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WFH Employee Performance: The Show Must Go On

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For some employers, widespread remote working this past year prompted by the COVID-19 lockdowns has radically revamped working practices and, as a consequence, how employees are assessed and managed.

One critical aspect of an efficient and effective workforce is performance management. This becomes particularly important as turn-over rates and natural attrition drop as people are keen to hold on to the job security they have. In an 'up or out' environment this becomes a budgeting issues as most employers assume a certain level of 'churn' to make room for promotion or upgrading existing talent.

SHIFTING THE GOALPOSTS

Observing and measuring poor performance without daily, face-to-face interactions and direct supervision in a shared physical space is a challenge. It is a challenge exacerbated by the fact that having these daily, face-to-face interactions and direct supervision in a physical space is often the very best way to turn around poor performance. Sub-par performance is unlikely to improve while working from home without hands on management.

Employers need to be looking at a proactive performance plan for under-performing staff. It is understandable that such policies may have been in limbo. Many employers adopted the temporary mindset, so the poor performers were to be addressed once the lockdowns were over. But the ongoing (and potentially semi-permanent) nature of flexible working requires engagement with poor performers rather than kicking the can down the road.

PIP AT THE CORE

First, employers should be providing direction and feedback to poor performers – and keeping a record of those conversations. They should be establishing fair targets and expectations in the knowledge that performance management improvement (or exits) can take months to



reach a conclusion. Indeed, employers should be acting now as an average performance improvement plan (PIP) takes anywhere between three and six months to draw up. With the economy lined up to open fully in the summer, acting on performance management now gives employers the possibility of being in the best shape when the ‘roaring twenties’ arrive. Actively managing talent will be a key marker for those companies which pull out of the pandemic most successfully.

Any PIP must be practical, reasonable and sensitive to an individual’s unique situation. There may be factors related to the pandemic or the lockdowns that have some bearing on performance. Employees may have contracted COVID-19 or cared or lost loved ones from the virus. Home schooling pressures, poor office or IT equipment and the mental, emotional and social toil of the last year all need to be considered and reflected in the PIP. Staff often need more support rather than more pressure.

MAKE THE CALL

Employers should look to organize an initial virtual meeting with a poor performer, reminding them of the HR support they offer, to go over a PIP. Plan conversations carefully and bear in mind that drawing out these situations rarely helps either party. If an employee says they are stressed by the process, moving through it without delay can often be the most compassionate way of resolving a situation. Always remind them that they can have a someone at the meeting to support them. Be prepared to be flexible and perhaps permit a family member to attend but do be clear of the role of that person. Keep the language direct but simple and jargon-free. An employee needs to be told there must be improvement if there is any hope of a successful PIP.

Implementing a robust performance management regime, which is perfectly adaptable to the office or WFH, will allow employers to support poor performers and help them try to turn the corner, no matter from where they are working.

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