

Changing HR helpdesk trends under COVID-19

HR helpdesk trends are a great place to observe human behavior in the workplace as the events of COVID-19 unfold. What lessons can be learned from what we're observing that helps us to design our HR helpdesks better and cater to the needs of our people in a more employee-centric manner?

The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented. It affects every aspect of our lives, at home and at work, and there is no set path to follow. It has transformed the way most people work and interact, and has, therefore, changed HR.

We have the privilege and responsibility of supporting our clients' teams through the circumstances of COVID-19 – the HR helpdesks we run for them are hearing from their teams everyday. This is giving us a unique opportunity to see the work issues that are currently top-of-mind for our clients' teams. We've also observed some interesting regional differences in the implementation of lockdowns and related behaviors as these are imposed and lifted.

Here's what we've seen so far.

The importance of a focal point and the need for human interaction

When people have concerns and queries – and they do now, more than ever – giving our clients' teams a single point of contact and HR helpdesk to reach out to is absolutely vital. This means there's no confusion for them about where to turn, and we've ramped up our availability and responsiveness in line with demand.

The shift in the way people use HR contact channels in times of need shows that people like engaging with people. Picking up the phone or chatting live to a centralized HR helpdesk staffed by a human being is now the most popular form of communication. While “less voice and more self-service” was a popular trend in pre-COVID times, our teams are witnessing a steep fall in usage of self-service channels.

Why? We think it's for two reasons. One, their queries are more complex than usual – and when that's the case, it's generally a good idea to interact with someone who's better informed than to search for information oneself. And two, it's the human element. On the phone, it's another voice, another person; and even on a webchat, you know you're communicating with an individual, someone with a name, to whom you can talk and explain things – someone who can also chat about the weather, ask you how you really are, and care about the response.

However, while humans are answering more of the difficult and emotional questions, robotic process automation (RPA) is still answering some of the easier questions, helping to provide continuity of service through balancing the workload between people and machines.

Changing topics of conversation

COVID-19 has caused a behavioral change among employee populations that HR leaders should consider in their organization. The top 4 topics are:

- **Hiring and onboarding** – as countries have gone into lockdown, and organizations put business as usual on hold, recruitment stoppages have caused candidates to surge in their concerns. They have most likely resigned from their previous job in anticipation of their new one – but now what? Where do they stand? Will their new employer renege on their job offer? They need reassurance. Remote onboarding is a new phenomenon for most. Shipping entire work kits to people at home and enabling this remotely is a hot topic
- **Benefits and healthcare** – is another area where people are checking how company healthcare packages apply to them and their families in the current circumstances
- **Time off and leave** – as changes to work routines, home-schooling, and mandatory leave uptake are being discussed by employers, people are all keen to know about changes in work routines affecting holiday entitlements; and, like new recruits, people are concerned about the effect of shutdowns and other business interruptions on any imminent transfers or promotions
- **Employment certificates** – lockdowns have also spiked the number of requests around employment certificates needed by governments and local authorities to allow people to travel outside lockdown restrictions.

Regional differences

In addition to the trends I've just summarized, we're also looking at regional differences, and at what might be learned from countries as they emerge from lockdowns. China and Poland will lay the groundwork for our observations, and we'll be hearing more about these differences in future blogs.

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