

# PANDEMIC DISRUPTION AND THE CHALLENGES OF MANAGING WORKFORCE

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## Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant disruptions in workplaces. The traditional tasks and techniques are giving way for emerging, creative and innovative ones with consequences for the workforce and the organization. How these alterations are challenging the management of the workforce and how organizations are dealing with the emerging issues is the focus of this research. The study is a theoretical review aimed at shedding light on the problems of coronavirus pandemic on the management of workforce. Data were sourced from learned journals and analysed qualitatively. Despite ambiguity surrounding performance of organizations, post-COVID-19 era is projected to witness increased adoption of disruptive technologies and corresponding acceptance of digital work models. The difficulties being experienced now in managing workforce will likely continue unabated until organizations fully integrate digitization of work processes. The workforce will be streamlined and additional set of skills will be required to manage them. Therefore, organizations are expected to invest in technology of the future and reskill themselves for the tasks of managing future workforce.*

**Keywords:** Coronavirus pandemic, disruption, workforce management, technology

## Introduction

The coronavirus disease popularly known as COVID-19 ravaging the world has brought organizations to crossroads where critical information required for continuity are

unavailable. Since its outbreak, and consequent lockdown, organizations have been grappling with how to make headway. The much that have been learnt from the pandemic require that organizations provide non-pharmaceutical interventions for workers to prevent person to person transmission (WHO, 2020). Accordingly, organizations that have implemented the World Health Organisation guidelines have directed workers to maintain social distance at work, wear mask and work from home (Hamouche, 2021). In addition, organizations are adopting emerging technologies as response to health and safety issues arising from the pandemic health threats. These technologies create the possibility for employees to work virtually from various locations thereby breaking barriers of time and place. These practices have altered the traditional way of work as well as management of the workforce (Carnevale & Hatak, 2021). Now, work team and board meetings are tele-commuted through virtual platforms (APEC, 2021). The usual work and office settings have been disrupted by the adoption of these emerging technologies. These dramatic alterations of organizational operational environment have aroused challenges for workforce and human resource managers.

The benefits of emerging technologies have pulled many multinational corporations to adopt them. However, the current chase is sequel to the requirement to stay afloat in view of the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. The menace which could be likened to a sudden attack on the traditional ways of life of both individuals and organizations has disrupted the

structure and culture of workforce and caused organizations to embrace pseudo-workforce with a way of life that is alien. The implementation of these technologies has rendered some tasks redundant as well as skills required to execute them (APEC, 2021). Similarly, new set of tasks are required as well as the skills to execute them (Baker, 2020). Thus, organizations are confronted with the challenges of managing changing tasks and skills as well as workers in different locations.

It seems the changing business environment will become the 'new norm' for future business model, and organizations will have to adjust operations accordingly if they have to succeed. The changes in business environment affect all organizations, and their ability to make any headway will be depended on how they manage the workforce which is most affected by the changes. So far, only few indigenous firms are adjusting to the new guidelines by adopting the emerging technologies. This raises questions about their responds to managing workforce during the pandemic and their readiness for the post-coronavirus era. This study attempts to investigate these issues with the intent to make necessary recommendations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is built on the disruptive innovation theory. Disruptive innovation is described as a process by which a new innovation dislodges an existing innovation by offering superior benefits (Igami, 2017). Such innovation could result from a gradual transformation or introduction of a radically new idea, technique or technology (Christensen, Raynor & McDonald, 2015). When a new idea, technique or technology exploits weaknesses in an incumbent in such a way that it becomes the dominant innovation then the innovation is considered disruptive (Kumar, Chung & Normala, 2019; Gemici & Alkpan, 2015). The basic focus of a disruptive innovation is to dominate an existing one. In doing this, the organization offering the innovation stirs competition with the major players and causes them to show loopholes which are then exploited strategically. Today's innovative disruption is primarily technology driven. Technological disruption is described as any

technological innovation that alters significantly the way business is conducted (APEC, 2021). In the current circumstance, the existing work systems have been weakened by the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. This weakness has been exploited by emerging technology in response to the present realities of social distancing at work and working remotely.

### **Coronavirus Candemic and Changing Work Practices**

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) evolved from the Wuhan city of China in the wake of 2019 (Hamouche, 2021). The health menace which was declared a global pandemic on March 11, 2019 has brought in its wake opportunities for some firms and threats for others (Liu, Lee & Lee, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a revolution that has never been seen since the industrial revolution. More so, this revolution is rather sudden than gradual. In trying to keep up with the precautions of the pandemic while avoiding the fear of the unknown, organizations have adopted various techniques which have altered the traditional work practices. The usual way of managing workforce is fast changing along with the patterns of work and the work environments (Hite & McDonald, 2020). Stolk and Whitmore (2020) outlined some of the ways COVID-19 has altered the culture of work to include maintenance of social distancing at work, working flexibly and adoption of emerging technologies. The implementation of these novelty approaches to work poses grave challenges to the workforce as well as the organization.

