

COVID-19 - A Game-Changer for Employers and Employees Alike

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The recent world events surrounding the outbreak of the extremely virulent coronavirus has led many to reconsider their previously held paradigms on so many fronts. This article focuses on the current and future impacts for organizations and working people in general.

For most people, this global event is without precedent. Most do not recall the devastation of the Spanish flu that occurred in and around 1918. While the Covid-19 pandemic can be compared to the Spanish flu pandemic in some respects, the work world has since evolved. One of the biggest differences lies in the way the world has modernized itself both in terms of the workplace and the knowledge required to operate these workplaces. The workplace and workforce have achieved many improvements in regard to the level of sophistication and knowledge required to reach levels of high effectiveness and efficiencies. Despite these improvements, the COVID-19 crisis has effectively been able to bring economies crashing as organizations struggle to maintain financial buoyancy and sustainability in very uncertain times.

Once this global crisis is behind us, we can foresee some fundamental changes occurring with both employers and employees. One immediate change is the movement toward more telecommuting. Telecommuting is not a novel idea – it has been around for years, but it has

gained a great deal more popularity in recent months due to the COVID-19 crisis. Employers and organizations of all kind have turned their attention to new work arrangements in order to maintain some semblance of normalcy in an abnormal social climate. With telecommuting, organizations can keep services afloat without employees actually attending their traditional workspaces in building or office towers, while employees serve the clients and customers without leaving their homes. The exponential evolution of our technological advances has enabled ingenious and resourceful employers to continue services with minimal disruption. While some sectors, such as the IT industry, have already plunged head-deep into telecommuting as a means of doing business, the insurance sector, in particular, has been able to capitalize on this trend as it found that it can still offer services with minimal disruption to its clientele. We are seeing many other industries gravitating toward telecommuting as a more permanent solution and this trend is likely to continue for many years into the future. Some telecommuting employers and organizations are already realizing greater productivity from a number of factors, such as:

- a. Reduced absenteeism and tardiness due to travel to and from the office;
- b. No downtime in beginning the work right away – the home is the workplace;
- c. Elimination of inclement weather delays and interruption;
- d. Monitoring productivity via reporting software integrated with the telecommuting technology;
- e. Elimination of excessive socializing by the watercooler.

As with many things in life, there are some downsides attributed to telecommuting, such as:

- a. Lack of socialization could have an adverse impact on employees with a greater propensity and need for social interaction with co-workers/colleagues;
- b. Reduction in the need for expensive commercial office space, thereby causing the real estate market to tumble, especially in larger metropolitan areas with a high density of office towers. As organizations experience more and more benefits from telecommuting, their need for large office spaces in expensive office towers may be abated. Some will see that this major overhead cost is better deployed in providing better technology for its workforce in order to enhance and perfect the telecommuting experience;
- c. The face-to-face engagement with clients and customers could wane, thereby making every transaction simply a mechanical exercise without the relationship building that typically precedes an engagement between the service-provider and the clients.

A trend that may also follow with positive and negative is the increased proliferation of Artificial Intelligence (AI). We know for a fact that AI is here to stay, but its proliferation into various industries/sectors will undoubtedly increase since robots and mechanized machine don't get sick. COVID-19 has taught us that such a virus can affect in varying degrees large cross-sections of our population on a global scale. At this time, there is no vaccines for it and some medical experts are now reporting that there may never be a vaccine. What now? Organizations will look to AI as a virus-free means of sustaining consistent productivity. With the advent of AI, the challenges of a pandemic from a production point of view becomes a thing of the past.

AI offers very enticing solutions but at what cost? The cost will be borne by humans. AI

will conceivably displace the worker/employee in the production of goods and the delivery of services. The obvious adverse impacts are numerous on the human front, and these are just a few of them:

- a. High unemployment rates, especially with low skill workers;
- b. Greater differential between high skilled labour and low skill labour;
- c. Overtaxing of our social welfare system;
- d. Lower taxation – good for employers but bad for government.

This global pandemic has and will fundamentally impact on how we function as employers and employees. It is clear that our new normal will require a paradigm shift of biblical proportion as we shift to the new realities of the workplace. This retooling of our workplace and workforce will undoubtedly require a herculean effort by industry, educational/academic institutions and governments. A good place to start is to develop a strategic direction with a focus on educating and training people to become tech-savvy employees for these inevitable economic and social realities. To remain at status quo is not an option!