

COVID 19: Responses for Talent Managers in Utility Companies **(with special considerations to Gender & Inclusion)**

Context

In these unprecedented times, leaders face the challenging role of managing the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the work and the employees. These times require strong leadership along with empathy, patience, kindness, and flexibility. They also require new ways of managing the work to not only ensure business continuity but to also put the teams in suitable work conditions and improve their psychologic wellbeing. This is even more challenging for utility companies given that they are expected to continue to deliver critical services to the population.

This is not a supply crisis of lack of water or physical failure of the infrastructures. It is a human resource crisis. Therefore, in a very short time, utilities must adapt to new forms of work and organization in order to minimize downtime risks and ensure the quality of water and sanitation services while ensuring the safety of workers.

In this context, it is extremely important to pay special attention to the staff groups who may be more adversely impacted by the situation, more specifically, female employees. As the natural caregivers, women may carry a higher burden of the uncertainties and will have to look for options to alleviate the impacts of the crisis on their children, parents, and family overall. For instance, if schools are closed, they are usually expected to find an appropriate childcare option or to stay home regardless of their work situation. If family members are sick, they would be expected to take care of them. Women also tend to be on the lower end of the career ladder or in less technical/core positions which may make them more vulnerable to job losses. Their particular situation should be kept in mind in designing a crisis management response in the utility sector and beyond.

Proposed Responses

1. Need for a special crisis management body

- It is important for the organization to put in place a COVID-19 Task Force in charge of analyzing the situation, proposing a customized crisis management plan, and preparing regular communication materials for business leaders. The task force should be empowered to make recommendations quickly and without too many consultations given the urgency of the situation. The team should include water utility experts, HR and health experts if relevant, some business leaders, staff representatives and if relevant, finance and communication professionals. To ensure that women's specific concerns are addressed, it is critical that the team includes a good number of female employees.
- This team should keep abreast of what is happening in the country in reference to the crisis to be able to share it with staff. They should also put in place mechanisms in reference to the health and safety measures in the office and the organization of the work on the basis of the country level decisions (confinement, social distancing...).

2. Protection of employees to ensure they can continue to provide essential services¹

- At the company level, leaders should first develop a business impact analysis to determine the potential effects on the workforce in case of increased absenteeism generated by a pandemic flu event. Because utilities are providers of essential services to the population, they will have to implement a wisely segmented approach to workforce management, considering activities' criticality and risk of exposure to the epidemic. Therefore, this business impact analysis must include the identification of critical operations that must not stop to ensure the continuity of water supply as well as the necessary critical staff and eventual need to readjust workers roles and working conditions.
- Second, companies should review their comprehensive emergency management plan to ensure its suitability in the current context. It is inevitable to adapt and complement the existing emergency plans, as the present crisis has no precedents.
- Third, the company should develop Pandemic Flu family planning guidelines and distribute them to all employees.
- Finally, the company should prepare an isolation area with the necessary conditions, to be used by any staff that reports symptoms as well as emergency quarters for critical staff (to include bedding, personal hygiene items, meals in stock, inventory of all First Aid Kits and medical supplies) and close all non-essential facilities such as fitness centers, lunchrooms, and other high congregation areas.
- At the employee level, employees should be provided with protective equipment as well as supplies to encourage healthy habits in the workplace, including tissues, soap, and alcohol-based hand cleaners. They should be encouraged to practice respiratory etiquette, be alert to the relevant symptoms and stay home in case of flu suspects. They should also clean commonly touched surfaces such as workstations, countertops, doorknobs, and light switches.
- For those segments of employees for whom remote work is possible, this is one of the most adequate measures to protect the staff and control the spread of the COVID pandemic. Effective remote work implies daily communication routines and virtual meetings. In this COVID-19 crisis, it is frequent to find women in remote work with children at home. Therefore, in these situations' leaders should consider some level of flexibility in women daily working agendas in order to cope with existing "at-home" constrains.
- One of the standard emergency measures to protect staff from potential COVID-19 infection is to identify workers who, due to their activities, may have a higher risk of getting infected. In some contexts, it is frequent to have women doing daily cleaning of the offices and related facilities. These tasks induce higher risk of infection since cleaning workers touch and deal with multiple surfaces and common waste.

• ¹ Webinar on "Utility Actions to Sustain Operations During COVID-19" by the American Water Works Association (AWWA), March 20.

Furthermore, during the emergency response, cleaning and disinfection of common and social areas, including canteens and changing rooms must be reinforced and temporary handwashing points must be maintained in proper conditions. These measures will involve additional time allocation for the cleaning teams. These workers must have suitable PPE and hygiene kits as well as quick training for protection and hygiene measures. As for other similar cases in the organization, payment of additional working hours should be considered.

- All measures regarding team's protection and welfare of the utility personnel defined by the top management must be applied, regardless of gender. Special compensation measures should be considered for women that need to give assistance to children or dependent elderly family members.

