

The impact of COVID-19 on the working environment of organisations

LARAN CHETTY*

Senior Physiotherapist, Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust, Occupational Health and Wellbeing Centre, London, UK

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The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared on 30th January 2020 that the outbreak of COVID-19 was an international public health emergency (WHO, 2020). Governments all over the world introduced lockdowns of all non-essential services. In the African continent COVID-19 lockdown began in April 2020 (Department of Health, 2020), while in Europe lockdown began in March 2020 (Tusi *et al.*, 2021). Worldwide, the impact of lockdown contributed to mental ill-health with social isolation and conflicting messages from governments being the leading contributory factors (Elmer *et al.*, 2020). As a result, the working environment of organisations faced rapid and drastic changes. For example, employees that commuted to the office were suddenly required to work-from-home, many employees were furloughed and essential services, such as healthcare and supermarkets,

* Corresponding author: Laran Chetty. Email : laranchetty@gmail.com

were faced with a rapid increase for their services (Koh and Goh, 2020). The evidence has indicated that COVID-19 contributed to a deterioration of working conditions and employees began to report more problems of mental health, which included anxiety, stress, depression and musculoskeletal health problems because their workstation at home was not set-up ergonomically (Ramani *et al.*, 2021; Turolla *et al.*, 2020). According to Kramer and Kramer (2020) the biggest fear amongst the working population as result of the pandemic was losing their job and thus their income.

This article will review the impact of COVID-19 on the working environment of organisations by critically analysing the following factors:

- (a) Employee engagement and recruitment;
- (b) Talent management; and
- (c) Organisational culture and employees.

(a) Employee engagement and recruitment

Organisations were required to purchase and develop more robust communications systems to deal with their teams working remotely, they had to find ways to show more instant appreciation, ensure that the implementation of procedures and policies were applied more flexibility, and a new virtual team had to be created with all employees to undertake online team activities (Nair, 2020). One of the main engagement dimensions that organisations had to take into consideration was the engagement of employees with their families and how their employees needed to keep their children entertained and home-schooled while they worked from home during the lockdown (Sarkar, 2020). According to Goswami (2020) organisations that kept their employees engaged during lockdown reported that their

employees were more motivated and positive because their fears were allayed. Some of the ways organisations ensured their employees remained engaged included weekly discussion sessions, team meet-ups on video conferencing systems for special occasions and lunch, virtual competitions and challenges, online training and courses, book club discussions and virtual exercise classes (Goswami, 2020). According to Dutta (2020) organisations that were quick to create engagement digitally during the first period of lockdown saw the incessant growth of their employees professionally while empowering them digitally for the future. In addition, Singh (2020) reported that when an organisation provides significant opportunities for growth, employees are more motivated and show increased commitment for their organisation. Goyal *et al.* (2020) highlighted numerous issues that employees had to face during the tough period of the pandemic and how organisations needed to address these issues. This paper suggested that organisations must respond to the increasing stress and anxiety levels of their employees and should create an open dialogue with clear channels of communication so that employees feel comfortable to step forward with problems they may be grappling with (Goyal *et al.* 2020). According to Anand (2020) organisations needed to show greater acknowledgement, recognition and acknowledgement when employees were isolating at home during the period of lockdown. Examples of this include allowing employees to interact and play with their children, undertake chores in the household, and take time to prepare meals (Anand, 2020). Nair (2020) highlighted that during the pandemic organisations needed to change their communication structures to more constant video messaging from the leaders so that a sense of belonging was maintained even if their employees were working remotely. With regards to this concept of feeling a sense of belonging to the organisation while working, Bhardwaj (2020) discussed various activities that organisations have undertaken during the pandemic to ensure that employees

maintained that sense of belonging to the organisation while working remotely, such as taking a home selfie or posting pictures of a pet, virtual 'know your leaders' and general knowledge quizzes and virtual hidden talent competitions. Metts (2020) advocated for organisations to commit to plans of communication to keep morale high and employees connected and engaged with each other. Communication was identified as an important feature that had to be adapted because of COVID-19. Fallon (2020) advocated for leaders to set an example by making regular and frequent contact with employees so that they remained engaged and to ensure that these interactions were not just work focused but also friendly and social by asking the employees about how they were getting on with their work and life. Numerous organisations have developed creative and innovated practices to ensure employee engagement as they begin to experience the impact of COVID-19. For example, Amway revised their medical aid provision to take care of the costs of treatment for COVID-19; Coca Cola Beverages developed an online programme that allowed for the engagement of employees, their colleagues and their families; and McDonald's developed electronic learning training modules for use on phone learning platform applications so that employees could undergo training while in lockdown (Hasan, 2020).

