

Managing Mental Health at Work during Periods of Uncertainty



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ABSTRACT: The coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic has resulted in a period of uncertainty where social, political, and economic factors have been affected. Employment is one the most essential components of an individual's life which determines the quality of life, generating income and constituting towards national and personal sustainability. As employees transformed their homes into their places of employment during the covid-19 pandemic, they were faced with numerous challenges particularly pertaining to their mental health and wellbeing. This study aims to identify the mental health challenges employees have encountered during the covid-19 pandemic with the endeavor to recommend strategies to manage negative mental at work during future periods of uncertainty. A systematic review of published and grey literature was conducted utilizing manual and grey literature sources. Results indicate that a work-life balance including organization; healthy eating; behavior, communication and skill development all contribute towards mental health challenges within the workplace. This study has deduced that the covid-19 pandemic has increased mental health awareness in the workplace, and every individual within employment is entitled to working conditions that are conducive, respectable, secure and have implemented legislations that promote human decency through good ethical behavior. Individuals experiencing negative mental health challenges must be provided with the adequate support to enhance their quality of life and facilitate organizational productivity. The mental state of employees has an impact upon the overall organizational costs including productivity and medical costs which contribute towards human resource challenges and must be addressed with urgency within the new normal world.

KEYWORDS: Covid-19, Employees, Mental Health, Organization, Workplace

I. INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic has resulted in a period of uncertainty where social, political, and economic factors have been affected [1]. Non-essential businesses faced closures and educational institutions had to cease face-to-face learning. Societies were confined to their homes as they adhered to national governing body lockdown regulations [2]. The covid-19 pandemic accelerated the rate of change, as global societies transitioned from physical face-to-face modes of communication to technological platforms to stay connected, continue education and operate businesses [3]. Employment is one the most essential components of an individual's life which determines the quality of life, generating income and constituting towards national and personal sustainability. More than fifty percent of the time individuals are awake is devoted to time spent in the workplace or completing work related tasks [4]. Approximately one-third of an individual's life and approximately 90,000 hours is the average life an individual spends in work-related environments [5]. Hence, the work environment and tasks performed have a considerable impact upon an individual's overall health [6]. Achieving job satisfaction is an important factor to ensure an increase in overall organisational productivity, a reduced employee turnover and a reduction in employment stress levels. When employees are satisfied within their employment statuses, they provide positivity in the workplace generating a conducive work environment for all employees which is important to generate financial benefits for the organisation [7]. Global statistics have revealed that India possesses the highest number of happiest workforces with eighty-nine percent, in contrast Japan possesses the unhappiest workforce with twenty-one percent of employees who are dissatisfied [8]. Table 1 highlights ten countries with the highest job satisfaction while Table 2 illustrates ten countries with the lowest job satisfaction rates.

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Table 1

Country	% of very satisfied employees
India	89
Mexico	85
Turkey	80
Norway	79
USA	78
Denmark	78
Spain	77
Argentina	75
Brazil	74
China	74

Table 2

Country	% of very dissatisfied employees
Japan	21
Hong Kong	11
Singapore	10
Hungary	10
Czech Republic	8
Greece	8
Sweden	10
France	12
Portugal	14
New Zealand	10

Each country homes individuals that are satisfied and dissatisfied within their employment positions, harboring either intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and rewards facilitating success [9]. However, employee wellbeing is largely dependent upon an individual's ability to cope with work pressures and the work environment, which can impact mental health and wellbeing. This has been further exacerbated during the covid-19 pandemic where individuals worked from remote locations and found innovative methods to continue organizational operation and continue working [10]. As employees transformed their homes into their places of employment, they were faced with numerous challenges particularly pertaining to their mental health and wellbeing. Mental health can be defined as "a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community" [11]. Despite the negative stigma attached to mental health, the term is not only related with negative implications nor is it only associated to disabilities or individuals with mental disorders. The psychological state of happiness and emotional wellbeing is also associated with good mental health. However, mental health is determined by how individuals manage stressors of life they encounter daily through the regulation of external and internal conditions. It has been highlighted that forty-three percent of unemployed individuals residing in the United Kingdom are challenged with poor mental health. While pre-existing mental health challenges have been heightened due to the covid-19 pandemic Employees with existing mental health conditions found that they were heightened during the covid-19 pandemic [12].

