A Study on Effect of COVID-19 Pandemic on Employees and Work Environments

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Abstract: *The whole world has experienced tumultuous situations due to sudden surge of covid19. Organizations are compelled to implement new work procedures and employees are forced to adapt new work arrangements through the usage of various new technologies without proper orientation and training. Sudden shift of work environments to remote has effected employees' physical & mental well being to maximum extent. The present paper has attempted to study the effect of covid 19 pandemic on lives of employees through research articles. The paper aims to describe the consequences of pandemic on employees' performance and wellbeing. Again attempt has been made to suggest the organizations with the strategies to be adopted to deal with unprecedented situations and generate positive work environments.*

Keywords: Covid-1 pandemic, work environments, wellbeing, work performance

1. Introduction

The World Health Organization declared covid-19 as pandemic on 11th March 2020 as an infectious disease which has spread across multiple continents throughout the world affecting large number of people (WHO, 2020). The spread of virus forced the Nations to adopt the series of lockdowns with stringent rules and became mandatory to adopt covid appropriate behavior of wearing masks, maintaining social distancing, and frequent sanitizing. Government adopted tough measures of closing down business activities, commercial hotels and services Educational institutions offices along with travel restrictions to cramp the infections. Only essential services are allowed to operate. The whole 2020 passed in turbulent situations and it is continuing. The entire human community has experienced a high amount of adversity, trauma and uncertainty in the restricted lifestyle. Despite adapting consecutive lock down and safety measures, innumerable vaccination drives, the whole world was in clutches of corona virus. In the year 2021, we all experienced adverse conditions due to variants of virus which are more virulent than basic one. A variant of corona virus was first detected in India in late 2020 and WHO named it as Delta variant on 31st May 2021 (WHO 2021) and the year 2022 faced with one more variant by the name Omicron.

Because of these variants, several parts of world have experienced a massive surge of COVID-19 cases and deaths (Sujith kumar et al 2021). In India, second wave has been started in the midst of March 2021 and by the April 2021, highest number of cases have been recorded (World meter, COVID-19 corona virus, pandemic, 2021). It has become a challenge to the government to handle the second wave in which major hit was on young and Middle aged population according to the National Centre for Disease Control, highest number of covid deaths took place in April and May 2021. Governments at state and central level have fastened the vaccination process throughout the nation to get situations in to normalcy. Whole society was under Traumatic conditions throughout the periods of pandemic which affected the normal lives of the people to the maximum extent.

Effect of Pandemic on Employee performance and well being

The pandemic had led to the emergence of more complex and challenging work environments for the employees, managers and HR practitioners. For the long periods of nearly more than 48 months, organizations were not sufficiently prepared to deal with this crisis as virus outbreak was continuous with different variants and its impact has became more and more severe in the periods of its intrusions. Due to this, many companies had conducted their operations through remote work and employees were forced to continue work from home (WFH).

Mixed set of arguments can be observed in the literature on the effects of WFH on the employees' performance. Research studies prior to the COVID-19 revealed that WFH had positive outcomes on work domain. Employee productivity, Job satisfaction, Work engagement was improved through WFH (Dutcher2012, Grant, Wallance & Spurgeon 2013). It has been identified from the literature that people working from home also reported greater job motivation and satisfaction and work life flexibility (Baruch Y, 2001). Personal comfort, flexible hours of work, no need to commute, managing house hold responsibilities, looking after dependents at home simultaneous with office work are considered as some of the positive aspects of Work From Home (Wheatley D, 2017). In a survey conducted by Deloitte, revealed that majority of millennials and Gen Zs, would like to work remotely in frequent times.

Before pandemic, home working has resultant in to greater satisfaction as employee enjoyed flexible work time. Because of COVID-19, their raised a compulsion of strict and extended lockdowns and employees are forced to work in the isolated work environments. Though it is WFH, these consequences resultant in to negative effects as employees are disconnected with their co-workers, experiencing isolation, loosing social life. major negative aspects of WFH

has been mentioned by most of the employees is about the blurring of line between work and personal life as they were compelled to work beyond their formal working hours (Felstead A, Henseke G, 2017). Some of the employees were worried about being out of sight on opportunities to career growth, loosing promotions, rewards, and positive performance reviews due to WFH and extended lockdowns. Being disconnected with the colleagues, social distancing with the team members, employees had experienced isolation for the extended period of time which resulted in to depression, loosing morale and motivation.

Usually WFH demands multitasking and because of intrusions of family and friends at working hours, employees may lose self discipline and self motivation at work which may leads to reduction in the performance. Though literature revealed positive outcomes of WFH as increased autonomy at work, flexibility in workday schedule leads to high levels of productivity and satisfaction, but, restricted environments, blurring of working hours, higher expectations from management end, lack of refreshment or recreation during working hours, high need of self discipline, salary cuts, disconnecting with coworkers for the loner time, lack of skill development and innovation, communication difficulties leads to negative consequences of boredom, losing morale and enthusiasm at work, distress and poor mental health leads to reduced employee performance (Brooks et al 2020, Rubin & Wessely, 2020).

