THE MALTA CHAMBER

Recommendations to Employers and Government to build a Culture of Wellness & Resilience during COVID with Employees

Feedback from:

- **Benchmarking Session: Creating a Culture of Wellbeing & Resilience during COVID** held on 29th October 2020
- **HR Essentials during COVID-19** held on 14th December 2020

An Initiative led by:

The Health & Wellness Committee within

The Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry,
Sponsored by:

Atlas Insurance

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The Initiative

The Health and Wellness Committee within The Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise & Industry held a Benchmarking Session on 29 October 2020 titled: Developing a Culture of Wellness and Resilience during COVID. This was followed by a further session hosted by the committee on 14 December 2020 aimed at the manufacturing sector within The Malta Chamber, in which the COVID-19 Public Health Response Team gave presentations during advice on reducing lost working days was stressed.

The first initiative aimed to raise awareness on company culture and how one may affect it, followed by a presentation on how one may improve wellbeing and resilience for the team. The session then split the participants into breakout rooms to discuss the following questions:

1. What are the key challenges in terms of wellbeing and resilience which we are experiencing under COVID?
2. What have been the best practices which we have found to increase wellbeing and embrace stress in a positive way to create a more resilient workforce during this difficult time?
3. What are the key recommendations we can make to businesses in Malta and government to help our workforce focus on wellness and remain resilient during the coming months?

This paper aims to present the outcome of the discussions held.

The second initiative offered information on contact tracing and best practices at the workplace and was then concluded with a presentation by the Commissioner for Mental Health, Dr John M. Cachia. This event arose out of concerns in the manufacturing sector that it was being much harder hit than others due to the fact that the vast majority of its employees cannot work from home.

Therefore, it became crucial to identify how to remain aligned with the highest health and safety standards, looking after the welfare of employees first and foremost, without losing out on productivity due to inefficient or unnecessary application of health protocols.

1. Key Challenges for Wellbeing and Resilience during COVID

Company Challenges

The participants highlighted several challenges experienced on a personal, company and sectoral level during COVID-19 throughout 2020. Employers had to reinvent their business operations overnight and the media did not help in calming the situation, it only seemed to further amplify the stress around the Covid-19 pandemic.

Employers were faced with several concerns, the greatest being the fear of the unknown, not knowing how long it would take or even if the situation would ever go back to normal. Over time it became clearer that an extended period of 'a new normal' was a reality.

Immediately, and where possible, several employers changed their employees shifts to reduce the possibility of contagion, resorted to **remote working** or **working from home** to ensure business continuity as much as possible, all at increased cost. This, however, also brought about further challenges such as increased **stress, especially for management,** within companies and response to stress also became a key feature which needed to be channelled positively. The element of social disconnection also impacted the workforce, especially those living alone and younger employees, making office days a treat and making it harder to maintain social distancing measures. As a result of such changes, **productivity** was impacted, some reported increased productivity whereas others reported a decline.

Challenges relating to extra precautions, regular sanitising and work design cost a lot of extra management time and money and these were also highlighted as difficulties to face during this time.

Individual Challenges

Covid-19 clearly highlighted and amplified how differently people react to a stressful situation and especially on a personal and individual level. Most employees reported feeling **overwhelmed.** The feeling was described by one of the participants as experiencing different stages of reactions, starting with shock, followed by denial and panic, adjustment, and eventually some feeling completely drained and struggling to cope.

The **fear of contracting COVID-19** and ending up in self-quarantine is a very strong fear, especially among the older generation and those most vulnerable. The younger generation on the other hand feared infecting those most vulnerable and found it very difficult not to meet friends and spend most of their time with their families.

Participants also reported a surge in **personal problems**, that ended up being brought to work and impacting productivity. This element demonstrated the different challenges facing different people at different stages in life accompanied by various levels of resilience emanating from the differing cultures and home backgrounds. This may have also resulted from the fact that, the **work life balance** situation completely changed.

There is now a blurring of lines between work and home life, especially with remote working, with some employees finding it hard to disconnect and being overworked, other employees finding it more difficult to remain engaged in their work and employers and co-workers finding it hard to trust.

Moreover, the strain posed with increasing numbers of employees testing positive for Covid-19 and even more employees suddenly being put into quarantine, increased pressures on co-workers and management, resulting in burnout.

Another strong challenge posed was with **child-minding** and **home-schooling** by working parents especially in situations where mothers ended up having to either leave their jobs to cope or reduce their hours to stay at home and be with their children. Working parents have had to juggle working from home or working shifts, home schooling, parenting, and home chores, making it difficult to cope without concessions from employers. This was felt much more in single-parent contexts or where burden sharing between genders was absent making it difficult for one to cope without experiencing burnout.

Despite the abovementioned challenges, a participant highlighted that new research in Australia found that, even in the midst of the significant disruption created by COVID-19 and the economic downturn, 39.1% of Australian employees feel that their teams and workplaces are consistently thriving when it comes to the changes they are experiencing[1]. This was surmised to be a result of the leadership approach to change and the way they ensured that workers had the skillset required to navigate change, equipping the workforce with this skillset was seen to be making the biggest difference in workplaces that are thriving, despite the incredible pace of change they have been experiencing recently.

