

Post-Covid19 Pandemic Back to workplace Policies and Procedures: A Case Study with Reference to Agricultural Research Sector, Hyderabad

K. D.V. Prasad and Mruthyanjaya Rao Mangipudi

Abstract— The Government of India announced Lockdown on 22 March and continued till May 21, 2020. Subsequently the unlock down across the country started from 8 June 2020 with various states following some regulations according to the respective state conditions. Several industry sectors – Information Technology, Central and State Government Offices, agricultural sector, and other public sectors started functioning partially. Most of the business outlets like supermarkets, shopping malls, financial institutes both public and private are functioning at full level. Several articles published on Covid19 about how to mitigate the infection risk and several literatures available on Covid-19 protocols, enhancing the immunity. However, till today there is no published literature on Covid19 back to workplace plan policies, procedures and protocol to safeguard employees from possible infection. In this manuscript the authors proposed a phase-wise post Covid-19 work plan with reference Agricultural Research Sector, Hyderabad. The manuscript studied the aspects of employee well-being, remote working, prevention of the infection, flexibility, and suggested a framework on back to work plan with phased approach, which is effective and cause minimal disturbance in carrying our routine activities in the sector. The author also suggests the new Human Resource Paradigms considering employee psychological wellbeing, anxiety, job security and remote working that are required to face the similar situation in future.

Index Terms — Covid-19 pandemic, protocol, framework, prevention, phased approach.

I. INTRODUCTION

The first Covid-19 infection as reported in Hubei province of China during November 2019 and World Health Organization declared Covid-19 as Pandemic. The Government of India announced its first country-wide lock down on March 22, 2020 and continued till May 31, 2020. The Union Government of India considering the economic activities started unlock down from 8 June 2020 with giving full control to States on the modalities of the unlock down. However important areas like schools, colleges, international travel, flights, mass conventions, film theatres and completely shut down and partial train and bus services on some important routes are functional based on the situation and seriousness of the infection. In India, till the end of the June, 2020 >5,00,000 positive infections reported with a recovery rate nearing around 60% and with 16,000 fatalities.

The new-normal situation provided options of working from home or remote working in most the organizations during Covid-19 Pandemic. Till even today only 30% of the staff are reporting to the physical working place in both the private and public organizations. Even in some research organizations wherever possible allowed/encouraged the employees remote working wherever possible and curtailing the field research. Most of the organizations provided the gadgets and required software for remote working, however not all the companies across the sector remunerated only part of the salary. The Government of Telangana is paying only 50% of the salary to its staff because of the fund crunch. The Government of India has put moratorium on Dearness Allowance (inflation allowance) till July 2021. All these situations inflicted a causal effect on occupational or job stress in the employees and employee psychological wellbeing effected (Prasad 2020). Workplace isolation, remote working, social disturbances, work-life balance, improper work schedule effected the employee morale and resulted in low-performance (Rao et al. 2020). The new-normal is now Work from Home means more work and role ambiguity. The work from home or remote working resulted multiple roles for employees as father/mother/wife/husband and employee is in precarious situation of role ambiguity [10].

Though, considerable time has lapsed on the report of first case of Covid-19 Pandemic till today no industry from any sector organization has come out with Covid-19 back to work policy. Some organizations issued some guidelines to the staff on how to protect themselves from the infection in work place without any concrete proposals of organizational policy. The women employees have tough time to reaching their workplaces because of the absence of transport, metro and the other types of available transport is not economical.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the recent past some industry sectors made an attempt to apply prudent measures restructure policies to have a workable solution like redeployment, job restructure, compensation restructuring, partial remuneration, retrenchment, defer the salary payment and temporary or partial shutdown [1]. The retrenchment is more visible in

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K. D.V. Prasad, ICRISAT, India.

(corresponding e-mail: prasadkanaka2003@yahoo.co.in)

Mruthyanjaya Rao, Karvy Stock Broking Limited, India.

