

BEHAVIOUR DETERMINANTS IN WORK SETTINGS: A PANDEMIC EXPERIENCE

Miebi Ugwuzor

Department of Management

*Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, P.M.B. 071, Yenagoa,
Bayelsa State, Nigeria.*

+2348036666332

Email:ebiugwuzor@yahoo.com

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Gift Juliet Eke

Department of Office and Information Management

*Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, P.M.B. 071, Yenagoa,
Bayelsa State, Nigeria.*

+2348033913412

giftyeke@yahoo.com

Abstract

The endemic challenges in the global corporate ecosystem seem to have taken alarming dimensions with the emergence of the novel coronavirus, the COVID-19 Pandemic. Although a biomedical health challenge, the pandemic is having tremendous impact on the other spheres of life with economic, social, technological as well work behavioural implications to mention a few. In contemporary corporate entities, there is a trending redefinition of how work is done as they realize, now more than ever before, that they are operating in a new normal and have to institute novel responsive systems. Already, many firms are leveraging on modified technology to enable their employees work using innovative and creative work options. In spite of the many oscillating modifications firms have made in the face of the current adversity, there seems to be a heightened accelerated need for managers to have meaningful understanding and interpretation of behavioural presentations as they attempt to surmount the emerging workplace challenges. Thus, this work, using the exploratory research design approach, is aimed at providing insights into how managers can make sense of employee behaviours at work by understudying the highlighted determinants of work behaviours as well as the suggestions that make them better positioned to succeed in the face of perils.

Keywords: COVID-19, engagement, Management, Nigeria, Technology.

Introduction

The whole world was rudely awakened by the biomedical health challenge brought about by the novel coronavirus. Persons lost their lives, some others lost their sources of livelihood. The COVID-19 disease, previously known as 2019-nCoV, outbreak was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), by the World Health Organization in January, 2020 (WHO,2020a) and a pandemic in March,2020 (WHO,2020b) By the declaration of the disease as a pandemic, humanity and the entire human existence were certified to be under severe attack and all the arsenals of survival were let loose. All instincts and strategies for survival were on trial. While the health mechanisms and infrastructure were put in the frontline of counter attack in the battle for the salvation of humanity, economic, socio-political as well as other spheres of human endeavours grinded to a halt. Extant literature has laid credence to this (Andam, Edeh, Oboh, Pauw, & Thurlow, 2020; Mohsin, Hongzhen, & Hossain, 2021).

Legal frameworks had to be reframed to cover the compulsory use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and as guiding frameworks to health interventionist agencies that are saddled

with the responsibilities of strategic policy development and implementation for the prevention of the spread of pathogenic organisms (NCDC, 2020). Apart from the special educational and training programmes as well as advertorials undertaken by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), which trained rapid response teams across the states in the Federation and the African Centre for Disease Control (Africa CDC) which trained experts from Nigeria and other African countries on the diagnosis of COVID-19, various private and government owned news agencies as well as individuals through the use of social media platforms made frantic efforts at training and sensitization on the control of the disease as well as on the use of protective clothing and equipment. From the efforts on such trainings, individuals had to learn to don and doff seemingly simple items such as face masks and shields the correct way. Personal hygiene took other dimensions and magnitudes all for the sake of safety and self-preservation. To further reduce the rate of morbidity and mortality as well as to sustain routine health services especially at the community level due to the pandemic, Ajisegiri, Odusanya, and Joshi(2020) have suggested the need to address observable shortage of skilled health workers. On their part Amzat, Aminu, Kolo, Akinyele, Ogundairo, and Danjibo (2020) noted that the extent to which public health education has influenced positive behavioural changes on disease prevention and control among Nigerians remain vague as many people and faith-based organizations have continued to defy the directives on social distancing and public gatherings.

