

# TEN OF THE BIGGEST HR CHALLENGES WITH COVID -19

Answers from our HR consultant

## EMPLOYMENT LEGISLATION STILL EXISTS

Despite the pressures businesses are facing and the uncertainties that have existed from one day to the next, organisations cannot neglect the fact that employment law still exists. A global pandemic does not mean the rules can be flouted. I have heard many horror stories about 'short cuts to redundancy' without following due process, furloughing without the necessary documentation in place and return to work schemes without exhibiting the required duty of care.

With the employment market shrinking, disgruntled former colleagues may feel they have little to lose by pursuing a tribunal claim. Compliance must therefore remain in sharp focus, now more than ever.



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## DON'T PRESUME WHEN IT COMES TO PAYROLL OPTIONS



When it comes to cash flow, swift decision-making is understandable. But when trying to cut payroll costs, it's important to consider all options, beyond simply reducing staffing numbers. Part-time hours, a reduction in pay, job shares and adjusted T&Cs are all possible, if explored as part of an official consultation process. So, speak to the workforce to ask for any ideas.

In many cases, colleagues are prepared to all be affected a little, if it prevents some people being affected a lot. And the sense of camaraderie to emerge from making this decision together may be really refreshing, at the same time as those all-important varied skill-sets being retained.

## LIVING THROUGH LEGISLATION;

Usually, the formation of employment law is a long, drawn out and extensively considered process. But now, instead of legislation passing slowly through parliament, we are living through it, as it is being written. We've had no time to prepare for the implementation of the furlough/job retention scheme for instance - we've had to interpret and apply it in real time, while at the same time making commercially sensitive decisions and ensure compliance.



## C-SUITE DECISION MAKING;

The financial impact of COVID-19 is beyond quantifiable for many businesses, and given labour is usually a company's largest overhead, now is a crucial time to map out future workforce possibilities. Where can headcounts be cut, can talent be redeployed, and are any efficiencies being overlooked? In truth the list of questions goes on and on, so HR certainly has the C-suite's attention as a result.

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## THE REPERCUSSIONS OF REMOTE WORKING

Lockdown forced even the most traditional of companies to take action and embrace remote working, whether they've previously accommodated flexible working patterns, or not. Many media headlines now claim this will be 'the death of the office' as we know it, which is perhaps not a bad thing. But employers must remember that every colleague is different.

Extroverts who thrive in a bustling open plan office may be struggling with the comparative confines of home working and the feeling of isolation that comes from not being surrounded by others. For such employees, video calls are not the same, so the risk of loneliness must be acknowledged and monitored. Elsewhere, more introverted team members may love their newfound privacy, but in truth, the appetite to remain at home will vary from one person to the next. It's likely that a hybrid approach to work will emerge when lockdown is over so employers must remain flexible, agile and, most importantly, keep in touch with the workforce about their preferences. Assumptions are dangerous.



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## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF COVID-19

The possible mental health impact of COVID-19 has been widely documented, with the World Economic Forum predicting that lockdown will result in a secondary epidemic of burnouts and stress-related absenteeism in the latter half of 2020. Employers who believe mental health first aid is simply a 'nice to have' are therefore sorely mistaken. Now is the time to upskill in this area to ensure the necessary duty of care is exercised when it comes to colleague wellbeing.

## CHILDCARE RESPONSIBILITIES

Lockdown has presented parents with a mammoth challenge to undertake, particularly when it has come to juggling workloads, home life and in many cases, picking up the teacher baton too! And this childcare quandary is far from over, with some schools still unclear as to when they plan to permanently open their doors to pupils again. Added to this, there are widespread mental health concerns among young people, who have also undoubtedly been affected by the stresses of lockdown, a lack of routine, separation from their trusted social networks and anxieties associated with the snippets of COVID-19 news they have been exposed to – even if parents don't realise it.

Children are therefore likely to need more adult support and intervention than ever, which is likely to impose attendance, productivity and concentration strains on the workforce. Many colleagues may also be firmer when it comes to ensuring a work-life balance, so behavioural 'norms' within any given organisation may need to be readdressed.



## TAKING CARE OF CULTURE



Even the strongest of leaders will have had to work harder to keep their organisational culture alive during lockdown, so this is another opportunity for HR professionals to safeguard and champion the spirit that exists within the team.

From simple messages and little unexpected acts of kindness, through to more pre-planned social events (from a distance), there are many ways to maintain a dynamic bond among colleagues. My key advice in this respect is to remain authentic and think carefully as to what would normally motivate the team. Now is not the time to insist in weekly virtual bingo if this sort of get-together would have filled people with dread pre-lockdown!

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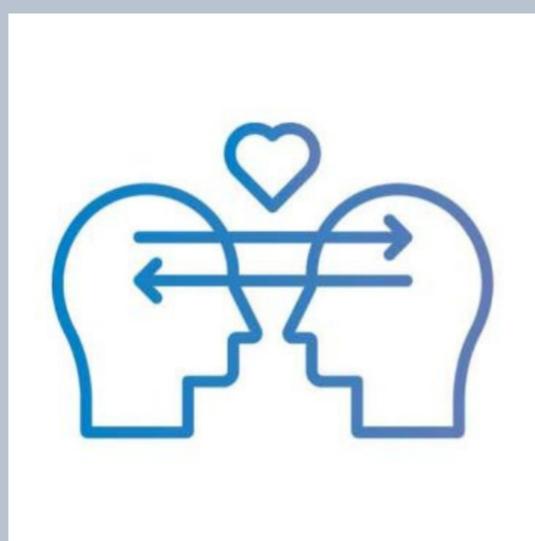
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## RECRUITMENT

Businesses typically recruit in one of two ways, but both are likely to create fresh challenges when it comes to the search for new talent. Those usually reliant on the support of a recruitment agency need to ensure they enlist a trusted and ethical partner, as aggressive, commission-hungry tactics are unlikely to uncover the best candidate for the job. Elsewhere, companies who tend to try and fill their own vacancies will probably find themselves overwhelmed by staggering application volumes and the extremely time-intensive sift for quality candidates. It's understandable to try and complete the recruitment process as quickly as possible, given the pressures companies are experiencing. But now is not the time to rush the decision – it will undoubtedly be regretted in the long run.



## EMBRACE EMPATHY



To draw upon an earlier point, this pandemic represents one of the toughest periods to have ever faced most managers. So, while feelings of an inferiority complex are perhaps understandable, they need to be banished as quickly as they surface. It is far more important to focus time and energy on the deployment and development of leadership skills that will continue to steer businesses through the uncertain times that continue to lie ahead. And one of the most crucial skills to harness, is empathy. Empathic thinking doesn't come naturally to some people, but a respect for individuals' different circumstances, resilience levels and personal 'side effects' of COVID-19, will undoubtedly prove crucial to maintaining rapport with valuable co-workers, when they need such support the most.



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