(e-mail: raomangipudi@gmail.com)

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hotel, tourism and MSME sectors. The partial lay off is strategy to sustain the industry on the long-term basis with available supply chain management. Kelly O'Connell suggested [2] suggested the review of remote working, leave policy, talent acquisition, and Objective and Key results during Covid-19 Pandemic. People HR [3] blogged about the Covid19-HR checklist suggested various measures like new hiring guidelines, new HR policies in remote working and new normal policies. In the similar line several higher education systems, universities, framed HR rules on for temporary working. A guide for HR Managers indicating how remote employees will be dealt with providing improved communication and motivation developed [4].

The HRO Today narrated how the six HR leaders managing their respective human resources taking care of employee safety, health and well ness and productivity during Covid-19 Pandemic [5]. The six suggested ways of employee engagement are employee safety, regular communication, feedback, employee supported policies, reward and recognition of employees during Covid-19 Pandemic [6]. Deloitte consulting prepared a research report on HR policies procedures during Covid-19 pandemic and emphasized the need of new order in HR narrated the employee problem such as commutation due to the absence of viable transport, healthcare facility, and other logistic issues [7]. Matt Collington [8] narrated the Covid-19 pandemic effects on the organization including structure and staff and emphasized the need to identify the needs and necessities of the organization rather than whims and fancies. He further suggested to address the stakeholder issues, maintain supply chain management and efficient allocation of resources resetting the business clock. The covid19-Pandemic caused severe disruptions in business, behavioral changes in employees, low more of employees, and unpredicted behavior of stake holders. Therefore, it is the responsibility of all the members of the organization to maintain cordial smooth business relations with stakeholders with positive communication and explaining the reason for initial slowdown of the progress [9].

Even after thorough literature search it was observed that several organizations indicated only temporary measures to run the office like remote working, safety kit ware, sanitizers and some mundane arrangement. No organization has planned to come in full details Covid-19 pandemic back to work plan.

III. RESEARCH GAP

There was no literature available on Post-Covid-19 Pandemic Back to work plan or policies in any sector. The literature available are only temporary notes or precautions to the staff working in their respective offices. Therefore, the researchers developed a Post-Covid-19 Back to Work plan which is detailed and phase wise approach to deal the situation so employees can back to work with minimum risk to themselves and the organization.

IV. OBJECTIVES

- To develop and provide a detailed Covid-19 back to workplace plan, which is safe and effective - Back to Workplace – a phase wise approach with minimal risk to staff and organization.
- To suggest appropriate Human Resource Paradigms and interventions for Post-Covid-19 back to workplace.

V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of the back to workplace procedure and methodology presented in Figure 1.

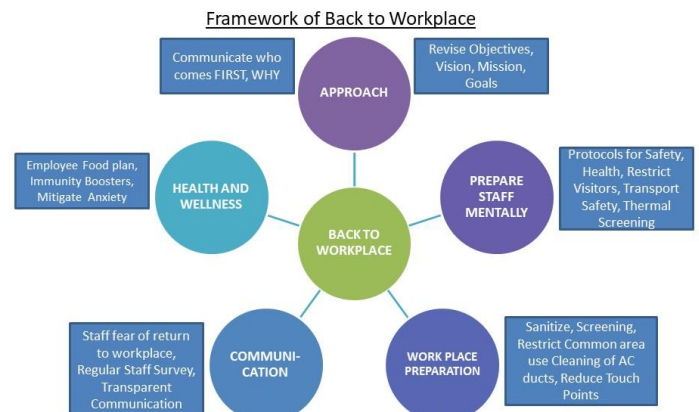


Fig. 1. Suggested framework of staff bac to workplace.

VI. METHODOLOGY

The framework provides for the safe and effective return of personnel to workplace both the office and field operations following the lockdown phase during which most staff were asked to work remotely. The 5-point framework, and phased approaches and practices that the sector can adopt in the region of Telangana and other sub-regions of other states. The new-normal which is uncertain, unpredictable, and is based on the lessons learned, and inputs available from web resources the plan which evolved is a dynamic one to management the crisis and a detailed narration follows.

