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Employee adjustment and well-being in the era of COVID-19: Implications for human resource management

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ABSTRACT

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. In this article, we discuss some of these challenges, focusing on the implications COVID-19 has for human resource management (HRM) as organizations help their workforce cope with and adjust to their newly altered work environment. In addition, we propose several avenues for future research and advocate for an integrated research agenda for tackling the challenges discussed.

1. Introduction

Organizations are faced with increasing uncertainty as they navigate today's "grand challenges", or highly significant problems not typically confined to national, economic, or societal borders (Eisenhardt, Graebner, & Sonenshein, 2016; Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015). The grand challenges of today are diverse, involving a range of complex issues such as climate change, severe economic downturns, and political instability (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016). In our interconnected world, these significant problems can pose an immediate threat to organizations' vitality and survival, encouraging organizations to remain responsive and adaptive as they organize and manage their workforce. But with the recent outbreak of COVID-19 ("Coronavirus (COVID-19)", 2020), organizations face a grand challenge of unparalleled proportions, one that forces them to dive into and directly manage unprecedented territory as they alter their workforce in technical, physical and socio-psychological ways not seen before.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a particularly challenging environment for human resource management (HRM) – with managers having to quickly venture into the "unknown unknowns" as they strive to help their workforce adapt to and cope with radical changes occurring in the work and social environment. For example, employees who formerly spent all or most of their time working inside their organization's physical boundaries now have to quickly adjust to remote work environments. Due to shelter in place orders and the closure of non-

essential businesses, even those who might be well adjusted to remote working conditions are now faced with their own unique challenges due to an inability to seek alternative workspaces (e.g., cafés, libraries, coworking-spaces) outside of the home itself. This has likely further limited the segmentation between work and private spheres leading to greater difficulties in "unplugging" from work demands (Chawla, MacGowan, Gabriel, & Podsakoff, 2020). Aside from the increased inability to separate work and private life, the closure of schools and child-care services has increased parental demands for employees, further blurring the lines between work and family spheres. While these work-family interconnections seem particularly demanding for employees with children, single and childless workers are not immune to the negative consequences of such altered working conditions, as they may be at greatest risk of loneliness, a felt lack of purpose, and associated negative effects on well-being (Achor, Kellerman, Reece, & Robichaux, 2018).

At the same time, the current grand challenge of COVID-19 provides an opportune moment for management scholars to coordinate research efforts and turn them into actionable insights to support organizations in tackling one of the greatest challenges in modern history. It also offers scholars the exciting opportunity to look across disciplines for guidance and inspiration so that the unique HRM issues organizations currently face can be managed in an integrative way. For even if potential solutions exist, this global problem requires coordinated and integrated (research) action.

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Toward this end, the purpose of this short article is to briefly explore the challenges and opportunities that COVID-19 presents to HRM practice as well as the associated avenues for future research. While the implications of COVID-19 will undoubtedly be far-reaching, we will focus on select topics surrounding employee adjustment and well-being as they navigate the current work environment.

2. HRM challenges and opportunities in the era of COVID-19

2.1. The erosion of “fit”

Perhaps one of the most salient HRM challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic involves adjusting new and current employees to drastically altered work conditions, such as shifting to remote work environments or implementing new workplace policies and procedures to limit human contact. Such dramatic alterations in how and where employees do their work is likely to have important implications for employees’ experiences of person-environment fit (P-E fit), or the level of congruence between the attributes they possess and those of the environment (Kristof, 1996). P-E fit theory posits that individuals are *attracted to* and *selected by* organizations whose work environments reflect the same values, cultures, and work features as their own important beliefs, values, and desires (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011). Based upon these processes, employees who enter organizations where their P-E fit is maximized typically flourish and experience heightened levels of satisfaction, engagement, and overall well-being (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). However, when the work environment that supports the fulfillment of these needs and desires is drastically altered – as is currently happening in response to the COVID-19 pandemic – the saliency of the growing chasm between an individual’s needs and current work environment is likely to lead to experiences of *misfit* (Follmer, Talbot, Kristof-Brown, Astrove, & Billsberry, 2018).