The Nigerian work environment, just like other workplaces around the world, was not spared of the impact of the world health challenge. With the prescription of physical distancing and other health safety measures put in place, such as the imposition of total lockdowns, persons were forced to stay indoors. Succinctly put by De Lucas Ancillo, Del Val Núñez, & Gavrila, (2020), the revolution initiated by COVID-19 has changed the way companies and employees work and will continue doing so. The informal and formal sectors of the economy had to go

remote. Technology became the bridge builder and link to enable work to be done in the new telework situation. It was observed that remote working, learning and other interactions were effectively handled through the technological interface of such platforms such as zoom, Skype, YouTube, to mention a few. Zoom for example recorded a massive boom at the peak of the pandemic. A year 2020 report described Zoom as one of the best performing stocks in the United States with a pandemic-induced sell-off which rose by more than 600% over the year (Klebnikov, (2020)). Should the risk of contagion persist, such firms keying into remote communications and interactions will receive continuously spiking patronage. With the increased use of such technological interventions, the meaning of what constitute a workplace and how work is to be done as well as the social and cultural settings of work life have all been altered.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has challenged many traditional and conventional thinking about work and has altered the meaning of the term workplace has transited from a physical location to any place work is done. This has also distorted traditional management policies, strategies and practices of organizations. While we are hopeful that the toll of the health challenge should depreciate, it is expected that managers should come up with creative, innovative and evolutionary ideas in work systems. In spite of the many identifiable gains of the practicality and workability of such novel systems, this paper is concerned with bringing to the fore what the new work environment, both in-person and remotely, means to the individual employees and how work can be effectively done within the ambits of the circumstances to mitigate the pains that may arise from the on-going process. The major focus here is to highlight the expected behavioural manifestations of employees in the present circumstance with the aim of managing identified behavioural determinants in a post pandemic work setting.

Theoretical Framework

This work is gleaned on the employee engagement theory (Kahn, 1990) and the human ecology theory (Bubolz & Sontag, 2009)

to have a theoretical standpoint. Kahn (1990) defined employee engagement as a psychological state of harnessing of organisation members' selves to their work roles and how they thought about their work. On the other hand work disengagement is described as employees' cognitive and emotional withdrawal from their job and the organization. The position was that the conditions necessary for employee engagement were meaningfulness in the work, psychological safety, and psychological availability. As he observed, engaged employees are seen during role performances to openly express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally.

From his research, Kahn (1990) developed the engagement concept based on the presumption that individuals could make real choices about how much of their real, personal selves they would reveal and express in their work and demonstrated that employees work behaviour was not necessarily about them being the right fit or the associated financial rewards accruing to the job but rather, about the way they felt. The argument was that employees would be engaged and offer discretionary effort to their jobs, if they felt that they were doing something important to contribute to organizational success; enjoying rewarding and supportive relationships with supervisors and coworkers; afforded the physical and psychological resources they needed to accomplish their work. Kahn(1990) emphasized the role of relationships in the workplace and reasoned that it was only when workers are considered as persons, not just employees, relationships assume great prominence; it is in the context of relationships that people make choices about bringing their selves fully into their work.”

The work was premised on the assumption that individuals performance are hinged on varying levels of themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally the bring to their work and their experiences of work. These were the main dimensions of the theory. To briefly explain, Kahn (1990)identified three principle dimensions of employee engagement - physical, cognitive and emotional. These are defined as follows: physical engagement is seen as the

extent to which employees expend their efforts, both physical and mental, as they go about their jobs. The level of confidence the employee had was directly related to the employees ability to expend physical and mental energy at work. Another dimension, cognitive engagement, was based on the theorising that the more knowledge employees had ,the more creativity they were encouraged to be and the more confident they were at decision making. In other words, employees will need to have knowledge of their employer's vision and strategies to make contributions and perform optimally. Through the third dimension, Emotional engagement, Kahn (1990) drew attention to the meaning people attached to their work. Emotional engagement is based upon the emotional relationship that employees feel with their employer. Loneliness is one prominent theme in this work and has been seen as a social threat and distressing feeling which has cognitive, emotional, behavioural, physical and physiological consequences and accompanies the perception that one's social needs are not being met by the quantity or especially the quality of one's social relationships (Hawkley, & Cacioppo, 2010) . The implication is that firms will have to make the work environmental climate such that employees feel at home and are emboldened to trust and work in tandem with the mission and values.

