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The importance of humanizing compliance during a global crisis

By Neha Gupta

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Inspiring employees to care about compliance isn't a challenge new to 2020, but in the midst of a global pandemic, that challenge is understandably magnified. This year, many employees turned their attention to figuring out a remote work environment and adjusting to new expectations and uncertain futures. Those concerns remain valid, and as a result, compliance is not at the forefront of the average employee's mind.

Of course, the need to maintain compliance hasn't disappeared just because of the global crisis. Compliance has changed—in terms of risk, everyday application, and employee needs—so organizations need to change, too, so their guidance is received, understood, and embraced by employees. Humanizing compliance offers a path toward acknowledging employees and emphasizing their important role in keeping the company safe, along with themselves and their coworkers.

A new risk landscape

Sheltering in place forced a significant percentage of the workforce to work from home. We became used to seeing kids and pets wandering in the background on video calls, and we could identify people's favorite T-shirts and baseball caps that they wear at home. We also changed our view of what's important, because no matter what your role was, or which company you worked for, we were all susceptible to a shared threat.

The global pandemic fundamentally transformed—and continues to transform—our professional priorities. This presents major ramifications for compliance, especially if the organization had a “paper program” in place that traditionally handed employees rules and policies and said, “Learn this.” In a COVID-19 world, this approach, at best, is tone-deaf and, at worst, invites workforce apathy.

Furthermore, the pandemic has opened a whole new swath of risk concerns. For example:

- How do you manage talent and monitor ethical conduct in a fully or partially remote workplace?
- Are there areas where risk protocols have changed, like third-party management and supply chain, especially changes in diligence requirements for third-party vendors?
- Will employees who are immunocompromised or have immunocompromised family be pressured to return to the office or face discrimination for being remote?
- How do you protect the privacy of employees who test positive for COVID-19?
- How do you enforce mask policies in accordance with the organization's guidelines and government requirements?
- How do you prevent employees and customers from getting sick—and avoid potential legal action if they do?

- How do you prevent unconscious coronavirus-related bias from seeping into your culture of compliance?

The potential risks go on and on. And with more employees working away from the office, conduct risk naturally increases—even if it's unintentional—because there's less oversight or helpful reminders and social reinforcement of the company values. Further, organizations may experience a reduction (or at least a more complex view) in reporting misconduct as employees choose to stay quiet for fear of retaliation or losing their jobs during such uncertain times. Compliance must adapt to this new reality, from the ways policies are updated to the strategies for communicating those changes while promoting a speak-up culture.

Humanized compliance drives change

Historically, compliance training that took a check-the-box approach was met with a check-the-box response: Employees tolerated learning, and compliance departments hoped a completion percentage would protect the organization in case of regulatory trouble.

In the current COVID-19 landscape—as well as whatever emerges when the crisis abates—check-the-box compliance simply won't be acceptable to the employees or the regulators. Our world has become inherently more complex and distracted. Organizations must figure out how to deliver information in a way that not only strikes a chord with employees, but also makes the learning stick.

The shift that must occur replaces a focus on policy with a focus on values, as well as a transition from presenting information to practicing behavior. Messaging should emphasize why ethical, business, and thoughtful individual decisions are important, rather than the technicalities of law or policy. Again, there are compliance concepts that people need to learn, but sharing that knowledge in a relatable way that connects with the roles and responsibilities they were hired for makes it accessible.

Behavioral change comprises the core of this new paradigm, especially when it comes to training. COVID-19 offers a prime example of this: People might not care to read about the biological structure of the virus, but they will be eager to read tips for keeping themselves safe and maybe pick up some of the technical details along the way. Compliance training should work in a similar way: Give learners the right decision-making skills in situations that matter to them, and they'll adjust their behavior and apply those skills to their day-to-day roles.

Humanizing compliance involves not only getting employees to listen to you, but also listening to your employees. The conversation must feel two-sided so that you acknowledge employee struggles and concerns; the tone, approach, and content must show that you are listening, responding, taking action, and empowering them to do the right thing. The more you humanize, the easier it will be for people to accept and embrace the value system you are promoting.

Building a humanized program

When organizations humanize compliance, content becomes the key driver of an empathetic approach. Ideally, your training content delivers the right message via the right medium. A once-a-week, spray-and-pray compliance newsletter focused on a random topic will be too easily ignored by an audience craving relevant messaging instead of lectures. You'll ultimately lose your employees' interest at a time when you *really* need them to pay attention.

Risk-based mapping can help implement a strategy in which employees are mostly exposed to content that matters to them—and come away having learned something important that they are unlikely to forget. Modern training technology helps sort out this mapping so that compliance departments can focus on the messaging, rather than trying to figure out what to send to whom.

Unfortunately, many organizations don't engage in this humanization, because they simply don't know how. To transform messaging, ask yourself these three questions:

1. **Is my content relevant?** Relevance should apply not only to the individual employee but also the circumstances around the content (e.g., compliance best practices for suddenly remote workers during a lockdown).
2. **Is my content to the point?** Job aids, quick infographics, and checklists help employees understand something quickly—and can be tailored for the intended audience.
3. **Does my content inspire emotion or action?** Create value-based messages that inspire employees to want to improve a situation or protect assets. Talk to people and provide them tools rather than just rote information. For example, scenario-based videos offer an empowering experience by immersing viewers in the emotion of a compliance decision.

Employees still must learn the compliance principles that adhere to policy and law and further the organization's goals and mission. Now the training must engage and apply to the learner, and help practice the right behaviors.

Adaptive learning, which adjusts training in real time to the user's interactions with the course, takes employees on a personalized journey instead of slamming them with a fixed, one-size-fits-all directive. It also makes the results from training measurable, enabling you to be better prepared to take targeted action if a message isn't getting across to learners.

What you do after compliance training is just as important in reinforcing the message to employees. Microlearning, spoken word messages, Netflix-style series, informal collaboration forums for sharing insights—a humanized approach in which you talk to people instead of at them puts the desire for compliance in employees' minds—with the knowledge that you're supporting them every step of the way.

A long-lasting effect

A humanized approach can make this uncertain time for compliance a little less daunting and prepare employees to protect the organization effectively in their day-to-day responsibilities. The benefits of this strategy shift will last long after the current crisis ends.

About the author

Neha Gupta is responsible for her organization's product and technology vision, strategy, and growth. Prior to her role as CEO, Neha served as senior director of learning solutions & strategic initiatives at NYSE Governance Services and as Citigroup's chief of staff for the Institutional Clients Group Technology organization.

Takeaways

- Amid the chaos of the COVID-19 crisis, getting employees to care about compliance has become an even greater challenge.
- With more employees working from home, compliance risk has become broader and more complex.
- Instilling compliance in a human, relatable way is more important than ever.
- Humanizing compliance involves taking a tone, approach, and medium that show you are listening to your employees.

- Today's compliance training content must be personalized, relevant, and to the point, and it must inspire emotion and action, not awareness.

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