitive advantage over those who don't. To conclude, successful companies are those that recognize opportunities to foster employee engagement. Employee engagement has always been a key metric to measure success of any organization but the tough situation like the Covid-19 pandemic has rendered more weightage to the given concept. When employees are engaged at their workplace they bring their full selves to work (William Kahn 1990).
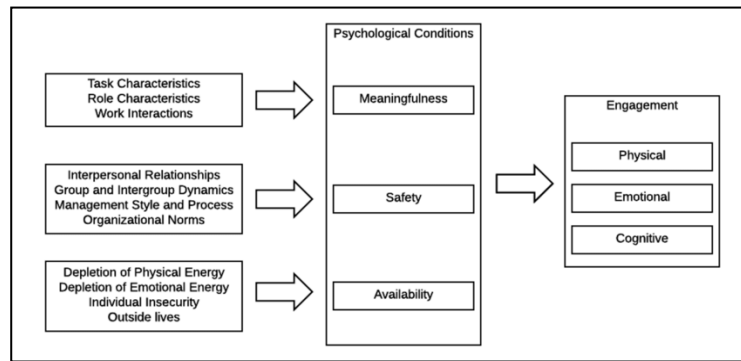
Source: Researchgate.net- Kahn (1990) model of employee engagement

Kahn first time coined the term 'Employee Engagement' presented his research on psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement and it outlined three dimensions of engagement. Firstly, physical engagement refers to the extent employees expend themselves at work both mentally and physically. The second level of engagement is cognitive. To be engaged at this level the employees must be aware of their employer's vision and strategy and the level of performance needed to align with their individual goals to the organization's goal. The third is at emotional level and relates to the cordial relationship between the employer and the employee. Kahn cited that a positive interpersonal relationship and team management strategies will pool in a sense of trust and security among employees. Thus the significance of employee engagement can be described as:

1. Engaged employees lead to high performance and boosts productivity.
2. Engaged employees leads to higher level of customer satisfaction.
3. It aids in creating a pool of talented people in the organization.
4. It augments the organization's culture.
5. High Engagement is an indicator of an organization's success

Thus, it is stated that employee engagement is an essential parameter of an organization's success and the managers are constantly working on deriving modern strategies to keep their workforce happy and remained in the organization.To conclude in nutshell as rightly said by Doug Conant "To win the marketplace you first win the workplace"

What areas of Employee Engagement changed dramatically during the crisis?
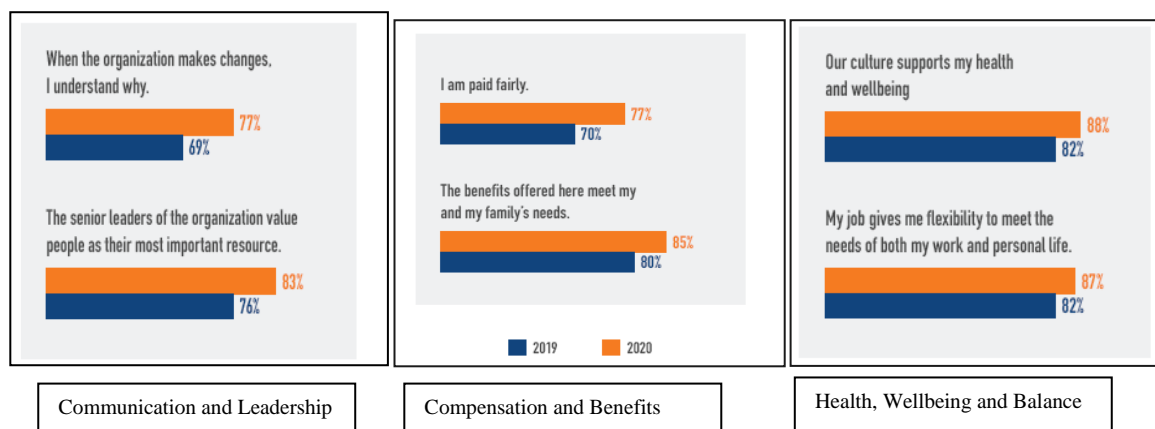
Source: quantumworkplace.com