### **Challenges for Managing Workforce**

The changes taking place in workplaces due to the outbreak of COVID-19 have several challenges for managing workforce in the present and post-COVID-19 era. The entire human resource management functions have been affected (Hamouche, 2021). A growing volume of extant literature is building to substantiate the level of challenges confronting today's workforce. From the job analysis to design the whole human resource management practices have been altered. The nature of work is changing. For instance, in attempts to limit

human contacts, the pandemic has expediated man-machine job migrations. Jobs that require significant manual efforts or highly routine have been automated, and are being done virtually (Hamouche, 2021). APEC (2021) reported that in interview of 60 CEOs of global industry leaders and focused-online groups, 64% of respondents admitted that specialised, administrative and clerical duties will be fully automated in the nearest future. Currently, the transition has reached advanced stages, and is causing furloughs and layoffs of workers (Baker, 2020). Thus, tasks which were hitherto performed by man are being executed by drones, automated machines, artificial intelligence and other innovative technologies. As routine and specialised jobs are being replaced by highly digital process, organizations will continue to observe high rate of job lost until such time when workers would have upgraded their skills to meet present day realities.

Automation of tasks has made it feasible for workers with capabilities to work remotely away from office. This too has been accelerated by the pandemic (Baker, 2020). Before the outbreak of the disease, only few companies implemented remote workstations probably due to cost involve. Now, many organizations have adopted this strategy to enable them cope with the demand to work from homes (Hite & McDonald, 2020). The alterations in jobs resulting from automation and the adoption of remote working environments mean that workers will have to cope with lots of challenges. First, administrative and specialised jobs are lost to machines. This will as well create demands for a new set of jobs (Gemici & Alkpan, 2015). Secondly, a new set of skills will be required to deal with the complexity of the new tasks and environment (APEC, 2021). APEC (2021) reported that 75% of respondents indicated that future skills will require complex problem solving and creative thinking with ability to learn continuously for improvement. Baker (2020) observed that 48% of workers are likely to work remotely in post-COVID era compared with 30% before, and that 16% of human resource managers will use technology to manage workers.

As new skills take precedent over older ones, organizations have to scout for people with ability to increase their productive capacity. Even the process of attracting workers has been altered. The usual recruitment process has been shifted online to avoid human contact. Now, interviews and selection of workers are done through virtual interactions (Carnevale & Hatak, 2021). The fact is that non-verbal interactions such as the psychological unspoken effect of body languages that assist in the selection of right candidates are being lost to virtual realities. It is yet to be ascertained the efficacy of recruiting workers with the right skills via online platforms. Another serious challenge which organization are experiencing is how to motivate the workforce. Within this period, it was difficult for organizations to cope with rising cost of workers welfare due to rising health and safety concerns (Aifuwa, Musa & Aifuwa, 2020).

The need to retool and reskill workers is a dire challenge for organizations these days. As new jobs are overtaking existing ones and skills becoming obsolete, the need for training and retraining is obvious. Current jobs are technologically driven therefore, there will require technological, innovative, creative and critical thinking skills (Caroyannis, Christodoulou, Christodoulou, Chatzichristefis & Zinones, 2021). This implies that current and future trainings would be focused on technology, innovation and critical analysis. Another arising challenge to human resource practice is the method of training. With restriction on human contacts, training programmes are now conducted virtually. The effectiveness of this method is however vague.

The challenges of retooling and reskilling workers will impact on the productivity of the workforce. It is usually difficult to adapt to specific technique but once adapted it is difficult to switch. As workers try to learn and adapt to new work techniques and environments, valuable work hours will be lost in the adjustment, and productivity will be affected (Stonehouse & Konina, 2019). Carnevale and Hatak (2021) reinforced this view in their postulation that adjusting new and existing workers to remote environment or

implementing new workplace policies and procedures erodes person-to-environment fit. Person-to-environment fit is the benefit that comes with adaptation of the worker to the environment. Alternatively, a misfit can be detrimental for organizations struggling to cope with trying times (Folloler, Talbot, Kristof-Brown, Astrove & Billsberry, 2018). It takes considerable time and resources to acclimatize workers with their work environments, which is why it is not recommended to alter work environments on the short run.

Health and safety issues have also taken toll on the productivity of many organizations (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, (2020). Stolk and Whitmore (2020) explained that the pandemic has increased the rate of presenteeism- a situation where people do less work because of suboptimal health. As rate of presenteeism increases, the attendant rate of absenteeism is likely to rise. Hamouche (2021) emphasised that information available to workers during this period was scanty. Thus, workers are left in dark regarding health and safety issues. It has presented severe health challenge and risk including increasing cost of health and safety.

The current upheaval has put strain on the finances of organizations (Aifuwa, Musa & Aifuwa, 2020; Baker, 2020). It is now more difficult for organizations to afford the cost of training and pay salaries than before. Hamouche (2021) observed organizations are adjusting to the challenge of cost by scaling down on high skills job and layoffs of redundant workers. It is herculean to cut down on costs of training and equipment at times when organizations are switching techniques. As organizations adopt the strategy of working remotely, it is likely that their budget on training and equipment will rise. Hence, Baker, (2020) observed that a rising number of organizations are embracing contractual and sub-contractual relationships to deal with rising costs. Going forward, organizations should expect rising budget due to the many costs that they need to accommodate.

