

HR Trends And The Corona Crisis

I The crisis as an HR incubator

 By **Tom Haak**

There are two different questions one could ask:

1. How will the HR trends be affected by the crisis?
2. How can the trends be used to accelerate out of the crisis, getting work life back on track?

The short summary: In my view many of the trends that were already ongoing, will (or can) be accelerated by the crisis. Moving out of the crisis will take a long time and the “new normal” will be different from what we were used to. We can use the trends to adapt organisations and the workforce to the new situation, and partly also to help shape the new situation.

Digitisation Without Redesign

A crisis makes creativity, and the use of technology gets a push. What I have seen a lot in the past weeks, is that organisations start with digitizing their current practices, and don't take the opportunity for a more drastic redesign.

Instead of the normal Monday morning team meeting at 10 am, they now plan a virtual meeting at 10 am with the same people, using Zoom, Teams or a comparable tool. Is the meeting really necessary in real time? Maybe this is the time to consider creating an asynchronous meeting, using Slack, Teams or even Whatsapp.

The consultant used to organise challenging business weeks for students. Do they redesign this event into a real challenging online experience, or will it be teams of students connecting to the HQ through a video conference, and get comparable assignments as they would have gotten in the F2F-meeting?

I read an interview with a manager who said he had stopped recruiting. Without looking people into their eyes in a physical meeting, he could not select the best, he said. What a pity! Anti cyclical recruitment is generally good advice, and if he would be willing to consider clever HR tech (not just video

recruiting) this manager could probably improve his recruitment process a lot!

The Trends

For background on the important HR trends, I refer to two of my articles:

- [12 HR Trends for 2020](#) (translations in [Portuguese](#), [Dutch](#) and [Russian](#) are available).
- 9 mega HR Trends

If you like videos better, watch: https://youtu.be/cwnu_C-AbeU

HR Trends and the Corona Crisis: Opportunity or Threat, Acceleration or Stagnation?

1. Personalisation

In times of crisis, personalisation is most often not a route taken immediately. The instinctive reaction of authorities and employers is to revert to command and control and one-size fits-all. Everybody should stay at home as much as possible. 1.5 meter distance, no less.



After a while, the crude measures become less effective. Even in the crisis, a more personalised approach might be effective. For example: the way you treat a fit 65-year old, with no health issues and who runs 40K per week might be different from a 65-years old person with health problems who live in a home for the elderly.

The way individuals react to a crisis is different as well, and it might be helpful to take these differences into account (have a look at the [Personalised Corona Coping Inventory](#)).

Psychological differences are not considered enough.

In the coming weeks/ months, people will have to get back to work. Given the predictions of today, the workplace will have to look different. 1.5 meters difference. Temperature checks at the entrance. Also here it might be useful to use personalisation and customisation. Who are really eager to get back to the office? Do we have insight into the personalities of our employees and other people in the workforce, so that we can predict who really

need the office and the daily interactions with the colleagues?

2. HR Tech

These should be good times for HR Tech. Unfortunately, many of the HR tech providers, start-ups and more mature organisations I spoke to in the last week were not so positive. Many projects have been put on hold. Hopefully, this is just the initial reaction from organisation, because there are many more opportunities than just switching from physical meetings to video conferencing. Some examples:

- **Recruitment:** video interviewing, online assessments, (gamified) online tests
- **Measurement:** mood measurement (realtime or via pulse surveys)
- **Learning & Development:** offering people microlearning solutions based on an assessment of the work they do at home
- **Wellbeing:** offering employees access to online resilience/ stress reduction solutions (gamified)

I am sure there are many examples the various HR Tech providers can give. Going forward we can predict that increasing sales and productivity, while increasing employee engagement and wellbeing, will be high on the priority list of organisations. This is the time to work closely with HR innovators, to see where they can add value.

