

Time to address the effect of Covid-19 on talent with strategic workforce plan

By [Yvonne Mbsadi](#), issued by [Heineken South Africa](#)

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The global Covid-19 pandemic has irrevocably changed the operating environment of human resource managers. The theory of a hybrid working environment composed of a mix of on-premise personnel and those working from home, is becoming the norm in the age of Corona. This hybrid model will be the dominant mode of operation for the medium to long term, while the medical community continues to discover new variants of the virus making it even more difficult to put the spread under control.



Yvonne Mbsadi

We have seen vaccine roll-out ramped up in many countries including South Africa, raising hope that we will eventually reach herd immunity locally as well as globally. With this hope comes the challenges of developing countries lagging behind with their vaccine programmes, due to socio economic issues, supply chain challenges, an anti-vaccine movement gaining traction within some parts of the globe and shortages of vaccines in some areas.

Our daily conversations already evolved at the start of the pandemic to integrate new phrases such as “sorry I was on mute”, and now these are taking a more sombre turn in that funerals are also taking a spot on the virtual call discussion agenda. The timelines of social media platforms, even professional ones such as LinkedIn and Workplace by Facebook are filled with “rest in peace” posts, as well as commemorative messages like “you have left a void in the industry”.

Not to undermine any lives lost, but the recent passing of some of the most iconic and talented individuals due to Covid-19 related complications, has left me wondering as an HR professional, as to whether we are doing proper due diligence in terms of addressing the seriousness of the impact of Covid-19 mortality rate within our organisations, particularly on productivity, talent sustainability and the future of our organisation.

Over the course of the last few months, the majority of organisations responded to the crises by mainly focusing on balancing lives, the livelihoods of their employees and keeping the business’ lights on and doors open. Topical topics of discussion in most seminars and webinars today, range from possible return to work models through to adapting to the new normal. Now that we have learned to live and survive under the pandemic, is it not time that we look to what life will be like in a post-pandemic world?

However, I am wondering whether executives are considering Covid-19 mortality impact in their crises management and the need for proactive counter measures to address this sensitive topic.

As we are moving from defensive to evasive strategies and reimagining the future, corporates should not shy away from discussing and reconsidering the effectiveness of their strategic workforce plan. In order for businesses to thrive, talent remains the most crucial enabler of any corporate strategy. The call to be honest and open to the possibility of not having everyone in our talent plan with us in the future strategy, no matter their current state of risks of loss to the organisation is real.

Sadly, and as sensitive as it is, death is inevitable. The daily loss of talent at mass is surely something that should trigger reactions from those who are responsible to ensure business continuity. To bring this closer to home, the average number of daily Covid-19-related deaths is already at 106 within provinces being ravaged by the third wave such as the Western

Province.

In the corporate world, we normally plan for talent loss in a controllable way, mainly looking at talent tenure and progression possibilities to gauge the risk posed by employee churn. We have also countered loss of talent in a short space of time, by extending contract termination notice periods to allow for more time to replace those who are leaving. That luxury of time to replace talent is not possible in the case of sudden death like in a case of a Covid-19 mortality.

I call for the review of the effectiveness of our strategic workforce plans to consider the eventuality of a sudden and uncontrollable loss of talent, review our ability to upskill with speed and determine the readiness of the business to execute our succession plan as and when the need arises.

The Covid-19 developments are unfolding at an accelerated speed and organisations may have a lot of gaps to cover in their business continuity plans. Factors such as operational agility and employee morale are just some of the main points at play.

It is time to activate those skills hubs /internal marketplaces to accelerate the development of new skills and empower your successors to become ready today to lead the organisation tomorrow.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yvonne Mbsadi's experience in HR spans more than 18 years. She began her career at Heineken South Africa in 2016 as Head HR Business Partner for Supply Chain and Support functions, as well as Employee Relations lead. She rejoined the company in 2020 as an HR Director. Yvonne holds an MBA from MANCOSA, a Human Resources Management degree from UNISA, and a certificate in Labour Dispute Resolution from the University of Stellenbosch. She has also successfully completed the Management Development Programme at Gordon Institute of Business Science.

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