Some other likely challenges the new work trend will pose to organizations are work life imbalance (Morgason, Major, Oborn, Verive &

Heelan, 2010) and likely depression as a result of working in isolation (Hamouche, 2021). Morgason, Major, Oborn, Verive and Heelan (2010) in a web-based survey of 578 workers in four locations, reported higher level of work life balance support for main office compare to satellite and client-based workers. Main office workers reported highest level of workplace inclusion. They concluded that allowing employees flexibility in choosing their work location is related to positive outcomes. The inability of workers to separate work and private life would result in disproportionate work-family-effect that may likely cause work-family-conflict (Carnevale & Hatak, 2021).

The changing work environment has made it difficult to predict workforce requirements Hamouche (2021). Future manpower needs are conditioned on many factors, which have been destabilized by the pandemic. Currently, many skills have become obsolete, workers are being laid off, presenteeism and absenteeism are on the rise and getting people with requisite skills is difficult. Strategic human resource planning has been affected (Hamouche, 2021). Unfortunately, with several mutations and waves of the virus the trend will continue to the future. Where it is difficult to predict workforce requirements how can human resource planning be done strategically? This question requires appropriate answer in further study.

### **Implication for Future Management of Workforce**

The disruption in work and human resource practices across the globe occasioned by the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has many implications for the present and future work designs and the workforce. Common opinion among researchers is that it will be too hasty to conclude that the effect of the pandemic will be short-lived (Aitken-Fox, Coffey, Dayaram, Fitzgerald, Gupta, McKenna & Wei Tian, 2020). The rate of adoption of the new work approaches including the modifications of work environments is indicative of the fact that the new work system has displaced the traditional work practices. Additionally, the wave of the virus and its mutation is a confirmation that the

pandemic or at least the virus with its dread will continue to push organizations to search for new approach to work. However, with the ongoing vaccination it is uncertain whether organizations will backdown on the adoption of the new work practices and return to status quo. In any case, the search for replacement of human labour by machines had been initiated ages ago and has been expediated by the pandemic outbreak. The trend is likely to continue in organizations even after normalcy returns to the society.

Despite ambiguity surrounding performance of organization, post-COVID-19 era is projected to witness increased adoption of disruptive technologies and corresponding acceptance of digital work models. This will unequivocally affect the strategic human resource management requirements of organizations, training and motivation, health and safety as well as their productivity. The difficulties being experienced now in terms of management of workforce will likely continue unabated until organizations fully integrate digitization of work processes. Only then will stability return to firms again. Therefore, for future concerns, organizations will have to invest in technology of the future, realign work processes accordingly, scale down workers, and equip them with skills that guarantee resilience and creativity.

As organizations globally struggle to adapt to various survival strategies during the pandemic, only few indigenous companies in low-income countries are observed to be involved in the trend. Many indigenous organizations operating in these countries still operate 100% in the traditional ways. As the societies were lockdown and movements restricted, the firms were totally shut down (Chinedu, Maduka & Chikwuemeka-Onuzulike, 2020; Olufemi, 2020; Aifuwa, Musa & Aifuwa, 2020). During this time, some the organizations made zero income, workers remained at home without salaries. While other organizations operated fully or partially using virtual presence, most indigenous organizations were shut down completely. This gravely aggravated the impact of COVID-19 in low-income countries (APEC, 2021). Indigenous organizations that thrived

during this pandemic are those involved in currier services, marketing, financial services, education, digital solutions and religion. These are the areas incidentally, that were promoting the use of emerging technologies before the pandemic.

It is obvious that indigenous organizations yet to adopt these technologies do not possess the capability to switch from stereotype. This weakness is largely due to deficit in infrastructure as a result of inadequate investment in technology. The future of work lies in technology, and organizations that invest less in technology are investing less in their future. The way forward will be for those that show weakness in acquiring or adopting technology to collaborate with companies providing this infrastructure. Currently, technology is creating platforms for team works and collaborations (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020; Christensen, Raynor & McDonald, 2015). What is being threatened by implementation of non-pharmaceutical interventions is being gained through the adoption of emerging technologies.

### **Methodology**

Research on impact of the coronavirus pandemic is ongoing. The level of understanding of the epidemic is still developing. Therefore, this study is a theoretical research based on qualitative research method aimed at drawing inferences from various submissions made by ongoing studies for better understanding of the menace and the impact on workforce management.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In response to coronavirus pandemic organizations have shifted focus from workforce to technology that guarantees continuity. What is being threatened by implementation of nonpharmaceutical interventions is being gained through the adoption of emerging technologies. The pandemic and technology have put strain on the workforce as well the organization. The workforce is being streamlined and additional skills required to manage them. Workers and managers are expected to reskill themselves to be relevant. Consequently, work systems

should be flexible and resilience with capacity to response to crisis. Organizations should invest in technology of the future and promote human resource management practices that will stimulate productivity in the altered environment.

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