Employee recruitment practices were also affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual interviews became the new normal (Mwita, 2020). This provided an opportunity for organisations because interviews could be more easily scheduled than face-to-face interviews, which saved both time and money for both the organisation and applicant (Mwita, 2020). The work location was no longer a deciding factor to find the perfect hire because organisations could adopt flexible working arrangements and therefore have access to a much wider pool of applicants (Mujtaba, 2022). Some of the challenges faced by less

established organisations was that the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic made applicants wary of applying to them because they were deemed to be high-risk, and they preferred to look for employment in more stable organisations (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020). As organisations began to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and began to recruit again, they had to offer more relevant benefits such as flexible working, generous salary and enhanced sickness pay, occupational health and wellbeing packages because they could no longer rely on recruiting employees with the perks of a nice office with a good view or an onsite gym or recreation room (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020).

(b) Talent management

The world economy has reduced substantially because of COVID-19. In many organisations worldwide there have been layoffs and freezes in the hiring process. According to McBride and Cannon (2020) organisations that were historically viewed as offering safe and secure employment, such as marketing companies, experienced layoffs during COVID-19. Wauters (2020) reported that in Europe and the United Kingdom, there were approximately 38% recruitment freezes. Those employees that were fortunate not to lose their jobs faced reductions or freezes in pay and many had their bonuses cancelled (Ferry, 2020). The pandemic changed the way in which work was done. McKinsey (2020) reported that by May 2020, virtual working became the norm with about 76% of organisations requiring their employees to work remotely. During this period the physical resources and equipment that employees were used to having access to when in the office were no longer available (Fana *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, with remote working, interpersonal communications were less spontaneous, there was a lack of support and feedback from leaders, and a change to the boundaries of professional and personal life, which made worse the levels of burnout and

stress experienced by employees (Brenan, 2020). Layoffs and freezes in hiring were challenges that organisation were already experiencing pre-COVID-19, however, these were made worse by COVID-19.

The principles and theory of performance management can be used by organisations amid a difficult time such as COVID-19. The principles and theory of performance management can assist organisations with the challenges due to talent management brought on by the pandemic. The definition of performance management is “a continuous process of identifying, measuring, and developing the performance of individuals and workgroups and aligning performance with the strategic goals of the organisation” (Aguinis, 2019, p. 8).

Thus, the management of performance can assist employees to remain committed, motivated and competent, while helping organisations to be clear on their goals, understand the performance of their employees, and to assist them with making decisions that are fairer (Aguinis, 2019). If no system exists to manage employee performance then the organisation will not be able to make equitable and fair decisions with regards to promotions, pay increases, bonuses and layoffs (Kakkar *et al.*, 2020). COVID-19 has revealed that numerous organisations have not kept pace with the latest systems to manage performance but have developed systems that only appraise the performance of their employees (Aguinis and Burgi-Tian, 2021a). Kakkar *et al.* (2020) reported that investment in performance management systems is often limited because the multiple value and purpose of the system is largely overlooked. The value and purpose of the performance management systems goes beyond the typical administrative functions such as personnel decisions, salary and promotions, it also provides critical functions that help organisations reach their goals. According to Farndale *et al.* (2019) these include being able to reinforce and communicate

strategic priorities, aid the development of employee development, maintain and plan a quality workforce, and collate information that can aid in making decisions. Therefore, if performance management systems are implemented it can not only support organisations inform the challenges that talent management posed during the COVID-19 pandemic it can also assist organisations to be more productive when the pandemic is over.

