

Transforming Employee Experience in post-COVID-19 Asia

The global pandemic has rapidly forced revolutionary changes in organisational work practices. As we assess the results, we ask what this means for Asia and describe how Employee Experience programs will be of strategic importance to make needed changes

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One of the greatest workplace transformations of our lifetime is underway and will continue for some time. COVID-19 has undeniably stress-tested every organisational system and managerial practice. In response, many organisations have shown enormous creativity and flexibility. In this article I discuss some of the implications for Employee Experience practice in Asia.

Approaching the midpoint of what has already been a year of unprecedented global changes, organisations face two major overlapping challenges: 1) how to continue engaging with remote employees and 2) determining how much of current practice will remain when we start to go back.

As time goes on and what were originally seen as emergency measures settle in to become standard practice, how will organisations reconcile the old ways with the new normal? Will we see a “snap back” or a move forward in positive people practice? And how well placed are Asian organisations to seize this opportunity for transformation?

Rising to the challenge

In the face of this year’s huge and unexpected COVID-19 challenge, organisations had to act fast. They implemented programs and initiatives that, previous to the pandemic, would have been deemed impossible. Organisations have been forced, in a sense, to trust in the system that many said would never work. To trust in their people rather than controlling them. Though it is still early days, enough time has now passed that we can say most of these actions have met with considerable success.

Recent research reported by [World Economic Forum](#) has suggested many positive developments have emerged from the way organisations around the world have handled the COVID-19 crisis. These include stronger organisational culture and improved employee experience (including both employee engagement and employee wellbeing). Most significantly, nearly 80% of respondents stated that employee productivity has remained steady or even improved.

In fact, these findings should come as no surprise. They are a strong validation of an idea long championed by people management professionals: good things happen (even in the face of crisis) when greater focus is put on your people.

They are also a great example on a vast scale of the psychological concept known as the *Pygmalion effect*, which describes how people live up to, or down to, your expectations of them. Faced with an existential threat – let people work remotely or shut down operations – organisations were in a real sense forced to trust their people. In the event, that turns out to have produced good results. People have paid back that trust in kind, often with added dividends.

I have been speaking to many of my contacts and they have all told me that they are actually working harder and longer now that they are working from home. I wonder if employees are doing this because they are grateful to still have a job and they want to demonstrate that they are not “slacking off,” but are in fact putting in overtime to justify their trust placed in them by managers.

Looking ahead, both organisations and employees are realising that these changes to how people work are largely here to stay. A large majority of companies currently have no end date planned for flexible working arrangements, while [Gallup](#) reports only one in four staff members in the US have expressed a desire to return to the workplace

once restrictions are lifted. These are strong indicators that the recent increased focus on employee wellbeing, improved communication and engagement will need to continue in the long term.

Organisations worldwide are now left with the choice: try to stuff the genie back in the bottle or embrace the new ways of working.

The coming revolution in Asian people management practice

The pace of change to people management practice in Asia was already undergoing a slow evolution; COVID-19 has accelerated some of those changes and produced a revolution. Based on this widespread remote work experiment, it is time for a fresh assessment based on what is working well in Employee Experience, particularly in people management and talent retention. And to ask the question: is Asia ready for these changes?

Management practice in many Asian organisations has long been described as paternalistic. This style has its advantages and disadvantages. It is often marked by its hierarchy, with a non-challenging culture of deference to senior leaders and a strong expectation of “toeing the line” from employees. People managers are typically most comfortable with a command and control style, with lots of micromanagement and a strong focus on processes over people.

Many Asian work cultures have previously been highly averse to remote work or working from home, believing in the equation “present = productive” in a quest to exercise constant monitoring of employees. The resulting lack of employee autonomy and absence of empowerment are among the key factors that have led to levels of reported [employee engagement](#) in Asia that are among the lowest in the world.

While some organisations remain resistant to letting go of these ways, the success of this global remote working experiment suggests that this resistance may be both misplaced and even harmful to employee engagement.

Broadly speaking, [productivity](#) has not significantly declined during COVID-19. Which, it is worth saying, is a remarkable fact even in normal circumstances, let alone during the huge uncertainty of a global pandemic. Employees have enjoyed the flexibility and options that remote working gives them. They feel empowered to make choices for themselves about where and how to get their work done. And they are unlikely to want to surrender this ability. Given this taste of freedom, there is arguably no going back.

In fact, this flexibility may well give a competitive boost to organisations that can incorporate its advantages while continuing to effectively manage its challenges. What must Asian organisations do to gain these advantages?

Chance for Positive Change...or missed opportunity

The idea that organisations will simply “snap back” to pre-COVID-19 practice is now highly unlikely. I believe it is necessary to instead talk about a “snap forward” to management practices that are more engaging for your people.

The year’s events have shown that flexibility is not only possible, it is now expected. Management practice must follow this lead. When exploring the “new normal” of what culture and organisational values will be, a focus on openness and transparency will be prominent themes.

Especially among managers whose habitual style is command and control, achieving these changes will require a shift in mindset from a Directive style of management to one that is more Consultative and Collaborative. The idea of **Manager as Coach** applies well to this situation, as does promoting a **Feedback Culture**.

Employee Experience now more than ever

I want to suggest that Employee Experience will be the primary means of managing this transition by providing the timely insight and guidance needed to make strategic decisions. Given its strategic importance, let me provide an overview of Employee Experience, which is well illustrated through the practice of continuous listening.

