Employee Mental Health Investment: A Business Imperative in the Post-Pandemic World

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Vivekananda Journal of Research
January - June 2022, Vol. 12, Issue 1, 93-113
ISSN 2319-8702(Print)
ISSN 2456-7574(Online)
Peer Reviewed Refereed Journal
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https://vips.edu/journal/

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the mental health issues faced by the employees as a result of disrupted business landscape post COVID-19 crisis. The study examines the business case of organization's investment in employees' mental well-being in the Covidised world and the emerging rescuer role played by HR in mitigating the impact of poor mental health of employees on the productivity. This research uses a qualitative method with normative research approach. The data for the study has been gathered from extensive literature review. A detailed analysis of various theoretical models of Occupational Health Psychology research serves as a base of the study. The initiatives undertaken by selected companies across the sectors in response to employees' mental health issues during pandemic have been studied.

A strong business case in favor of investment in employees' mental health has been brought forward in the study. An analysis of initiatives undertaken by corporate giants in response to pandemic reinforces the fact that workplace mental health investment is a business imperative. The study clearly shows that HR practitioners will have a significant role to play in devising the recovery strategies that boost employees' mental well-being while also ensuring a smooth employee re-entry to workplace post pandemic.

The study brings employee mental health issues at the forefront. It also brings Right to Disconnect back in spotlight. It asserts that the cost of

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not giving due attention to mental health issues far exceeds the cost of investment in employee mental health programs. Thus, it urges top management and HR managers to acknowledge mental health issues of the employees and chalk out recovery strategies that HR must implement to create mentally healthy workplaces.

Keywords: *Mental Health, COVID-19, Response, HR, Recovery*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 times we are living in are unprecedented. The imposed lockdowns, physical distancing measures, 24/7 media channels, divergent social media views, and a very volatile environment have never been experienced before, (Deloitte, 2020) It has almost been more than two and a half yearsyears already, and with the third wave approaching, it doesn't seem coming to an end in near future. The pandemic had hit the mankind in the most unimaginable forms and nations across the globe have been severely hit with the physical health issues. The work from home, school from home, and shop from home have been the new normal and digitalization has penetrated even more in all walks of life.

As regards business houses too, the pandemic has changed the rules of the game to a great extent. The business enterprises of all size, nature and kind have been affected considerably. The pandemic has led to structural changes in the business landscape with the sudden shift to remote working and work from home arrangements The changed scenario has thrown considerable challenges to all business establishments and all sectors- Hospitality, Aviation, Information Technology, FMCG and all others, have been strategizing to adapt to the new challenges of remote working employees and the growing digital way of doing things. While the physical health issues relating to pandemic have been much talked about, not much has been brought to table as regards mental health aspects of pandemic.

A new survey reported that 45 percent of Americans felt that the COVID-19 crisis is harming their mental health; while 19 percent felt that it is having a "major impac," (Coronavirus is harming the mental health, 2020). In case of business houses, this mental health of employees has contributed negatively on the productivity aspect. The remote working arrangements brings with them challenges from a mental health aspect which deserve due consideration. The companies need to respond to the feelings of isolation and loneliness amongst its employees. Even the best of employees have felt the brunt of too much of isolation, digitalization and remote localization. The issues of work concerns, financial concerns, and trust concerns have led to heightening stress levels and anxiety among

employees, (Ghosh, 2020). The changing landscape of physical to virtual work settings has been another huge challenge to employee morale and productivity.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

According to the World Health Organization, mental health is referred to a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community(WHO, 2018).

Mental health relates to being healthy on various fronts, be it cognitive, emotional or social.

Employee burnout has been labeled as a medical condition, noting that its cause is chronic workplace stress (*Burn-out an "*occupational phenomeno*, 2019).*

Different theories go on to explain the causes of occupational stress that happen to the individuals. These Occupational Health Psychology theories attempt to examine various processes through which stress travels to an individual and the organization. Organizations can manage to take adequate steps to mitigate the adverse effect of workplace stress on employees' productivity by developing an in-depth understanding of the stress theories.