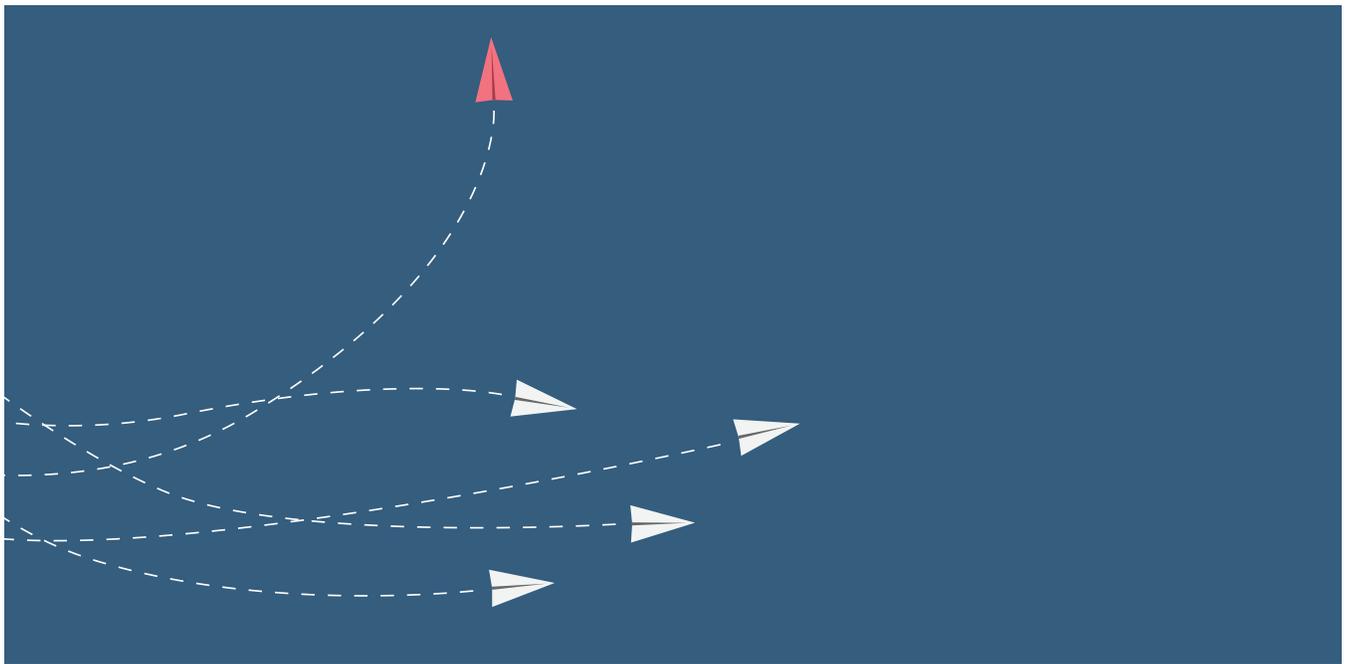
Let's hope (and make sure) that the implementation of clever HR tech is accelerated through the current crisis.

3. Speed

We have seen that when the urgency is high, developments can be speeded up a lot. New hospitals were built in days. New staff was recruited for hospitals ultra fast. Working from home became the standard for many office workers in a matter of days. The need for speed will increase, as organisations will have to work themselves out of the crisis. Ongoing trends, like the use of agile methodologies, will be accelerated.

4. Employee Experience

The employee experience and more employee focus were getting some traction in the last years. The question is what will happen now? The needs of many people will be rather basic. Will I have a job? Will I have an income? Are my children getting back on track at school? The focus of many organisations will be on survival. Downsizing and cost cutting will be unavoidable.



My guess: a step back for the employee experience, and “Chief Happiness Officers” and “Employee Experience Architects” maybe should revert to their old job titles.

5. New Ways of Organising and Leadership

In times of crisis, you always hear the call for strong leaders. You could also argue that these are excellent times for organisations that have embraced self-managed teams. A self-managed team probably has less need for one strong leader, the team members will be relying on the dispersed leadership in the team.

The crisis can act as a pressure cooker. We saw how hospitals became creative in staffing intensive care units. The work was reorganised in such a way that the specialist nurses could focus on their core activities. Non intensive-care staff was

quickly trained, on the job, total over other tasks. Psychologists were added to the teams to allow teams to reflect on the high pressure they experiences. The flexible workforce (retired nurses, people who had made a job switch etc.) was called upon to strengthen the teams.