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Objectives

This study aims to identify the mental health challenges employees have encountered during the covid-19 pandemic with the endeavor to recommend strategies to manage negative mental at work during future periods of uncertainty.

METHODOLOGY

A systematic review of published and grey literature was conducted utilising manual and grey literature sources. Google scholar, Scopus, JSTOR and Gateway were used, and a thorough process was implemented where literature was extracted from, analysed, evaluated, and interpreted. The initial search comprised of the following keywords 'Employees' 'Employers' 'Covid-19' 'Mental health' 'Management' and 'Workplace'. Numerous literature sources were identified resulting in the development of the following exclusion criteria was devised:

- Literature relating to mental health challenges in the workplace prior to the covid-19 pandemic were not used
- Papers in languages other than English were omitted
- Papers providing insufficient information within their approach were excluded
- Papers focusing on mental health challenges experienced by individuals other than associated to employment are ignored

A total of twenty-seven literature sources were identified. Upon further analysis two literature sources were duplicated and as a result they were omitted. After reading the abstracts and introductions one literature source was disregarded. This left twenty-four literary sources for further investigation. Upon completion of full literature analysis, two had a lack of implementation details hence excluded from the study. Therefore, in this study a total of twenty-two literary sources met the overall criteria and were used as primary sources within this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results indicate that a work-life balance including organization; healthy eating; behavior, communication and skill development all contribute towards mental health challenges within the workplace.

Mental health challenges have increased through the pandemic highlighting the need for intervention through policies devised by international governing bodies like the World Health Organization (WHO) that have recognized mental health as a "top propriety" [13]. This has been an advancement since 2019 during which time employers were trying to address stigma associated with mental health and a correlation to diversity, equity, and inclusions. Young employees and those underrepresented are more susceptible to encountering heightened mental health challenges. Research has indicated that increased employees are exiting their employment due to work induced mental health issues. Such factors include unsustainable work or high-pressure workload. It was noted that in 2019 approximately eighty-one percent of Generation Z and sixty-eight percent of millennials ceased employment both voluntary and involuntary due to mental health implications [14]. It is within the norm to whiteness mental health challenges across the hierarchy of an organisational structure as within the past year approximately seventy-six percent of employees reported a minimum of one mental health condition due to increased work and life stresses.

The stigma attached to mental health is gradually decreasing within society as mental health awareness has increased within educational institutions and organisations [15]. Employees feel more comfortable to discuss their mental health concerns with trusted colleagues and peers, highlighting the openness from employees to seek help and treatment options. Individuals that are historically underrepresented like individuals within the LGBTQ community, a person of colour and individuals with disabilities are more susceptible to experience mental health challenges within employment. Hence, organisational culture should support individuals to facilitate them to better mental health. The role of employers and policies are vital for this purpose particularly during the covid-19 pandemic as individuals are experiencing instability. The primary reason for experiencing mental health challenges amongst employees during the covid-19 pandemic was linked to emotional exhaustion as work was stressful, monotonous, unstimulating, and overwhelming combined with isolation. Many employees have found trying to achieve a good work-life balance very difficult.

Work-life balance

A vast number of employment positions are deemed as demanding, tiresome and very chaotic as employees work for long hours to ensure professional success. However, to achieve a work-life balance there is a resistance amongst employees to work long hours utilising a mental process contributing towards better living. An amalgamation of reflexivity which helps to reach the desired work-life balance through a series of questions aimed at heightening self-awareness and defining one's role. As circumstances and priorities alter the cycle to achieve a work-life balance must also change. According to a study conducted by Harvard Business

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School consisting of two hundred interviews with seventy-eight London professionals, equal numbers of males and females between the working ages of thirty to fifty, there is a five-step process that can help employees achieve a good work-life balance [16].

1. Pause and acknowledge; Employees can ask themselves a series of questions relating to the causes of stress and the reasons pertaining to an unbalance between their work and personal life. The way in which the circumstances of life are affecting engagement and behaviour in work related tasks and the impact of personal life. It is also important to attain a realisation of what is being prioritised, sacrificed, and lost. This can only be determined when the individual takes a mental pause to understand acknowledge the answers prior to seeking a solution. Although time to cease work related tasks and finding time for reflection is difficult, it is needed to achieve a work-life balance.