Transactional theory of workplace stress emphasizes that the stress is the result of the transaction that occurs between employees and the environment which may drain their resources and thereby may adversely affect their physical and mental wellbeing .This transaction takes place in the form of two types of appraisals conducted by an employee. Primary appraisal involves appraisal of situations by the employee that surround him/her in terms of predicting the potential threats the future may pose before the employee, analysis of events which have already caused harm to the employees in his/her opinion and potential loss that he/she might have to face when dealing with some event. Under Secondary appraisals, an employee evaluates various alternative solutions that he/she can put in place to mitigate the threat posed by an event and analyses the coping strategies that he/she might adopt to manage the resultant stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

Interactional theories of stress asserts that stress is the byproduct of the stimulus offered by the environment and corresponding response from the individual. For instance, Person-environment fit theory of stress proposes that when the characteristics (like skills, abilities, value system) of the person performing the job are unaligned with the environment

(demands, values, supplies), it results in stress. The compatibility between the person's attributes and environmental attributes is of supreme importance for achieving optimum outcome, (Edwards and Cooper, 1990).

One of the famous model- Karasek's model (Job Demand -Control Theory) clearly brings out the interrelationship between the jobs demands, degree of autonomy at work and mental strain experienced by the employees. According to the model , the employees who are into demanding job profiles experience mental strain when they possess little control as to when and how they can do the work .As the work pressures increase beyond a point , the amount of control they possess over their work decreases and it results in mental strain .This theory also brings out that mental stress arises out of psychological demands on the part of the job like increase in workload, interpersonal conflicts , level of job security, conflicting role demands etc., (Karasek , 1979).

Effort -Reward Imbalance model has also emerged to be one of the influential research that states that when an individual is faced with the conditions of high job related effort with lower levels of control over intrinsic and extrinsic rewards results in adverse effect on his/her physical and mental health, (Siegrist, J. , 2016).

One another well accepted model of employee well-being- Job demands-resources model classifies working conditions into two broad categories namely job demands and job resources. The model states that strain happens to an employee on account of imbalance between his unique job demands and the number of resources he possesses to deal with them. There has been a positive association between job demands and the burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001). To meet the increasing job demands, employees need corresponding resources. These job resources can be classified as support from management, feedback from supervisors, opportunities for developing the skills and autonomy (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011) Employees experience burnout when faced with the situations of high job demands and low availability of resources to meet them.

Another well accepted psychopathology model - Diathesis-Stress Model asserts that it is the inherent vulnerability that increases or decreases one's probability of developing stressful feelings, thoughts and behavior if a certain stressful event has been encountered with (Bleuler M, 1963).

Psychological theories of stress highlight the role of psychological processes in stress generation. Allostatic Load Model of Stress posits that every individual's physical and psychological system is affected as and when he/she encounters a stressor. The model

explores the psychological processes that help individuals adapt to that stress. At the primary level, the individual experiences stress symptoms like shortness of breath, increased heart rate, inability to focus. If the stress persists, then the individual experiences secondary level stress symptoms like adopting a sedentary lifestyle, unhealthy eating habits etc. which may cause him greater harm in the long run. If the stressor still persists, the individuals may experience serious symptoms like they are at a risk of developing lifestyle diseases or clinical depression. This is the stage where any form of interventions have a very limited scope to reverse the situation, (McEwen & Stellar, 1993).

Stress is detrimental to employee productivity. There is negative relationship between stress and job performance .Higher degree of stress is being experienced by the employees when there is low concern exhibited by management to resolve the underlying cause which subsequently results in reduced employee productivity, erosion of organizational reputation and attrition of highly skilled employees (Imtiaz & Ahmad, 2009) .Workload pressures and stress obstructs effective job performance on the part of the employees (Okeke et al., 2016). Employees experience stress due to increased job demands , lower degree of support from supervisors and colleagues , and changes in work role , uncertainties induced by changed environment resulting from restructuring and redundancies , changing nature of working without any communication which affects the employee productivity adversely (Mawanza, 2017). Employees experiencing burnout, depersonalization, emotional fatigue, reduced sense of personal achievement exhibit reduced performance on job (Mirkamal et al, 2019).

