

#DAY33LOCKDOWNSA

Remote talent management during lockdown: Unlocking the potential of your talent

by

Marius Meyer

Over the last 33 days it was a period of leveraging the talent in both our essential and so-called non-essential services. Brilliant professionals such as doctors, nurses and other professional support staff members have managed to effectively deal with the coronavirus in hospitals while their own lives have been at risk. The World Health Organization have praised South Africa for this incredible effort of containing the spread of the virus and to ensure that the country has one of the lowest Covid-19 virus mortality rates in the world. We need to thank our health talent for being in the frontline at our hospitals and other healthcare centres.

Other professionals in non-essential services, i.e. managers, accountants, engineers, auditors, academics, lawyers and many other top talent from the corporate world and smaller and medium companies, including government professionals continued with their work from home. Thus, while we often complain from a pure business perspective that the economy has been locked down, the reality is that thousands of people continued working from home where possible.

Minister Ebrahim Patel announced that 1,5 million workers will return to their workplaces in May, and if their sectors are allowed to operate, a reduced workforce will return to their work sites, albeit under strict health and hygiene conditions. What this means is that thousands of top talented professionals will continue to work from home during the relaxed level four of the lockdown. The question is whether we have managed to leverage the lockdown period to take care of our talent. I specifically use the words “taking care” within the spirit of being an employer of choice with a sound employment value proposition (EVP). If your EVP is strong and you really look after your talent, then parts of the lockdown period would have been beneficial to your top talent. In fact, working from home is what most top talented employees prefer.

In a traditional office environment, there are many things frustrating talent, such as their talent being wasted in long drawn-out meetings, continuous interruptions, office politics, unnecessary administrative work and of course, their overall under-utilisation. Therefore, working from home when doing knowledge work is an ideal opportunity to unlock the talent of your workforce. However, that can only work if there is good trust in your talent – you trust them for their skills, and you know that they will continue to deliver their best. Caring employers have caring employees looking after your customers irrespective of the lockdown.

While I facilitated a talent management workshop for a management team in Johannesburg, we engaged in a conversation about talent segments. The discussion regressed into different directions, so much so that two extreme schools of thought emerged. One school had an inclusive approach to talent, perhaps too inclusive stating that all employees are talent, while the other school of thought

basically said that only the top management team and a few high level specialists in the company can be regarded as “real talent.” Eventually we found a middle ground and that was to define the different levels of talent, or as the company preferred to call it, their “key talent segments” driving the core business, in other words, who are those people that given their unique and special skills you are unable to replace over a short period of time. We then brainstormed a unique definition of talent, i.e. those employees who can do high quality specialised work without supervision towards the direct achievement of your business goals, which in essence constitute your managers and high level specialists as well as talented solid contributors indispensable for your business. If those employees are not there, your business will collapse. An engineer will continue doing good engineering work, with or without supervision, a lawyer will work on legal work and preparing for court cases without supervision. Having said that, some engineers are also better engineers than others, and you therefore may have different levels of top talent based on the real and direct contribution they are making to the success of your business.

The extended lockdown period, now disguised as “levels,” is likely to remain in place for as long as six months if the spread of the Covid-19 virus is not contained, hence the likelihood of further working from home arrangements. It is therefore of paramount importance for business leaders to adopt a talent management mind-set during the lockdown. Progressive employers will make working from home arrangements permanent, any many of them have been doing this for three decades already.

In the light of the above reality, I want to propose some clear guidelines for companies to step up on their talent management efforts during this period. Specifically, I am recommending a shift in focus in really treating your talent well during this period of an extended lockdown. I want to argue that talent should even be managed better remotely than on-site, given the fact that top talent is not static, they can easily move around to the next employer when the situation changes to a different business environment. And I purposefully don't use the words “normal” or “stable” or “traditional,” or “usual” because those days are gone. We are not returning to the past. We are “returning” to a new reconfigured organisation, or rather safely “staying at work” situation (which will be home) that will be totally different. We will have to work much harder and smarter to turn things around, to think and work innovatively to recover lost business and, most importantly, work differently in creating and building a new organisation that will survive the rest of the year, and grow next year, and if you get these two years right, only prosper in your third or fourth year. Therefore, you will need your talent more than ever to help your business to first weather the storm, and if you get that right, to keep things going.

Unlocking your talent is more important than ever before, hence, the following guidelines are recommended:

- Revisit your EVP and emphasise the value for talent.
- Ensure that talent management is firmly embedded in the people strategy of the company.
- Provide an exceptional employee experience for your talent and all other employees.
- Create explicit talent pools and make sure that your top talent working from home know that they are part of the talent pool.
- Adopt a caring and specific responsive approach to address uncertainties, anxieties and problems as they arise.
- Build trusting relationships with your talent.
- Show understanding for the challenges they face during these difficult times.
- Encourage your talent to balance their work and other life commitments.
- Develop specific activities to brand your talent individually and collectively.

- Convert your temporary remote working arrangements into permanent working from home policies for top talent as part of your EVP.
- Recognise and reward talent achievements and their contribution to the success of the business.
- Grow and build your talent pipelines during the lockdown.
- Communicate key information to your talent.
- Stretch your talent by creating specific opportunities for your talent to invest focused time and effort to come up with breakthrough innovations.
- Continue providing online talent development opportunities.
- Put your top talent on challenging assignments and projects.
- Encourage them to take regular periods of rest and leave.
- Ensure that you have clear competency models for your talent.
- Develop or strengthen your employee wellness programmes for talented employees.
- Evaluate the successes achieved by your talented employees working from home.
- Conduct online “stay interviews” with your talent.
- Connect top talent with one another in talent chats and with external experts.
- Continue with virtual meetings but don’t let it interfere with their work and family schedules.
- Assist talented employees with their priorities and ensure that they have the necessary support structures in place.
- Conduct focused and comprehensive talent reviews during the lockdown.
- Formulate specific actions to build your talent culture remotely.
- Provide all the necessary resources and support they need to deliver their best.
- Continuously ask for their feedback and implement their ideas.

Talent management should continue during the lockdown. The difference now is that you are implementing remote talent management. In fact, it should rather be strengthened. If you weaken your talent management, you are likely to lose them during or after the lockdown. Remember that all top talent are potentially attractive for other employers and they could become freelancers, so be careful of not pushing them away from you. Now is the time to care for your talent. We are relaxing the lockdown level, not your talent management. The economy is in lockdown, not your talent. Really looking after your talent during this difficult time, is an opportunity for unlocking your top talent by enabling them to deliver their best under very difficult personal and socio-economic circumstances.

Marius Meyer lectures in Strategic HR Management at Stellenbosch University and is Chairperson of the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). For more information about the coronavirus and Covid-19 visit www.sacoronavirus.co.za