

INTERVIEW

Upskilling and rapid learning applications will lead the way in future

Ahmedali N, Mentor, Cornucopia - V5 Global - a unit of FirstMeridian talks about the shifts in pharma hiring and training since the onset of the pandemic and elaborates on the emerging trends and strategies in talent management, sourcing, retention in the pharma sector, in an interview with **Viveka Roychowdhury**



Pharma companies had to work through the lockdown as essential services. What were some challenges related to staffing, accommodation, training younger staff to perform without seniors who might have been in the higher age risk group, permits, etc.?

Pharma companies have both blue-collar and white-collar employees. They typically operate across different models and are involved in manufacturing, R&D, field sales and more.

In the last few months, many companies were operational around the clock to meet the demand for products. The industry, as a whole, had to adapt to newer ways of working in a very short period. There were various challenges with the supply chain, procurement, retaining quality and meeting production deadlines.

One of the biggest

challenges has been staffing. All sectors have seen their share of attrition in the past few months, which has created challenges for training and maintaining quality and continuity of operations.

In pharma and other sectors, a solution to this has been adopting contract staffing and managed services. These services allow companies to expand their workforce without undertaking the pain of training and managing the staff.

In the current situation, while the industry needs to add people, constant disruptions are a challenge to training. Many companies have been addressing this issue by virtual training programmes for their employees.

With these challenges in place, upskilling and rapid learning applications will lead the way in future, which will

help companies train their staff virtually.

A lot of pharma companies who worked through the lockdown had a sizeable section of staff getting the COVID-19 infection. How are they coping with staffing challenges, especially as the second wave looks to be worse than the first?

Every sector has had its share of challenges. The pharma sector adopted standard protocols like regular temperature checks, sanitising work areas, limiting contact, and face shields.

Like many other industries, the pharma industry also adopted a hybrid work model. About 30 per cent of the staff will be under the hybrid model, where they are required to be present in the office only a certain number of days. About 40 per cent of the staff will stick to traditional working in the office to execute strategic processes. R&D units are operating with 50 per cent staff.

Special leave policies were designed to help employees who had tested positive for COVID-19.

As mentioned earlier, pharma companies have begun adopting contract / temporary staffing services to meet staffing demand. Outsourced staffing helps meet the temporary shortfall or additional short-term increase in demand.



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Outsourced staffing also provides companies with the flexibility of additional workforce on demand – they get the option to hire a skilled workforce for short periods without the hassles of hiring, onboarding, exits and the other tedious processes involved. In the functioning of Medical Affairs, Medical Liaison, product development and R&D, Regulatory and Pharmacovigilance, there exist many opportunities for outsourced staffing solutions.

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Given that the pharma

sector requires staff with specific skill sets and qualifications, how is the pharma sector different from other sectors when it comes to talent management, sourcing, retention?

The pharma industry requires highly qualified people with specific skill-sets. Depending on the company and the sector, there might be additional requirements that need specialised training. For instance, besides digital and technical skills, some companies require employees with skills like empathy and communication while dealing with the doctors on the field.

Managed Services can positively help here – right from recruitment and onboarding to training and

expanding the team as needed. Having a suitably well-skilled workforce is notably vital because a skilled workforce is precisely what will help companies meet their targets and emerging demands.

Pharma companies are different from other sectors in terms of hiring. The difference is typically linked to a clash of old vs new culture and the changing nature of the expectations from external stakeholders.

The pharma sector hires both blue and white-collar staff. Has the pandemic impacted staffing services in these two levels of staff? Is temporary hiring a solution?

Pharma industry, as compared to other sectors, is

a little different and slightly more conservative. Generally, they take time to try newer ways of working. At the same time, they are beginning to realise the severity of the COVID situation. The companies are in an observant phase and experimenting with different opportunities to stabilise their businesses. There is uncertainty of the future and hence they are reluctant to add on too many headcounts.

Therefore, contract staffing is the future in meeting employee shortage needs of employees owing to lack of skills and the ongoing pandemic.

What are the potential solutions to these staffing issues, especially as it looks

like there could be recurrent waves of COVID-19?

The recurrent waves of COVID-19 will be a reality as assessed by experts worldwide; pharma companies have started to broaden their perspective and adopt contract staffing just as IT and Telecom industries have. The challenge could be the differentiation between permanent and temporary staff, employee relations, and employee engagement.

Companies that provide mature products and are well known in the market can utilise temporary staff to promote mature products, possibly becoming a prevalent trend sooner than later.

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