

Lessons from the Pandemic: In Conversation with Human Resources Leaders

Summary Report

December 2020

Introduction

In April 2020, a round table organized by the Chartered Professionals in Human Resources (CPHR) Canada in collaboration with the World Federation of People Management's concluded a "people first" agenda is required as a way ahead for the workplace not just during the recovery period but in the long term.

As the pandemic's second wave hit, CPHR Canada once again convened leaders to discuss what lessons might be drawn from the past 10 months and what can be expected going forward.

The participants were:

Anthony Ariganello, President & Chief Executive Officer, CPHR Canada & CPHR BC & Yukon

Rodney Miller, President & Chief Executive Officer, CPHR Alberta

Manon Poirier, Directrice Générale, l'Ordre des conseillers en ressources humaines agréés

Laura Thurnheer, Associate Dean, Science, Technology & Health, Okanagan College

Carole Presseault (moderator), Principal Consultant, Presseault Strategies+

With an introduction by Susan Ryan, Vice-Chair, CPHR Canada and Chief Financial Officer, Nanaimo and District Hospital Foundation.

The round table was attended more than 300 individuals from across Canada who shared questions and comments throughout the session.

The Context

The roundtable discussion was convened as the pandemic entered its 10th month where businesses of all sizes, workers in all sectors, families and individuals are finding ways to adapt to the "new normal." As Susan Ryan said in her introduction: "Things may have indeed changed forever and many of our employees are hurting. Many businesses are struggling. Families are still grappling with balancing the needs of their children, the closing of schools and daycare with the requirements of work. Women have been disproportionately impacted by the recession." Recognizing that the situation has put a strain on CPHR Canada members, Ms. Ryan challenged panellists and attendees to set the course for the future.

The Issues

From the outset of the discussion, panellists agreed that human resources professionals have been central to helping people and organizations rebuild and recover from the pandemic. Businesses of all sizes have turned to the profession to seek advice providing a unique opportunity to position the profession as experts with a global vision.

About CPHR Canada

CPHR Canada is a national association comprised of 27,000 members in the human resources profession across nine provinces and three territories in Canada. CPHR Canada's provincial bodies are the grantors of the CPHR designation in their respective provinces. Together we are responsible for setting and upholding national standards for the profession.

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A copy of the video recording of the event is available here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWZX7WIMT2U&feature=youtu.be>

The flip side is that many HR professionals are exhausted, acting as advisors to employees and employers alike, while juggling their own professional and personal lives.

Panellists made a number of core observations:

- organizations are facing two very different and conflicting realities: there are those which are greatly impacted and others who have done well but are faced with challenges to recruit and retain employees;
- concern for young people aged 20–35 whose lives and careers have been put on hold by the pandemic;
- company loyalty is disintegrating and will be difficult to restore;
- women’s participation in the labour force is at its lowest level since in three decades.

On the positive side, working remotely is now widely accepted allowing people to choose where to live and workers everywhere are making good use of new tools.

This set the stage for the discussion.

While working remotely, or working from home, is now well accepted, some panellists felt it is not the panacea some believed it to be and remains a challenge for some workers and organizations. While a hybrid model may emerge, human resources professionals and the organizations they serve will be challenged in creating the environment that enables employees to connect informally.

40 per cent of jobs can be done remotely

Remote work brings other challenges such as dependable access to high-speed internet and safe and secure workplaces. Panellists agreed that remote work may favour contract employees over full-time staffing eroding the safety net regular employment provides and contributing to the growing gig economy. It also opens the important question of employers’ requirement to provide a healthy and safe environment while having little oversight on the physical space.

On the plus side, with geographical constraints removed, employers can now access a wider pool of workers bridging the skills shortage and ensuring the workforce is diverse and inclusive. This has also provided more opportunities for smaller employers who, in the past, may not have had access to a wide talent pool and reduces the challenge faced by some job seekers living outside of fast-growing regions. The pandemic is shown that workers can be productive and engaged while working remotely.

49 per cent of workers are seriously considering quitting their job in August; 21 per cent said they were planning to change jobs with 3 months.

Hays Canada

Building a strong organizational culture in a virtual environment is a challenge but it is not unsurmountable. Leaders will need to reflect about traditional leadership models, how performance is

measured and managed, how employees' needs are met and they are supported and how culture evolves in a virtual environment especially in the context, as one panellist reported, where young people are rethinking their careers.