Aguinis and Burgi-Tian (2021b) proposed the following recommendations to assist organisations to management their talent which has been impacted by COVID-19:

- i. Understand that monitoring employee behaviours and results are not going to be easy to observe and measure and to accept the fact that there is going to be different ways of doing the same job.
- ii. Consider non-traditional ways of measuring performance such as an adaptive performance measure so that employees who adapt to the everchanging crisis are rewarded and which is critical to ensure that the organisation survives the pandemic.
- iii. Have 'stay' interviews with top performers so that their talent is retained. This will assist the organisation to maintain a competitive advantage during the pandemic because these top performers make a significantly more impactful contribution.
- iv. Introduce a performance management system that provides a continual feedback and communication loop between employers and employees. This helps to ensure that employees become less defensive when poor performance feedback is provided.

(c) Organisational culture and employees

This section is grouped into themes following a critical synthesis of the literature.

(a) Moving away from the past ways of working

In pre-COVID-19 times organisations were in the process of embracing technology within the workplace, however with the crisis of COVID-19 these plans were expedited to deal with the circumstances of lockdown. The role of automation was one such change that created opportunities for organisations to rethink their business strategies and to determine what future job roles will look like (Deloitte, 2020). According to Forbes (2020) these new job roles should take into consideration the needs of the workplace, and the amount of productivity and performance that is required, and to use this information to ascertain the type and level of automation that is needed. Most organisations at present are looking at moving from a physical contact business to a remote approach with some physical contact. This approach is not necessarily supported by all employees as some would like to work physically in the organisation, some would prefer to work fully remote, and others prefer a hybrid approach (Chetty, 2021). In this regard, Miller (2020) does caution organisations to resist any temptation to go back to previous ways of working that are no longer suitable for the current work climate and to avoid making mistakes of the past. To embrace the digital world of work and to build new processes it is important for the organisation to adequately invest and prepare the workforce for the incoming changes. According to the Harvard Business Review (2020) employees need to have proper training sessions with the implementation of any new digital system and that new work processes should be designed in such a way that differences in remote work and in-person work are minimised. This new way of working will also require organisations to evaluate how they motivate and reward

their employees and how they measure their productivity and support their career growth (Harvard Business Review, 2020).

(b) Redesigning the workplace

To prepare for the post-COVID workplace, organisations must reassess the work that needs to be done and the location at which it can be performed. It is therefore inevitable that a redesign of the workplace is a priority. Pre-COVID workplaces have only considered basic redesigns, such as rooms for meetings, confidential cubicles and spaces and communal areas, with almost no consideration to the needs of the employee (Gill, 2019). However, in a world of COVID-19 organisations need to consider different types of workplace designs to incorporate both onsite and remote working (Rico and Cabrer-Borras, 2020). For example, if an organisation is working on a very collaborate project, then space in the office should be provided for meetings, while on the other hand, if the work can be performed remotely then the organisation would not require significant office space. In the latter situation, Rozman and Strukeli (2020) proposed that with remote working the organisation can focus on supporting their employees with setting up an office in their home or even have local offices set-up near to the location of their employees. According to the World Economic Forum (2020) the criteria for redesigning the workplace need to be based on safety, with the focus on social distancing with onsite working and safety and occupational health regulations. As the COVID-19 rates of infection begin to ease, only part of the workforce will physically return to the office, and the consequence of this is that office rent and costs related to maintaining the office will also decrease as organisations reduce the amount of space needed to manage their business. Mikusova and Horvathova (2019) reported that organisations that go fully remote will see significant cost reductions in all their office costs.

Therefore, the redesigning of the workplace, catalysed by COVID-19, brings benefits not only to employees but also to the organisation by reducing real estate costs.

(c) The use of technology

Organisations must take the relevant precautions to ensure that they do not spend beyond their budget during COVID-19 but ensure that costs for technology to maintain digitalisation and associated costs for cybersecurity are protected (Ting *et al.*, 2020). Post-pandemic, many organisations will retain the use of technological working which many employees report allows them the flexibility to work remotely which help to facilitate their feelings of health and wellbeing (Chetty, 2022). Prior to COVID-19 many organisations had restrictive practices and controls over the use of technology, however, post COVID-19 this created an opportunity to re-evaluate the technological processes and protocols and performance management systems. The use of technology in the workplace provides an opportunity for organisations and their employees to be agile in their interactions. For instance, technology allows employees to work from home and those with musculoskeletal mobility issues, childcare responsibilities and/or having to take care of elderly parents do not have to contemplate leaving their jobs (Bouziri *et al.*, 2020), and the re-evaluation of the technological processes and protocols and performance management systems will allow organisations to reset how productivity is measured when employees work in the office and when they are working remotely (Garfin, 2020). Therefore, regarding the use of technology, regardless of the usage level of the organisation, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity to engage with it. With the introduction of new technology in the workplace initial problems and challenges are also happen. Ting *et al.* (2020) reported these as having connectivity issues or employees having limited access or an overload of the network. Both

