

# COVID-19 Pandemic and the Workplace: Issues, Challenges and Changes

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the COVID-19 related issues, challenges and changes for workers, workplaces, and work practices. The ongoing COVID-19 crisis has had a remarkable effect on workplaces across the globe. The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared coronavirus disease 2019 a pandemic on 12 March 2020. Workplace represents an environment that could accelerate the spread of COVID-19. The workers spend an average of 8 hours in the workplace daily, potentially in environments where the workers congregate in large numbers. Social distancing, as a preventive measure recommended by the WHO, maybe a challenging owing to the nature of some work processes that require workers to work in close proximity. Poor workplace hygiene may risk to contamination and spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. Some businesses and workplaces are beginning to reopen even though under extraordinary rules pertaining to physical distancing, personal protective equipment, and physical guards. The efficacy of such measures in the workplace are unknown, and the managers have much to learn about how workers adapt and function under these circumstances. This study aimed to identify a variety of impact of COVID-19 for workers, teams, management and work organizations to curb the spread of the virus have created a wide array of unique issues, challenges and changes for workers and employers in the workplace. It is expected that this article will provide guidance to workers and employers to help systematically organize and prepare to return to the workplace and society as a whole responds to new phases in managing the global pandemic.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Workplace, Flexible Work Arrangement, Virtual Teamwork, Virtual leadership, Digital Technology

## Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted work and organizations across the globe. COVID-19 has a great impact on issues, challenges, changes and implications for work practices as well as workers safety, health and well-being. On 11 March, 2020, World Health Organization Director-general declared COVID-19 a pandemic. The announcement prompted governments to intensify their regional- and country-level responses in the following weeks. In the absence of a vaccine or approved drugs against COVID-19, social distancing has been the only available approach to try to slow the spread of the virus (Ghebreyesus, 2020). Entire countries have implemented aggressive lockdown strategies. Schools are closed, sporting events cancelled, public gatherings banned and a range of non-essential businesses shuttered indefinitely. Government of India has started phase-wise lifting of lockdown for the resumption of the workplace. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare Department (EMR Division) has given the work guidelines for the workers' safety, health, and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic unlocking.

Again, the post-COVID-19 workplace reopening process may also need to address this complexity of factors such as workplace safety and prevention factors, e.g., supervisor support, ability to accommodate, physical demands, to psychological factors, e.g., perceived impairment, job stress, coping, fears of re-injury and infection or worsening health conditions, catastrophizing. It agrees with Simple and Cherrie (2020) that there is significant proficiency in the occupational hygiene and experience knowledge and professional groups that can contribute helping employers and workers to contain and interruption the spread of COVID-19: the challenge is to produce appropriate knowledge, tools, and methodologies, possibly by coordinating the initiatives of different scientific associations, and to effectively transfer them to employers and Workers. Furthermore,



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risk assessment in terms of workplace infection is necessary for every workplace. Risk assessment items should include a flexible schedule, congestion of the workplace, personnel density, and a disinfection schedule; the same causes of infection that we observed in the COVID-19 workplace outbreaks (Kim, 2020). On the basis of the above context, this study has been planned to study issues, challenges and changes on the impact of COVID-19 and the workplace in the context of the work practices for workers and employers.

#### **Review of Literature**

COVID-19's impacts on workers and workplaces across the globe have been histrionic. The review of prior research rooted in work and organizational psychology, and related fields, for making sense of the implications for employees, teams, and work organizations. Coronavirus and its resulting COVID-19 disease are infecting and killing essential workers every day (Cech & Rothwell, 2020).

The virus is easily transmitted between people, increasing the likelihood of infection of these essential workers and those they come in contact with (Rothan & Byrareddy, 2020). As the risk of infection is ever-present, essential workers live with the fear of exposure and lack of certainty. In the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, companies and institutions all over the world, supported by their Occupational Health Services, are trying to find the best ways to reorganize their activity to minimize the contagion risk among their employees, so as to protect their health and prevent internal SARS-COV-2 outbreaks (Gallardo, Arroyabe, & Arranz, 2020). The collective response to the COVID-19 pandemic substantially impacts the safety, health, and well-being of essential workers, who come into contact with the general public even during the stay-at-home orders. Some of the challenges of inviting workers back to the workplace mirror some of the issues that we recognize as commonplace in the return-to-work and occupational rehabilitation, the idiosyncratic nature of health and work, individual disease vulnerability, susceptibility to environmental hazards, the need for job flexibility and modification, and differences in work style, social capital, and organizational support. These changes are stressful for everyone but are even more stressful for those who must continue to go to a workplace while others stay at home. In the analysis we present here, we focus on the relevance of COVID-19-related risks and changes for workers, workplaces, and work practices – and do not differentiate between the direct health risks associated with COVID-19 and the economic consequence. Our broad survey of topics allows us to identify a variety of economic, social, and psychological risks that workers appear likely to face as a result of COVID-19.