The crisis has also amplified the need to restructure the labour market in certain countries (as The Netherlands). In the good times, we accepted the big group of so-called self employed people (often not self-employed by choice), and now we are confronted with the downside: many self-employed people without an income, and not really entitled to the social security system.

6. Be Kind!

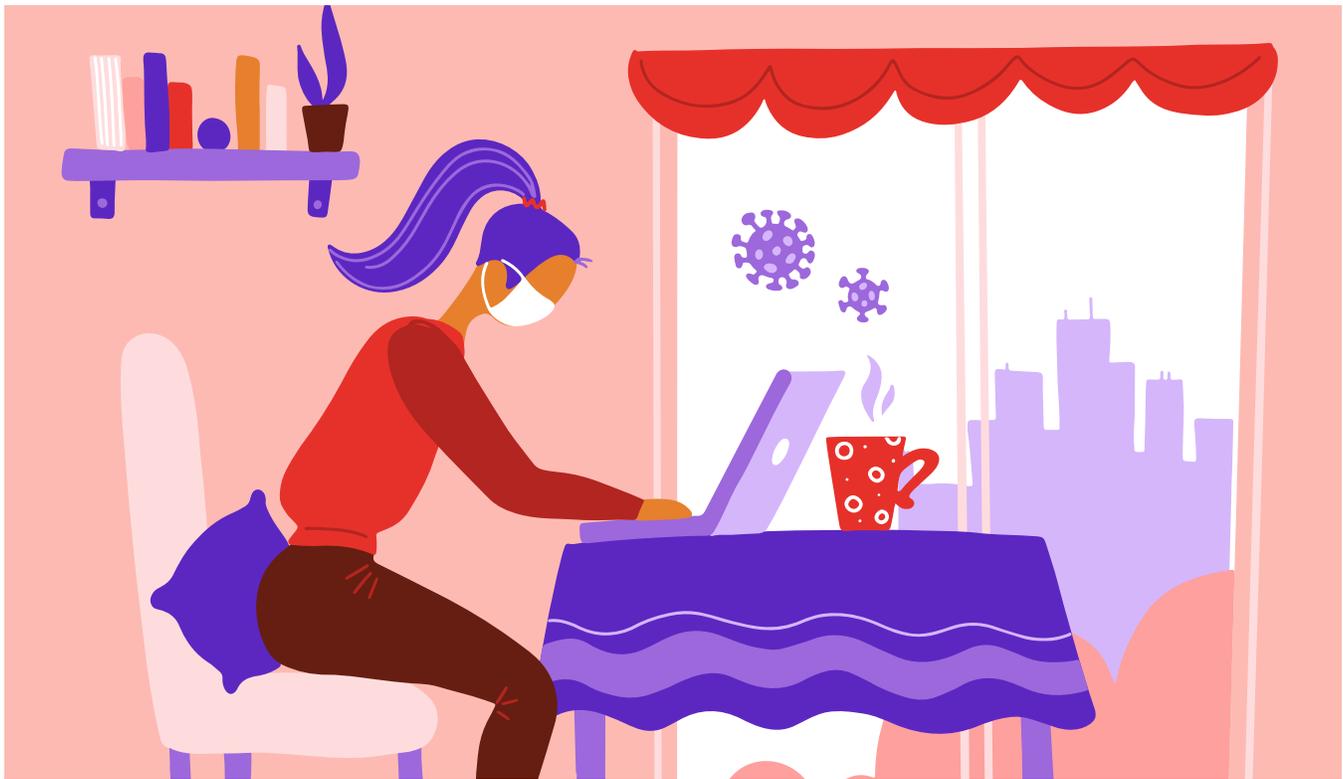
“Be Kind!” was the number three trend on my list for 2020. It resonated and many other

people confirmed this trend. In the current crisis we luckily see a lot of kindness. What will happen when the economic crisis really hits us, and many jobs are at stake? Will employers be kind, or will they quickly revert to their old practices.

