

Beware the unintended consequences of return-to-work ultimatums

Following the great office exodus of 2020, companies across SA are rapidly demanding a return to work of all employees. While there is a case to be made for getting all hands physically on deck again, leaders should be aware of the consequences of a top-down approach, says Advaita Naidoo, MD: Africa at Jack Hammer Global.



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“The USA and a number of other countries around the world are feeling the effects of the so-called Great Resignation – the phenomenon whereby vast swathes of employees simply quit their jobs instead of returning to the office. But the socioeconomic environment in South Africa means that while some people are indeed quitting, most don’t have the luxury to do so. That does not however mean that return-to-work mandates at short notice will not negatively impact workplaces here – it will just impact in different ways,” says Naidoo.

“In South Africa, companies face a real risk of the rapid call-back impacting on their bottom line. We are already fielding calls daily from highly sought-after professionals who are not prepared – through choice, changed circumstance, or both – to return to the way things were before Covid. So while employees might not actually resign, the reasons for them wanting to do so will remain and compound,” she says.



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13 Apr 2022



Pause, reflect and strategise

Companies might consider it their prerogative to mandate employees to return to work without delay, but they will be doing themselves a disservice if they don’t pause, reflect and strategise the way forward before doing so, says Naidoo.

“The reality is that after two years of pandemic fight-or-flight survival, employees are tired, demotivated, stressed, worn out, fearful of the future, straining because of the rising cost of living, and still dealing with the fallout from Covid’s impact on their lives and families, to name but a few of the issues facing most people at the moment.

“One only has to look at the real-life impact of the return-to-work ultimatums on social media forums on the part of desperate employees who simply can’t adapt and change their lives with short notice to understand that just because companies can make this demand, it doesn’t mean they should.”



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Three potential scenarios

There are essentially three scenarios awaiting companies following a top-down approach at this stage: losing people, developing a toxic workplace, and failing to attract good people down the line, Naidoo says.

“A tremendous amount of goodwill was built up during the pandemic, with companies facilitating work-from-home arrangements. The levels of teamwork and pulling together hit impressive highs despite the stress of the pandemic, and unprecedented levels of emotional support and ‘keep-in-touch’ initiatives ensured the mental wellbeing and cohesion of teams.

“For more than two years, companies were able to get the job done while employees continued to pull their weight and more from home. So, looking at it from the point of view of the employee who now must return to the office, it is not unreasonable for them to question why it is suddenly again necessary for everyone to be physically at their desks from sunrise until sunset. Adding resentment on top of existing stressors is a sure-fire way to turn the workplace toxic, leading to reduced productivity, absenteeism, loss of motivation and a negative work environment.”

Naidoo says it is essential for companies at this juncture to:

1. Communicate how the office is going to be a place of purpose going forward (as opposed to employees needing to be there... just because),
2. Allow sufficient time for employees to make new arrangements (because circumstances and logistics have changed for many people),
3. Consider hybrid options and continue to allow flexibility where possible and appropriate,
4. Consult sufficiently and substantially, and
5. Continue to provide support services and check-in sessions as was done during the pandemic.



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Need for real conversations

“Here and now, in the second quarter of 2022 as another shift is happening, it would be ludicrous to consider reverting to the leadership status quo of January 2020. Everyone who will be returning to the office has been changed by the past two years. For some, the impact was not majorly life-altering, despite them no doubt experiencing all the fears and emotions the world shared. For many others, however, their whole lives have been turned upside down.

“They would have made new arrangements for childcare, they may have been forced to move, perhaps they have divorced and now no longer have the support of a partner who can help out with admin and logistics. They may have lost loved ones, they may have lasting mental or physical health issues, and so forth. The variations are legion and impossible to comprehend unless real conversations are had before one-size-fits-all rules are introduced.”



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Attracting talent

Naidoo says that companies need to acknowledge that we are facing a period of transition, and that time for adjustment and consultation must be allowed in the interests of their employees, but also in the interest of the company.

“In addition to addressing the challenges around motivation for current employees, it is also necessary to consider the company’s ongoing ability to attract talent – many of whom now won’t look twice at a company that doesn’t consider the employee experience and which allows no flexibility. If a company isn’t considering the employee experience, they will not only strain or even fail now, but also in the future.”

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