A. Principles

The back to workplace plan is based on key principles:

- **Well-being:** the paramount is the safety, health and well-being of workforce, and the safety and protection of vulnerable communities in which we operate during field operations
- **Prevention:** Minimization of staff Wherever possible, minimize staff presence and congregation/gathering in the workplace across all the place through physical/social distancing or remote working (wherever possible)
- **Compliance to directives of ICMR and State Government:** Will fully adhere to the norms suggested ICMR mandatory directives and state government, including tracing systems, cleaning and workplace management;
- **Flexibility:** To Remain flexible but responsive to dynamic and unpredictable and uncertain events.

- **Phased approach:** Rather crowding all the staff at a time it is suggested a phased approach to return to workplace with a focus on essential service deliveries, key objective deliverables and addressing site-specific risks. The division or grouping of staffing levels for key and essential staff and non-essential support staff.

B. Framework

The suggested 5-point framework for a return to a safe workplace that includes a phased approach to return, preparation of workplaces with sanitation control of access, communications, staff travel and other areas. These are emphasized in detail as follows:

Approach: *At first, create a Crisis Management Team (CMT) or similar team for an organization locally, if the organization spread is local or Global Crisis Management Team if the organization spread is global.* If needed, the agricultural sector organizations need to revise the objectives, vision, mission and organization goals to suit the present situation. The modified plan of back to workplace should developed and circulated to the staff in advance to avoid confusion. The policy should clearly mention who will FIRST return to the work and why?

Prepare the staff mentally: The organization should thrive to prepare the staff mentally developing the protocols for safety, health, visitor and vendor movement, transport safety, establish thermal screening centres, primary health clinic at the entry point and communicate the staff the reasons for the new protocols.

Workplace preparation: Sanitation, thorough cleaning of the premises, air conditioned ducts, restricting the use of Central AC systems, reducing touch points, restricting the use of common areas, installing sanitizer points, detergents for hand wash, encourage staff for frequent hand wash, restricting the movement of staff, checking the electrical system and cleaning of split ACs. Disinfection of vehicles is also needed however, group transport need to be discouraged, provide masks, and other necessary things for safe work.

Communication: Fear of employees to back to workplace is major concern which needs to be addressed. Positive and regular communication will play major role in boosting the employee morale explaining the employee that the workplace is safe and virus free and employees can carry their duties without fear. However, decreasing the employee's density, employee schedule, traffic patterns will play a major role in effectively containing the infection spread.

Health and wellness: Employee health and psychological wellbeing is paramount to the any organization. Employee food plan, immunity booster, reducing employee occupational stress, stress management through coping mechanisms, virtual teaching of yoga, breathing exercises, educating staff about how to build the immunity. The other important aspect of the mitigating/containing the virus spread is social distancing among the staff. Electronic communication without human interaction, virtual meetings, and mobile communication are some of the procedures need to be followed by the staff

The framework (in figure 1) provides an overview of the 5-point framework which is dynamic. Beyond the framework, the detailed implementation plan for each workplace will need to consider the fact that each office lactation may be at a different stage of development vis-à-vis the pandemic, that the lightening of restrictions may vary in degree and modalities, and that many planning aspects will be subject to mandatory government directives and guidelines for back to work plan of the institute.

The plan and framework identify the following key prevention and staff safety measures:

- Access and control: Register the staff coming to the office
- Health and safety: Health screening and protocols for all staff like temperature monitor, cold and cough detection and response to illness and COVID19 positive protocols; and
- Use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) following the ICMR protocol guidance on the use of PPE

C. Phased approach

Returning to the physical workplace will involve a phased approach. During March 2020-Jun 30th, most of the agricultural sector staff have been working remotely with minimal and essential workers at workplace. Following the lifting of the Government-imposed lockdown, the removal of restricted site access, and the back-to business operations by civil and private services, there will be 2 PHASES as a prelude to being fully operational as an Institute, in its 'new normal' in response to Covid-19. The following phased approach suggested the agricultural sector employees. The phased approach modalities are presented in Table 1.