3. The importance of regular and transparent communication

- A communication plan needs to be developed to not only confirm that relevant health and safety measures have been put in place (as per above) to ensure staff's protection but also to clarify that the HR policies and financial measures have been developed to support staff. A communication plan is also an important tool to help reduce emotional distress caused by the uncertainty that arises from this COVID-19 epidemic, such as anxiety, fears, demotivation, and depression. To be effective, the communication plan must be based on good and accurate information. Key-information must be reviewed on a periodic basis, repeated, and reinforced in the communication actions.
- The plan should provide responses to staff's most common questions: What does this mean for me? How do I cope during this period and how will it affect my job? What is the top management doing to protect me?
- The plan should also include a phone tree to ensure constant contact with staff and the use of WhatsApp groups or similar platforms to facilitate the communication between teams and coordinators. To establish simple routines such as daily virtual meeting of at least 30 minutes between coordinators and teams that are working remotely from home is a good measure to maintain group spirit and reduce anxiety.
- The communication should be clear, simple, comprehensive, and regular. A good approach is to develop a written document with the decisions made and answers to common questions and make sure all the decision makers have a copy so they can share the same messages with staff. Leaders will lose credibility if different responses are provided since this would increase the anxiety level of the staff. All the leaders in the business should walk the talk and convey the same messages. Staff should feel that the director (leader) is present, visible, and available at any time for questions or clarifications.
- The communication plan should include the concerns that may be specific to women. For instance, if there is the need to provide family support due to national emergency decisions (e.g. closure of schools and nurseries), the company must find adequate solutions to ensure the balance between family and work. This is of major importance to minimize the risk of growing anxiety and stress among female staff.

- In addition to including female colleagues in the crisis management team, it will be a good idea to organize separate meetings with them to hear them out and capture their views.

4. Need for flexible and creative solutions for women

- On the basis of the feedback collected from female colleagues, the business should develop or enforce flexible work practices such as telecommuting, compressed work schedule, or paid leave. If their current position does not allow working away from the office (e.g. a woman working as a chemist in a lab), female colleagues could be allowed to adjust their work schedule or take on a special project temporarily if they are interested. If none of these options works, they may be allowed to take annual leave, if possible. In determining the essential personnel to maintain operations, it is important to keep in mind women's special situation before including them in the pool. Regardless of the flexible option women decide to take, it should not have a negative impact on their career.
- Their anxiety level may be higher given their concerns about their children and family, so it is critical that they be given the opportunity to share their concerns and worries. In addition to ensuring that their supervisor talks to them, HR and members of the crisis response team should also inquire about their concerns and find ways to accommodate them, as needed. Staff are always best placed to indicate what they need, no one should guess or decide on their behalf and each case is different.
- Another type of concern could be related to the security of their job. As part of the communication plan, it is important to clarify that the flexible work options are put in place to ensure business continuity, so jobs are safe. If this is not the case, staff should be informed and be told about their rights and options if they were to be let go.
- Financial measures may be considered to ensure business continuity and alleviate the burden of the crisis on staff. In some countries, there is low connectivity so companies can invest in improving home technology to provide internet for employees to work from home. A transportation premium may also be needed to encourage the use of taxis or carpooling in order to limit the use of public transportation.
- If the company includes pregnant or breastfeeding women, it is imperative to allow them to work from home given the danger they could face by being exposed to the virus.

5. Leading with empathy, transparency, and authenticity and by going back to the basics

- Gallup has studied global citizens' worries, fears and confidence during nearly every major crisis of the past eight decades -- including the Great Depression, Pearl Harbor and World War II, the Kennedy assassination, upheavals and riots in the 1960s, 9/11, the 2008 global financial crash, and now the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that during high-stress times, employees are more engaged when managers go back to the basics of clarifying expectations, reviewing

material and equipment needs, and readjusting roles. Further, each employee needs to be reminded of how they fit into the bigger picture of the organization -- its mission and purpose².

- The behavior of the leader is also equally important. S/he should be present and in constant contact with the staff. In communicating at large or individually, s/he needs to be firm (to convey that this is a serious matter), consistent (similar tone and messages all along), reassuring and positive (to clarify that the company will support employees) and authentic (to reiterate that they believe in the special measures they took for employees at large because they make business sense). For utilities that may have, typically about 50% of the staff in remote work and other 50% working on-site and at the facilities, it is even more critical for the leader to be transparent and explain why some colleagues may work from home while others need to maintain working at the facilities with higher levels of social contact and therefore higher risk of getting sick.
- Given that the company may not have all the solutions, it is important to be transparent with staff and share what is possible and what is not. Sometimes, what matters is to be heard and understood even if there is no solution.
- The supervisor or manager is the key conduit, responsible for translating the organization's response to COVID-19 for each employee. Only the direct manager can know each employee's situation, keep them informed, and adjust expectations, coaching and accountability to inspire high performance³. Given the critical role of the line managers, the top leader and HR should ensure that all the managers and team leaders demonstrate empathy and care towards staff and, as mentioned above, that they communicate the same messages. They need to be present, caring and convey the same reassuring messages to ensure staff's protection, wellbeing, and psychological safety.
- Directors and managers are human beings and will face the same concerns and worries as their employees, so it is important that they take care of themselves. They should not hesitate to take the time to reflect on how they feel and accept that these are uncertain times and they can feel doubts and lack of confidence in the next steps. Once they are mentally prepared, they will feel more at ease with their staff. They should also seek help as needed.

• ² & ³ GALLUP WORKPLACE, MARCH 23, 2020: COVID-19: What Employees Need from Leaders Right Now. By Jim Harter.