

COOL, CALM,

HOW BRISCOE GROUP MAINTAINED FRONTLINE RESILIENCE DURING A LOCKDOWN

BY JD DILLON

March 25, 2020 brought about a sudden and sobering reality for the team at Briscoe Group Limited. Like many companies around the world, they were required to close their 85 homeware and sporting goods stores across New Zealand as the nation entered a level four lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This unforeseen turn of events introduced a brand-new set of challenges for the retailer. At the top of that list: 'How do we keep connected to our team and what do we need to do to give them peace of mind?' The closure meant the company's 2100 employees would be staying home for an unknown period of time. The leadership team made adjustments to stay connected and continue doing their jobs from home where it was possible. Although a limited number of retail staff would return early to support the online sale and dispatch of essential goods, most of the 1900 people who work on the frontline in stores and distribution centres would not have that option.

According to Aston Moss, Briscoe Group's general manager of human resources, the company's immediate attention turned to its frontline staff. 'One of the early commitments we made was that we would look after our team throughout this experience, which meant keeping them all on full pay.' But making sure people could pay their bills and feed their families was only the first step. The team was intent on maintaining employee engagement, and perhaps even strengthening their workplace culture, despite the most trying circumstances.

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COMMUNICATION: THE REAL ESTATE OF CULTURE

'In pandemic planning – and most things HR – the 3 most important things are communication, communication, communication,' said Moss. His team rapidly developed an engagement strategy that would keep employees connected to the company as they waited at home. The foundation of their strategy: digital communication.

Briscoe Group uses the Axonify learning solution for their frontline digital training. Before the lockdown, they had already established an exceptional level of learning engagement. 94% of their employees log in to complete training on average two to three times per week. The team took advantage of this engagement to deploy their new communication strategy. Axonify provided a 'one-to-all' communication tool for their entire frontline staff. And, because employees had already developed a daily learning habit, they knew their messages would be received.

The team focused their communication strategy on the 'whys' – why would people continue to engage with company information and training while at home? As a result of this employee-centred perspective, they applied a multi-faceted approach. Some messages were purely informational, providing general updates on the company.

Others were of a more inspirational and motivational tone, sharing messages of hope and solidarity. The communication plan also included Briscoe Group's brand ambassadors, including famous athletes, chefs and fashion designers, who delivered personal wishes for employee safety and wellbeing. Key leaders from within the business were also featured because there's nothing quite like hearing it from the people you know personally. 'Keeping a human face was critical, and these were all people who had the trust and respect of our team members.'

As a result of this approach, engagement actually increased during the lockdown. 98% of employees accessed Axonify, with the average increasing to between three and four times per week.

STILL LEARNING AT HOME

Employees continued to receive digital communications from the company's leadership team throughout the lockdown. But they also did more than just review the latest messages after they logged in. They continued to voluntarily complete short, personalised digital training sessions.

Briscoe Group HR maintained this daily learning habit by keeping their training content fresh, current and relevant.

They launched new product knowledge content that was already in development before the lockdown rather than waiting for employees to return to work. They also partnered with Axonify and The Capability Group to enhance their content agility and quickly introduce new, highly relevant topics, such as health and hygiene, work from home practices, and mental health and mindfulness.

Once again, employees engaged more than expected. 'Our people have responded. They've voted with their fingers and their ears and their eyes by going online. They've done more learning and they've used the materials on the platform to help them stay safe and well.' Not only did team members complete their typical daily training sessions, but they also accessed more self-directed training. Extra training sessions per person went up from 11.3 to 15.1 per month. Throughout April, employees answered more than 980,000 reinforcement questions. But, most important of all, they learned a lot by continuing to do their training at home. Their knowledge of critical, relevant topics increased by an average of 9.8% with some topics seeing increases as high as 28%.

Briscoe Group HR also introduced a rewards program in Axonify to recognise employees for their continued engagement in company communication and training. They launched a series of prize draws and lotteries based on daily training activities. Winners received a range of prizes, from \$50 vouchers to company merchandise.

THE PATH FORWARD

The New Zealand government reduced the alert status to level three on April 27, 2020, after almost five weeks of lockdown. This allowed Briscoe Group to start bringing their frontline employees back to work. Bricks and mortar stores, the majority of the business' footprint, remain closed until a lower alert level is in place. Sales are limited



to online and contactless options. Employees who are particularly vulnerable or have unique circumstances remain at home. Now, alongside so many other disrupted businesses around the world, everyone in the company must work together to move forward and find their next normal. But Moss and the team are firmly up to the task. 'I'm incredibly lucky to work as part of a phenomenally engaged and motivated team.'

Maintaining exceptional communication and learning engagement during the lockdown has helped Briscoe Group get a headstart on their business restoration process. They won't need to spend time and resources reboarding their workforce on the day they return. Instead, they built their resilience by keeping them informed and educated for the entire five weeks they were away.

What exactly will retail look like in the near future? With the pandemic unlikely to subside over the next few months, no one knows for sure. However, Briscoe Group recognises just how important their brand experience will be for customers who may struggle with the decision to return to bricks and mortar stores over the near term. 'We have to play our best game ever so every customer who does come in understands and trusts our brand is there to satisfy their needs.' And the frontline will continue to play a critical role in bringing this brand promise to life.

'For us, the frontline represents the bottom line.'



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JD Dillon is one of the most prolific authors and speakers in the global L&D community. For 20 years, he worked in operations and learning roles within highly regarded organisations, including Disney, Kaplan, Brambles and AMC Theatres. JD is now chief learning architect with Axonify and founder of LearnGeek.