

The Journey Back to the Workplace Employee Engagement



Re-engaging your Workforce after and during change

As the economic landscape continues to evolve, the outcome of the Covid-19 health crisis has not truly been felt and with that comes a constant and cyclical change that will impact Organisations in a manner that is undetermined at present. Notwithstanding this, the Covid-19 health crisis has proved that most Organisations in the Community and Voluntary sectors have strength and agility in practice. This is a testament not only to the Organisations themselves and to the service users but most importantly the Employees who work within them.

With agility comes resilience and while many Organisations have adapted to the necessary changes and manoeuvred through the lockdown period a lot of this was down to resilience. Having this resilience has led to efficient and innovative decisions on the direction an Organisation needed to go and an alignment of resources and knowledge to that future purpose.

As Organisations further navigate through inevitable change one must consider Employee strategies that are a necessary factor in promoting and supporting continued agility amongst the workforce. This is of particular relevance where workforce planning has already occurred and where changes have been implemented, perhaps leaving the remaining workforce feeling less empowered and therefore less engaged.

The Employee Engagement Strategy

Strategic Employee engagement should be front and centre as we move through the easing of restrictions. With a constant change enveloping Organisations in the present and future, any

approach taken to Employee engagement should be united with an Organisations established culture, values and mission, focusing on four main areas:

1. Communication
2. People Management
3. Wellbeing
4. Learning & Development

Communication

Communication is a powerful tool in Employee engagement and must be utilised in the correct manner in order to have the correct effect. Whether your Organisation is at the precipice of change or faced with the aftermath of change one cannot assume that change in the context of the Covid-19 health crisis is over. What is likely in this context, is that change is an evolution in itself which means that communications should at this point be well planned, purposeful, authentic and frequent.

Communications is one of the drivers of Employee engagement and in order to maintain and promote engagement it should in the first instance acknowledge and appreciate the work of your Employees thus far. Recognising the work of Employees and sharing their successes will, in itself, support Employees feelings of isolation and uncertainty and will drive the emotional connection necessary in reinforcing an Employees sense of belonging and purpose within the Organisation.

A further benefit of succinct and frequent communications is its ability to build trust in the employment relationship. Open and transparent communication is a must in order to build and maintain trust with Employees. This type of exchange should also encourage Employees to be open in return and lead to meaningful engagement thus furthering the engagement agenda.

Finally, asking Employees for feedback on what's working well and what could be done better is the most important way to engage Employees. This allows an Organisation to quickly identify issues and provides an opportunity to act on and address and track the progress of these issues both during the pandemic and as we begin reopening and beyond. This will ensure that Employees feel their opinion is valued and consequently they are more likely to stay invested in your success.

People Management

Gone are the days where standard working practices are being employed. Even where remote working is in practice, for most it is a temporary measure, one which was successfully implemented at the commencement of lockdown thus demonstrating huge amounts of agility. Whatever approach is taken by Employers in the return to the workplace people management will play a huge part in the promotion and maintenance of Employee engagement, especially where there has been an influx of change to work practices, policies and procedures and resourcing. Employees are being afforded much more flexibility in their working day than ever before with Employers understanding that there is a blending of work-life balance like never before and this acceptance leads to favourable engagement from Employees.

Managers must be clear on setting Employee expectations of their role and provide clarity regarding the agreed workload and priorities. While key performance indicators may have to be adjusted

following changes to the workforce, it is important to focus on the outputs or outcomes and measure accordingly, not on the activity or time taken to do specific tasks. In some respects, it may take longer to complete work tasks but that is not an excuse for not getting things done but is a reason to reconsider what productivity really means. It's not possible to manage every aspect of the work done by a remote team or a hybrid remote team. Instead of focusing on activity or hours worked, focus on the outcomes and measure your team accordingly.

Managers should be flexible and be there to offer support and encouragement, particularly for those who may be struggling. Design and revise policies so that they too can be dynamically flexible in the event of further change being necessitated and ensure that all Employees have appropriate equipment to perform their roles and systems that endorse collaboration. Positive people management will act as a driver for Employee engagement and when done correctly will also support Employee wellbeing.

Wellbeing

Challenges that present themselves following change will impact on Employees in different ways. It is for this reason that an agile approach to wellbeing promotion and management should be taken. Support in whatever context is essential to well-being management, this should be reflective in management of Employees through clarity of expectations and flexibility in approach.

There should also be a conscious effort to action tangible items from the measures and controls implemented under the Return to Work Safely Protocols to the introduction of an Employee Assistance Programme, good wellbeing management and practices will promote positive Employee engagement. It is also important that Employers are developing resources for health and wellbeing, so an awareness is brought to the workforce of supports they can avail of such as stress management, resilience building as well as other health and wellness initiatives. In order to promote and maintain Employee engagement there has, in some cases, been a need for a mindset shift and this can be supported through the facilitation of resources that centres on positive mental health and wellbeing support.

Keeping in touch with teams through chatrooms or messaging platforms as well as daily check-ins are particularly important when managing remote workers. Making sure there is time for casual catchups within the Employee groups and fostering a culture of wellbeing built on the values of an Organisation can go a long way for Employee engagement. However, cognisance must be had of the challenges that have presented themselves in a changing work environment as this will assist Organisations in planning how to boost wellbeing and further embed the right type of Employee engagement in the right way.

Learning & Development

An Employee engagement strategy would not be complete if there wasn't a level of investment in learning and development. Organisations that are resilient continue to learn and as the dust settles on changes to the workforce, Employers and HR practitioners must quickly adapt their focus to Employee retention which is a direct outcome of emotional activity and thereafter engagement. The manner in which an Organisation addresses the needs of Employees as well as their

development instils a commitment to Employee engagement which can positively impact on Employee retention.

Organisations must encourage Employees to build time into their working day or week to further their professional development and then provide them with the tools necessary to support that development and promote collaborative learning, which in turn impacts on effective team functioning.

Adapting to change is a skill in itself and with the future uncertain it is essential that Employees are equipped to navigate future change. Provide learning experiences that support shifts in priorities, strategy or revised work processes. Embrace talent upskilling programmes that align with the shift in strategy and further develop the skillset and competencies of Employees to future proof your Organisation so that when change inevitably happens Employees are prepared and can approach change with confidence.

Finally incorporate the values, mission and culture of the Organisation into a training programme that will foster a sense of belonging, purpose and support Employee retention and engagement. Having a sense of adaptability in learning and development, one which is built on the values of an Organisation will be the difference between just coping with change and embracing any changes that are to come.

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**For further information or advice, please contact the designated HR & Employment Helpdesk at thewheelhrhelpdesk@adarehrm.ie or via telephone on (01) 5394661
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