Workplace is said to be one of the most important environmental factors with the potential to bring stress to the employees. .Even before the onset of the pandemic, employee stress and burnout had been the point of concern for the HR practitioners. However, with the pandemic setting in, mental health issues among the employees and corresponding stress levels have been reaching staggering levels. The environmental changes happening at the macro level have been affecting the employees' life substantially on various levels. Be it the lockdown impositions, closure of schools or vaccination policy of the governments across the world to contain the pandemic, the employees have been on the receiving end of everything. On the economic front, there has been growing uncertainty around the survival of various businesses which has given chills to the employees .The large-scale layoffs, closure, mergers and restructuring of various establishments, hiring freeze announced by various corporations has further added to their woes. Pandemic has created devastating impact on the social front too by changing the way people socialize i.e. shifting social interactions to virtual interactions. These prolonged periods of social isolation have pushed many towards anxiety and depression.

The COVID -19 infections affecting the near and dear ones have been like adding fuel to the fire. The employees have been dealing with an additional workload of taking care of children who have been at home due to closure of schools and household chores due to unavailability of house-helps. All in all, social distancing protocols have ensured protection of physical health of the population but is taking a severe toll on mental health. Technology has emerged as a rescuer for everyone during the pandemic. Be it the software to develop and disseminate the vaccines , apps for implementing the vaccination programs or apps for virtual meeting platforms, technology has been at the forefront of dealing with the pandemic. However, the new set of technical skill demands on the part of the employees to use this technology has acted as a major source of stress to many. From the micro level perspective, workplace changes like Work from Home, fear of layoffs, virtual meetings, increased job demands, limited career development opportunities in the environment uncertainties have been causing strain to the employees across the world.

MENTAL HEALTH - A BUSINESS ISSUE

Mental health is no longer a personal wellness issue but has become an important business metric. The average return on investment on mental health comes to **£5 for every £1 spent (**Deloitte, 2020).

Companies are continuously increasing their investment in employee's mental health due to numerous business advantages it offers.

Mental health issues among employees cost dearly to the employers. The indirect costs involve costs related to employee absenteeism, turnover and presentism. As per an estimate, total annual cost incurred by businesses is £45bn, of which £7bn accounts to cost of employee absence , £27bn – £29bn accrues due to presentism costs i.e. when employee attends the job while unwell thereby low on productivity and £9bn is attributed to staff turnover.(Deloitte , 2020) The direct costs of poor mental health involves the healthcare costs and costs associated with income support .In Canada , the economic cost due to mental health amounts to CA$50 billion per year of which largest proportions are accrued to direct costs (Mental Health Commission of Canada,2012).

Ample evidence exists to show the positive impact of investing in employee mental health on the business. The stock performance of companies on the S&P 500 Index having high health and wellness scores appreciated by 235 percent as against overall appreciation of 159 percent over a period of 6 years (Deloitte, 2019).

Organizations that tend to invest in employee well-being earn a positive reputation as an employer of choice in the eyes of candidates .This helps organization to win the talent war by being able to attract the best of the talent. For instance, through an initiative named "Bacardi Assist", Bacardi India extended support to its employees by conducting free confidential counselling sessions on a range of themes like mental health, parenting etc. Additionally, the company also introduced Work from Home tips on a weekly basis and fitness sessions virtually to ensure employee well-being during the period of prolonged nationwide lockdown. Accordingly, the company's efforts were highly appreciated by its employees which helped Bacardi achieve high scores across various categories like credibility, respect for people, camaraderie in Great Place to Work Trust Index Survey (Bacardi Limited, 2020).