Management

Top and middle management reported high levels of stress related to the future of the company, the economic downturn impacted by the situation and the pressures that come with having to work with limited staff as a result of COVID-positive employees, possible contagion, or quarantine. Although strong leadership may truly positively impact employees, the stress posed on top management and the possibility of having to let go of personnel, or worse still, having the company not surviving the COVID storm was real. Although government helped in some sectors, others remained side-lined.

Moreover middle management often felt that they were required to carry out a balancing act between showing a strong sense of positivity and leadership to ensure employee engagement, while also being aware of the challenges and difficulties faced by top management.

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[1] How Are 39% of Australian Employees Thriving During COVID? | Psychology Today -
https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/functioning-flourishing/202009/how-are-39-australian-employees-thriving-during-covid
(Accessed: 9 December 2020)

In addition, middle management often had to face and give support and flexibility to individual employees facing additional stress challenges at home or those who were finding it more difficult to adapt as mentioned above.

Similarly, team management became a tougher challenge, especially with remote working. Many participants reported a lack of trust between team members emerging due to the absence of visibility of work being completed by the various team members. Perceptions often emerged that not all burdens were being shared equally. Such situations further challenged managers when trying to keep up positive team dynamics. Social disconnection due to remote working further exacerbated team dynamics in some cases and made it harder for certain characters to adapt and resulting in team members reporting lack of team morale and the need for greater efforts to maintain team cohesiveness and trust.

Another issue reported was the lack of compliance with health and safety from certain employees, notably those who were casual employees, paid by the hour. While in general, employees who were entitled to quarantine leave and other leave were inclined to obey rules relating to staying at home if they had any symptoms or if any family members were awaiting tests or being quarantined, it was casual employees who tended to continue to come to work even when they, or their family members were at risk. This caused additional problems. It was their lack of compliance which resulted in other employees having to be put into quarantine. This was reported by several employers in different sectors.

Sectoral

Attendees reported variations across sectors and each sector was impacted and challenged differently during COVID, for instance:

1. The **Construction Sector** reported having several employees particularly the foreign workforce being worried about not being able to pay for living expenses, fear of losing work, and not being able to send money to families back home.
2. **Elderly care homes** staff were concerned due to infection contagion as staff and for their residents, the reinsertion of a lockdown and family separation including young children, severe burnout and exhaustion issues due to staff on quarantine or positive with Covid, this has been going on since the beginning of the pandemic.
3. The **Catering** and **Hospitality** sectors have seen redundancies which was hard on both staff and management.
4. The **Manufacturing** sector saw a rise in absenteeism which was creating stress for the rest of the staff. At the same time there was a decline requests for vacation leave. It is worth noting that although the level of stress remained the same, COVID brought about a situation where the rules are constantly changing which for those less resilient employees creates additional challenges.
5. The **Pharmaceutical Industry** faced different challenges, since their staff tended to be younger and foreign. The generation being described seems to live in a bubble, as they socialize together, living detached from reality. Management had to constantly remind them of the reality of the dangers of COVID infection and the threat to the work environment if they did not change their behaviour.

6. The **Banking, Insurance and the financial services** sector in general have seen a quick transition from the office environment to working from home. Some employees adapted very well, yet a sense of **social disconnection** is evident which also gave rise to loneliness. Moreover, the lack of visibility and transparency also brought about an environment of mistrust and even distress in some instances.

The general feeling now is that the situation has persisted for far too long, and a general feeling of fatigue, with a further challenge that Christmas will bring with it.

2. Best Practices for Employers to Increase Wellbeing & Embrace Stress Positively to Create a more Resilient Workforce

To unleash the power of human potential and remain an employer of choice, organizations need to understand that their employees' state of wellbeing is vital. Employers need to develop new support programmes that can help employees build resilience, embrace mindfulness, and strengthen wellbeing for an evolving future. The following best practices are real examples of what has been achieved by various participants.

It is important to remember that before the pandemic, physical staff meetings, networking and events were a daily affair, affecting team cohesiveness and trust very positively. It has been a challenge for many to keep up that level of enthusiasm and engagement; however, many companies have understood the difficulties and made special efforts to address these issues and have had success in keeping their employees morale up.

Digital tools can help a great deal shifting staff meetings, networking, and events online. Regular meetings have become even more important due to the general lack of transparency and visibility and many businesses have not only held regular staff meetings online but have also provided well-being programmes and well-being coaching. Many town-square like activities with recordings by business leaders, flattening communication channels have been reported to be successful and often companies set up company or team wide social activities such as online quizzes, cooking lessons, exercise classes and other online activities and events. Other companies have addressed key areas of stress by offering informative sessions to staff on health and safety areas, and other wellness related topics such as sleep, nutrition, and financial management. Coaching on expressing concerns in a non-aggressive manner is also important with many companies training managers on coaching skills which will develop the skills of their staff and show a far more caring and developmental attitude. Other participants have added mindfulness training to their wellness classes.

