ACI EUROPE WORKING PAPER – "OFF THE GROUND"

Report of the HR WS – Calling airport employees back to work

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Recommendations to Airports

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1. Recommendations to call back the airport workforce currently on short term or temporary unemployment

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

The airport sector is badly impacted by cross European coronavirus containment measures. Travel bans forced airports to reduce their activities to what was strictly required in order to accommodate essential, repatriation, sanitary and cargo flights while other airports closed completely. Airport employees were sent to remote work, furloughed or laid off. Gradual alleviation of lockdown measures in each country will require airports to bring back their workforces.

1.2 PROBLEM DEFINITION

Airport HR departments need to reorganize their work in order to meet all the health and safety measures, and ensure the gradual return of their employees. The development of appropriate standards across all airports to assist in the recovery and to engender staff (and passenger) confidence is desirable. These measures may be temporary and should be reviewed regularly.

1.3 PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Work organisation
- Create a special committee (senior management) to discuss COVID-19 measures
- Risk assessment matrix for all categories of staff (administrative, operations, front line)
- Rotating shifts of less duration
- Alternating presence of workers in the work sites, no gatherings, social distancing
- Remote working and more flexible working are encouraged, with the necessary technical support, all in line with local regulations
- Time flexibility in working hours.

«Welcome back» communications campaign
- CEO/HR department regular communications on the state of the company and work organisation
- Covid-19 hotline information service for staff
- Intranet: guidelines on hygienic measures and instructions (personal protection equipment as applicable, instructions to keep tools & equipment clean, frequent hand washing etc.)
- recognition to those employees who remained operational during the crisis.

1.4 EXPECTED OUTCOME

A set of actions from the HR departments will ensure a smooth & comfortable return back to work. Advanced work planning and reorganization together with structured internal communications are essential to business continuity post pandemics.

2. Recommended measures to protect physical health (1) and psychological well-being of staff(2)

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Airports need to ensure a safe working environment, both physically, and mentally to return to. Enhanced measures are essential to protect physical and mental health post pandemics.

Conditions imposed by previous and current pandemics reveal that COVID-19, as an illness, but also because of containment measures such as lockdown, could have profound and potentially prolonged mental health consequences, particularly with staff who face customers (for example in operational security roles) and who have close contact with passengers.

Some people may suffer from what is known as "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" following return to work and this may persist for a while. Not everyone will demonstrate this so it will be important to check for symptoms such as depression; anxiety; decision making difficulties; poor problem solving; inattention to detail; information processing problems; irritability; mood swings and fearfulness. The conditions could continue to exist for a while if not dealt with effectively by trained personnel. The longer the uncertainty prevails the more these symptoms will persist. Airports may have to employ qualified psychologists to help deal with problem.

2.2 PROBLEM DEFINITION 1.

As a public space the airport is exposed to potential spread of virus. Human Resources departments play a crucial role in ensuring safe working conditions to both frontline workers as well as administrative staff. It is essential to eliminate/reduce to the maximum extent possible the chance of contamination between airport employees and passengers.

2.3 PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

- Provide personal protection equipment for those professionals who are in contact with baggage, involved in cleaning operations or at border/security/customs control including any other position highly exposed to the virus, as required by national standards
- Changing rooms are to be closed or properly disinfected and sanitized
- Ensure the supply of personal protection equipment as required by national standards
- Place plastic screens to protect staff exposed to the public on all front desks and security tracks as well as other controls such as borders and customs
- Avoid biometric ID methods. Only contactless card IDs in the entire airport facility
- Implement COVID-19 tests for employees on a frequent basis for all employees
- Provide extra insurance coverage for employees affected by COVID-19.

2.4 EXPECTED OUTCOME

Much reduced levels of cross contamination between airport employees and passengers. Safe working environment, lower cases of absenteism, burn out, and sick leaves.

2.5 PROBLEM DEFINITION 2.

Airport employees coming back to work might experience psychological issues firstly by being exposed to spread of virus working in public space, secondly due to personal circumstance as employees' well-being might have worsened during lockdown.

2.6 PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

- Strong emphasis on employees personal physical safety
- Empathy and understanding of the specific individual circumstances of people and managing these with sensitivity
- Ensure visible and supportive leadership
- Establish hotline to address the issues related to anxiety and stress
- Appoint a trustworthy person within each team/department who will serve as the person of reference for all related Health & Safety COVID-19 issues
- Organise group and private consultation with medical specialists, as well as peer support groups.
- Provision of "safe" spaces for people to go to "unwind".
- As it is expected that the financing of these measures will be difficult during the COVID-19 crisis, the following four phase approach is recommended to develop a sustainable support system within the airport community:
  o Bringing together psychologically relevant and accurate information and material;
  o providing psychological first aid by training a network of suitable employees;
  o implementing a systematic approach to enable employees to access support when needed and
  o bringing in specialist psychological professionals when required to provide individualised support.

2.7 EXPECTED OUTCOME

The above proposed measures will help employees feeling secure at their workplace which will result in employees' engagement, staff retention, increased levels of airport service quality, and lower numbers of absenteeism.

3. Additional and new skills required to face the aftermath of the crisis

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

Resuming airport operations after a prolonged lockdown will require certain competencies and new skills. It is strongly recommended to organize e-learning/webinars to focus on raising awareness about sanitary measures, internal procedures, and psychological competencies.

3.2 PROBLEM DEFINITION

Airport employees need to be acquainted with the new hygienic and safety norms applied in the terminal and at the work space. The employee safety instructions need to be updated.

HR departments will need to organize additional trainings/workshops/presentations explaining the new work order to airport staff.

3.3 PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

- Training on knowledge of sanitary measures:
    - o Understand and apply all hygienic norms in all activities of airport including in operational processes such as boarding/disembarkation to ensure physical distancing if/where required
    - o Define procedures to deal with passenger/employee showing COVID-19 symptoms
    - o Develop transparent communication solutions (make sanitary processes more visible)
- Create virtual exercise training to ensure the physical condition of employees (this relates to job profiles where good physical condition is required)
- Psychological competencies:
    - o Resilience
    - o Empathy
    - o Understanding and knowledge of relaxation techniques
    - o Stress management
    - o Dealing with depression/loneliness/loss
- Communications and digital skills:
    - o Use of new technologies for remote working
    - o E-learning: support employees working from home with psychological guidance, including virtual reality/gamification skills to enable to cope, train and manage fast changing, emerging situations and communication needs
    - o Health related applications for smartphones
    - o Empower the leadership team with new ways to lead remote teams, for an extended period of time, including resource mobilization skills, situational decision-making skills, and complexity management skills
- Liaise with national psychological organisations to help teach people the skills of resilience and empathy and to provide general support.

3.4 EXPECTED OUTCOME

HR departments play a paramount role in bringing employees back to work. The range of trainings explaining new work procedures as well as skillsets required in post pandemics will help airport employees adapt to new work procedures faster.

CONCLUSION

The recovery from the crisis will be long and slow. The airport HR departments will play an essential role in the organisation of new work procedures, ensuring a safe and healthy work environment to return to, and provide adequate compensation and benefits package in order to retain highly qualified airport staff.

The implementation of the above solutions will be particularly important to keep the airport workforce well informed, trained to work in public space post pandemic, and confident to come back to a safe working environment after an extensive period of lockdown.