

Balancing economics with empathy



welcome to brighter

A Guide for Organizations to help employees cope with social isolation

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COVID-19 has forced nations around the globe to take unprecedented measures, sanctioning countrywide lockdowns, asking citizens to stay indoors for a prolonged period (in most cases, 21 days). Most of the avenues of information have addressed the economic, social, and physical impact of the sanction. However, very few have highlighted the psychological impact of a nationwide lockdown on the workforce.

As we witness a surreal situation, with at least 20% of the global population under the coronavirus lockdown, challenges for both individuals and organizations to navigate through this period of uncertainty grow multifold.

Apart from focusing on the apparent economic impact of this unfolding crisis, it is now critical for organizations to understand the psychological impact of social distancing on their employees and find meaningful ways to help them navigate through it.

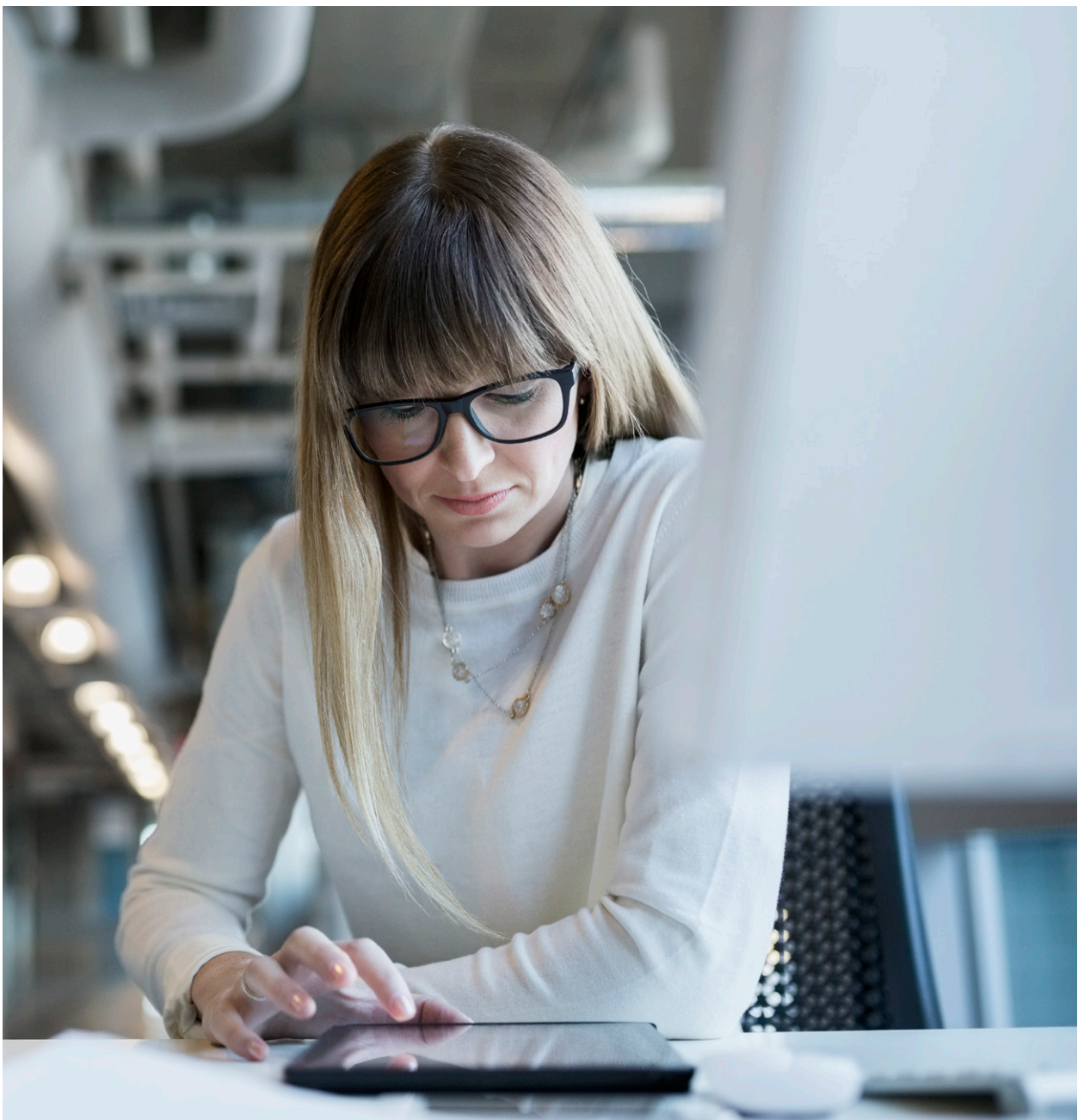
Research suggests that balancing economics with empathy should be the ideal standpoint taken by organizations to tide over these turbulent times, ensuring the continuity of businesses.

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To be empathetic, however, one first needs to understand the impact of this adversity on employees' mental health. How does a 21-day lockdown impact the human spirit? Does it give rise to employee anxiety and thus affect employee efficiency? How do organizations overcome it and steer towards ensuring employee productivity?