the organisation and their employees must boost or upgrade their existing telecommunication infrastructure to boost the connectivity of the interfaces of the users which can support remote working (Ting *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, the use of technology and its impact on remote working has supported many organisations survive the COVID-19 pandemic. For employees, it had ensured that connection, productivity and collaboration with the workplace were maintained which contributed to feelings of job security and health and wellbeing (Garfin, 2020).

(d) Having a digital strategy

COVID-19 has required organisations to rethink their digital strategy. In European countries the process of digitisation has already began while in Southern Africa, the homeland of the author, many organisations are yet to begin. The implementation of technology due to the pandemic has been successful in several countries despite the short time frame in which remote working had to be introduced and employees had to be trained in digital networking platforms. According to Whitelaw *et al.* (2020) organisations that had a significant amount of digital working pre-COVID-19 were in a much better position during the pandemic than organisations that were non-digitalised. Thus, the technology gaps and inefficient infrastructures within organisations were surfaced because of COVID-19. Fortunately, this created a catalyst for organisations to realise the need for a digital strategy, not just for COVID-19, but for situations that may arise in the future that are unforeseen. Whitelaw *et al.* (2020) proposed the following digital strategies for organisations to consider: (a) documents in paper could be digitised; (b) 5G broadband; (c) use of artificial intelligence; (d) virtual reality; and (e) quantum computing. However, Gabryelczyk (2020) noted that when changing or introducing a new strategy, it is important to consider organisational culture so

that there is an acceptance and collaboration amongst employees with the new strategy. For the digital strategy to be successful it will require senior leaders to analyse the digital needs of the organisation in relation to their business market needs and balance these with the infrastructure and training requirements of their employees. Furthermore, the development of a digital strategy post COVID-19 will serve as a benchmark when organisations must respond to future business challenges. According to Gabryelczyk (2020) from a change management viewpoint any initiative of transformation, which in this case is the development of a digital strategy roadmap, is more likely to be successful if organisational culture together with the viewpoints of management and employees are considered so that ultimately the initiative of transformation will be accepted more willingly by all stakeholders, and it can be adapted more successfully in the workplace.

(e) A 'new' workplace and hybrid working

Initially organisations were reluctant to allow their staff to work remotely, however because of COVID-19 employees worldwide had to work and stay at home. Before COVID-19, organisations were of the mindset that employees could be more productive when working on-site and many organisations competed for office spaces in prime areas usually in the city centres (Wang *et al.*, 2021). The rationale was that it would attract the top talent through welcoming and collaborative office designs (Wang *et al.*, 2021). As governments all over the world begin to reduce COVID-19 restrictions and people must now start living with the virus, organisations had to also start thinking about what models of work would work best for their business and their employees. Jobs traditionally thought of as never being able to be done from home, such as customer care and insurance brokering, were able to demonstrate that operations could be carried out effectively remotely (Bonacini *et al.*, 2020). According

to Wang *et al.* (2021) organisations must have a clear understanding of the concept of remote working. Bonacini *et al.* (2020) reported that organisations that forced employees back to the office as COVID-19 restrictions were lifted resulted in large numbers of resignations. Bhardwaj (2020) proposed that a hybrid working model whereby employees could work partially from home and partially onsite appeared to be the most preferred model. This model is preferred because it blends the benefits of being onsite such as physical contact and interactions amongst employees combined with the flexibility of working from home (Bhardwaj, 2020). Different organisations have been impacted differently because of COVID-19 and the process of creating a 'new' workplace is an ongoing process. Brennan (2020) proposed that it is important for organisations, as they try out different ways of working, to ensure that employees feel productive, engaged and a sense of happiness during the journey of change. This is important because Brennan (2020) pointed out that during the process of experimenting with new models of working, other ways of working start to be discovered many of which have not even been conceptualised or reported previously.

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