The Pandemic Effect on Indian IT Sector: Indian IT firms faced the full impact of business disruption as the US and Europe due to the Covid 19-induced lockdown in the quarter to June, as analysts expect companies to report 5-10 per cent drop in revenue due to clients cancelling or putting off discretionary spending on technology in the three-month period. IT firms like Infosys NSE 4.89 %, Wipro and Tech Mahindra booked chartered flights to bring home employees and their families, who were stranded overseas due to the pandemic and visa issues. And almost overnight, IT companies big and small embraced work from home. There were initial hiccups but almost 98% of the IT workforce was working from home at the peak of lockdown in India.

KPMG Management Consulting administered survey for 315 organizations across 20 industry sectors. The survey report highlights the survey outcomes and showcase our understanding of the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on wide gamut of HR Practices and processes like employee wellbeing, employee engagement, recruitment, compensation and benefits, performance management and learning and development, etc.(KPMG India's Covid-19 HR Practices Survey May 2020) The following practices were adopted by the organizations to keep employee engaged.
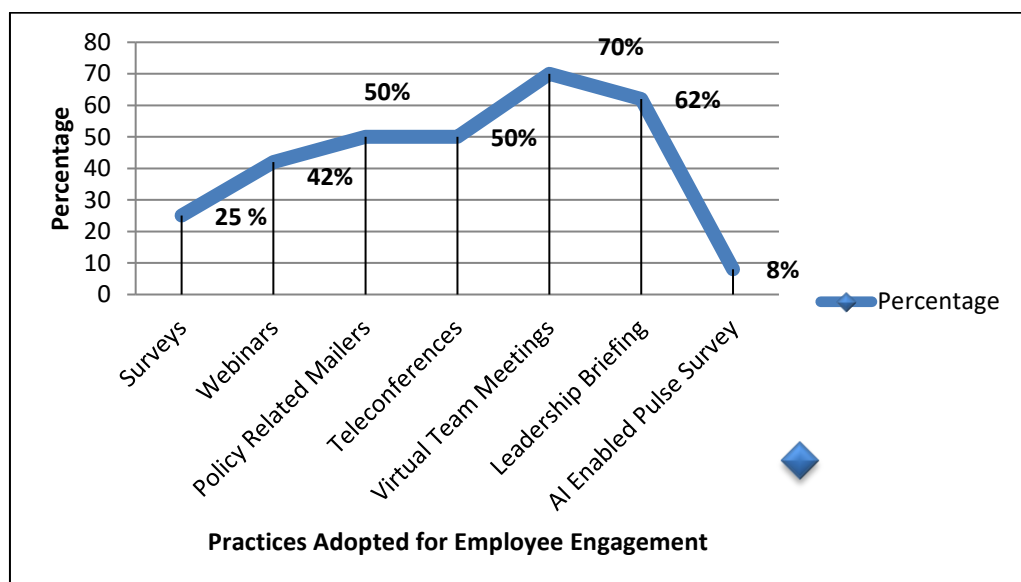
Data Source: KPMG India's Covid-19 HR Practices Survey May 2020 Report

Challenges Posed to Employee Engagement: According to Charles Darwin - it is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive but those who will manage change". Today it is followed as a mantra more than ever. This Covid-19 pandemic has also impacted the pattern in which the whole world treating employee engagement. Some of the recent challenges are enlisted below:

1. Lack of clarity: There was an urgent need to evaluate employee engagement level to avoid losing top talent of an organization. Enforced lockdowns complete work from home pattern, job insecurity, pay cuts and many more were alarming issues that warned the employees about their sustenance at their workplace.
2. Work life Imbalance: The work from home pattern left the employees with a feeling that there is no start or end time to their work days. Companies were at a point of cost cutting and were finding ways to escape the heat of the pandemic.

