

How ACSA is nurturing wellness and performance through Covid

By Hlumelo Dokoda

The impact of Covid-19 in terms of health consequences for millions of people and economic costs for the entire world has been deep and extensive.

Now, just more than a year after all of our lives were turned upside down and inside out, we are better equipped to survey what happened and how we all responded.

For many millions of people, Covid-19 drove a mass social experiment in working from home (WFH). Some people liked WFH and flourished. Others felt isolated and alone. Parents trying to work from home while attending to the schooling needs and boredom of children experienced another level of stress entirely.

Interestingly, not a lot of reliable research has been done so far on WFH. Certainly we see some general surveys about whether people like or don't like it and how many days a week they would like to spend at the office in future.

But there's not much research available yet that gives an in-depth view of how the WFH phenomenon affected people's ability to work, collaborate effectively and manage their mental wellbeing.

At Airports Company South Africa we have been reviewing the activities and programmes we established early on to help our leaders and employees cope with the new realities.

Indications so far are that these interventions were critical to enabling the transitions to WFH and to helping people manage the varied impacts they each felt.

What became clear soon after the introduction of the hard lockdown was the severe psycho-social impact this was having on our employees. It therefore became incumbent on Airports Company to ensure that it effectively supported its employees. The additional challenge that would be faced in the delivery of this support was that employees were not physically at the airports but were at home and the company would therefore have to provide this support remotely.

Airports Company focused first on the Executive and Senior Management levels of the organisation. This was premised on the fact that the leadership was experiencing anxieties and concerns no less than employees. We needed to equip leadership to navigate the company through the pandemic.

A series of virtual leadership interventions was delivered through webinars which covered:

- "The inspirational and responsive leader during a crisis", providing leadership with the tools to effectively lead their teams in unprecedented times;
- "Strategic thinking during a crisis" focused on helping leaders develop responsive business and operational strategies;
- "Collaborating for business sustainability" addressed various leadership styles required to navigate the pandemic and how to ensure that they effectively compliment each other for business sustainability;
- "Managing fatigue" was critical as leadership was required to work non-stop through this difficult period and therefore it was essential that they were equipped on how to deal with physical, mental, and emotional fatigue; and

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- “An outside-in perspective on aviation” provided leadership with the perspectives of aviation industry experts and their thoughts on what recovery would require.

We determined that employees had a range of concerns and needs that had to be addressed as soon as possible after the first and most severe lockdown. The subjects covered in webinars and online team meetings included:

- “Maintaining wellbeing during a pandemic”, focused on equipping employees with coping mechanisms amid periods of considerable turmoil;
- “Financial management” aimed at ensuring that employees effectively managed their finances and were made aware of various financial relief measures available to them;
- A conversation with the administrator of the company’s retirement fund focused on how it was performing during the pandemic with the aim of creating a sense of comfort for employees;
- A webinar on “Buffering Your Finances” provided additional tools to employees for managing their personal finances as they navigated the pandemic;
- Some months into the pandemic, when lockdown levels were eased and employees were preparing to return to work, ACSA put on a “Your Health, Your Wellness” presentation to demonstrate all of the health measures in place and to provide comfort that employees’ concerns had been addressed;
- “Locked down but not locked out” zoned in on mental wellness and work-life balance with working from home being clearly an extended reality. It was important that employees were prepared for a long road in this regard.

All of these online interventions were rolled out from May to July 2020 on a live and interactive platform. The series was recorded and re-run from September to November 2020 using internal platforms such as Yammer and the company WhatsApp platform.

Feedback from employees and monitoring of employee use of company-provided or sponsored programmes indicates that not only was the content helpful but also that there was a sense that the company genuinely cared about how staff were coping.

We started off here talking about research into WFH. We do have some quantitative surveys available in South Africa and plenty of anecdotes.

But hopefully we will soon see some detailed research similar to that undertaken in the United States by the Becker Friedman Institute at the University of Chicago.

The results of this survey of more than 30,000 Americans over multiple waves investigated whether WFH will endure, and why.

The research authors say that, going forward, 20 percent of full workdays will be supplied from home after the pandemic ends, compared with just 5 percent before.

The authors project three consequences in future: First, employees will enjoy large benefits from greater remote work. Second, the shift to WFH will directly reduce spending in major city centres by at least 5% to 10% relative to the pre-pandemic situation.

Third, data on employer plans and the relative productivity of WFH imply a 5% productivity boost in the post-pandemic economy due to re-optimised working arrangements. Only one-fifth of this productivity gain will show up in conventional productivity measures, because they do not capture the time savings from less commuting.

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For us at Airports Company, these findings feel about right even though this research is from the United States. We look forward to seeing the outcomes of similar research that will hopefully be conducted in South Africa in the near future.

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