Ensuring Employee Safety and Happiness in Times of COVID-19 Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Human history is observing a very tough time fighting an invisible enemy - the novel infectious respiratory disease COVID-19 Corona virus, which emerged in Wuhan, China and rapidly spread globally. At this moment, the world has literally come at a standstill as the entire human race gets gripped by this deadly pandemic. The sudden emergence of the crisis is pushing many families into poverty and increasing existing inequalities. Employees are suffering immediate losses in terms of income and employment. In current stressful situations, they are worried about the pandemic's implications on their workplace. Governments alone cannot address the challenges. The company heads, employers, business leaders, and HR professionals should come forward to accept the challenge to minimize the impact of the pandemic on the employees and ensure their safety, health, and happiness. Today's organizations have to remain alert and adaptive to unforeseen events, such as external crises, which create increased uncertainty among their workforce and pose immediate threats to the organizations' performance and viability. As corona virus is affecting workplaces around the world, employers need to adjust to this new situation and develop strategies that can help the employees to work as effectively as possible during the crisis period as well as prevent the damages that the novel corona virus can bring. At this difficult time, employers should practice transparency, empathy, and patience with their employees.

Keywords: COVID-19, Novel Corona Virus, Pandemic, Employee Safety, Employee Wellbeing, Workplace happiness, Human Resource Management.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, the world is facing humanity's most challenging health crisis since the Second World War that is threatening all of humanity and every aspect of human lives. Human history is observing a very tough time fighting with an invisible enemy. A pandemic outbreak from China has gone everywhere, turning to be an extraordinary situation for almost all nations of the world and is severely disrupting the global economy. The world is at the brink of a major widespread recession that probably has no parallel in the recent past. To date, over 70 million people are worldwide affected by this crisis and over 4 lakh people died out of the infection [*]. Indirectly, billions of people are suffering from the impact of this global pandemic. As the corona virus crisis unfolds globally, it is expected that this pandemic has the potential to reach a large proportion of the global population. Some researchers suggest that 40-70 percent of the world's population could become infected (Baldwin and Di Mauro, 2020).

Almost all nations are struggling to slow down the transmission of the disease. Various measures like social distancing, intensive surveillance and quarantining of cases, contact tracing and isolation, combating the mass gatherings, and community containment was undertaken to minimize the spread of the virus. In the attempts to contain the spread of the infection among the public, governments around the globe started imposing travel restrictions, curfews, lockdowns, and more. Due to lockdown, all means of transport - flights, railways (except goods trains), buses, trucks, and vehicles are suspended with special exemption to those associated with essential commodities. Industries are suffering a lot as many of these, excepting those related to essential amenities, remained closed for a long time in many countries. Almost all countries are facing the threat of low productivity, high inflation, and increasing unemployment, thereby putting a severe strain on the global economy.

As the virus continues to spread, the society, the economy, and the business are being impacted. The uncertainty for businesses has heightened dramatically and, in turn, the employees are suffering immediate losses in terms of income and employment (Bloom et al., 2020). In particular, the sudden emergence of the crisis is pushing many families into poverty and increasing existing inequalities. Governments alone cannot address these challenges. The company heads, employers, business leaders, and HR professionals should come forward to accept the challenge to minimize the impact of the pandemic on the employees and ensure their safety, health, and happiness.

For employees in many organizations, this is a time of great uncertainty. The novel corona virus outbreak is changing the way people work, with remote work, meeting protocols, travel bans, and social distancing becoming the new norms. In almost all organizations, these changed ways of working are raising questions and concerns. Apart from the financial impact of this pandemic, the safety and well-being of employees is another area of concern for the employers. Covid-19 not only presents risks to employees' health and safety; it also increases work-place stress and decreases productivity, thereby reduces employee happiness. In such a time of crisis, when employees understand that their employer isn't risking their safety to improve the profit margins,

employees may be more satisfied and happy in their jobs. The employees are in stressful situations and HR professionals should try their best to keep everything in perspective and aligned.

