

OPINION

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Adapting to the pandemic with a human touch

BY **KAVITHA NAIR**

The present pandemic has possibly been one of the most disruptive events in our lives, both professionally and personally. It has dislodged us from our comfort zones and challenged us to find novel ways to work, collaborate, and interact. Like everybody else, the Human Resources (HR) team at the [Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy \(CSTEP\)](#) in India had to adapt and evolve to keep up with this unique situation.

This article is an overview of some of the challenges the CSTEP HR team has faced, and how we've overcome them.

Our 'work-from-home' policy was put to the test

With India's sudden declaration of lockdown in March 2020, our 'work-from-home' policy proved to be an advantage, but not without an inherent set of challenges.

While we were accustomed to some of our workforce working from home, we were completely unprepared for the entire workforce to suddenly work remotely.

It seemed like this unexpected adjustment took its toll, leading to a struggle to manage work versus leisure for many of us.

In response, we authorised our senior managers to bring about a balance between working 'from' home and working 'for' home. They were requested to follow a 'flexible' work schedule. Team members were given the liberty to choose their convenient time slots for the daily work as long as it didn't hamper the work flow and met deadlines. And we released a more detailed work-from-home policy to outline this and allay staff apprehensions.

Over time, we are glad to (virtually) see our staff beginning to enjoy working from home. With the extra time on their hands, they got a chance to focus on their hobbies as well – which has been documented as Lockdown Stories on the [CSTEP Instagram](#).

Recruitment and staffing: regaining the human touch virtually

On the hiring front, we continued our efforts to recruit the best candidates. At CSTEP, the volume of hiring has remained unaffected during the lockdown. We have actively hired across both our geographies, Bengaluru and Noida.

This continuous flow in recruitment helped staff morale at a time when reports of employees being laid off were making the rounds globally.

And, with the changing times, the recruitment process has also evolved. On-boarding of new recruits is now done online.

But while we took efforts to be tech-friendly, the human touch was, unfortunately, missing. Creating an atmosphere of trust is a crucial aspect of our HR bond-building exercise, and establishing trust (especially with new hires) 'remotely' was not easy.

While uncertainty looms over physically getting back to work, we have taken measures like holding regular all-staff meetings, employee-feedback meetings with HR, and regular webinars for specific research groups.

Every new recruit gets to record a video to introduce themselves, which gets aired in our staff meeting. HR induction meetings, which used to be held one-to-one across the table are now conducted in an audio-visual format. The HR induction video covers our journey so far, the important milestones, our engagements with the central and state governments, the impact our work has been making at the grassroots level, and vision statements by our leaders.

With all these measures in place, we are confident of gaining and building the trust of our new staff members, gradually.

Adapting to new technologies

Initially, the HR team was unable to get in touch with some staff members because of network connectivity issues, delaying certain approvals. We managed to tackle this by introducing Microsoft Teams as a new technological platform to collaborate. This enabled better connectivity and clarity and provided the benefit of working together while physically-distant.

Thanks to the lockdown, today we are proud to say that we are a truly digital organisation, and are able to save a lot of paper, electricity, energy, time, and effort.

All our HR staff meetings are now held virtually with the Microsoft Teams meeting application, with zero hassles.

Prior to lockdown, our HR statutory compliances were carried out in traditional paper-open mode. Now, we have gone digital and are using online signatures, with all paper work being carried out online. We have also been instrumental in inspiring our external statutory compliance vendors to adapt to new technology for a hassle-free experience. Our vendors have found these measures to be more convenient and efficient, and are urging other clients to follow suit.

Ensuring health and wellness

In the early weeks of lockdown, when there was a lot of uncertainty and anxiety, our HR team was in constant touch with employees and healthcare service providers – to make sure our staff received timely support in case of any emergency. HR team members were in touch with staff members (proactively) through email, WhatsApp, and telephone to make sure our staff were safe.

CSTEP has always followed a pragmatic and prudent approach towards hiring. We do not get into passive hiring, so all staff have sufficient work and feel secure on the work front.

The benefits team worked impeccably and our benefits and compensation, namely annual leave and sick-leave, have been unaffected, giving our employees ample freedom to rest amid these tough times.

We also organised a training session by a health expert on tackling issues related to mental health during the lockdown.

While we cannot say for certain when all of us will convene at the office. But the prime focus of the HR team, as always, shall be to retain, motivate, and ensure the complete safety of our staff.

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