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OPINION PIECE

HR in a post-COVID-19 world: UP expert on embedding a ‘people over profit’ culture

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The global COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact our health, well-being, ability to earn an income and how and where we learn. It has also affected our work and how we engage with colleagues. In this regard, the key role that HR plays in organisations has never been clearer – within days, businesses and HR leaders were coordinating teams, departments and entire organisations to plan, act, monitor and adjust.

Every crisis in history has resulted in change, and this crisis will be no different. Overnight, HR functions across industries and company sizes experienced what it really means to operate in a VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) world. Over the past decade, VUCA was something generally read about in articles or mentioned at conferences. Very few felt the impact or a pressing need to change, and most were comfortable to maintain the status quo or revert to old ways of thinking when solving new challenges or addressing emerging opportunities.

COVID-19 is providing the opportunity, compelling reasons and a mandate for HR to take action in changing what needs to or should have been changed by now. While the new normal that will emerge is fundamentally what HR should have attended to over the past decade, it has never been better positioned to demonstrate that being a strategic partner is essential to business.

There is now a realisation that in the human economy the focus is on “people over profit”, and that profit is the result of focusing on people first. The COVID-19 pandemic should motivate HR to focus on a few key areas to shape a new normal that is fit for a VUCA environment, enabling it to be agile, flexible and to put people first:

- Fast-track equipping and supporting leaders to shape a positive and adaptive culture that should also focus on trust and innovation;
 - Restructure and refocus how work is done (including virtual, remote and dispersed work);
 - Enable purpose-driven teams (some of which will continue to work virtually and dispersed for months, even years to come) to align and collaborate (not work in silos), get work done (with agility) and be the micro-system where great workplace experiences happen (despite not being in the same geographical location);
 - Redefine work-life balance and employee well-being;
 - Redesign people processes (including recruitment, skills development, managing performance, reward and recognition, and succession management) that are purpose-aligned, simplified for users, automated, digitalised, and quick and easy to implement, manage and adjust;
 - Provide people data and analytics for insights, predictive analytics and data-driven decisions;
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- Rethink the jobs and skills that will be required in future, and the behaviours that will enable an organisation's desired culture;
- Provide virtual and self-directed learning and employee assistance and well-being programmes; and
- Use online tools for collaborative work and communication, and surveys to listen to employees en masse, and to monitor and swiftly address challenges and act on feedback.

HR needs to ensure that these changes are embedded in the DNA of the business to avoid going back to the status quo pre-COVID-19. Most companies realise they need HR for the operational decisions and actions required during this pandemic, including employee or employer relief funding; retrenchments and business closure; dealing with leave, payroll, unions and labour law; and planning for the health and safety of employees who do work or will return to the workplace shortly.

People who will grow from and be better as a result of this crisis will be those who understand that people and culture provide a sustainable competitive advantage and who value the contribution that HR leaders and professionals can add at board and senior executive level and across the organisation. The alternative is to return to the way things were before and get the same results as before.

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 112-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country that has a Faculty of Veterinary Science which is ranked top in Africa, and overall has 120 academic departments, as well as 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. It is also ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and among the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences).

In June 2019, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings once again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33 000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond university and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training to its students.

As one of South Africa's research-intensive universities, UP launched the *Future Africa Campus* in March 2019 as a hub for inter- and transdisciplinary research networks within UP and the global research community to maximise 4IR innovation and address the challenges and stresses our continent and world is facing. In addition,

UP also launched the Javett Art Centre in September 2019 as a driver of transdisciplinary research development between the Humanities and other faculties. In 2020 UP will launch Engineering 4.0. as a hub not only for Smart Cities and Transport, but also to link the vast resources in technology and data sciences to other faculties via Future Africa. These initiatives are stimulating new thinking at the frontier of 'science for transformation'.

For more information, go to www.up.ac.za