Human ecology theory (Bubolz &Sontag, 2009) took a critical look at humans as both biological organisms and social beings in interaction with their environment. Human Ecology , which was born out of the desire to make sense of the impact of humans on the man-made and natural environment as well as the impact of environments on the social systems of humans ,has been seen as the study of the relationships between humans and their environments(Human Ecology ,2021) It is a field with a large scope and complex history which arose out of multiple disciplines such as animal biology, anthropology, geology, ecology, and sociology. The proponents of the Human ecology theory considered the family as an energy transformation system that is interdependent with its natural physical-biological, human-built, and social-cultural milieu. Human ecology is also viewed by as a

methodology or framework for studying human activities and social institutions, often in conjunction with the health and functioning of the natural environment. In the face of the COVID -19 pandemic, this theory will definitely be apt in observing behaviours of employees working in the 'new normal' work situation.

Managing Behaviour Determinants

Firms are being faced with extra ordinary turbulent times in the face of the recent pandemic. It then becomes imperative for managers to ensure that work behaviours of their employees are able to live above the dictates of the circumstances for the efficiency and prosperity of their firms. This section highlights the apparent behavioural manifestations of employees by the aftermath of the COVID -19 pandemic. The traditional Nigerian workspace was no doubt affected by the disruptions of the COVID 19 pandemic as well as with digital technological innovations. The call is for practical forward –looking managers to understand determining factors that could affect the behaviours of persons at work and take advantage of the scenarios of opportunities highlighted and strategically surmount them.

Boundless Timing of Work

Traditional timing of when to be at the workplace usually followed a pattern of eight to four, nine to five or indeed whatever flextime pattern firms adopted that will meet the minimum requirement for remuneration and performance appraisal. In some cases, early arrivers and late leavers to and from the office were highly rated performers who showed high sense of diligence and commitment due to the number of hours spent in the workplace. In the post pandemic workplace, work timing structure seem to follow several boundless work timing patterns and the work output quality, quantity as well as value added component are likely to be the performance rating yard stick. With this new pattern, employees tend to work longer and harder round the clock with statutory meetings being called at seemingly odd hours and output expectations unrealistically high. All of these have implications for employee work

behaviour. More fatigue, mistakes, low level of concentration, stress and burnout, complicated work-life balance issues.

In as much as firms will want to get the most value of the employees output, how all of these new expectations affect the employees should be critically considered for optimum ultimate organizational benefit. Structures and processes delimiting realistic extents of the amount of work within a specified period should be explicitly revised in line with the available realities. Hours spent in front of the screen to be reduced to mitigate zoom fatigue.

Work Climate

A work climate is how persons feel when they work. It has to do with the mood of the person at work. Persons that feel lonely, isolated or unsupported will have a higher propensity to leave an organization. A positive work climate should make the employee feel valued and have a sense of inclusion and reduce employee turnover. Hawkley and Cacioppo (2010) model of loneliness posit that perceived social isolation is tantamount to feeling unsafe. In a warm work climate persons may be working alone without feeling lonely. Unlike in a cold climate where persons not working alone feel lonely. The evolving thinking as an aftermath of the peak of the pandemic is a redefinition of work and how it should be done. The pandemic has taken a huge toll in terms of the numbers of human lives and jobs lost. Besides this toll, organizations are faced with managing the challenge of the physical ,emotional and psychological distress of the surviving returning employees.

The distress may also affect the employees level of engagement as well as a general sense of connectedness and cohesiveness within the workspace. Employee engagement leads to positive outcomes and enhances employee job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviour and performance (Shoab, & Kohli, 2017). Humans are social creatures. Physical social connections are important as persons have the need and desire for casual conversations that come before or after meetings or to have a physical contact with persons within the workspace which one might

never have known. The work design of the new workplace is still ongoing with many potential prospects and challenges. While the situation subsists, managers should think of the social needs of social creatures, who will have the need for social interactions and interpersonal interconnectedness and how to address them. However, to build team spirituality and increase employees' sense of interconnectedness in the present circumstance, structures should be put in place to make room for in-person social connections and interactions.