Extensive research work has been carried out that focuses on employees mental health and psychological distress from the pandemic periods. The main reason for psychological distress and depression is because of experiencing intense stress and individuals unable to cope up with manageable stress life events (Cummins et al, 2015). The pandemic of covid-19 has become a major source of distress among the individuals. The impact of the pandemic significantly increases the feeling of job insecurity, extended pay cuts and financial loss, Where individuals were unable to fulfill their personal life obligations that lead to long lasting effects on mental health of the individuals (Yang et al, 2020).

It became inevitable on the part of organizations to build up the virtual team work not to get hindrance in the business operations. 'Team virtuality' is a concept of multi facets that includes various dimensions of geographical and demographic distribution of team members (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014) With exclusive psychographics. Past research mentioned that virtual team works were resultant with poor communication and conflict can escalate if not properly aligned (Mortensers, Hinds 2001; Martin, Gilson & Maynard 2004).

COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of virtual teamwork. No doubt that remote working shows more safety and individuals can gain more protection from the attack of deadly virus. Here, the challenging aspect is that to perform in teams Virtually with effectiveness, employees lead with Information & Communication Technology (ICT). Before the pandemic only certain groups used to work remotely but now every employee is forced to work Virtually and it became a compulsion on their part to get well versed with these ICT tools to deal with their work effectively and efficiently. So it is very crucial for organizations to come out with interventions which help to improve teamwork in the virtual settings (Mark & Kozlowski, 2019). Prior research suggested that the virtual team work more effectively on brainstorming sessions (DeRosa, Smith & Hantula, 2007). Due to lack of personal interactions, exchange of ideas and creative thoughts might not generate to the required extent (Allen, Golden & Shockley, 2015).

It has been observed from the earlier research that greater congruence between the employees attributes with the organizations work environment result in increased level of satisfaction engagement and overall well-being (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman & Johnson 2005). This implies about person-organization environment fit theory which explains about compatibility of individuals' values, culture, beliefs and desires with organizations culture (Kristof, 1996).

If the work environment fulfills the needs and desires of employees with appropriate P-O fit both employees and organizations can flourish with better performance. According to P-O fit theory, every individual will have a desire to develop relationships with others (Barrick, Mount & Li 2013; Edwards & Cable, 2009).

People will match themselves and absorb with organizations to fulfill their social desires of association with others (YU, 2016). But in the era of covid-19 pandemic organizations limit the social interactions and employees are asked to maintain virtual communication which stem towards the misfit in the congruence of organizations' work culture with employees needs and aspirations. This p-o incongruence leads to the wellbeing of the employees that can in turn hinder to the productivity of the organization (Carnevale & Hatak 2020). The consequences of social exclusion because of shifting to remote work environment, physical distancing measures, lack of belongingness with work culture have become salient points for increased employees' feelings for loneliness (Kopp 2020, Robinson 2020). Lack of psychological Association with organisation may also results to poor emotional attachment among the employees and it may leads to significant loss of productivity and motivation (M koushik 2020). A lare wing of psychological disorders is observing in covid-19 era due to frequent quarantines which is affecting the mental health of the people (Brooks et al 2020). Negative impacts of Mental Health can be in the form of depression, behavioral disorders, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), frustration (Shankardas 2020).

A Research paper came out with the conceptual Framework on causes and relationships of Mental Health of the people in the context of covid-19 which consists of two sets of factors-proximal and distal; the interaction of these factors is the outcome of Mental Health. proximal factors are considered as direct effects of the pandemic like family issues of violence and abuse, Stigma, any preconditions of health, co-morbidities, economic crisis. Disital factors are indirect effects which have been raised due to the hit of virus or disease on individuals like fear of infection, stress due to financial loss, economic instability, social isolation due to lockdowns, Quarantines. Along with the direct and indirect factors, the conceptual map also included with protective factors like positive thinking, spirituality, family and

community support as mitigating elements to over ride the effect of these stressors and maintain good mental health (Shankardas 2020).

Before pandemic, Employees had less experience of remote working and after pandemic, employees were suddenly in to technology based work environments (Moretti, A.; Menna, F et al 2020) (Afrianty, T. W.; Artatanaya, I. G.; 2021). So much of research has been conducted to understand the effect of remote work on productivity of the employee. Occupational discomfort has been experienced by the employees during pandemic as there was no proper work policy adopted with respect to work from home, no proper training and availability of ICT tools and internet connectivity and insufficient Guidance on usage of technology, poor communication. These situations considerably showed impact on ob performance (Kumar, P.; Kumar, N.; Aggarwal, P.; Yeap, J. A. L). It's important to note that different levels of multi tasking, interruptions from personal life during working hours in remote working are detrimental to employees' productivity and it can be observed more in case of women work community (Leroy, S.; Schmidt, A. M.; Madjar, N.2021)

There is an extensive literature which shows the relation between relation between mental well being and productivity of the employees in the work environments. [Chu, A. M. Y.; Chan, T. W. C (2022), Umishio, W. et al, 2021, Dongarwar, 2020, Majumdar, P.; Biswas, A.; Sahu, S.2020). Covid 19 pandemic has changed the personal and professional life styles of the individuals throughout the world irrespective of their Geographic, demographic and psychographic characteristics. (Matli, W.2020). There was greater amount of distress among the employees due to sedentary lifestyle and confinement to home. Due to lack of physical activity, individuals used to have worse sleep which led to poor quality of personal and professional life. Many individuals experienced fatigue due to extended hours of workings at home as remote work blurs the balance between work life and personal life.