a. *The first phase Start to return to the workplace (minimum 6-8weeks):* A limited number of staff focused on key result areas will operate at the physical workplaces and the remaining staff will work from home or remote working wherever possible. It is expected about 30 per cent staff start working during the first phase in the workplace. Strict Preventive measures and protocols will be in place and implemented following the ICMR protocols

b. *'Semi/Partial' phase (minimum 10-12 weeks):* A partial and gradual return by more staff to the physical workplaces while staff who can continue to work from home effectively wherever possible remote working. It was expected about 50-60% of staff will come the workplace.

c. The Organization Management will decide the who will return to the workplace in physical include:

- Risk assessment of staff health, safety and wellbeing.
- Individual personal circumstances, preparedness and mode of transport (institute, public and private transport)
- Capacity to implement healthy and safety measures such as physical distancing and ventilation given the physical space.
- Nature of the job, in terms of its impact on critical resultant activities or on productivity.
- Extent to which directives from the local

TABLE I: PHASED APPROACH (SUGGESTED, BUT LIST IS NOT EXHAUSTIVE)

Issue	Lockdown/Restricted access – Delivering Key Result service	Start to Return to workplace (Must only for key result activities)	Semi/Partial phase (only for delivering key activities)
Organization	Organization is in closed phase with only essential staff required for key activities	Organization sites open with limited restrictions and Operations are guided by the ICMR Protocols	Organization sites open with restrictions for essential staff and Guided by ICMR protocols
Time frame	Government instructions /directives	Organization being operational with no adverse Government directive with minim 6-8-week period risk assessment and evolution	Organization will open will and run partially with 10-12-week period on site-specific issues with no Government adverse direction. Will assess the risk/ opportunities during this period
Staff/ Workforce	Essential staff on workplace, key result staff will work in limited number. Essential warrior services like Medical and Security services will function	Key result staff will work for essential delivery services with prior approval (Maximum 30% staff). Routine health screening will be done. Remaining staff will continue remote working	Maximum of 50% staff will work for key result areas apart from security, medical and essential service delivery. Routine health screening will be done. Remaining staff will continue remote working
Prevention Protocols	Masks required as per Directives; Thermal screening required; 2-3-meter physical distancing of work stations in fields offices and workshops. Entry health assurance and screening required; Access to hand sanitizers and cleaning protocols	Masks required as per Directives; Thermal screening required; 2-meter physical distancing of work stations, including in fields and workshops; Entry health assurance and screening required. Access to hand sanitizers and cleaning protocols	Masks required as per directives; Thermal screening required 2-3-meter physical distancing of workstations, in fields offices and workshops; Entry health assurance and screening required; Access to hand sanitizers and cleaning protocols
Meetings within the workplace/in-country meetings	Only virtual meetings	Virtual meetings and continue activities that would congregate staff with following protocols	Virtual meetings preferred Maximum of 8-10 participants with 2-3 feet social distancing in the large meeting room areas without central AC
Field operations	Essential field operations on the basis of approved Operational Plan only in country field operations	Limited field operations on the basis of approved Operational Plan and Skilled Labour only the requirement basis authorized for operations to limited and essential extent with clear prevention guidance and instructions in place. On-station field workers access set-up for hand sanitizers/washing devices	Field operations on the basis of approved Operational Plan and skilled labour only on the requirement basis
Transport	No organization transport will be run as the restrictions are on for all the transport	Suggest staff to use their own mode of transport preferably without group (single) Therefore, infection spread can be mitigated Transport Allowance to identified staff as applicable.	Reimburse the fuel
Travel	No travel is allowed. Only some essential field staff can visit on-farm field trials with following appropriate safety protocols	No work related local or overseas travel permitted. Only field staff Personal travel Government quarantine requirements need to be considered before travel	Only work related essential travel, approval process as per Institute travel guidance
Cafeteria	No provision of service except for essential staff on social distancing and take out basis. Dine-in residential essential staff.	Food service provision to be reconfigured to address and implement prevention protocol and to allow for staggered service; Only essential resident staff will be served dynein; all others take-out food. Limited lunch/dinner dine-in with protocols	Food service provision to be reconfigured to address and implement prevention protocols and staggered service. Only essential resident staff will be served dine-in; all others takeout food. Limited lunch/dinner dine-in with protocols.
Visitors	No Visitors Allowed	No visitors allowed Deliveries permitted; “No masks no entry”, thermal screening, hand washing protocols in place	By appointment only, no walk-ins Deliveries allowed. Health questionnaire and screening required as applicable “No mask, no entry”