A helpful way of looking at the issue, might be through the lens of “[dilemma reconciliation](#)” : it is not being kind or tough, but the question is how you can be kind AND tough.

7. People Analytics

Thorough people analytics was vital and will be vital. The current crisis creates also a kind of workplace laboratory. Clever organisations have intensified measurement and analytics, to learn from the current situation, as input for redesign going forward. examples of questions organisations could ask:



- What is happening to the engagement of teams and individuals?
- How is productivity evolving? Where is productivity going up and where is it going down?
- Why do we know about the behaviour and actions of the people in our talent pool?
- What learning solutions are currently used a lot, and what is the effect?
- How are the preferences of people changing over time?

8. Productivity

I repeat what I said under point 2: "Going forward we can predict that increasing sales and productivity, while increasing employee engagement and wellbeing, will be high on the priority list of organisations."

HR will be looked at to address these priorities. I repeat a plea here I made some years ago: [Stop counting heads!](#) HR can contribute a lot, not by counting the heads, but by cleverly using people analytics and HR innovations. Kind, tough and clever...

9. Employer/Employee Activism

I quote from my article in November 2019: "Many organisations are still very inwardly focused. The key question is more "How can we solve our problems?" than "how can we solve problems in our society?". Taking ownership of your corporate social responsibility can be more than offering employees the opportunity to do good on one day per year.

What will happen to the trend "More employer/employee activism" post Corona crisis? One would hope acceleration, but I'm afraid we will probably see more stagnation.

10. Privacy

Many people are writing about how privacy and data protection will suffer as a result of the Corona crisis. Probably there is no other way than to trust our governments, which is easier in some countries than in others.

In a recent McKinsey article, (David Chin et. al. [Europe needs to prepare to get back to work - safely](#)) I saw an interesting exhibit that I have copied below. In the exhibit examples of the measures companies are developing in order to enable people to return to work safely.

European companies are developing a range of safety and health protocols for COVID-19.

Safety and health protocols



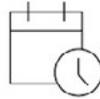
Access control and quarantine

- Set clear policies for workplace access
- Measure body temperature at building entry
- Conduct random visual and temperature checks during workday
- Request employee quarantine when slightest COVID-19 symptom shows up
- Track and document all building entries and exits



Remote working

- Encourage remote work in all roles that do not require physical presence
- Provide webinars on remote-working and -leadership best practices



Work and shift planning

- Create differentiated shift plans and break times for minimum congestion on work premises
- Split shifts and disperse workplaces/desks to ensure minimum distance
- Identify and isolate critical employee groups
- Define contingency plans for workplace closures



Hygiene and health

- Set clear policies for physical distancing in workplace
- Establish daily disinfection procedures
- Promote mandatory health and hygiene protocols (eg, hand washing, mask use, glove use) for employees
- Stop elevator use whenever possible
- Discontinue use of shared items (eg, pens, phones)
- Provide critical supplies



Compliance and communication

- Communicate at least once per day about purpose and changes on measures in effect
- Perform random checks in all departments on full list of measures
- Report COVID-19 symptoms to relevant health authorities
- Clear all protocols with local authorities

McKinsey & Company

“Measure body temperature at building entrance” and “Conduct random visual and temperature checks during workday” are some of the potential measures. Will employees accept these kinds of measures? Probably they don’t have a choice.

Keep Moving!

What is my advice for the short term? Keep moving! Prepare for the short- and medium term. The McKinsey table above shows what kind of measures should be prepared know, I would hope in consultation with employees and workers councils.

Also short-term: see how people analytics and HR tech can help to deal with the most urgent issues. Use the opportunity to accelerate the digital HR transformation.

Note: A video of Tom Haak speaking about the subject of this article is [available](#).



Tom Haak is the founder and director of The HR Trend Institute. Prior to founding the HR Trend Institute in 2014, Tom held senior HR positions in companies as Arcadis, Aon, KPMG and Philips. The HR Trend Institute detects, follows and encourages smart and creative use of trends in the field of people and organizations, and also in adjacent areas.



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