3. Revising the strategic framework and the role of HR managers: during pandemic low budgeting, downsizing and revising the strategic framework was needed in a very different context.

4. Amplified use of Artificial Intelligence: Use of AI can be challenging too. An augmented use of artificial intelligence was witnessed during this lockdown period owing to less use of manpower. AI boosted the communication and personalized activities at workplace.

5. Lack of commitment from Top management: There were many issues that the top management was handling simultaneously and it got difficult for them to focus on issues like employee engagement.

6. Trust in the employer trusting the employer was also challenging during the tough time like in the pandemic era. Loose connect and low communications were present during this period of pandemic. Employees were apprehensive in consulting their employers and as a consequence it led to a friction in employee-employer relationship.

7. Decline in Spending: Pain for IT and outsourcing companies stems from a decline in spending on IT projects by companies in the U.S. and elsewhere, especially in such sectors as travel and tourism, hospitality, and aviation, which have lost 80 percent to 90 percent of their revenues.

8. Captive Centers' Struggle: These are one of the segments of IT industry and performs certain functions for the parent company, including data analytics, IT management, and research and development to save costs and benefit from the local talent pool. Walmart Labs and U.S. retailers Target and Lowe's are among those that have such centers based in India, These smaller centers have struggled amid India's lockdown, which prompted industry analysts to say that some of them may eventually be sold off or shut down.

9. Digital Transformations: On a positive note, the pandemic is expected to push more organizations worldwide to undergo digital transformations, which include shifting to digital technologies to manage many business functions, including business processes and customer engagement.

10. Acknowledging technology as a new friend. Though the mainstream work in IT industry is bonded around technology, the HR processes are gradually moving towards technology too. The best way to engage them is through leveraging HR technology.

Discussion and Findings: Formal working was replaced by work from home and online work assignment. This posed as a challenge for the HR leaders to confirm the engagement quotient of their employees and whether they are in line to achieve the organization goals or not.

1. Employees lacked in clarity about the direction in which their company was heading. It created a challenge for the HR managers to motivate and retain the talent in the organization.

2. The HR managers were bounded to have an in-depth knowledge of market conditions, competitions and Company's vision. Situation monitoring and assessment were added on to an HR's Duties and responsibilities.

3. To be an effective communicator, retaining top talents, maintaining health and hygiene also got included in his duties. Dealing with low morale and disengaged employees was also tough. It became more challenging for the HR professionals to manage all the added responsibilities in an effective way.

4. Embracing AI in day to day routine is expected but it can't overlook the human factor in the organization and is still considered as a challenge to many HR managers.

5. The strategic framework must be compelling enough to draw out results. There is an involvement of technology in almost all facets of HR processes. Considering this, the HR policies must be reframed.

6. During the lockdown the employees were confused, fearsome and curious to know about their job security and survival and ultimately eager to know the company's status.HR managers must work on the deficiency and build strong communication network.

7. Companies need to go an extra mile in support of their employees. This will help in building trust among employees which brings special attention to role of HR managers' compassion and empathy for employees as an important ingredient. Reinventing the human part in HR will become pivotal in the digital era.

8. Inclusion of Team building, wellness and mental health program. This is something almost all companies are adopting.

9. Leadership Briefing, Virtual Team Meetings were top two HR Practices adopted for employee engagement.

Scope for further Studies: As the present study is focused on Indian IT sector only. The study can be extended to other major sectors. An empirical study of employee's opinion about engagement level would be suggested to conduct to get different perspective.

Conclusion: To conclude we can say that balancing business and people is imperative in such pandemic like covid-19. Leadership, Communication, Employee Support, Compensation and benefits, wellbeing program plays crucial role to protect the organization from talent loss. Employee Value Proposition, Synchronization between Personal and Organizational Goal, Freedom and Autonomy, Employee Orientation, Bridging Performance Gaps, Recognition to be understand and taken care.

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