

Navigating Unprecedented Challenges: Journey Through a Pandemic and International Conflict

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ABSTRACT

After expanding operations into Ukraine and opening an office in the city of Kharkiv, Veramed's head of the Ukrainian division faced events that required swift adaptation to rapidly changing circumstances. This presentation explores the unique challenges faced that started with a global pandemic and overlapped with an international conflict.

The presentation not only covers transitioning the team to safe remote working whilst maintaining productivity and client satisfaction, but it also delves into the strategies employed such as conducting daily meetings, addressing employee needs and fostering remote social connections. Furthermore, it discusses the manager's efforts to ensure business continuity during the conflict despite power outages and limited internet connectivity.

Through this case study the presentation highlights the importance of adaptability, communication, and resilience in managing teams effectively in unusual and challenging circumstances.

INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, the global community has faced numerous unexpected events that have demanded adaptability from companies all over the world. Amidst this backdrop, Veramed took a significant step in its growth journey. Recognizing the potential in Eastern Europe, the company strategically opened an office in Kharkiv, Ukraine three years ago. This move was not merely a geographic expansion; it was a conscious decision to leverage the abundant local talent and unique capabilities the region offered. Such proactive steps not only signify Veramed's forward-thinking approach but also its commitment to global excellence by integrating diverse expertise into its operations.

The head of the Ukrainian team was very important for Veramed's expansion. This person had to guide the team in normal times and during challenges. The manager had many jobs: looking after daily work, keeping good ties with clients, making sure the team worked well together, and keeping Veramed's main values and goals clear in Ukraine. This shows both the leader's skills and how much Veramed trusted them in the new place.

Not long after Veramed set up its office in Ukraine, the world faced a big problem – the COVID-19 pandemic. This caused many problems for businesses, like changes in buying patterns and the need for people to work from home. On top of this, Veramed's team in Ukraine had more problems because of international conflicts, making the area less stable and harder to reach.

Dealing with both a pandemic, which brought health dangers and work issues, and an international conflict, which brought unpredictability and risks for the team, was a big challenge for the Veramed group in Ukraine. They needed to be very adaptable, communicate well, and stay strong to keep working and make sure everyone was safe.

This paper will look at how Veramed's team in Ukraine dealt with many challenges during difficult times. We'll see how the manager made quick changes, kept up the work, made clients happy, and continued business even when there was no power or poor internet. This story shows how important good leadership, flexibility, and clear communication are when managing a team in tough situations.

By looking at Veramed's time in Ukraine, this paper wants to add to the conversation about how companies can stay strong and change when faced with big challenges. It gives important lessons for other companies in similar situations.

TRANSITION TO REMOTE WORK DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In recent times, Veramed had made a significant move by opening an office in Ukraine. This decision was taken with a forward-looking strategy, primarily aiming at tapping into the rich talent the region offered. Not long after establishing its presence, the company identified and hired six promising students for its first Graduate Training Programme (GTP) in Ukraine. This program, spanning three months, is meticulously designed to offer a comprehensive understanding of the SAS programming language, hone soft skills, and provide a deep dive into the nuances of the pharma industry.

Originally, Veramed envisioned a hands-on, in-person training approach for these fresh recruits. The idea was simple yet effective: young learners would immerse themselves in the office environment, absorbing knowledge through peer interactions, seeking clarifications face-to-face, and learning the ropes under the direct guidance of experienced programmers and statisticians. This environment was seen as an incubator for nurturing skills and fostering growth, with an emphasis on team collaboration and real-time learning.

However, the world was soon gripped by the COVID-19 pandemic, an unforeseen challenge that demanded drastic changes in operational dynamics. Veramed, prioritizing the safety of its staff, made the immediate decision to temporarily shut down its Kharkiv office. This sudden shift posed a significant challenge, especially for the GTP participants. They were poised to embark on an enriching journey, but the closure meant that the much-anticipated direct interactions and on-the-spot guidance would now be missed.

But as the saying goes, "When one door closes, another opens." Veramed was quick to adapt, leveraging technology and innovating its approach. The primary tool in bridging the communication gap became virtual rooms. These digital platforms allowed for seamless interactions, ensuring that the graduates could ask questions, seek clarifications, and even engage in group discussions, much like they would in a physical setting. It provided a space where the line between learning and interaction blurred, mimicking the office environment to the best extent possible.