2. Understand emotions; Upon experiencing increased awareness of the current situation, the individual should reflect on the associated feelings of the current work-life balance. If they feel happy, energised, satisfied, or fulfilled or in contrast to they feel angry, unhappy, resentful. The employee's ability to realise how the situation makes them feel is important to create emotional awareness and provides an emotional and rational understanding of the choices being made and determine changes if necessary.

3. Alter priorities; By heightening emotional and cognitive awareness employees will possess the tools required to put circumstances into perspective and understand if priorities require adjusting. Questions relating to what needs to be sacrificed and duration, including prioritising work commitments over family and necessity of action which may cause regrets. Returning to a 'new normal' world many individuals are likely to encounter numerous shifts through which the work-life balance might be compromised.

4. Seek alternative solutions; this can be initiated through understanding if components of the occupation or workload require altering, understanding the amount of desired time attributed to work and private life to achieve goals.

5. Implement changes; through understanding what needs to be improved and act in accordance with achieving positive change. This can include shifting expectations which can involve other employees, alternatively self-change including better time management, improving organisational skills and ensuring work tasks are not implemented during the evening time and weekends. Private and public alternations can result in effective strategies with sustainable change when implemented effectively. Public changes can include seeking additional support from managers, flexible working hours or a new employment position that is more flexible. Within the UK one out of ten employers would immigrate to another country to improve their current work-life balance [8] this stresses the importance of maintaining a good work-life balance.

Healthy eating

Research has identified that there is a positive correlation between mental health and diet linked to emotion [17]. According to the mental health organization when individuals eat a regular and balanced diet, the blood sugar levels can be regulated which are associate with feelings of tiredness and ill-tempered. By drinking enough fluids an individual can maintain hydration affecting mood, concentration levels and energy levels. The human brain requires healthy fats to work efficiently hence, by consuming the correct balance of fats found in olive oil, nuts, oily fish, avocados, rapeseed oil, milk and eggs can be beneficial. In contrast by consuming high levels of trans fats from packaged and processed foods, can imping upon heart health and temperament. By including wholegrains, vegetables and fruits the body will have the nourishment of vitamins and minerals simultaneously proteins possess amino acids the brain requires to regulate the mood. Probiotics, fruit, vegetables, and beans are good for the gut health which can reflect an individual's feelings that are associated with stress levels. In addition, caffeine found in tea, coffee, energy drinks, coke and chocolate can affect the mood and interfere with sleeping patterns causing anxiousness and irritability [18]. Eating with other people has been proven to result in psychological, biological, and social benefits providing individuals with rhythm, regularity, and connection to others as individuals can talk about the day's events. By sitting in an upright position individuals facilitate digestion and actively listen and engage in conversations which can encourage a slower eating process preventing risk of indigestion [19].

Behaviour

The covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of mental health within organisations due to pressures imposed on employees resulting from remote working, the presence of children in their homes, self-isolation legislations and a potential lack of support from employers. There is a vast gap between employee needs and what is offered by employers, hence seventy-nine percent of employees have experienced stress within the previous month. Sixty percent of employees have experienced negative challenges imposed due to work related stress and seventy-one percent of individuals who experience stress, or a tense feeling seek different employment opportunities outside of the organisation within a year [20]. Stress and burnout are the dominant reasons why employees leave organisations and are three times more likely to find new employment positions. It is important for high stress organisations like healthcare and other industries to possess behavioural health resources to ensure employee mental-health is looked after, in addition to cultivating a cultural shift and utilise technological advancements appropriately.

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Unemployment can result in negative behavioural changes and long-term effects on psychological health leading to stress, anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem. Therefore, it is not surprising that in January 2021 forty-three percent of unemployed individuals possessed poor mental health, twenty-seven percent in employment and thirty-four percent of individuals that were furloughed. Organisations can facilitate a decrease in the rise of mental health challenges through employment retention schemes which can reduce unemployment rates and employment creation programmes to provide individuals with opportunities to attain employment. Behavioural changes can be altered through ensuring social security systems are implemented supporting individuals with poor mental health through sufficient financial support and employment opportunities [21].