#### **Objectives of the Study**

The present research paper focused on the following objectives:

1. To investigate various workplace challenges faced by the organization during the COVID-19.

2. To critically assess the workplace strategies to alleviate the threat of COVI-19 in the organization.
3. To give suggestions for sustaining workplace organization during the COVID-19.

#### **Methodology**

Data and information presented in this study are collected and reviewed from various secondary reports prepared by national and international agencies on COVID-19 pandemic and workplace challenges and changes. Data is collected from multiple authentic websites and magazines. Some journals and e-contents from google scholars and ProQuest relating to the impact of COVID-19 on the workplace are reviewed and referred.

#### **Issues, Challenges and Changes in Work Practice**

The COVID-19 situation has brought in changes in the way of work. The COVID-19 crisis has led to an unprecedented need for employers to provide flexibility and leeway so their workers can continue to work productively from home, adopt different work habits, or work in a new or rapidly changing environment (Shaw et al., 2020). The workforce model has been evolving and is seeing major changes in its structure, and the COVID-19 situation has accelerated this rate of change. The COVID-19 outbreak has led to the adaptation of e-learning, digitalization, tech-solutions and remote or virtual workflows. COVID-19 abruptly upended normal work routines, and it is also caused an acceleration of trends that were already underway involving the switch up of work to online or virtual environments. A key difference, though, is that WFH was previously often responsive to employee preferences, but COVID-19 forced many into Mandatory Work from Home. Hence, the Covid-19 pandemic forced India to implement nationwide lockdowns and social distancing, driving employees from most organizations to work from home. Managers are working to devise solutions that work best for their teams to enable productivity and manage their responsibilities at home, with options like Compressed Workweek, Flexi-hours, wellness breaks etc.

#### **Work from Home (WFH)**

The work from the Home policy was implemented from 19 March in order to ensure the safety of staff and to break the chain of transmission. The need for millions of workers to WFH in response to COVID-19 has accelerated recent remote work trends facilitated by the rise of connectivity and communication technologies. While "remote work" is a broader category since it can include Work from Anywhere (i.e., not necessarily home), it is known that some – such as professionals who need to perform complex tasks that require little interaction with peers – actually prefer and are more productive if they WFH (Allen, Cho, & Meier, 2014). Workplaces are also one of the high-risk areas for COVID-19 transmission. Therefore, home office working must be encouraged if possible, in workplaces where home office working is not possible, adherence to recommendations of WHO remains quite important (World Health Organization, 2020).

Given the likelihood that COVID-19 will accelerate trends towards WFH past the immediate impacts of the pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic has been the shift of many employees to work from home arrangements across occupations. Individuals from some occupational groups that had very little experience with working from home were shifted to such arrangements (e.g., teachers in primary education) while individuals across occupation who preferred not to work from home, were now forced into such working arrangements (Kramer & Kramer, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the way many people work. It has notably increased the share of people working from home. Indeed, since the start of the social distancing measures, many firms have made it possible for their employees to work from home in order to slow down the spread of Covid-19. Future challenges that workers can face when WFH, it is also notable that the reluctance of many employers to adopt WFH before COVID-19 stemmed from a perceived lack of control that employers would have over workers who were out-of-sight and although managing and controlling is not feasible when workers are working remotely.

#### **Virtual Teamwork**

As COVID-19 has accelerated the expansion of virtual teams, it will be valuable for organization and workers to track and work virtual that may enable such teams to function optimally their jobs. To conceptualizing of virtuality – as a continuous variable, given that teams are not simply either face-to-face or virtual – has already been developed (Mak & Kozlowski, 2019) and should prove helpful for future researchers who work to classify the different forms of virtual teamwork that have emerged. In general, implementation of distancing measures should also aim to sustain personal and professional community connections by virtual means and technology, including widely accessible means such as radio, mobile phones, laptops, video-conferences and webinars. Prior research shows that virtual teamwork tends to lack the communication richness available to face-to-face teams (Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004) and that traditional teamwork problems such as conflict and coordination can escalate quickly (Mortensen & Hinds, 2001). Building structural temporary arrangement for convenience of workers to mitigate infection of COVID-19 in the workplace. Increased team virtuality as a result of COVID-19 may also affect helping and prosocial behaviour. While physical distancing among co-workers may reduce helping behaviours in the near term, prior research has shown that people should be bolder to request help from others since people do tend to be more willing to help, and give better-quality help, than is usually assumed (Newark, Bohns, & Flynn, 2017), perhaps especially during crises.