Employee experience is very critical to any company's bottom line because it is the happy employees who create happy customers. Employees who feel a strong sense of belongingness, achievement and vigor have been seen exhibiting superior performance at work and their contribution often exceeds expected performance. Thus employee experience becomes all the more important during a crisis when every employee experiences challenges on multiple fronts (IBM, 2016). Also it is a well-known fact that a healthy workforce is known to have a highly positive impact on organization's productivity. Employee engagement and well-being are said to have reciprocal relationship. The employees burnout levels are significantly reduced as their engagement levels at work increase and thereby the resultant productivity too (Gallup, 2021). Mental health initiatives are said to improve employee engagement levels that's why many corporations launched engagement initiatives around mental well-being of the employees. For instance, a virtual engagement programme was conducted by Hindustan Coca Cola Beverages aimed at improving the mental and physical well-being of employees by involving them as well as their family members virtually ("How companies are", 2020).

Mental health initiatives at work place create positive employee experience thereby reducing the probability of voluntary turnover amongst High Potential candidates in the organizations. This further results in reduction of recruitment, onboarding and training costs for the companies.

Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors are assuming an increasingly important role for the investors while mental health at work is also considered important for business success. Thus there is a constant pressure on the organizations to stick to ESG criteria which also deals with well-being and safety at the workplace.

The smart organizations are smart enough to invest a good deal in mental health

programs of its employees. This is because the cost of not doing much by employees on account of mental issues far outweigh the corresponding cost of investing in well-being programs for employees. (Deloitte Insights, 2019)

INDUSTRY RESPONSE TO COVID -19 PANDEMIC

It is well accepted fact that demands of the workplace have a huge impact on mental health of employees. The investment in mental health care programs can help the companies big way by not just making a positive impact on productivity but also in placing and projecting itself as one with commitment to all stakeholders- employees, customers and society at large.

The Big 4's Response

Earnest & Young

In response to COVID-19, the company had launched an initiative for employee health and well-being called "Better You" in addition to its already existing Employee Assistance and work/life Program, EY Assist. EY has also offered eight-week mindfulness courses, group counselling sessions with individual therapy facility, drop-in sessions on demand, trained mindfulness champions to ensure sound mental health of its employees (A COVID-19 Response Story: EY, 2021).

PricewaterhouseCoopers

PwC's wellness initiative titled "Be Well, Work Well" is directed towards physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being of its employees. To remove stigma associated with mental health and encourage conversations around it , the company launched e learning series .Through a mental health app, the company provides employees 24/7 free access to connect to therapist. The employees at PwC are encouraged to opt for blockout Fridays after 12.00PM so that they can use this time block to do anything they feel like doing in uninterrupted manner (PwC: Prioritizing Employees' Mental Health and Well-Being, 2020).

KPMG

The company runs COVID -19 pulse surveys thereby encouraging the employees to share their experiences and also speak about the support needed by them in this hour of crisis. Adoption of an expanded listening strategy helped the company to understand about the anxieties that the employees were facing during the pandemic. Accordingly, a World mental health Summit was organized by the company in September 2020, which was attended by

6000 people across more than 70 nations wherein personal stories were shared by employees and external mental health advocates and experts discussed about the coping strategies. Company additionally has an employee assistance program in place to offer mental health and wellbeing support to the employees (Health & well-being, 2021).

Deloitte

In order to address the stigma associated with mental health, Deloitte has started their "This is me" campaign. (Deloitte, This is Me, 2019) is the campaign is directed towards reducing the stigma around mental health at work by providing an opportunity to employees to have open sharing with employees. They also organize Mental Health awareness Week. It also compiles videos of people dealing with poor mental health which is a platform for telling their story which make it easier for others to talk about mental health.

To help their teams to deal with these turbulent times effectively, Deloitte has created a special guide. Which acts as a ready reckoner on the ways to nurture mental resilience among employees, (Deloitte, 2019).

Information Technology (IT) Sector Response

Tata Consultancy Services (TCS)

As part of its mission to ensure all no one in the company feels left out in the company and employees are able to counter mental health challenges, it has initiated- TCS *Cares*. TCS Cares is a program that promotes awareness, understanding, and acceptance around mental health and provides support through qualified counselors and self-help resources. The program includes assessments, workshops, podcasts, webinars, blog and personal counselling to advance promote mental health. It also prepares senior executives on new ways of managing teams' mental wellbeing for improved productivity (Chandran, 2020).