These new communication channels present great opportunities to harness the creative potential of various staff members. One way of doing so is by 'Crowdsourcing' information which provides a platform to use the 'ideas of crowds' to gather open-ended data and generate a series of ideas from employees to put into practice.

A key trend noted by The Malta Chamber has been the emergence of a more flexible approach. This includes encouraging employees to dress more casually when possible, allowing them the space to work when they can if deadlines are met and allowing to them to work where they see fit, always with their eye on agreed outcomes.

One company went the extra mile when it converted its multipurpose room into a grocery store. They listed 200 products that their employees could buy at wholesale price. Employees could purchase what they needed and paid for the items without any control from management. The company was ready to do whatever it took to support its employees and the mutual trust created the success of this project.

Another best practice was by an employer that purchased a desk and an office chair for each employee, to set up a home office, this brought about a positive boost to employees especially when working remotely.

Other best practices included leaders thinking outside the box and using positive psychology as far as possible to motivate teams, empower middle-management and the introduction of more frequent one to one sessions to ascertain the wellness of the individuals instead of resenting poor performance. This point was stressed by various participants. No matter how many team meetings are held, this cannot replace the need for one to one check ins. The use of buddy systems was reported as very successful in identifying problem areas and giving support before issues became more serious.

Another important area which was emphasised was the need to be transparent and factual with staff. This approach with regular communication and open communication fora gives reassurance to employees and further encourages them to keep going. Additionally, communication flows between management and employees provide the right climate, support, and security for a positive environment. Consequently, the human resources team becomes vital to ensure a common approach and proper implementation of these information flows throughout the company. HR departments should also create channels for employees to voice concern and whistle-blower and other similar channels and policies may need to be created if not already available. It is also worth noting that a participant reported how the HR team within his company started preparing the staff for the pandemic from January 2020, therefore, the trust and safety started there. This demonstrates that when the wellbeing of the employee is prioritised and given due attention, trust and engagement tends to increase naturally.

The Government also launched schemes that are dedicated to up-skill and re-skill their employees. In cases where it is opportune to do so, employers might take this opportunity to grant their employees with this advantage. In doing so, employees will feel as though they are contributing not just to themselves but to the company by becoming better.

Another area where employers can assist is in support for mental health issues which are on the increase during this period. The increase in family problems including gender-based violence, isolation and financial worries will need additional support and employers can help through the provision of information and actual support. This can often already be available for serious cases through health insurance which may already be provided by employers. Preventive care and support for emerging problems can also be provided through EAPs.

3. Key Recommendations for Government to help the workforce focus on wellness and remain resilient

Increasing awareness and close links with the COVID-19 Public Health Response Team

Businesses must be given, and themselves seek, more training and understanding of contact tracing and social distancing measures at work. This will reduce lost days in the event of one of their employees or their family members contracting COVID-19 or being put into quarantine. The aim must always be to reduce contact between staff members and so reduce the numbers of infections and quarantined employees. The COVID response team showed great interest in setting up links with individual companies and this should be applauded and taken up by Chamber members.

Health and Safety Risk Assessments and COVID-19

Government and the MCCAA specifically can assist by giving organisations information and support including templates for incorporating COVID-19 related measures including mental health assessments into mandatory risk assessment questionnaires. Risks are changing and support for employers from government can assist in ensuring that employers are covering these new risks in their assessments.

Alignment of Government and Opposition

A joint body of some kind should be constituted in order not to give the public mixed messages. This is not the time to gain political ground; this situation only causes unnecessary panic. This is particularly true at this time when the roll out of the vaccine and the importance of vaccination must be stressed. Mixed messages give rise to suspicion which will result in less people taking medical advice seriously. On the subject of vaccinations, direction would be welcomed as to the right of employers to know whether vaccines have been taken or not. If some kind of travel passport is likely, it would be helpful for similar reasons for employers to understand their rights eg on employment of new staff, for the protection of other staff members who may be vulnerable and want to come back to weork

Schools and Childcare centres

The relatively positive experience with keeping schools and childcare centres open must continue. Closing schools creates more stress on families and in turn on industry.

Digital Transformation

The Government should continue to incentivise businesses to go digital and must continue to provide the right incentives to do so, such as through the 'Re-engineering and Transforming' scheme organised in collaboration with The Malta Chamber, which has a heavy emphasis on Digitisation of business processes including the deployment of digital technologies, such as IoT, artificial intelligence, machine learning and predictive analytics. There should also be investment in web development and e-services.

Investment in mental health

Given the increase in mental health problems reported and expected, much needed investment in the infrastructure in this area needs to be prioritised. Employers should also be incentivised to purchase EAP support for their staff or other psychologist services as should budgets for NGOs such as Richmond Foundation.

Enforcement

Lastly, we should mention the need for enforcement of current measures. The requirement for limits on persons congregating seems to be be flouted openly. Many resent the fact that while they are not meeting family members and investing in keeping their businesses safe, others are disregarding rules with impunity. More presence of the various enforcing bodies would be very welcome.