Communication and skill development

Poor communication has been a vital contributing factor of poor mental health amongst employees during the covid-19 pandemic [22]. Poor communication has led to reduced feelings of support and connection particularly as individuals worked from remote locations. The organisations that supported employees during the pandemic to fight racial injustices for example during the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter Movement, planning a phased face-to-face return, mental health support and setting appropriate achievable goals through employing good communication tactics encountered positive outcomes. The individuals that had good communication from employers felt supported and twenty-six percent less employees were less likely to report mental health symptoms due to a reduction in mental health issues. As a result, employees performed well and attended work feeling the workplace was a conducive working environment and a 'safe space' where mental health could be discussed. Simultaneously, employees experienced increased job satisfaction and served in their organisations for longer time frames. As good communication was maintained within some organisations, employees cultivated trust with their management team, harboured positive views of the company, management and were proud to be part of the workforce, hence there is a positive correlation between the organisational culture and intentional ability to support mental health at work. Although the covid-19 pandemic had affected the transformation of vast organisations, globally thirty-eight percent of the employees who continued with the same employment position are happier than pre-covid. In contrast one third of global employees have claimed their employment positions have become more challenging within the new normal. Financial implications are a vital element constituting towards employment satisfaction, and with the global economic recession and an increase in living costs numerous individuals are seeking new job opportunities with increased financial rewards. However, statistics have revealed that approximately sixty-four percent of employees residing in Britain would stay in employment positions that they enjoyed with lower pay, in comparison to an employment position with higher pay and a lack of enjoyment. In contrast when offered a ten percent pay increase, forty-three percent of individuals in full-time employment would leave their current employment position for financial gain [8].

CONCLUSIONS

This study has deduced that the covid-19 pandemic has increased mental health awareness in the workplace, and every individual within employment is entitled to working conditions that are conducive, respectable, secure and have implemented legislations that promote human decency through good ethical behavior. Individuals experiencing negative mental health challenges must be provided with the adequate support to enhance their quality of life and facilitate organizational productivity. The mental state of employees has an impact upon the overall organizational costs including productivity and medical costs which contribute towards human resource challenges and must be addressed with urgency within the new normal world. When employees are happy with their job and environment, they are more likely to generate an increased revenue for their employers. Hence, it is in the interest of the organization to ensure their employees are facilitated towards good mental health. It is vital for managers to provide their employees with the appropriate level of emotional support. This may result in reducing pressure levels through enhanced employee support and workload distribution, communicating expectations and opportunities to re-skill and up-skill. During the covid-19 pandemic organisations have been more aware of mental health implications their employees are encountering. Some organisations have taken appropriate measures to facilitate their employees towards better mental health like counselling or mental health days.

Recommendations

- It is important for organisations to raise mental health awareness and identify mental health symptoms, which can promote early intervention towards recovery. In addition, there is increase confidence cultivated to help individuals with mental health issues, simultaneously eradicate mental health associated stigmas. There is a need for a cultural change within organisations to ensure places of work for employees are mentally healthy. This can be achieved through employers acting with integrity implementing verbal strategies through their actions.

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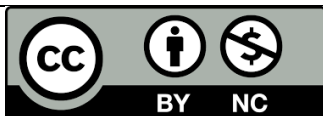
- Collaboration between employers and employees whilst initiating strategies proposed by national and international governing bodies will constitute towards positive mental health.
- Most individuals have access to one or two mobile devices that are internet connected and can download mobile apps. There are numerous apps available for individuals facing mental health issues in the workplace including self-affirmations and motivational tools.
- Management within the workplace must view mental health challenges as a collective priority opposed to an individual issues. Although individuals can take appropriate measures to ensure they look after their mental health through self-care, days dedicated to wellness and mental health, employers are required to alter the workplace culture. Every individual must consume responsibility of developing a culture to break the mental health stigma and support individuals facing mental health challenges collectively.
- Accountability mechanisms should be employed, demonstrating ownership in addition to management teams demonstrating openness and transparency.
- Education and societal awareness through local and international collaboration can gradually decreased the negative impact associated with mental health stigma. Within organisations, management and employees should be trained on identifying signs of mental health with appropriate coping mechanisms and supportive workplace tools because cultivating a safe psychological environment is vital within organisations.
- Updated and regularly assessed mental health policies and practices should be effectively communicated through verbal and non-verbal communication forms.
- Strategies like group therapy sessions, exercise, yoga, meditation, and mindfulness have been recommended to manage negative mental health at work to help employees in the new normal world.

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