

Problem Solving Report

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Introduction

This report aims to present an approach to apply recognised problem-solving tools and techniques to identify and propose solutions to a work-based problem. The report also includes an evaluation of possible solutions. The problem identified is about the fact that since Covid-19 pandemic started, more and more employees dread returning to work after a weekend break and are searching for new jobs across the UK. People are unhappy with work, and this report contains an analysis of this problem and an evaluation of the solutions found, as well as an implementation plan, communication of the solution to the stakeholders, and techniques to monitor and review solution implementation.

Problem definition

According to an article in *The Independent* (Chapman, 2020), there is a crisis among the UK work force this year, with more than half of the employees thinking to get new jobs, and even more are feeling bad when they need to go back to work after the weekend. The percentage of people unhappy at work has risen by 10% only in 2020, and women seem to be more affected, since 80% reported they feel stressed at work in the past 12 months, compared to 69% last year. The main reason is that with the pandemic of Covid-19, more and more people started working from home, and the separation of work time and personal time became difficult, some working more than before. For those considered essential workers, they had to work under new conditions of social distancing and while wearing masks for the entire period they are working. In addition, personnel reductions occurred and the ones remaining would have to work overtime to account for the extra responsibilities. A PESTLE analysis was conducted for the issue identified.

Information about the problem

As per the PESTLE analysis (Warner, 2010), which is a tool often used to analyse the external factors which determine a problem and is used in the decision making process, there are several political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental factors which can be used to define the identified problem.

Political factors leading to this issue include the most recent decisions taken at country level in order to control the Covid-19 pandemic. These include various lockdowns taking place since March 2020, the mandatory mask wearing, social distancing and various other restrictions. A report (Chung, 2020) indicates that lockdown decisions have led to numerous people working

from home, which had a negative impact on the work to life balance of people, leading to a work-family conflict. The work culture during lockdown also changed, and 90% of people working from home saying their managers were supportive of the new conditions (Chung, 2020). However, only 20% of essential workers who could not work from home indicated managers were supportive.

There are also economic factors leading to employee dissatisfaction. With the profitability of businesses being affected by the pandemic (Keogh-Brown et al., 2020), many were forced to reduce their workforce or shutdown the business altogether in more severe cases. The pandemic may end up costing the UK economy £40 billion (Keogh-Brown et al., 2020), and a solution may be to minimise business lockdowns, however that circles back to political factors, and businesses have no control over public health led decisions.

Social factors leading to this issue include the reduction of social interaction due to social distancing and isolation rules. Williams et al. (2020) argued that the reduction of social interaction and the uncertainty about the outcome of the pandemic have led to more and more people feeling distressed and fearful, which affects both their personal and professional lives. Even after the rules become more relaxed, some participants in the study said they were fearful to engage in social interaction, and this fear affected their mood. At work, this may impact on engagement and the organisational culture.

From a technological perspective, companies have been forced to search for new technologies to help them address the reduction of work force (Hutchings, 2020). The adoption of digital technology may be a key to address this, however Hutchings (2020) indicates these requires companies to invest funds in the development or buying the technology, and many companies have limited funds due to the economic downturn.

The legal factor is related to the rules of the imposed lockdown and other policies implemented to control the infection rate. An article published in The Lancet in November 2020 (Gurdasani et al., 2020) indicates that these legal rules cause distress among the population, together with the associated uncertainty which can lead to anxiety, and the UK has not found yet a sustainable strategy for the Covid-19 problem. This means companies are challenged to find solutions themselves to follow the legal rules while focusing on improving the life of their employees in the workplace. From an environmental perspective, no factors have been identified that may impact the current issue with employees, although it is necessary to argue that in the autumn and winter period, studies have shown people tend to have a less good mood (Winthorst et al.,

2020), therefore this is something to be bared in mind in devising a solution to the identified issue.

Alternative solutions to the problem

The PESTLE analysis has shown what the main factors that cause the issue are. This is needed in order to inform the decision-making process and help in the solution finding. Some alternative solutions to lessen the impact of political, legal and economic factors which were caused by the Covid-19 pandemic are out of the control of businesses in the UK. If wearing a mask, or working from home, and social distancing are mandatory by law, there is nothing the company can do to remove these regulations.