#### **Virtual Leadership and Management**

Leadership makes worker safety, health and a clear priority for the entire organization. It drives accountability and provides the necessary resources and environment to create a positive environment. The role of leaders to determine organizational outcomes that have a broad impact on employees at

all levels is especially clear in the crucible of a crisis and certainly vital in fundamental ways. With the COVID-19 crisis requiring millions of employees across different hierarchical levels to work from home, it is reassuring to know that leadership can also work effectively from a distance (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). The effectiveness of leadership during and after the COVID-19 crisis should examine an array of activities, including the degree to which remote leaders are persuasive if they (a) clearly state their values that will guide institutional actions; (b) understand and openly discuss the travails and hopes of their collectives; (c) clearly communicate an ambitious vision of the direction that the unit will head toward; and, (d) demonstrate confidence that strategic goals can be achieved. Indeed, crises can bring about changes in leadership styles (Stoker, Garretsen, & Soudis, 2019). Thus, management can expect to be better prepared by ensuring that they have adequately invested in leadership development and technological innovation for workplace sustainable in this pandemic.

#### **Flexible Work Arrangements**

With the outbreak of COVID-19, flexible work arrangements have become the "new normal" (Rofcanin & Anand, 2020). The vast majority of employers have asked their workers to work from home. But this new change to established work patterns comes with a change in work-family boundaries. Employees are encountering a number of challenges in fulfilling their "work" and "home" domain roles simultaneously, leading to undesirable outcomes of blurred work-family boundaries, role conflict, stress, and reduced work motivation. Therefore, this special virtual issue sheds light on flexible work practices to tackle the problems of work-family boundary management. Reducing period required at a workplace, working distantly or providing services through audio-visual may be a choice for some workers, and all of these clearly also constructively line up with efforts to limit travel in relation to decreasing risk of a pandemic. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on these measures are expected to show short-term and long-term effects on people's working lives. However, most media reports focused on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on changes in work arrangements, e.g., short-time work, flexible location and hours for workers in a regular employment relationship, i.e., jobs with a fixed schedule, at the firm's place of business and with the mutual expectation of continued employment (Kalleberg, 2000). The most flexible type of work arrangement, the online platform has more flexibility compared to regular work arrangements. Flexible employment workers will become more aware of the impact of their working conditions on their health, work and career development, potentially leading to empowerment of workers in the form of conscious self-care and request for workers' rights in this pandemic.

#### **Digital Technology Adaptation**

For ensuring business continuity during COVID-19, technology is a critical enabler as the organization finds a way to thrive new normal of work. The organization will need to quickly adapt digital

technology solutions to ensure that regular work process such as learning and training, performance management; feedback and even regular team meetings continue to meet organizational goals and objectives. Organizations have realized that importance of digital technology not only in the way of doing business but also in the way they are dealing with their internal and customers and their employees for the workplace safety and prevention of the COVID-19.

#### **Policies and practices to supportive working Conditions**

The policies and practices that impact the working conditions and environment of the organization. Working conditions are central to effective infection control in the workplace. Grounded in workplace safety and health's hierarchy of controls, effective infection control reduces worker exposure to the coronavirus. This includes engineering controls such as increased ventilation of fresh air and high-efficiency air filters to reduce airborne pathogens (Allen & Macomber, 2020). These can include scheduling policies that reduce workers' contact with customers or clients; for example, scheduling retail workers to restock shelves during hours closed to customers or scheduling the same workers to the same crews/shifts. In addition, providing adequate access to handwashing facilities at work and providing personal protective equipment for workers and customers/patients, e.g., face shields, masks provides the last layer of defence in the hierarchy. In addition, employers may provide additional resources to ensure the safety and health of their workers. Implementing supportive policies and encouraging workers to use these policies can have a profound impact on workers' physical and mental health. The workplace social distancing policy with timely implementation of specific guidelines was key to preventing a large outbreak of COVID-19 in workplaces. However, incidents of COVID-19 are still ongoing in a few places, and risk assessment in vulnerable workplaces should be continued (Kim, 2020).

