

# COVID-19: In life beyond lockdown, start treating your employees like your customers

Central to positive well-being is a sense of personal space and security. Despite early indications of a phased return to “normal” worklife in some countries, the white-collar global workforce is set to be remote working for the foreseeable future. So what happens when the office has become the home, and the home has become the office? Managers must heed 5 core principles to manage employee well-being for the long-run as we bed in for a new normal.



A happy and healthy employee is a good employee. That’s why employee well-being has entered the management mainstream, and now widely considered an indirect contributor to the bottom line.

As most companies rush to provide online workout classes and remote Friday drinks for their employees on lockdown, they should stop.

And think: how well do I *really* know my staff, and what are the limits to my power of intervention to manage their well-being, particularly in worklife after lockdown?

Managers should not be shy about communicating where they can and can’t intervene, not least in influencing employees’ physical health. Absent ill physical health, research shows positive emotional states rely on sound social and psychological well-being. At times of stress, they are proven protectors. Simple, right?

No. Mental health is the real battleground for managers who are finding themselves ill-equipped to manage employee well-being remotely. 5 guiding principles should inform the approach they take on how to maintain a “happy” employee – and explain why those gimmicky tactics might not be working for everybody.



### 1. Segment your employees based on their individual circumstances, not by their job title.

Employees are the new customers in the remote workplace, so start treating them like it. Enriching your understanding of workers' personal circumstances will allow you to identify what might risk stressing them out most now and in the future. Is it social isolation or increased monotony of their work and how might this evolve over time as the novelty of working from the makeshift home office wears off? This helps predict those at highest risk of low social well-being, and with more personalised support, research shows that greater long-term employee commitment can be generated in return. You will likely find those with most acute needs sit at different levels of the team structure, so now is the time to abandon the one-size fits all approach.



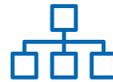
### 2. Re-draw the definition of work-life boundaries and fill the time of those people who want it with more "work".

Keeping long hours heightens the risk of burnout. That's proven. But managers need to be aware of the trade-off that comes with time, for some, now being not such a commodity. The risk of low psychological well-being stemming from loneliness and limited social interaction is materially higher. For those identified as such through employee segmentation (hello, principle #1), opportunities to fill time productively with work-related tasks is a form of escapism. It can enhance job motivation, control and personal gratification. So, don't always assume that it will lead to burnout. Give workers the option: do more only if you want to. This helps redraw some work-life boundaries to make what makes work "work" more realistic in the Covid context. This is critical for those with dependents who will likely report higher work-family conflict, and despite studies claiming the opposite, dual-earner families will suffer as much as single-earner families. For these segments, time won't be a luxury as the grind of maintaining parents' new role as self-styled home-schoolers becomes clear.



### 3. Devolve decision-making and give more reward - but don't redesign job specifications on the fly at a time of flux.

Giving employees more involvement over decision-making is proven to moderate psychological job demands. But not all employees may be used to making decisions. Providing opportunities for light-intensity, intrinsically rewarding responsibilities over which they have control will help adjust a better fit between the organisation and the individual. It's critical that such behaviour – big or small – is praised. At a time when societal rewards for life under lockdown are limited, they have an outsized impact in enhancing employees' engagement with work. Make this incremental though, and don't over-expose employees to new duties at a time when their world has inevitably been turned upside down, inside out.



### 4. Control and autonomy over individuals' workload isn't as desirable anymore; employers are welcome authority.

In devolving decision-making, you might be asking employees to participate more than they ordinarily would. Not all folks will want such responsibility. This is where the macro work boundary must be set so that it continues to define the professional workplace, albeit remotely. This is all about framing what we know as decision latitude, but making it proportional to the times in which we live. Giving all employees maximum autonomy over their work lives might not be welcome at a time when many will crave more structure. Make the boundaries fluid, yes, but not at the expense of what really defines you as an organisation.



## 5. Line managers know your place: extend relationships beyond supervisors.

All hail the almighty line-manager. Maybe not. Of course, coaches and mentors will be key in upholding their responsibility to support more vulnerable employees. But social support is a collective responsibility. Relationships must be more multilateral by moving beyond traditional borders. Employees should be discouraged from going it alone at the expense of remote inclusivity. Forging new role-models will be helpful to build more trust in the remote workplace. That might mean graduates start mixing with senior executives. Yes, you heard right.

Employers should be realistic about the interventions they can take in mediating well-being at a time like this. To give managers a fighting chance in testing circumstances, it all starts by segmenting employees as you would your customers. Then all else will flow from there. Worklife beyond lockdown could become that bit more bearable.

We dissected **Bakker and Demerouti's (2007)** classical job demands-resource model to understand the primary “job stressors” during Covid-19, and whether traditional HRM interventions were fit for purpose in managing and influencing physical, psychological and social well-being; practical experience of which has been gained by our client consulting in the last few weeks.

On the surface, many workers appear in the same boat. Their circumstances are more homogeneous than ever. So, no wonder managers make an intuitive intervention to adopt a one-size fits all approach to making sure employees stay happy – but from the home “office”. Amp up the communications; make the remote workplace a more social place, and be extra nice to your colleagues. Open leadership for-the-win.

But based on our experience grounded in academic study, it might not always work in the long-run. Even absent material health concerns, life under lockdown is exhausting. Research on “work-family conflict” suggests a primary strain on work-life balance. Social life – typically for most a means of contentment and enthusiasm – has evaporated overnight; notwithstanding the flurry of amateur quizmasters and wannabee TikTok influencers, as friendly gatherings and pastimes move online.

The risk of increased anxiety is high, and as the pandemic persists, the prolonged monotony for most means emotional exhaustion will be common.

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