Some companies in the UK were forced to engage in teleworking without having the proper technological solutions to make their employees' work easier. However, investing in teleconferencing hardware and software, inputting an allowance for the employees in their salary to help them pay for internet, or acquire desks, chairs, or hardware equipment to help them work comfortably in their homes can be a solution for those forced to telework during the pandemic. The quantum of this allowance can be calculated by evaluating the needs of the people, because for example some employees may require a chair and a desk, others just a chair, or hardware equipment. Monitoring connection and blocking some time frames in people's calendars (for example no person can book meetings during lunch time, or after hours) can also help with an improved work-life balance and the work would not cross into people's personal time.

A solution to the social distancing issue would be to encourage online informal team meetings and suggest people to share their camera. People could be encouraged to have coffee together or chat for a few minutes, as often as they need, and the cost for the company is null. A solution for people feeling underappreciated at work is to have managers talk to them more often and thank them for their work. Events such as employee of the month can be held both for at home workers and on-site workers. For people working on site, in order to lessen the impact of having to keep a distance, people can be encouraged to share appreciation messages to each other on whiteboards installed in the work area. Studies (Fehr et al., 2017) have shown that expressing gratitude and receiving appreciation have a similar effect of elevating mood at work and make people feel less stressed.

Evaluation technique for solutions

The first thing to be considered in evaluating the solutions proposed is the main focus that is to be accomplished, meaning the main objective the solution will help to achieve. Thus, the main focus is to improve the satisfaction of the employees. Secondary focuses would be constituted by employee performance, efficiency and engagement. A five step systematic process was used to the decision making process: first identify the problem (as previously done), then define the problem and see which factors influence it (which was achieved using a PESTLE analysis), find alternative solutions to the problem (as presented), then evaluate the solutions based on their ability to reach the main and secondary objective and select the best one, devise an implementation plan, communicate the plan to the stakeholders and monitor the progress.

The management team and several key employees was involved in the evaluation process. Using the gradients of agreement technique, the proposed alternatives were analysed, and the conclusion was that the best solution is to implement a reward and appreciation system for all employees, both working from home and working on site. In addition, it is strongly advised to all management and teams that no person can request employees to work during their lunch hour or after hours. If a certain exceptional situation, such as meeting a strict deadline or finishing an urgent client request, leads to overtime, the hours will be paid in double. Such situations, however, should be rare.

Solution implementing plan

Since the solution has no immediate cost for the company, the necessary change taking place being a matter of attitude change, the implementation plan can begin immediately. This solution can be implemented for all employees and management team in two steps. The first step is to inform all employees of the fact that no meetings are to be scheduled during the lunch time, between 12:30 PM and 1:00 PM, as this is the proposed lunch time for the employees. In addition, no meetings or activities will hereon be planned after the end of the working day (i.e. 5:30 PM). All employees will be requested to adhere to this rule and employees will be encouraged to notify any misconduct. Moreover, all employees will be informed of the exceptions, which can be projects with very strict deadlines or finishing urgent client requests. These will constitute exceptional cases, and employees will be informed that they can claim overtime for this situation, and the overtime will be paid in double.

The second step of the implementation is to encourage the teams to schedule frequent meetings in which the achievements of team members are recognised publicly. For employees working

from home, these meetings can take place by teleconference, and for the employees working on the site, these can take place in person, as long as the Covid-19 regulations are respected (i.e. mask wearing, social distancing, limited number of people).

How to communicate the plan to stakeholders

In order to decide on a communication plan it is necessary to identify the stakeholders of the proposed solutions. The people who can benefit from the implementation of the solution are the employees who are unhappy and the company, who risks losing these employees. Therefore, the stakeholders are employees and the organisation.

The plan will be communicated with all employees via a newsletter. The communication will include a brief description of the issue identified, the proposed solution and the implementation plan, together with a start date for the implementation. In addition, the communication will include the details about the monitoring plan.

Monitoring and review techniques

The best technique to monitor the progress and the success of the proposed solution is to collect feedback from the employees. Monthly meetings will be held with employee representatives to monitor their level of satisfaction with the new working conditions and with the approach management is taking in order to ensure that the proper work-life balance is achieved for all employees. In addition, quarterly, a survey will be sent to the employees to review their level of satisfaction and engagement.

Conclusion

The aim of this report was to identify an issue, analyse it, and, through decision-making techniques, find solutions and devise a plan to implement them. The issue was that employees are unhappy with the way in which they work since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. A PESTLE analysis was used to find the various factors that determine this issue, in order to make solution finding easier. Several solutions were proposed and evaluated using the gradients of agreement technique. A solution was selected, and a plan to implement it, inform stakeholders and monitor progress was done.

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