#### **Issues, Challenges and Changes for Workers**

COVID-19 crisis is likely to impact workers differently because of issues like the threat of viral infection, health vulnerability, organizational perceptions, income levels, and seniority/job tenure. In addition to the immediate impact of COVID-19, there is also likely to be a diverse range of social-psychological, health-related and economic costs of the pandemic for individuals, including for those (a) whose work was made virtual or remote, (b) who continued as "essential" workers (c) who were laid-off either temporarily or permanently (d) encourage employees with symptoms to stay at home and self-isolation (e) prohibit non-essential official work travel (f) promote frequent handwashing (g) advise employees to practice good respiratory hygiene (h) provide waste bins/packets (i) provide masks for sick employees who need to go to the hospital (j) avoid gathering/meetings (k) encourage employees to work from home. Workplace flexibility and modification will be needed to support safe workplace

openings, and this will vary substantially by industry and occupation. All these interventions are relevance for all the employees to curbing the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace.

#### **Adherence to SOP on Preventive Measures to contain the spread of COVID-19**

Based on the recommendations by WHO and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare guidelines are prepared for infection control and circulated to all the State Head/ project managers. These guidelines included instructions on cleaning and disinfection of the office spaces, project offices, static clinic, recommendations on hand hygiene, cough etiquette, wearing of personal protective equipment like surgical masks and gloves when providing primary health care services in an outreach programme, encouraging staff to report symptoms if unwell and stay at home till they recover, wearing surgical masks if they develop any respiratory symptoms at the workplace. While both ethical norms and legal standards are changing quickly as communities and governments enact sweeping rules to stem the spread of COVID-19, adhering to worker safety and health standards provides a starting point to protect their workers. General organizational measures regarding the containment and management of the epidemiological emergency of COVID-19 have been imposed by the competent authorities for adequate and proportionate management of the evolution of the epidemiological situation (Cirrincione et al., 2020). Organizations must follow existing and evolving standards and recommendations from governmental agencies for reducing the risk of transmission. In addition, adhering to wage and benefit requirements, especially sick leave policies and expectations, helps provide a supportive environment for workers.

#### **Social Distancing and Loneliness**

The loss of social connections – for those who were laid off and those required to WFH is likely to negatively impact workers. Prior research has shown that high-quality social interactions – including informal chats among co-workers – are essential for mental and physical health (Mogilner, Whillans & Norton, 2018). More insidious than the loss of social connections, loneliness is a psychologically painful emotion that results from people's subjective feelings that their intimate and social needs are not adequately met (Cacioppo et al., 2006) and was already considered "an epidemic" (Murthy, 2017) prior to this pandemic. Workplace loneliness has been shown to have strong negative relationships with employees' affective commitment, affiliative behaviours, and performance (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). As organizations look ahead, psychological counselling is pivotal for workers during this pandemic as the workplace loneliness be acknowledged and addressed as an indicator of employee well-being in human resource policies, programs, and practices.

#### **Health, Safety and Well-being**

During this COVID-19 pandemic, organizations need to actively support the health, safety and well-being of workers. There is evidence suggesting that working conditions have deteriorated for many workers health. In light of such strains,

COVID-19 has contributed to a greater risk of employees encountering job burnout – a chronic stress syndrome, including permanent feelings of exhaustion and a distant attitude toward work (Demerouti et al., 2010). Moreover, the continuous exposure to COVID-19 media news fosters rumination – repetitively and passively focusing on symptoms of distress and on the possible causes and consequences of these symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). More immediate than many forms of stress, COVID-19 draws close attention to the problem of presenteeism, i.e., people going to work when ill (Johns, 2010). As the risk of infection is ever-present, essential workers live with the fear of exposure and lack of certainty. The collective response to the COVID-19 pandemic substantially impacts the safety, health, and well-being of the workers. The organization places a high priority on worker health and safety, which sets the stage for ensuring accountability and support across all levels of the organization. These communications need to be supported by clear and consistent actions and implementation of new policies by management demonstrating policies, programs, and practices that foster supportive working conditions values by providing a supportive work environment. In addition, regular evaluation guides an organization's priority setting, decision making, and continuous improvement of worker safety, health, and well-being initiatives should be taken by the management.

