



Jean-Pierre Brun

Professor of Management at Laval University (Canada)
Expert at Empreinte humaine

Risk management & Covid-19: the human impact of the crisis

What are the impacts of the crisis on people, corporate culture and performance? We hear the views of Jean-Pierre Brun, Professor of Management at Laval University and expert at Empreinte humaine that were shared at the Icsi webinar held on February 4, 2021.

What are the impacts of the crisis on operators and managers?

Since March 2020, our professional and personal lives have shrunk and all of our ecosystems have been impacted (education, the economy, social lives, culture). Nobody is safe, and we should not think that all this is just a difficult time that will pass, leaving no traces. The people who work in your organizations, their families, and others that are close to them are all being impacted by the situation.

At Empreinte humaine, we conducted [5 surveys in 2020](#) to take the pulse of the French working population. The study found that 50% of respondents showed signs of significant distress: anxiety, decreased optimism, depression. These symptoms are unrelated to post-traumatic stress, but rather to chronic stress that has long-term effects.

3 populations are particularly at risk:

- **workers aged under 29**, especially those who are working remotely. Youth is all about social relationships, and isolation has caused significant distress.
- **women**, who have a higher rate of distress than men. They have paid the highest price for working at home, and the invasion of the workplace into domestic life.
- **managers**, who I see as industrial athletes: it is clear that they have an excessive workload, they suffer from fatigue, and find it difficult to recover. Rates of sick leave and absenteeism have increased.

What are the impacts on corporate culture and performance?

The first problem is keeping track of the **workload**, especially when working remotely. We all expected to see a better work-life balance, and more free time given the lack of travel, but we have filled that time with meetings. 'Zoom fatigue' has set in: how many remote meetings can you stand and how can employees switch off?

Another critical point is **remote teams, the erosion of group cohesion and corporate culture**. Remote communication is 'cold': human relations and dialogue must be recreated.

Recognition is also a key challenge. I often say that we should not only recognize the results, but also the efforts of everyone. That is even more true at this time.

Finally, we are seeing many companies adopt an approach that is based on **benevolent management**, listening, tolerance, and flexibility.

For more information

>> [Follow the "Risk Management & Covid-19" campaign](#)

Icsi is examining the Covid-19 crisis from the angle of the "health crisis and major risk management". It has launched a new program based on 3 axes: an observatory, discussion about the future, and an international perspective.

[Explore the Risk Management & Covid-19 section of our website.](#)

Although this is a good start, it is not enough; we also need to work on **management and governance practices**. Companies have resumed work at a frantic pace since last autumn, despite a context of individual fatigue and a lack of motivation. The balance between meeting objectives and people's resources is poorly set. We must examine **the impact of management demands on workload** and make **quality of life at work a criterion for decisions** at the highest level.

How can we recreate links, human relations and team spirit in this context?

There are two points that I think are essential:

1. For a manager, it is important to be **proactive with team members** and to ask for regular updates.

But you have to be vigilant. Simply asking "how are you doing?" or saying "my door is open and you can come in anytime" is not enough. In our last survey, we asked the question "Would you dare tell your employer that you are not doing so well?" and 50% of respondents said no. Furthermore, 60% of people say that they don't need help while all of the indicators are in the red. Stigma and denial remain a problem.

Short, but regular phone calls to check in with people, a chat that is not necessarily about a problem or work issue can do a lot of good in a team. It opens the door to dialogue, and can make it easier for employees to express themselves.

2. At the organizational level, it is necessary to provide **space for discussion and dialogue**.

Often companies offer psychological support, listening cells, or e-learning on

"how to manage a team", they set up a PDF, a tool or a training program. All of this is good, but it is not enough. At the moment, people (both operators and managers) do not need information: they need to talk. This is essential for them to be able to face their individual, group and managerial problems.

But we should be careful. Currently, many meetings are hierarchical exchanges where information from senior management is cascaded down, with little room for discussion about projects, methods, problems or solutions. We need to give people time to talk about how they do their work on a daily basis.

And post-Covid?

We need to prepare for the return to face-to-face working, and not think of it as a return from vacation. Some people will want to continue working from home and there will be many other challenges: some will have been vaccinated and others will refuse to do so, and there may be long-term psychological impacts. New parameters will have to be taken into account.

