2021 set to bring fresh set of challenges for HR

HRD explores some of the pressing issues facing the industry this year

BY Jess Bell / 13 Jan 2021 / Share

As employees return to work, thoughts will be on the challenges up ahead for 2021.

While they're unlikely to match those of last year, HR professionals will undoubtedly face new hurdles as the world of work continues to evolve.

Speaking to *HRD*, workplace culture and leadership expert Tammy Tansley outlined some of the biggest challenges facing the profession this year.

"There are some continuing issues from last year and the first one is taking the lessons that we learned around remote and flexible working," she said.

"Now we know it can be done and it can be done very effectively. But I think what we also learned last year was that it's not the total solution.

"There needs to be a hybrid model of remote working that also allows for collaboration and problem solving, all work which requires people being together."

The short-term methods put in place during the crisis phase last year will have to be remodelled into long-term initiatives that work for a hybrid workforce.

HR teams will also have to deal with the practical issues of rostering and enabling workers to remain COVID-safe while in the office.

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The other trend Tansley hopes will continue is the push towards better mental health support for employees.

"In the last few years we've seen lots of activity around mental health first aid and a growing awareness of what that looks like," she said.

"But again, I think that's going to become much more sophisticated this year.

"It's the question of how do we create psychological safety as a concept so that people feel really safe coming to work, whether that's from a Covid perspective, a mental health perspective, or an inclusion perspective."

The issue of safety includes from the threat of domestic violence – something that has become a workplace responsibility since the rise of working from home.

Again, HR professionals will need to delve deeper into what they are doing to keep employees safe.

Health and safety obligations are another difficult challenge for the industry.

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While cases are far lower than during the first wave last year, the recent outbreaks in NSW and Melbourne show how quickly the situation can change.

During the Northern Beaches outbreak an infected person had gone into the office, highlighting the continually high risk that workplaces present.

While the state government had urged businesses to bring employers back in a bid to boost the economy within the city, HR leaders are now having to reconsider the health and safety risks.

This ability to react quickly to future outbreaks and scale down activity within the workplace will be crucial for maintaining smooth and efficient operations throughout 2021.

Later this year, the issue of vaccinations is bound to be another hot topic for HR.

Talk of mandatory vaccinations is already building within certain industries like healthcare, aged cade and potentially even the aviation sector.

But a huge number of ethical and legal ramifications stand in the way.

Tansley said it will be vital for HR leaders to operate with empathy as they navigate their way through this tricky issue.

"Once you start talking about a blanket rollout, it's going to really test some interesting ethical questions around personal rights vs the needs of a society," she said.