

14 Apr 2020 - Mel Green, Research Advisor

# Coronavirus and the workforce: doing the right thing in a crisis

Exploring how people professionals can navigate ethical decision-making through COVID-19

People professionals often need to make complex decisions in a rapidly changing environment. Never has this been truer than today, as the coronavirus pandemic creates a wealth of challenges for businesses and the people within them.

Some organisations have had to scale up or change their operating model to cope with increased demand, while others move to remote working. Some industries have had to cease operations entirely. To say these changes have had a huge impact on businesses is an understatement.

Organisations need to make difficult decisions, and make them quickly. They also need to do this under pressure – a risk factor for unethical behaviour, according to our research on the [drivers of unethical behaviour at work](#). Taking a principled, ethical approach to decision-making is ultimately required to ensure the best possible outcomes for all.

## Ethical decision-making in a complex environment

Positively, many businesses are doing the right thing, going above and beyond to support employees, adapt ways of working and allow vulnerable people to take time off work while still receiving pay. The people profession is often at the centre of this, and we're celebrating the brilliant work our profession is doing in our [#HRtogether campaign](#).

However, we've all heard reports of businesses making short term decisions that risk employee health or job security during the crisis, or [workers losing jobs or pay while shareholders are paid out dividends](#). Calling out these high-profile controversial approaches is important. But all businesses will have to make day-to-day decisions throughout this pandemic where there's not a clear 'right' or 'wrong' course of action.

## The role of the people profession

As the profession that champions better work and working lives, we need more than ever to demonstrate [ethical practice](#) and weave [professional principles](#) into decision-making (work matters, people matter, and professionalism matters).

Ethical practice is an integral part of HR's professional identity. Our [research exploring HR professionalism](#) found that 85% of people professionals say ethical values are important to them in their working lives. Perhaps it's not surprising then, that HR is often called on to be the moral compass of an organisation.

However, this can be a tall order. Our [2018 People Profession Survey](#) found that 28% of people professionals felt it was often necessary to compromise ethical values in their company. The same survey found that 63% said economic value is often the most important factor in how people professionals have their work evaluated, far higher than contributing to employee well-being or the wider society.

People professionals, like any other workers, are under pressure to deliver on financial business objectives. In a time of economic turbulence, many organisations are struggling, which creates potential tensions between short term cost saving and employee well-being or job security, as well as long term business sustainability. In response to this, the CIPD has developed a [COVID-19 workforce planner](#) to support people professionals to consider different approaches and strategies to manage their workforce ethically during this pandemic.

## A collective effort

With the pandemic likely to cause long term economic instability and uncertainty in all spheres of life, the people profession needs to continue to role model ethical practice and ethical decision-making to ensure businesses adapt their workforce appropriately and think about the long term.

Big businesses have already, and will likely continue to be, publicly scrutinised and called out when they behave unethically. It will be interesting to see how this impacts their decision-making going forward, and whether we see a shift in short term unethical business practices that hinder employee and societal well-being.

However, people professionals alone can't make this shift. They need the support of business leaders to make ethical decisions and create businesses practices that treat employees as legitimate stakeholders in decisions. This will help organisations to respond to challenges brought about by the pandemic and support their workforces through these unprecedented times.