Home- Work Conflict

Globally, the acceleration of remote work options brought about by COVID-19 is making working from home or anywhere the predominant work style of corporate entities. Many employees are spending less time to commute and more time with family and friends which seems very attractive and desirable. The idea of work from a remote workstation will continue to be appealing for employers and employees in the changing workplace. Although Hybrid of work processes, a situation where it will be acceptable for employees to work sometimes in person and sometimes virtually, may be the new normal, the stay-at-home order and the astronomical increase in the number of persons working from home may have added another dimension to the issue of home-work conflict. The management of Home-role and Work-role balance of employees for the socio-behavioural wellbeing of society is important (Ugwuzor, 2019). For those who have challenging home lives, and see the office workplace as a temporary escape route, the idea of working from home will adversely affect the work life of such an employee. Apart from the loss of lives of some working persons, the pandemic has also led to the loss of jobs of some of those who survived the health toll. With the current levels of anxiety, economic uncertainty and adversity being face by individuals in households one will expect that domestic abuse and violence will increase. Capaldi, Knoble, Shortt and Kim (2012) have observed that there is a link between financially stressful times and problems at work, possibly moderated by alcohol use, and the perpetration of partner abuse by both men and women. Within the

context of family, domestic, and intimate partner violence it is noticeable that although an abuse can be driven by a need for power and control, when individuals find it difficult to cope with pressures at work or financially they may become abusive toward their family members (Piquero, Riddell, Bishopp, Narvey, Reid & Piquero, 2020).

It should also be noted that home-work conflict could also play out in other scenarios. For example, if there are little children and no care giver or minder in the house, there is likely to be conflict between home and work roles. Again persons may live in residences where family members or friends share common rooms and spaces, working without a good workspace may be another challenge that will warrant the provision of an alternative workspace.

Employees' Psychological Status

Nigerians are known of their flexibility and resilience. They have the innate capacity and special knack for accommodating all sorts of stressors. However the level of physical and mental strain generated by the pandemic is capable of destabilizing the toughest of minds. Loneliness has been regarded as the social equivalent of physical pain, hunger, and thirst; the pain of social disconnection and the hunger and thirst for social connection motivate the maintenance and formation of social connections necessary for survival (Banerjee, & Rai, 2020). Issues may arise due to social isolation from colleagues in the workplace. It may be necessary for managers to know the mind workings of their employees as they work from home or anywhere. Employees' job engagement has been identified as a key driver for organizational success and competitive advantage (Pham-Thai, McMurray., Muenjohn & Muchiri (2018). The challenges of persons doing their work without the impact of the physical presence of people around. Whether it is a complete lack of a physical workplace due to telecommuting migration or a modified person of a physical workplace there is the need for employees to communicate and interact with a focus to actively support and connect with employees socially.

Humans are social beings and find some level of safety and security in the social component of their environment. Hawkley and Cacioppo (2010) opined that humans rely on a safe, secure social surround to survive and thrive and that an individual's perceptions of social isolation, or loneliness, increase vigilance for threat and heighten feelings of vulnerability while also raising the desire to reconnect. Need to set up corporate neighborhood pods which will be made of employees living in close proximity with each other and offering virtual support to one another. This can be done virtually through digital means such as phones, computers and other social media applications and in-person, noting the prescribed safety conventions. The need to set up corporate neighborhood pods will help build a social support system and enable employees of a particular firm living within a given radius, work together as both colleagues at work and share some form of community life together. This may give them some form of shared social connectedness especially if they also have to share the same router or mi-fi as they do their official work.

Infrastructural Work Support

This is the organizational support relating to the basic physical and organizational structures and facilities needed for the operation of an employee working for a firm. Literature is replete with various measures of organizational support. Eisenberger, Shanock, & Wen, 2020 posited that employees develop perceived sense of organizational support when they feel that their work organizations value their contribution and care about their well-being. It has also been observed that the general performance of an employee is enhanced by organizational support in terms of supervisor care, organizational justice, leader's behaviour and employee participation in decision making (Abou-Moghli, 2015; Chen, Hao, Ding, Feng, Li, & Liang, 2020). Huge organizational benefits may also accrue through firms commitment to special support provisions in areas as such as flexible work schedules, finance, safety and health and wellbeing as well as employee creativity and development (Ibrahim, Isa, & Shahbudin, 2016; Sinclair,

Allen, Barber, Bergman, Britt, Butler, Ford, Hammer, Kath, Probst, & Yuan, 2020).