Microsoft

Ever since the onset of pandemic, Microsoft has offered its employees the option of work from home, to those who aren't comfortable making it to office physically. In order to cater to the needs of employees with parenting responsibilities, it has offered additional 60 business days leave with 100 % pay protection. (Douglas, 2020) the financial concerns have been a big source of stress to employees. Microsoft has also declared bonuses this year, pandemic notwithstanding. It is one of the few companies to make investments even in these uncertain times.

Offering tips to employees on setting up office at home, organizing fitness programs, conducting webinars on dealing with isolation, helping employees to purchase ergonomic office equipment are some of the other initiatives taken by Microsoft. (Douglas, 2020) Even before the pandemic, it had been giving due consideration to mental wellness. It provides support to its employees children experiencing behavioral challenges. The behavioral experts also counsel parents collaborate with their children during these turbulent times.

With a view to address employee mental well-being, Microsoft also launched "Be Well" platform. This helps the employees in maintaining a good physical health and mental state of mind, ensures decent employee engagement and gives a sense of being cared to the employees. "Pandemic School Closure Childcare Leave" is another noteworthy initiatives taken by Microsoft.

Microsoft also conveys variety of themes relating to mental well-being of its employees on its "*Best of Mental Health*" page (Microsoft*, The Microsoft Way)***.*** It is a repository that covers various Ted talks and much needed training programs on mental aspect.

Accenture

Accenture has partnered with *Beyond Blue* to fund a national solution for customized response to the demand for mental health services. (Comfort in Crisis.., 2020) .*Beyond Blue*, is a leading Australian mental health organization has really come up well to offer great support in these turbulent times. It provides 24/7 digitally supported counselling services. It addresses the issues of mental health of all categories- children. Young people, men and women, older people, pregnancy and early parenthood, aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people, LGBTI, multicultural people and others. (Beyond Blue, web) Beyond blue has been witnessing a huge spike in calls related to pandemic concerns. Accenture, has been a transformation partner for Beyond Blue for more than a year.

The new Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service offers free mental health information, phone and web chat-based counseling (lower- and medium-intensity counseling for those who need extra assistance), and referrals to other organizations— 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The service, connects people to a variety of digital self-help information, tools and wellbeing advice, based on their need. **(**Comfort in Crisis…, 2020

Walmart Global Tech

A remote counselling service named Access to Happy Minds was offered by Walmart Global Tech India to help employees deal with stress, anxiety and mental health issues .It has

also provided its employees access to an app - Global Thrive which offers scientific solutions to avoid employee burnouts. The company has been organizing webinars and offering self-paced e learning modules around the issues connected to mental health (World Mental Health Day: How Corporates are Ensuring the Mental Wellbeing of their Employees, 2020).

FMCG Sector Response

Pepsi India launched an initiative called Pepfit to boost the mental health of its employees. As a part of the initiative, PepsiCo organized an employee counselling session of experts with a view to break the stigma around mental health among its employees. To provide employees an opportunity to rejuvenate themselves, PepsiCo also developed self-care spaces for them. ("How brands are", 2021).

Reckitt India, in order to destigmatize mental health issues faced by employees during pandemic, had organized a series of podcasts where Global Executive Committee members shared their own experiences with the employees. The company also offered meditation to help them deal with stress through an app called Headspace .to help employees working from home, resources on team engagement, time management were shared by company's remote working hub regularly. The company has launched various activities related to stress management and mental well-being under "liveyourbest" umbrella to further extend support to its employees. In Mexico, United States, India and the United Kingdom, Reckitt has introduced a social well-being platform to help employees with achieving mental well-being (Reckitt, 2020).

Hospitality Sector Response

At the onset of the pandemic, Hyatt collaborated with Weill Cornell Department of Medicine for the development of a mental well-being assessment tool called Hyatt Well-Check. This tool was developed with a view to help Hyatt employees understand the status of their mental well-being and to guide them towards the resources. Additionally Hyatt also offers its employees complimentary Headspace subscription to help them achieve mental well-being ("Hyatt named to 2021 Fortune "100 Best Companies to Work for" List", 2021).