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[*] Figures as on 10th June, 2020 – www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/

From an employee wellbeing perspective, the panic is mounting among the employees due to the all-time high uncertainty that the COVID crisis has bought for them, even if they or their families are not displaying symptoms. In current stressful situations, they are worried about the immediate, near-term, and long-term implications of the novel corona virus. Employees are totally relying on the guidance of the government and employers to remain employed, safe, and happy. As the government is doing its role, it is high time for the employers to accept the challenge to ensure employee safety and happiness during these times of emergency (de Flamingh and Fairhall, 2020). Organizations have always been initiating wellness programs and providing employees with security, health benefits, and flexibility to help them overcome their safety issues. But the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 has brought the employees' safety and happiness issues in the front seat. This may be due to the existence of certain fears among the employees, such as:

- Fear of the possibility of getting infected by others.
- Fear of becoming a cause of spreading the epidemic.
- Fear of the possibility of getting quarantined.
- Fear of loss of pursuits of pleasure.
- Fear of attending the work premises in an unsafe environment.
- Fear of continuity of business operations.
- Fear of losing the job.
- Fear of Salary reduction.

Table 1 – Understanding Employee Experience: Before and After COVID-19

Before COVID-19	After COVID-19
- Financial Fitness - Leadership Opportunities - Teamwork & Recognition - Wellness Programs - Safety Programs - Health Insurance	- Salary Reduction - Infection Reporting - Work in Shifts or From Home - Temperature testing - Masks, Sanitizers, etc. - Meeting Protocols

OBJECTIVES

The current research was undertaken with the following objectives in mind:

- To understand the reasons for employees' panic and stressful situation amid the COVID crisis.
- To understand how COVID-19 has affected the workplace happiness.
- To highlight the key factors that may increase employees' safety and happiness.
- To suggest measures to decrease employee stress and anxiety.
- To suggest measures that make employees feel valued, heard, and engaged.
- To suggest measures that create a sense of normalcy among employees.

METHODOLOGY

The method adopted in this paper is a general literature review, based on the classification of Grant & Booth (2009), which provides for an examination of the recent and current literature and covers different subjects in varying levels of completeness and comprehensiveness. The narrative form is the main characteristic of this type of review (Grant & Booth, 2009). Due to the paucity of studies on the impact of COVID-19 on employees' happiness and safety, the researcher had to draw on recent studies related to the pandemic and its impact.

The search for articles was made in Google scholar, Web of Science, and Semantic scholar, using a combination of keywords related to corona virus OR COVID-19 and employee safety, COVID-19 and workplace happiness, COVID-19 and employee wellbeing, COVID-19 and HR strategy. Articles were chosen according to their relevance to the current research topic. A search was made for those articles that provided information regarding the impact of COVID-19 on employees' safety and happiness, focusing on those articles that were recently published between January 2020 and May 2020. Keeping a focus on the objectives of the current research, the researcher analyzed articles which helped to create a bridge between epidemiology, psychology, and HR management. Hence, the bio-medical articles were not considered. All the reviewed articles are included in this paper and listed in the references.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

COVID-19 and related literature

An outbreak is a sudden rise in the number of cases of a disease, which mainly occurs in a particular geographical area, or may extend to several countries. It may last for a few days or weeks, or even for several years. An outbreak becomes an epidemic when an infectious disease spreads rapidly to a comparatively larger area among many people. An epidemic becomes a pandemic when a disease outbreak spreads across countries or continents. Pandemic differs from an outbreak or epidemic because it:

- affects a wider geographical area, often worldwide.

- infects a greater number of people than an epidemic.
- is often caused by a new virus or a strain of the virus that has not circulated among people for a long time. Humans usually have little to no immunity against it. The virus spreads quickly from person-to-person worldwide.
- causes much higher numbers of deaths than epidemics.
- often creates social disruption, economic loss, and general hardship.

Pandemics, in general, are not merely serious public health concerns, rather these trigger disastrous socio-economic and political crises in the infected countries.

Corona virus is a family of viruses that circulate among animals but some of them are also known to affect humans. The 2019 novel corona virus is a new strain that has not been previously seen in humans. The COVID-19 pandemic was very new to the globe and very little scientific information was initially available about the manner of the spread of this infection in humans. The transmission takes place through respiratory droplets and close contacts (Phan et al., 2020). It has an estimated incubation period of 3 – 14 days, with an average incubation time between 4.75 and 7 days (Li et al., 2020). Its primary symptoms being Fever, Cough, Difficulty breathing, muscle pain, tiredness, respiratory failure, and septic shock (Backer et al., 2020).

A cluster of cases of "pneumonia of unknown etiology" (Xiang et al., 2013) emerged in Wuhan, China, at the end of December 2019 (WHO Report, 5th Jan. 2020). The cluster was epidemiologically associated with the Hua Nan seafood and animal wholesale market (Huang et al., 2020). A novel Beta corona virus was immediately identified as the causative agent (Tan et al., 2020) and it is shown to be related genetically to SARS-CoV (severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus) and other bat-borne SARS-related Beta corona viruses (WHO Report, 9th Jan. 2020). The virus is the third zoonotic corona virus, after SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV (Middle East respiratory syndrome corona virus), but appears to have pandemic potential.