Going to the traditional workplace may be utilized but technology continues to transform the place of work. Virtual links and communication lines are being utilized now more than ever before. The new workplace helps reduce stress and enhance creativity. Computing and communication technologies are opening new vistas how work is being done and how workers interconnect and interrelate. Suffice it to say that the level of digital enablement and empowerment of work stations outside of the conventional workplace is a measure of organizational support and will, no doubt, be a key determinant in the individual employee performance outcome. The pandemic has forced many firms to look into options of employees working in various out stations. Proper and adequate skilling to improve employees capacities and competences on the use of the new technology for the new workplace will very well mitigate the distressful situation (Ugwuzor & Arikawei, 2021). It is also important that for work to be done in the remote workplace there must be basic input infrastructural work support facilities such as adequate power supply and internet facilities and connectivity. Many traditional office blocks and domains have these key facilities provided for. However, this may not be the same for employees who reside or work from locations devoid of such luxuries. Due to these inadequate essentials, work from home or anywhere else may mean no work being done all. Expected work behavioural outcomes are likely to be distorted and deadlines and work outputs may suffer a wide spectrum of shortfalls indicating unsatisfactory work performance. If allowed to go unabated and work outputs remain a basis for employee performance appraisal, work may become frustrating and uninteresting for employees. In some cases employees may begin to think of coping with cheating behaviours. This is in line with position that there is a correlation between performance evaluation techniques and employee cheating behaviour (Daumiller & Janke, 2019; Gill, Prowse & Vlassopoulos, 2013).

Although the issues raised here highlights the daunting challenges of addressing the issues of people working from different work addresses, when employees live or do their work from within a given radius or particular cluster of neighborhoods, such work support facilities may be easier provided for as against when work team members are sparsely dispersed. Nevertheless, the need for infrastructural work support facilities and work designs to bring them together even though working remotely is imperative. This is one great way for employers to demonstrate adequate support for their employees especially in distressful times as this.

Corporate Structuration

Corporate structuration is the deliberate arrangement of the interrelated units and processes within a corporate entity. The monumental changes in the today's workplaces are still on going with no end in sight soon and the level of corporate success will be predicated on their level of preparedness to the paradigm shift. Obviously the traditional thinking of how work is done has been altered and the trend is that firms are likely to be continuously searching for new means and instituting new policies that will balance the needs of their employees and corporate stake holders as well as that of the organization.

Putting the environmental factors into perspective, dexterous virtual corporate structuration will be required that should cover all aspects of human resource management including e-recruitment, e-interview with video interviews increasingly becoming the norm with many persons seeking placement for remote positions and jobs. Also with the issues of absence of a physical workspace and no in-person supervision there is a glaring need to re-evaluate noncompliant operational templates to be structured in line with the changing circumstances. Role allocations, expectations and *modus operandi* of individuals and teams as well as new ways of coordinating and motivating will have to be thought out and reflected on. Workplace cheating behaviour has been identified as unethical behaviour that seeks to create an unfair advantage and enhance benefits for the actor (Mitchell, Baer,

Ambrose, Folger, & Palmer, 2018). Structure design should handle issues of all forms of workplace cheating behaviour.

Methodology

This is a theoretical paper and utilized the exploratory research design to give more insight on the issues raised by this Paper.

Conclusion

The experience of the COVID -19 pandemic has indeed bought novel disruptions to the different dimensions of management thought and practice. While hoping for the eventual end of the biological contagion, managers of productive work system should note the social implications and potential behavioural manifestations of employees in a post pandemic era. Regarding the pains of the period as opportunities for gaining insights into work behaviours, this Paper, through the x-rayed themes, has set the tone for the management of behaviours in times like this. The highlighted themes have serious implications for managers in terms of model considerations and work designs for efficiency and effectiveness within the ambits of the circumstances.

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