#### **Unemployment and Inequality**

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis has had an unprecedented effect on workplaces across the globe. The extent of viral infection, illness, and fatalities has transformed or closed many workplaces and resulted in large numbers of temporarily furloughed or unemployed workers (Shaw et al., 2020). As entire industries such as travel, hospitality, sports, and entertainment were shut down by COVID-19, millions of people across the globe filed new unemployment claims in early 2020. In addition to losing income, individuals who are unemployed may experience a range of stress-related consequences, including depression, anxiety, and physical ailments (Wanberg, 2012). Hopes related to COVID-19 unemployment have centred on an economic recovery unfolding fast enough that jobs lost to COVID-19 unemployment will largely be regained, but that is far from certain. The workplace closures associated with COVID-19 have further complicated typical advice for individuals who are unemployed to develop a regular routine of job search (Wanberg, Ali, & Csillag, 2020). Meta-analytic evidence finds that the overall reduction in staffing has roughly the same adverse organizational performance as comparable voluntary turnover (Park & Shaw, 2013). As a broader cost associated with the pandemic, many analysts expect that inequality will increase in the wake of COVID-19 just as it has in recent shocks such as the 2008 financial crisis (Wisman, 2013). Such inequalities are known from past shocks to provide differential resources and opportunities for individuals to gain employment and promotions while exacerbating inequalities in pay and benefits (Bapuji et al., 2020). Given prior research

work showing that organizational and societal inequalities feed into each other, there are reasons to be concerned that growth in inequality after COVID-19 will contribute to a downward pattern of negative trends in the workplace in the form of decreased work centrality, and increased burnout, absenteeism, deviant behaviours, bullying, and turnover of the workers.

#### **Discussion**

It is apparent that COVID-19 will be known for changing the ways workers work in fundamental ways in the workplaces. For example, COVID-19 abruptly accelerated the speed of changes associated with working outside of organizational settings. Virtual work practices are likely to spread as organizations realize the cost-savings from structuring labour with fewer full-time employees and more contractors connected technologically (Spreitzer, Cameron & Garrett, 2017) and perhaps with less office space in light of the health risks known to be associated with conventional open-plan offices (Pejtersen et al., 2011). Considering the major component of a workplace emergency response against COVID-19 outbreak is distancing, and disinfection, conducting a distancing policy might be crucial for preventing infection transmission in the workplace. As many businesses around the world will be restructured or disappear due to the pandemic, workers will be retrained or laid-off, and the economic, social-psychological, and health costs of these actions are likely to be immense in the forms of declining GDP rate of most of the countries.

Recently, the organizational researchers forecasted that from the studies the long-term effects of COVID-19. There are some parallels between the current crisis and previous threats such as WWII, the 9/11/2001 attacks, and the 2008 financial crisis. Yet COVID-19 is also unique since it is primarily a global health threat and thus requires a different set of adaptive responses, e.g., physical distancing instead of coming together. Therefore, theory development is needed on how different kinds of global threats and crises shape in workplaces.

As workers now live and work in globally interdependent communities, infectious disease threats such as COVID-19 need to be recognized as the part workplace. To continue to get the benefits from global cooperation, it will be necessary to find smarter and safer ways of working together. Total Workers health framework for employers and managers at essential businesses to be strategic in implementing workplace measures to protect worker safety, health, and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, there are many external challenges for the workplaces that make implementing some guidelines more difficult. For example, the availability of personal protective equipment, disinfectant, and reliable COVID-19 testing makes it difficult for companies to comply and adds to workers feeling uncertain about their safety. Finally, while work and the workplace are changing rapidly, these characteristics still hold true to protecting and promoting worker well-being by focusing on improving working conditions, rather than

depending on individual behaviour change. These characteristics are core principles that can guide any employer and help workers find support within the organization.

### Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing, and nobody can anticipate how the COVID-19 will be ended. Therefore, risk assessment in terms of workplace infection is necessary for every organization. Risk assessment should include a flexible schedule, presenteeism, congestion of the workplace, personnel density, and a disinfection schedule and the causes of infection that observed in the COVID-19 workplace outbreaks. In occupational health, occupational infectious diseases should be treated as a more important part because it sometimes requires the national crisis response system.

In order to move forward and continuing the business organizations, it is important to critically evaluate the currently existing policies and practices, and work to develop them in a way that allows both integrations of isolated efforts as well as foresight and development of sustainable solutions in the workplace. In COVID-19, which has no approved treatment, it is very important to prevent the spread in the workplace. The main points in preventing the spread in the workplace are hand hygiene, social distancing and quarantine. With increased testing capacity, detecting more positive patients in the community will also enable the reduction of secondary cases with stricter quarantine rules. (Guner et al., 2020). By adopting these organizational, environmental and personal measures, emergency management can be optimized, ensuring the continuation of normal activities and ultimately contributing to reducing the risk of contamination of the entire organization's workforce and the society as well.

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