The number of cases expanded rapidly and spread covered more than 25 provinces in China. To help control the spread of the virus, a "cordon sanitaire" was instituted for Wuhan on January 23, 2020, which soon stretched out to other cities in Hubei Province. Almost every country soon got affected by the devastating Corona virus disease. Subsequently, the outbreak was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the Director-General of the World Health Organization on January 30, 2020 (WHO Report, 31st Jan. 2020). The virus was named SARS-CoV-2 by the International Committee for the Taxonomy of Viruses (Gorbalenya et al., 2020) and the infection it causes was named COVID-19 by the World Health Organization (WHO Report, 11th Feb. 2020).

Employee Safety and related literature

The literature has established several factors that have a bearing on the link between employee productivity and workplace safety. Various researches (e.g. Cha, et al., 2006; Mygind, et al.,

2006; Henshaw, et al., 2007) focus predominantly on disease prevention, psychosocial factors at the workplace, safety concerns at the workplace, workplace politics, workplace spirituality, epileptic medication at the workplace, safety climate at the workplace, and safety management. Anderson and Gough (2004) argue that safety and health in the workplace have become an integral component of the viability of the business for employers, labor unions, governments, and environmentalists in general.

Erickson, J.A. (2000) described safety culture as "the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions shared by natural groups as defining norms and values, which determine how they react in relation to risks and risk control systems". Robert and John, (2004) explain that a healthy person is free of illness, injury, or mental and emotional problems that impair normal human activity. Health management practices in organizations strive to maintain the overall well-being of individuals. Safety on the other hand refers to protecting the physical well-being of people. Oliveira and Almeida (2008) in their study found that safety and occupational health has become an integral component of management plans as a necessary dimension in conducting sound business.

Wong et al., (2020) argues that the increase in the overall self-reported stress level was significantly associated with a lack of workplace policy in place, inadequate comprehensiveness, lack of timeliness, and lack of protective equipment supply. The study highlighted workplace policy should be further strengthened in both government and organization settings. Bennet (2002) argues in his study that workers' views on occupational safety and health in the workplace are often ignored due to various management styles and a shortage of safety regulations, allowing for little reflection for worker contribution. Workers as subordinates often find themselves compelled to simply comply with and submit to rules and policies already in place at the workplace. He states that in many industries, the plight of workers is left in the hands of health and safety professionals, industrial hygienists, academics, and industrial managers.

Employee Happiness and related literature

Happiness may be defined as the experience of frequent positive effect, infrequent negative effect, and an overall sense of satisfaction with life as a whole (Myers & Diener, 1995). Dr. Laurel Edmunds and Jessica Pryce-Jones have researched the concept of happiness at the workplace in detail and from their findings: "Happiness at work is about mindfully making the best use of the resources you have, to overcome the challenges you face. Actively relishing the highs and managing the lows will help you maximize your performance and achieve your potential. And this not only builds your happiness but also that of others – who will be affected and energized by what you do".

Happy employees are increasingly innovative, imaginative, and committed, and they're more likely to remain in long-term employment with the organization. Physical health generates happiness — though once a basic level of healthiness is reached, more health doesn't generate more happiness. Physical safety generates happiness — though more of health doesn't generate

more happiness after a certain level. Neog and Barua (2014) analyzed that the work remuneration is the foremost significant variable for improving the level of employee happiness and the impact of other variables like work-life balance, healthy working environment, proper training, supervisor support, promotion, career development opportunities, are also significant for improving the level of employee happiness.

There are community-related drivers of happiness. People develop a sense of identity from feeling pride by gaining a place in their relevant community, whether within the organization or outside it. Apart from these, there are other drivers of Workplace Happiness, like – Fairness, Being valued, Recognition in Team, Trust, Autonomy, Positive Emotion, Work Engagement, Rewarding Relationships, Leader Influence, Work-Life Balance, and so forth. Building social bonds have been found to be especially contributive towards long term Happiness (Haller & Hadler, 2006).

RESULTS

In these trying times, organizations should specifically vouch to look after the needs of the employees in distress, while showing care and understanding to all the employees. As corona virus is affecting workplaces around the world, employers need to adjust to this new situation and develop strategies to prevent the damages that the novel corona virus can bring. A timely business strategy can help the employees to work as effectively as possible during the crisis period. While developing the strategy, all the essential aspects of the organization should be taken into consideration to ensure employees' health, safety, and happiness.