To encourage employees to get vaccinated during pandemic so that they feel safe, Marriott introduced a vaccination care program which rewards employee's equivalent with four hours pay once they complete their vaccinations. Additionally, the company already has a wellness program called TakeCare Program which was launched in 2010. TakeCare program include holistic programs covering not only physical health but also mental and emotional health .The company provides well designated relaxation space to all its employees at work

(Marriott International Announces Expanded Wellbeing Certification Program, 2019).

The Right to Disconnect: Time has come

In the age of information, communication and connection, all times availability is a must for employees. With the advent of smart phones, there is no end to the work related communications throughout the day. The constant monitoring of emails can create a lot of anxiety (Becker, 2019). According to a survey done in 2019, almost 75% of office workers in United States are monitoring their emails even during evenings and weekends. The smartphones have been in use constantly all times more so while at home (U.S. frequency checking, Statista-2021) In fact, there have been case where few companies also had the practice of rewarding an employee who engages in official communications even during weekends as Star Employee. The work from home arrangement during the global pandemic has brought the right to disconnect back to focus. The right to disconnect refers to the worker's right to disengage from work and avoid work-related communications on emails, WhatsApp's and others modes.

More than 50% of UK home workers surveyed during the first COVID-19 lockdown said they experienced dismal work-life balance during work from home. (World Economic Forum, 2021). The WFH scenario has actually forced workers into longer working hours than Work from office (WFO (Flexible jobs can make..., 2019)

The digital world has pushed the employees into an always available mode has considerably blurred the work life and home life balance. This has turned into a perfect recipe for ever increasing mental health issues.

The lawmakers at many European countries have backed the workers right to disconnect. France has already taken the lead in putting up a law in place in recognition of workers RTD. RTD has already found legal clothing in France, (Right to Disconnect, 2019). . The serious effect on mental well-being of employees has prompted German government to have a relook at legal framework. (Elliott, 2020) Greece, Ireland and Spain too have been considering a welfare legal regime in response to mental side of global pandemic. (World Economic Forum, 2021)

The organizations need to build a "Talk it out openly" culture. This is the only way to reduce the stigma associate Thus, conversations about mental health issues faced by employees will be the first good step to take the issue head on.

Another critical aspect with respect to talking out mental issues is the proper

shaping of conversation. Words carry great power. The use of empathetic and supportive language at all levels of the establishment can solve a lot of issues automatically. The sick leaves for such reasons can be renamed as 'wellness' leaves. These little changes will go a long way in building up a health culture in the organization. A recent study has revealed that the pandemic has had huge impact on employees with 94% reporting to be stressed (Laker, 2021).

Instilling robust peer-to-peer relationships is though not directly related to issues of mental health but it can contribute immensely to well-being of an employee and affect productivity. Having friends at workplace can improve employee's productivity to a great extent. Thus, cooperation and compassion in the organization makes lot of business sense as well.

Netflix gives its employees great freedom with unlimited vacation leaves and customized flexi work arrangements. (Netflix's Unlimited Vacation Policy.., 2020) Thus, giving workers autonomy can work wonders as well in creating a spirited workforce. The companies can on an experiment basis can initiate measures like- no official calls after office hours, no emails during weekends etc. These can be great little steps towards creating an empathetic and caring team culture which in turn advances employee well-being (How to Handle Mental Health Issues, ETHRWorld, 2020).

Considering the data above, it is high time for companies to appreciate that first need to win in the workplace to win in the marketplace (KMPG, Cutting through Crisis, 2020).

HR In "Rescuer's Role"- Recovery Strategies

The HR need to work out strategies to ensure more social connect among team members in the organization. The need is to push for 'water –cooler' conversations to replicate the workplace of the normal times. One way could be having some time (5-10 min) at the start as warm up time for sharing something personal among team members. There can also be virtual communities being established which will help greatly in building up the connect-feel among people sharing a common neighborhood (Catia Davim, 2020).