Employees' wellbeing has been affected due to stress, anxiety, and depression due to the social isolation, extra hours of work load, job insecurity feeling, and demand for ICT skills to cope up with new work arrangements. Furthermore, factors such as longer working hours and the general home-working arrangement impacted employees' well-being even in other forms, for example, by compromising work-life balance or reducing the time devoted to leisure, family duties, and friends. Covid work arrangements result to poor quality of communication where interpersonal relations were effected to maximum extent. Receiving and delivering of opinions, expressions were hindered due isolating work environments. Employees lost the sense of belongingness with their teams and organizations that causes disengagements of employees with the work environments. New work arrangements at pandemic times demand new job skills of usage of technology. Inadequate proficiency towards techno related factors also developed insecurity feeling among the employees. (Molino 2020, Taser, D.; Aydin, E.; Torgaloz, A. O.; Rofcanin, Y, 2021). Though time is saved due to remote work and non commuting, employees are over loaded with work that demands high level of multi tasking generating more stress levels and mental ill health. that leads to lower performance.

2. Discussion

From the above points mentioned in various research it has been cleared that new arrangements of work environments developed due to covid 19 pandemic had led to severe consequences. So organizations have to deal strategically to enhance productivity. It can be done by creating proper work environments even virtually and should involve in imparting technical guidance and assistance through training sessions to handle with new ways of working [Kumar, S.; et al 2020, Carillo, K.; 2020 Chanana, N. Sangeeta2020, Dongarwar, D; 2020). Organizations should come out with the effective Leadership style which can help to enhance organizational commitment and extra role behavior. Organization Leaders have to provide guidance rather involve in intense monitoring and acknowledge the quality and quantity of work and by preventing extra workload on employees (Spagnoli, P et al, 2020.; Contreras et al,, 2020, Platts, K et al, 2022., Mari, E. et al 2021).

Leaders should promote social support in dealing with technology based work to overcome reluctance towards the usage of ICT tools and their dependency. Collaboration work with effective and open communication among the employees would overcome the conflicts among the team members and this can be possible through positive and effective leadership. Communication is main tool which is directly linked with performance and it has been identified that effective organizational communication impacted the individual's work effectiveness even at remote work (Wang, B.; et al 2020). Organizations should identify the factors and execute them strategically to improve employees' productivity and well being. Organizations should support employees' wellbeing by adopting employee engagement activities, and also support social well being by promoting culture of trust and collaboration in the organizations [, Kumar, S., 2020 Breideband, T et al, 2022, Chanana, N. Sangeeta, 2020, Leroy, S.; 2021, Buli ́nska-Stangrecka, H 2021). Programs are to be organized in the form of webinars, online classes focusing on reduction of stress, anxiety levels, conducting meditation classes, provide access to counselors, yoga instructor to maintain work-life balance and also deal with physical health issues. Organizations can motivate its employees by conducting Team alignment sessions, online competitions, virtual team meet-ups, family Engagement practices. The leaders of the organizations can conduct team-building activities and virtual events such as lunch in a video conference (Chanana, N. Sangeeta2020), online happy hour, hidden talent show, virtual karaoke, and campfire challenges (Dongarwar, D.; Yusuf, K. K.; Maiyegun, S. O.; Ibrahimi, S.; Ikedionwu, C.; Salihu, H. M2021). . These types of activities can mitigate the effect of stress and anxiety that had been arise due to new work arrangements and can develop positive relationship between superiors and employees so that there can be open and free communication among the members to discuss on any issues and problems arised in the work environments. Through these practices, compassionate culture and cohesion can be cultivated among the members (Kotera, Y.; Green, P.; Rhodes, C 2021).

3. Conclusion

The major challenges faced by the employees in the times of pandemic were sudden demand for the adoption new work environments through the usage of technology. Employees who were not oriented with the application of ICT tools and various technologies were compelled to implement these in their work process that led to stressful situations. Consequently, organizations also encountered with turbulence situations in process of carrying its functions. Pandemic has not given any time to cope up with the changes and crisis. Pandemic period had taught new lessons to the society and organizations that we should be ever ready with updated plan of action to face sudden surge situations. Employees should be empowered with diversified skill set and make them physically and mentally strong to deal with unexpected unstable environments. Organizations should adopt good practices and policies which generates collaborative work, support, innovative thinking, open communication, empathy. Effective & efficient Leadership plays a major role implementing these practices which develop positive work environments. The technology mediated strategies, consistent post pandemic use of work arrangements, providing sufficient autonomy in the work can promote employees' well-being and productivity.

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