Additionally, to ensure that the camaraderie among the GTP participants wasn't lost, Veramed organized remote social activities. These activities aimed to instill a sense of belonging and community among the participants. Virtual team-building exercises, online group projects, and even casual digital hangouts became regular features. These not only kept the spirit of teamwork alive but also provided much-needed breaks from the intensity of the program.

In hindsight, the transition was undoubtedly challenging, but with a combination of adaptability, strategic communication tools, and an emphasis on team bonding, Veramed turned potential setbacks into successful adaptations. The graduates, initially overwhelmed, found themselves thriving in this new setup. They not only mastered the technical aspects of their training but also adapted to the nuances of remote collaboration, a skill that's invaluable in today's digital age.

In conclusion, Veramed's experience during the COVID-19 pandemic stands as a testament to the company's resilience and adaptability. It showcases how, with the right approach and tools, challenges can be transformed into opportunities for growth and learning. This chapter in Veramed's journey offers invaluable lessons for organizations worldwide, emphasizing the importance of adaptability, communication, and a human-centric approach, even in the most challenging times.

ADAPTING TO WORKING DURING CONFLICT

The world of business is often tested by external factors, and Veramed's Ukrainian division was no exception. Following the difficulties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the company found itself in the midst of another storm: the unsettling atmosphere of an international conflict. Such a situation was unpredictable and came with a set of unparalleled challenges.

RELOCATION AND CONNECTIVITY ISSUES

Firstly, the rising tensions in the region resulted in a massive disruption in the team's cohesion. Many of the employees felt the need for safety and moved to other cities, and in some cases, even sought refuge in different countries. This displacement wasn't just a logistical challenge but also a personal one. People were uprooted from their homes, familiar surroundings, and a set routine.

In addition to relocation difficulties, there were frequent power blackouts. While the pandemic had already created a gap by eliminating face-to-face (f-2-f) interactions, these blackouts further widened the communication breach.

To counter these problems, Veramed implemented several measures:

- **Supplying Essential Tools:** Understanding the importance of consistent communication, Veramed provided team members with mobile data boosters and alternative power sources, such as portable chargers.
- **Embracing Flexibility:** Recognizing that not everyone was in the same situation, the company allowed employees to choose their working hours. This flexibility ensured that everyone could work when they felt safest and most productive.

PRIORITIZING SAFETY ABOVE ALL

For Veramed, the well-being and safety of its team were always at the forefront. Given the unpredictability surrounding the conflict, the company devised a quick response communication system. Through this system, if any member felt threatened or in danger, they could send out an immediate alert, ensuring that the broader team was informed and could offer necessary support.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS FOR GTP

The Graduate Training Programme (GTP) already had its set of challenges due to the pandemic. Now, with the added layer of the conflict, the complexities multiplied. However, Veramed was determined to ensure that these external factors did not compromise the quality of the program.

Their strategies included:

- **Virtual Classrooms:** Using top-tier online platforms, the GTP was transformed into a digital learning experience, ensuring the program's momentum wasn't lost.
- **Strengthening Mentorship:** In lieu of the regular face-to-face interactions, the company connected graduates with experienced professionals. These online mentorship sessions ensured that the students still received personalized guidance.
- **Augmenting Online Resources:** Understanding the need for more extensive resources during these times, Veramed built a comprehensive online library. This ensured that graduates had a plethora of materials at their fingertips.

ADDRESSING THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: MENTAL HEALTH

The overlapping challenges of a pandemic and an international conflict meant that there was a significant toll on the employees' mental health. Professional pressures combined with personal safety concerns created an environment of stress and anxiety.

To mitigate this Veramed:

- **Offered Professional Counseling:** Understanding the gravity of the situation, counseling services were made available to all team members.
- **Promoted Regular Check-ins:** Beyond work, team leaders held regular sessions where team members could voice their concerns, fears, and anxieties.
- **Introduced Flexible Deadlines:** Recognizing the heightened pressures, Veramed emphasized mental well-being over stringent work timelines.