One panellist argued that two essential values are needed to build a culture in the future: trust and vulnerability. Do leaders trust that employees wherever they may be are doing their best work possible? Can a leader display vulnerability as he or she navigates through the unknown recognizing that leaders do not always have the answers? These values will guide engagement and build culture.

The federal government has indicated that it will include mental health as a key component of occupational health and safety in the Canada Labour Code (Code). It will require federally regulated employers to take preventative steps to address workplace stress and injury.

Panellists noted that this was a positive step and while mental health has been long recognized in the workplace, the pandemic has certainly brought the issue to the forefront. Employers and human resource professionals must go beyond employee assistance programs and create the right environments to support positive mental health. In the words of one panellist: "Organizations cannot keep operating the way they always did. That would be a mistake. It's OK to be ambitious but managers must be aware of the impact. Human resource professionals have the power over what happens in the workplace."

The Mental Health Commission of Canada estimates that 500,000 Canadians are unable to work each week due to a mental health issue.

One of the issues at the forefront of the pandemic has been the muddling of boundaries between home and work giving rise to employees being "over connected." Employers must be clear in their expectations about the right to disconnect while at the same time recognizing that one "size that doesn't fit all." Workers may have specific needs as do employers.

Harassment in the workplace has not disappeared because of the pandemic. According to an August 2020 survey conducted for l'Ordre des CRHA, one third of workers said they would not be comfortable reporting harassment from a remote environment. All agreed these issues must be addressed.

One panellist put forward three elements to tackle issues in the workplace including mental health issues what he referred to as "3 Cs": clarity, communication and connection. Put simply: are managers clear with their expectations; can they communicate and can they connect in a genuine and authentic way?

What is needed

A plan to move forward

The status quo is not an answer. As all have been affected, so too, all must be involved in building a way forward.

Under the leadership of the federal government, we believe a special task force be created. It should be composed of business, labour and government representatives and its role would be to chart the course and develop a credible plan to move the economy forward and ensure Canadians have the skills they require for tomorrow's jobs.

In addition, we recommend the final actions to be taken:

From governments

- The government of Canada must accelerate its commitment to have all Canadians access high-speed internet. The goal of connecting all Canadians by 2030 is not acceptable in the current environment.
Canadians need access to high-speed internet to work, to learn and to communicate with each other.
- The federal government's objective to require federally regulated organizations to include mental health as a key component of occupational health and safety and require federally regulated employers to take preventative steps to address workplace stress and injury is a laudable goal. We encourage all jurisdictions to follow suit. We also encourage the federal government to provide employers with the support they need to take these preventative steps. The profession can assist in developing tools.
- We are encouraged with the federal government's \$1.5 billion investment in Workforce Development Agreements (WDAs) with provinces and territories. This investment will help Canadians in underrepresented groups and those in sectors that have been hardest hit by the pandemic to re-enter the workforce. Focus needs to be on workers re-skilling and acquiring technical skills and be support of small and medium-sized businesses.
- All governments must review occupational health and safety legislation to reflect the changing working workplace.

From employers

- Clarity in their expectations about the employees right to disconnect and articulate those expectations in policies.
- Go beyond employee assistance programs and provide environments where workers feel supported.
- Support diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

From human resources professionals

- Access training to learn how to better support our people facing mental health challenges.
- Use your influence to ensure ambitions do not surpass employees' capacities.
- Foster diversity and inclusion in the workplace and ensure hiring tools are unbiased.
- Understand the business of your organization.

Conclusion

There will be no return to normal but a “new normal” will be established. Panellists were unanimous in their call for human resource professionals to rise up to the occasion and create the path for the future. They are at the heart of the organization and belong at the executive table. Over the past 10 months, HR leaders have proven the value they create for organization.

Change creates opportunity and we need too collectively reflect on our ability to lead. As professionals, we will have to accept that change will continue to change and put our trust in our people, understand what they individually need and we will have the best teams possible and loyal employees. Our future leaders will be vulnerable and authentic. They will build trust within their teams and in organizations as a whole. Leaders who put people first, are empathetic, understand the business operations and communicate effectively will be our future. In sum, our future leaders will have the ability to bring the best in people.