Continuous listening means asking the right people the right questions at the right time to get the right information, which is then given to the right managers and leaders when they need it.

In organisational terms, the focus of continuous listening efforts is ongoing action toward improvement. In other words, listening is just the price of admission. The true benefits are realised when focused action is applied where it is most needed to enable business improvements.

Shifting mindset and culture starts with leadership. But more than that, it requires those in leadership positions to make their decisions informed by awareness of what employees actually want, what actually matters to them.

Three action points for leaders and managers (Ask – Analyse – Act)

First, **ASK**. Faced with rapid change and uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is more important than ever to listen to your people. Because some managers have a mix of co-located and remote working employees, now is the time to invest in building a feedback system that includes multiple methods and channels to engage and communicate with employees across different settings. This versatile approach also lays the groundwork for future listening strategies.

The art here is to strike a balance of frequency and detail that is just enough, but not too much. More frequent short surveys used as pulse checks are a good way to check *in* with staff, ideally without making them feel that your intent is to check *up* on them. In other words, focus more on care than control.

With all the stressors they already have on their plates, you want to make sure that your people are comfortable telling you what is really going on with them during a difficult and chaotic time. The objective of this process is to get accurate information so that issues get surfaced in a timely manner and are addressed before bigger problems emerge.

In an Asian setting, the use of online feedback channels such as regular check-in pulses or pop-up surveys has another benefit. Some staff will find these digital means more discrete and less confronting than a face-to-face discussion. This increases the likelihood that they will share information on sensitive issues, such as areas where they might be struggling. In this way, managers can collaborate with human resources to develop timely responses to situations that might otherwise go unaddressed.

Importantly, the survey process must be undertaken not as a box-tick exercise that seeks feedback then fails to act on it (perceived and rightly maligned as “pretend listening”). Rather it must be an effort to genuinely engage with the insight that is gathered and, ultimately, to do something with it!

Next, **ANALYSE**. High quality data is the goal. Even with regular pulses, the way to get it is to identify a set of pertinent questions on key topics, then give employees the chance to express freely via open text. Expressing their views more broadly lends itself to sentiment analysis and text analytics that can help identify the themes that are most pressing in their urgency and frequency, highlighting hot spots for attention and action.

Together with text analytics for unstructured data, make use of the suite of data analytics that are available in most [employee engagement software](#) to translate numerical data to unique insights.

To truly harness the full power of data analytics, your goal is to achieve the 3C's:

- First, these tools must provide you **Control** over your own data that enables you to undertake further and continuous analyses of employee sentiment across their work journey.
- Next, to further improve **Clarity** of the voluminous amount of data collected, you must have access to the latest data science (including artificial intelligence, machine learning and predictive analytics) that investigate relationships, identify impact and produce predictions.
- Finally, the ultimate prize is to have all the data collected at critical touch points across the employee stages (from candidate to employee, through onboarding and employee engagement right up to exit) to be **Connected** on a dashboard for ongoing tracking and remedial intervention.

Here you also ask how this data will influence the decisions your leaders and managers make on how to engage with your people this year. Determine where you are, and where you need to be, to achieve your organisational objectives and financial goals while taking into account the enormously changed global conditions of 2020. Once you have an informed strategy in place, it is time for implementation.

Now you need to **ACT**. Having identified themes, it is time to decide what actions are needed to address them effectively, swiftly and with greatest impact.

With the increased frequency of pulse surveys, there is a natural opportunity to develop a **continuous improvement** process. Each successive round of asking, analysis and action contributes to a virtuous feedback loop that improves ongoing data quality and accelerates organisational learning. This iterative process develops a system of actions that encourages managers to intervene early, often and in real-time.

Something else is well worth bearing in mind here. The Total Quality Management (TQM) movement is famous for the phrase, “If you can’t measure it, you can’t improve it.” Taking this to heart, organisations will often hold managers accountable for measurable improvements made on their action plans. Sometimes, however, what counts is not always something that can be counted. Here it is the intangible aspects that produce tangible benefits. In these challenging and stressful times, it is equally important for managers to be empathetic, flexible and compassionate to maintain the well-being, health and safety of their employees.

A key aspect of this phase will be a frank assessment of your organisation’s commitment and capacity to turn these decisions into action, to achieve continuing employee engagement from hire to retire. In particular, to implement new practices your people managers may need a shift in mindset and leadership styles. Supporting them through this process will reap enormous benefits, now and in future.

While much has changed – in some ways very dramatically – the fundamentals remain the same, particularly related to people: your employees and your customers. More than ever, Employee Experience is a continuous learning cycle to attract, retain and grow your talent; who will, in turn, provide the outstanding service and engage your customers in ways that differentiate your organisation and ensure your competitive edge.

Your Employee Experience Partner in Asia and APAC region

As the current revolution in people management practice continues to unfold across post-COVID-19 Asia and you explore what your own **Ask – Analyse – Act** approach may be, look to DSRInsight to be your Employee Engagement partner. Our multinational team is made up of a network of highly experienced independent professionals. They have previously worked in leading consulting firms and large organisations and now bring these years of expertise and practical know-how to our clients.

With advanced human resources and Industrial psychology degrees and extensive hands-on knowledge, they are subject matter experts specifically in the area of Employee Experience. More than that, they know first-hand the importance of turning the rich insight gathered in an Employee Experience program into real action that gets tangible results for your organisation.



About Digital Survey Research Insight – [DSRInsight](#) is a management consulting company that helps organisations across Asia-Pacific to strategize, design and deliver Employee Experience programs