

TALKING POINTS FOR 5TH PLENARY SESSION OF THE TWENTY-FIRST INTER-AMERICAN CONFERENCE OF MINISTERS OF LABOR (IACML)

Friday, September 24, 2021

TOPIC:

Strengthening ministries of labor to address emerging changes in the world of work and the effects of the pandemic

Key Areas of Focus

- 1) Emerging Changes in the World of Work
- 2) Pandemic's Impact on the World of Work
- 3) Imperatives for Strengthening Ministries of Labour to Respond the Impact of the Pandemic on the World of Work

INTRODUCTION:

The Workplace of the 21st Century is vastly different from that of 100, 50, 25 years ago - or even 1 year ago. **Areas of Emerging Change Include:** -

- **Technology** – Computer Information Systems that allow for real time communication that transcend national and international borders.
- **Remote Working/Telecommuting**
- **Greater Number of Women and Young People in the Workplace**
- **Workers in the workplace at an Older Age**
- **Greater Number of Businesses Headed by Young Entrepreneurs**
- **Ubiquitous Incorporation of Social Media Tools in the Workplace**
- **Workers who have had several career changes** due to the economic shifts at the national, regional and international levels that have

necessitated retraining and retooling in the workplace in order to maintain currency and relevance in employment

- **Virtual Meetings** – instead of costly, time-consuming and in-person meetings and conferences – such as the ITC driven modality via which this conference is being held.

The Covid-19 Pandemic has left an indelible impact on the World of Work and the Workplace. A number of these changes are permanent and have resulted in significant shocks and shifts in the workplace that must be accommodated. **Some of the areas of Workplace impact created by the pandemic include the follow:**

- Job Losses
- Reduction in Working Hours
- Layoffs/ Furloughs
- Reduction in Productivity & Competitiveness – due to illness and Quarantine
- Complete Business Closure
- High Rates of Absenteeism due to Covid-19 infection of workers or family members for whom workers must render at-home care
- Relatively High Incidence of Covid-19 Deaths of Workers – particularly those who are unvaccinated
- Loss of Talent, Specialised Knowledge from the Corporate Setting when Workers Get Sick or Die.
- Increased Expenditure on Training and Retraining of Workers to Replace those who have out of office as a result of the pandemic

However, not all of the Workplace changes brought about by Covid-19 are negative. One new feature which has caused a paradigm shift is the hosting of virtual meetings and conferences. Due to the needs of social distancing

and other measures to control the spread of the disease, more meetings and conferences are being held virtually, and more efficiently. This has resulted in cost-savings from expenditure associated with travel and accommodations. To do this, some enterprises would have had to invest in new technologies in order to go virtual but these are worthwhile investments.

Exponential growth in businesses producing meeting software is a key indicator of the universal shift towards virtual meetings and conference. These applications include Zoom, Webex, Blue Jeans, Skype, Microsoft Teams, etc.

DISCUSSION FOCUS

What do these changes mean for Ministries of Labour?

I will address this from our pandemic experiences in St. Kitts and Nevis: -

The pandemic has shone the spotlight on key areas of improvements which are required at the Ministerial level. Some of these matters were imperatives before the pandemic but the global medical crisis has now created urgency in attending to them. Areas where our Ministry of Labour require strengthening include: -

- 1) **Acceleration of the move towards critical Labour Law Reform**, as a result of job losses created by the pandemic. Our Legislation re: **Severance Payment Fund and Long Service Gratuities** must be addressed because of their currently limitations to certain sectors and workplace displacement criteria. When these laws and regulations were passed and revised over 35 years ago, no one envisioned a global pandemic.
- 2) **Finalisation of our National Labour Code** – a matter that has been discussed among the social partners for several years with support from the ILO. The Draft Document must now make room for the amendments being contemplated regarding the Severance Payment Fund, closing of loopholes re criteria for severance, and expansion of the eligibility for Long Service Gratuities across the gamut of the productive sectors – rather than continued confinement to (a) manufacturing and (b) tourism and the allied services sectors.

- 3) **Investment in Tools, Technology and Training for Occupational Safety and Health** to be inclusive of Covid-19 protocols, Workplace ergonomics, etc.
- 4) **Greater Partnership with Key Stakeholders to Improve the Workplace and make it Safer** – such partnerships must be strengthened with the Ministry of Health, the National Bureau of Standards and the National Covid-19 Task Force to ensure compliance with Health regulations, Covid-19 protocols, etc in the workplace. Such collaboration are particularly required for jobs in manufacturing, the hotel and tourism industry, the personal care industry where people work in close proximity to each other.
- 5) **Training of Labour Inspectors as Workplace Compliance Officers/Auditors** – with training provided by the Covid-19 Task Force and the Ministries of Health and National Security.
- 6) **Greater Focus on the New Modalities and Working Conditions for Effective Telecommuting/ Remote Working** – requiring home audits (perhaps virtual) – in advance -to ensure that workers will be no worse off by working from home. (There are growing reports and complaints from some private sector workers that even while telecommuting their employers seem to grudgingly allow for coffee and bathroom breaks and time off for lunch. Some assume that workers should be in virtual meetings all day: this is a recipe for poor circulation, swollen legs, and sedentary lifestyles in front of a computer or laptop all day long = poor health in the long run.
- 7) **Conducting Periodic Psycho-Social Assessment of Workers Who Telecommute over Extended Periods** – given that some workers may function better or worse than others in environments where there is an absence of social engagement which easily occurs on-the-job. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that some workers slip into depression from protracted periods of working from home where the customary creativity and stimulation by co-workers is absent.

Psycho-Social Assessments should also be beneficial for workers who have had Covid-19 and may be stigmatized by co-workers once they return to work after recovery.

We need to use this time of adjustment to Covid-19 to improve the way work is conducted – be it in the corporate setting or at home sitting at a computer or workstation. The best practices that emerge can go a long way in securing and insisting on process improvements. We will, in the process, be better prepared for the next pandemic.

Open for questions or comments ...