Focus on the physical and mental health and wellbeing of the entire workforce - Allowing for remote work where possible, providing safety training and information, and setting clear guidelines around what employees should do if they get sick are all critical first steps. As a second step, ensure that the employees are getting the mental health support they need to cope up with the stresses of the pandemic (e.g., work-life balance, social isolation, anxiety). Companies continuing to operate workplace facilities should take extra precautions to ensure employee safety. These should comply with all workplace health and safety regulations as well as any additional steps needed to prevent the spread of the virus. Considerations may include travel restrictions, separations/rotations of workers in critical roles, or temporary shutdowns of facilities. Organizations should stress on workforce safety as employees may face different health risks depending on the type and location/function of their work.

Encouraging employees to work from home – To ensure protecting the health and safety of the employees, the organization should strongly encourage all the employees to work from home, if they're able, with the goal to lower the probability of the spread of the COVID-19 for all. For those employees who prefer or need to come into the offices, they will remain open for offices to promote constructive engagement.

Suspending non-critical business travel and events – HR professionals should continue to monitor the situation closely and should adjust the organization's internal policies to respond to this rapidly-evolving situation. As a pandemic precautionary measure and to reduce the risk that anyone in the organization might contract or inadvertently spread the virus, all non-critical business travel and events should be suspended.

Continuous communication - Companies should communicate policies and procedures clearly to their employees. Organizations should foster a culture of expression by open feedback and mechanisms which provide a platform to the employees to give continuous feedback (Dipstick surveys, opinion polls, special blogs, and chat forums) and suggestions on generic and specific areas.

Managing employee morale - Organizations should educate employees about the symptoms of COVID-19 and the preventive measures that are required to be taken. They should focus on establishing employee support procedures. Organizations may consider launching a communication channel in the workplace to disseminate information from credible sources and avoid the spread of any misinformation. They should also consider revisiting leave policies, travel, and meeting protocols. Employees look up to their leaders for direction, guidance, and confidence during a period of uncertainty. Communication from business leaders will be very critical in this situation and it leaves a lasting mark on corporate culture. It is of paramount importance that organizations adopt transparency in communication, engage in proactive & consistent messaging, and model the right behaviors. Allowing teams to work on the most critical tasks and empowering them to be creative in how they deliver non-essential work while minimizing unnecessary risks or exposure will boost employee morale substantially.

Compensation and benefits - Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 outbreak, a lot of organizations have made provisions for sick pay benefits to account for time spent away from work due to potential illness or self-quarantining. The specific policies vary, but many companies are offering up to two weeks of paid leave to employees who are absent from work on account of being sick. While sick pay benefits exist for full-time employees in most companies, these policies are also being formulated for non-full-time employees. For contractors and hourly workers who are not able to perform their responsibilities from home, the organization should continue to pay their labor costs to cover standard working hours.

Ensuring employee wellbeing - Emotional as well as physical wellbeing of employees should be taken into consideration at this time. Line managers and other colleagues should be alert to this and ensure they are being supportive and caring.

SIGNIFICANCE

Most of the current researches are bio-medical in nature, mainly focusing on individuals' physical health. In this context, safety and happiness issues seem overlooked. This paper helps to

broaden the scope of research on workplace wellbeing by examining the impact of a complex new pandemic: COVID-19 on employees' safety and happiness.

CONCLUSIONS

Today's organizations have to remain alert and adaptive to unforeseen events, such as external crises, which create increased uncertainty among their workforce and pose immediate threats to the organizations' performance and viability. However, with the recent COVID-19 pandemic, organizations suddenly have to navigate the unprecedented and thereby find new solutions to challenges arising across many areas of their operations (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020).

The corona virus pandemic presents unprecedented risks to employee safety and happiness. At this difficult time, employers should practice transparency, empathy, and patience with their employees. Maintaining employee well-being requires prudent measures to keep the workplace virus-free, effective health-care and sick-time policies, and a shift to remote working (Aburumman, et al., 2020).

People with happy dispositions are likely to be more proactive and resilient to adverse conditions and less prone to stress symptoms. COVID-19 may fundamentally change the ways of working and how organizations engage with their employees. In the longer term, it can also present them with opportunities to think about how to create a more agile workforce, build rich connections over virtual communication modes, and increase focus on employee safety and well-being.

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