IN RETROSPECT

The international conflict and its accompanying challenges tested Veramed's mettle. But with a combination of foresight, swift decision-making, and an unwavering commitment to its employees' well-being, the company navigated these turbulent waters with commendable grace. The strategies implemented and the resilience shown during these times offer a robust model for organizations globally. It beautifully highlighted the values of adaptability, care, and the undying spirit to rise above adversities.

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the realm of business, external events can rapidly reshape the landscape. Veramed's experiences in Ukraine, through a global pandemic followed by an international conflict, provided a first-hand lesson in adaptability, resilience, and the importance of prioritizing employee well-being. As organizations globally might face similar challenges, this section aims to summarize the lessons learned by Veramed and offer recommendations for other entities navigating comparable situations.

1. Importance of Flexibility

Lesson Learned: One of the first lessons from Veramed's journey was the immense value of flexibility. Whether it was accommodating employees moving to safer locations or adjusting to unpredictable power blackouts, a rigid structure would have only added to the challenges.

Recommendation: Organizations should cultivate a culture of flexibility. This includes allowing employees to choose their work hours, especially during crises, and adopting technology that facilitates remote work. Being prepared for unforeseen circumstances by having flexible policies can make transitions smoother.

2. Communication is Key

Lesson Learned: During both the pandemic and the conflict, consistent communication emerged as a pivotal aspect. It wasn't just about work updates but also ensuring everyone felt connected and supported.

Recommendation: Invest in reliable communication tools. Regular check-ins, both work-related and personal, can bridge the gap created by physical distance. Moreover, creating open channels where employees can voice concerns can foster a supportive environment.

3. Safety Takes Precedence

Lesson Learned: No business goal can be more important than the safety and well-being of the team. Veramed's rapid response to potential threats highlighted the significance of prioritizing safety.

Recommendation: Always have a crisis response plan in place. This plan should detail evacuation procedures, emergency contacts, and communication strategies. Employee safety should always be the foremost concern, and every team member should be aware of the steps to take in different emergency scenarios.

4. Adapting Training Programs

Lesson Learned: Traditional training methods, like the Graduate Training Programme (GTP), might not always be feasible. Veramed's ability to transition this into a virtual format without compromising its essence was a significant achievement.

Recommendation: Organizations should be ready to adapt training methods. Utilizing online platforms, creating digital resource libraries, and encouraging virtual mentorship can ensure that training programs remain effective, even when face-to-face interactions are not possible.

5. Mental Health is Crucial

Lesson Learned: The overlapping challenges took a toll on employees' mental well-being. Recognizing and addressing this was essential to maintain team morale and productivity.

Recommendation: Organizations should always have mental health support structures in place. This could include professional counseling services, regular mental health check-ins, and creating a culture where discussing mental well-being is encouraged and not stigmatized. Remember, a mentally healthy team is more engaged, productive, and resilient.

6. Planning for Continuity

Lesson Learned: Business continuity plans are not just theoretical exercises. Veramed's experiences underscored the importance of having such strategies ready to deploy at a moment's notice.

Recommendation: Regularly update and test business continuity plans. This ensures that when a crisis hits, the organization isn't caught off guard but has a blueprint to maintain operations.

7. Community Building is Vital

Lesson Learned: With physical distancing norms and the challenges of relocation, there's a risk of employees feeling isolated. Veramed's efforts to foster community, even virtually, played a crucial role in keeping the team cohesive.

Recommendation: Encourage virtual social activities and team-building exercises. These can range from online games, group challenges, to simple virtual coffee breaks. Such interactions can boost morale and maintain a sense of unity among the team.

8. Re-evaluating Priorities

Lesson Learned: In the face of unprecedented challenges, it's essential to understand what truly matters. For Veramed, it was the well-being of its employees and ensuring they felt supported and valued.

Recommendation: Organizations should regularly reassess their priorities. This doesn't mean neglecting business goals but understanding that a supported and valued team is more likely to navigate challenges successfully.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of Veramed in Ukraine provide a roadmap for organizations worldwide. By learning from these lessons and implementing the recommended strategies, companies can be better prepared for unforeseen challenges. It's crucial to remember that at the core of any successful organization is its people. Prioritizing their well-being, ensuring open communication, and fostering a flexible, adaptable environment can make all the difference in navigating turbulent times.

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