Psychologists suggest that when a person, or a group, is stuck at an isolated location or in confined quarters for an extended period, they are most likely to experience irritability or restlessness. This is referred to as 'Cabin Fever.'

To understand what most of us are already experiencing or may experience in the coming days, we need to understand the definition of cabin fever. The term originated in the colder states of the northern hemisphere, like Canada and Alaska, where people confined to their solitary cabins during the winters exhibited an array of mental health problems (Rosenblatt, Anderson, & Johnson, 1983). Similar symptoms were then noticed in people who undertook polar expeditions and these have been lately associated with isolation and confinement. Even though the term originated as folklore, the associated mental health problems are very much empirical. Therefore, the need to acknowledge and recognize them is well-founded.



As the initially intended one week of work from home extends to two weeks, and then stretches to 21 days of absolute lockdown, nobody is sure of what is in store for them. In this scenario, the longer the employees stay confined to their homes, the higher is the probability of them becoming more irritable and prone to emotional distress. The most commonly experienced effects might be:

- Restlessness

- Boredom

- Fatigue

- Melancholy

- Trouble in concentrating

- Lack of patience

- Frequent napping

- Decreased motivation

Some people may also experience frustration and difficulty in waking up. In a few cases, it might lead to depression or insomnia. Such symptoms are commonly associated with loss of routine and a growing sense of isolation (Brooks et al., 2020). Apart from signs of cabin fever and psychological distress, confinement and seclusion have also been associated with increased household tension among families (Read, 2013, Wang, Zhang, Zhao, Zhang, & Jiang, 2020)

Employees, who in these times, have to be the primary caretaker of an infant, sick or elderly, might get more impacted than others. Individuals in the younger age bracket (16–24 years), with lower levels of formal educational qualifications, having one child as opposed to none, or having a history of psychiatric illness, are more prone to stress than others (Jeong et al., 2016; Taylor, Agho, Stevens, & Raphael, 2008). Further, employees who are living alone or are not technologically advanced may undergo more distress than the usual.

What organizations must understand is that employees are humans first. To expect them to be at the top of their game amidst the disruption is nothing short of naïve. It is also essential to understand that individual differences in personality and the nature of work may also play a role in how this period of uncertainty impacts an employee's mental health.

It is thus crucial for organizations to be mindful of their employees' anxieties and concerns. There are a few steps that can be taken proactively by organizations to understand and empathize with their employees.

Understand uncertainty and associated employee anxiety

It will be a good start if leaders communicate by acknowledging the change and normalizing anxiety. It would be even better if organizations try to understand how this uncertainty is impacting their employees mental health and productivity. A recent study by Mercer discovered that only 10% of organizations had attempted to understand employees' anxieties in trying times and gather meaningful feedback to find ways of helping them.

As a leader, the first step is to understand who amongst your employees could be the most affected. Organizations should gather information on how many employees stay alone, fear for their jobs, are suffering from some physical or psychiatric illness, have family obligations like a sick family member, aging parents, or infants? How is it impacting their work? Are they showing any of the symptoms as mentioned above?



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Make provisions for mental healthcare

In most cases, such symptoms are relatively mild and employees can feel better by themselves by taking active steps. Guidelines should be issued for employees on the proactive steps that can be taken by them to sail through these times positively, such as creating a routine, getting some sun, exercising, etc.

Work peer counselors may also be utilized during these times to help other employees who are suffering mildly from this situation. Work peer counselors are working professionals who volunteer their time to support people through severe work issues. Research links peer counseling programs with reduced stress levels in employees. Even in the longer term, it may prove advantageous for organizations to identify employees who have high character strengths, such as empathy, hope, resilience, altruism, gratitude and are willing to volunteer to interact with their peers during such times.

However, in severe cases, like any mental health condition, cabin fever is best treated with the assistance of a therapist or other such trained mental health professional. There are many psychologists, counselors and mental healthcare organizations that are providing tele-counseling for individuals during this time. Employees should be encouraged to utilize such facilities to help them cope better.

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Build a sense of community with an online network

The failure to experience a sense of connection with other members results in adverse outcomes of alienation. Thus, building an online community where people can stay connected and share their concerns and motivations may provide individual social support from fellow team members – a positive sense of self, a sense of shared values and interests, and a sense of belonging. Such initiatives help counter employee isolation, reduce stress, and boost well-being. Managers may begin by creating groups for their teams on messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Slack, Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, etc. to conduct simple activities, encouraging team members to share pictures of their work-station, food cooked, books read, or any other hobbies pursued, etc. This would not only help people stay connected but also engaged during social distancing.

COVID-19 has changed the typical routine of businesses and their employees in unusual ways. The real value of effective employee communication, driven by technology, has never been more imminent. Organizations must implement a plan and take measures that support employees and prioritize their physical and emotional well-being.

With a focus on future-proofing businesses, the immediate steps towards happy and healthy employees will ensure long-term safety and continued productivity. Setting up a safe space for employees and initiating a two-way communication is paramount during these difficult times.

As the state of affairs continues to unfold over the next few weeks, we urge businesses to find an equilibrium between the health of their economics and that of their employees.

How are you mitigating the present circumstances, ensuring business continuity, and keeping your employees in high spirits?



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