D. Future Exit Plan

- As the Covid-1p Pandemic is uncertain there may be a re-exit plan if need to be.
- A Re-exit may be implemented by the Organization Management if needed. This may happen in the event of a new surge of COVID-19 infections across the country. ‘Full’ or ‘Partial’ re-exit will be implemented based on the following key triggers:
- Government directives and instructions and ICMR protocols;
- As per WHO the virus will stay for longer period than expected and based on the situations and government

directions appropriate action need to be taken by the respective organizations. The organization Re-exit triggers and plans need to be identified at site level to be managed by the respective organizations management teams This will allow for swiftly changing to post-lockdown plans, including a possible return to rigid lockdown restrictions.

- The Organization will maintain constant communication with the workforce, partners and others.
- Staff will be encouraged to enhance their knowledge through virtual trainings where institute will handle all the expenses. Prior approval of the peer is needed for

virtual learnings which will be useful to the organization`.

VII. CONCLUSION

The framework suggested, was developed considering the work culture, ethics, values of agricultural research sector and believe this framework can be tested and applied in other areas also if need be with necessary modification to suit the organization. The Covid-19 Pandemic will stay for some more time. The New Human Resources Paradigm should concentrate on developing policies to reduce the anxiety of employees, stakeholders with positive communication, and allocating some resources to maintain the disturbances of Covid-19 situation. There is an urgent need of realigning the policies and developing new company strategies to suit the situational needs with a perspective of leaving away what an organization has learnt with the past experiences as the Covid-19 is creating new normal situation. Developing and implementing the remote work/work from home policies for new normal situation with inclusion of health and wellbeing of the employees, reducing the in-office operations wherever possible, online transition procedures, are the need of the hour. The organization must do whatever possible for enhancing and mental and psychological health evening if costs some additional resources. The organizations cannot miracles to change the turnaround quickly to suit the organizational needs, however the objective of Human Resource Services is to develop new policies and paradigm that will assist the organization to adapt and accomplish the goals with quickly. Maintaining the employee psychological and physiological wellbeing, reducing the anxiety, providing job security, wherever possible remote working is must in the new HR policies which will benefit both the employee in reducing the commutation time, occupational stress and employer in reducing the operational costs such as infrastructure, maintenance, transport and other costs.

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Dr KDV Prasad Possess MS in Computer Application and MS (Software Systems) from Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Pilani Rajasthan, and MBA from IGNOU, New Delhi, PhD in Business Management from Kanpur University, PhD in Business Administration and Management from RTM Nagpur University. He is AIMA Accredited Management Teacher and Fellow in World HR Board, Carlton Institute of Management, New York.

He is working as Senior Officer (Strategic Management and Communication) at the International Crops Research Institute. He published over 50 publications in several national and international journals including Scopus and Web of Science Indexed Journals. His interests are strategic management, New HR paradigms, Survey Research using advanced statistics, etc.



Dr Mruthyanjaya Rao Mangipudi studied B.A. Management Studies from Andhra University; LL.B. from Osmania University; MA (Economics) from Andhra University; MBA (HRM) from Acharya Nagarjuna University; Post Graduate Diploma in HRD from NIHRD, Madras; PG Diploma in Computer Applications from NIC; and PhD in Business Management and Business Administration from RTM Nagpur University, Nagpur. He is an individual professional member

in AIMA, New Delhi.

He held various positions in Admin and HR in Judicial Authorities, and the corporate companies in the sectors such as Telecom, IT and ITES, and is presently working as Senior Manager (Corporate Support) at M/s. Karvy Stock Broking Limited (Banking & Finance), Hyderabad. He writes articles on HR Management, and also published 12 research papers in several national and international journals including Scopus, Web of Science Indexed Journals, etc. His interests are to create new models in the field of Management. His other areas interests are learning & development, performance management, organization behaviour, strategic management, conducting extensive research in the field of Business Management.