This is the age of information overload- too many texts, too much social media connection and too many news flash updates. Many times, this has been a big source of anxiety among people. Moreover, this is mostly unverified information which lacks sound credentials. Creating timely authentic information channels of information can be the organizational response to this issue. Along similar lines, the management can also share the business continuity plans with employees to take them in confidence. The business

leaders also need to be caring, considerate and compassionate towards people. The family responsibilities may vary-some may have little kids to manage, old age parents to support etc. The personal lives were hitherto outside the workplace dynamics but the pandemic has necessitated these to be given due weight by the employers.

One of the often overlooked aspects of creating a well-being culture in the organization is the lack of lead by example narrative. It is critical for the senior executives and officers of the company to themselves invest in their own mental well-being by disconnecting themselves from work intermittently (Catia Davim, 2020).

The current times we all are navigating are unprecedented. Cooperation and Co-existence are the buzzwords to deal with challenging times. The business leaders need to build strong trust with the employees. They need to acknowledge the uncertainty and ensure proper and timely information sharing with the employees.

The management must also appraise the employees about the mental health support services available online such as Beyond Blue, Black Dog Institute, headspace, to name a few.

Once normalcy returns, the world will surely be a different place, with the workplace being no exception either. The change has already been felt across with adaptation being the key. In Spain, communities have partaken in group fitness classes being hosted on balconies; in Italy villages are coming together to make music from their windows. Australia has seen the entire workforces being transitioned between industries across organizations (Catia Davim, 2020).

HR‘s role in managing “Return to Office Anxiety”

As the vaccine rollouts have been reaching a larger chunk of population , more employers have initiated employee transition back to office .This move of employers is receiving mixed response from the employees .This development has come with its own baggage of stress to the employees who have spent more than a year in social isolation . two third of employees are worried about the idea of returning to their workplace with instances of people experiencing depression, post traumatic, stress disorder, stress on rise again (“Mental Health Index - Total Brain”, 2021).

It took employees good amount of time to develop their routines around Work from Home settings. Now going back to office will require them to change their routine again which bothers them. Another reason for return to office anxiety is related to work life balance.

The future status of their home life makes them anxious about returning to office.

HR practitioners need to take note of these employee concerns to chalk out a full proof plan to facilitate smooth transition to Work from Office. HR's return to workplace plan must touch upon multiple facets of employee work life.

Employees need to feel safe as well as actually be safe in the workplace .This feeling of being safe at the workplace can be achieved by transparently communicating about safety measures at the workplace with the employees.

Employees need to be made aware about the contingency plans in case the situations change and there is a new surge in Coronavirus. This will reduce the sense of uncertainty amongst the employees and thereby their stress levels too.

Employees who are uncomfortable to return back to office should not be forced to do so. HR must try to comfort them about returning and be ready to readjust the re-entry plan if the situation demands .Also HR must be open to shift to re exit plan if employees who returned back to office have started feeling unsafe.

Employees' anxiety must be acknowledged. Employees may have their own set of stressors like childcare issues, elderly care responsibilities, commutation problems etc. which may be reducing their productivity at work. There should be some mechanism in place to encourage the employees to talk about these stressors with their superiors and at the same time superiors must be equipped to help their employees with coping strategies.

CONCLUSION

Given the age of disruptions leading to "New Business Normal," employee mental health issues are a phenomenon, business will be facing time and again. The study reconfirms the applicability and relevance of Occupational Health Psychology theories even today, pointing out the fact that any disturbance in environmental variables will put strain on the mental health of the employees .The growing investment in employee mental health by business giants goes on to establish a strong business case for the same . When the business environment is undergoing severe turbulence, HR's role has emerged to be that of a "Rescuer" i.e. one who protects from some crisis. Organizations and employees have been hit hard mentally and physically with COVID-19 crisis. HR must devise and implement suitable recovery strategies to re-establish healthy workplaces for the organizations and individuals to flourish well .The shift from reactive approach to proactive approach towards handling

mental health issues at work can go a long way in preventing the crisis from happening and thereby helping pave the way ahead to continued organizational growth in the age of disruptions.

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