For example, one of the most commonly sought desires within P-E fit work relationships focuses on an individual’s fundamental goal for developing relationships and striving for communion with others (Barrick, Mount, & Li, 2013). Throughout the recruitment and selection process, people are attracted to organizations based on this fundamental need (Yu, 2016), and indeed extant research supports the notion that work relationships fulfill this fundamental desire for association with others (Edwards & Cable, 2009). But as organizations adapt their workforces in response to the current pandemic in ways that fundamentally limit physical interaction, the potential misfit stemming from this newfound P-E incongruence presents a potential disaster for employee well-being and productivity for organizations.

Accordingly, as organizations continue to adapt their HR practices in the face of COVID-19, understanding how these unprecedented changes are influencing employees’ experience of P-E fit, and how to resolve potential misfit, will be critical. For instance, as organizations have to transition to virtual forms of recruitment, selection, and training in lieu of face-to-face interactions (Maurer, 2020a), it will become increasingly important to understand how these practices will impact the future fabric of an organization’s values and culture, as these new practices could certainly attract and retain individuals differently than traditional face-to-face approaches. Toward this end, research is needed to understand the impact that COVID-19 has on employees’ ability to navigate the job search process, how the transition to virtual recruitment affects their ability to develop and assess perceptions of fit regarding potential employment situations, and the efficacy of virtual assessment centers and training programs.

In addition, understanding whether certain socialization practices can help rebalance potential perceptions of misfit among existing employees, and how to best implement them, will be necessary. Keeping with the prior example concerning the need for social relationships, a current panacea for balancing social connections embraced by many organizations involves virtual socialization opportunities such as virtual

lunches, coffee breaks, and happy hours (Maurer, 2020b). While these practices potentially alleviate perceptions of misfit as a result of the abrupt change in the social fabric of the work environment, they may also leave participants feeling unsatisfied as they pine for the social interactions they had in their pre-pandemic work-lives (Fetters, 2020; Sacco & Ismail, 2014). Accordingly, more research is needed to better understand how these transformed community-building practices translate to rebalancing the experienced P-E misfit. Building upon the work of Chawla et al. (2020) regarding the daily recovery activities of employees, for instance, future research could investigate the daily impact and recovery experienced when engaging in virtual social activities with colleagues as a replacement for face-to-face social gatherings.

2.2. Disproportionate work-family effects

As organizations navigate the challenges posed by COVID-19, they will also need to remain attentive to employees who might be disproportionately affected by current alterations of the work environment. Perhaps most notably, the changes we have witnessed in response to the current health crisis have already begun to exacerbate work-family conflict, which refers to “a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect” (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77). The past few years have witnessed an increasing interest in and application of family-friendly workplace practices such as flexible work arrangements, services including on-site childcare, and benefits that include childcare subsidies. These policies have been found to be important for reducing family to work conflict (Neal, Chapman, Ingersoll-Dayton, & Emlen, 1993), particularly among employees working from home (Golden, Veiga, & Simsek, 2006).

But as the current pandemic continues to unfold, the potential for conflict between the work and family spheres may be greater than ever. Indeed, in addition to managing the increased strain that can result from transitioning to remote working (particularly for those not accustomed to such autonomous work environments), employees are having to manage increased childcare concerns with the widespread suspension of schools and child-care services, and cope with constant concerns over the health and safety of family and friends. These newfound demands have further blurred work and family roles, thus making it more difficult than ever to maintain adequate work-family role boundaries (Giurge & Bohns, 2020).

Accordingly, understanding the impact these extreme family demands in conjunction with heightened levels of work autonomy and thereby self-responsibility can have on employees’ productivity and well-being, and which practices can alleviate such new avenues of family to work conflict, will be important. For example, insights into whether and how additional types of organizational support, beyond those emotional or instrumental in nature, can help to combat family-work conflict, can support organizations aiming to sustain employee well-being (French, Dumani, Allen, & Shockley, 2018). One form of support that is likely to be increasingly necessary for employees balancing blurred work-family roles is informational support. In the present context, such forms of support might include helping employees stay informed of recent developments regarding health and safety, whether and when local childcare options or elderly care services are available, and self-development and training opportunities that can help employees adapt themselves to changing roles and requirements.

Consistent with our previous discussion of P-E fit, this last example, in particular, may be leveraged to help employees unaccustomed to their new working conditions better adjust and achieve fit while maximizing the effectiveness of practices and initiatives aimed at reducing family to work conflict. Consider, for example, the role of job autonomy, or the degree of discretion individuals have about how and when to do tasks or what methods are used when carrying out their work (Langfred, 2000), in reducing family-work conflict. In general,

increasing job autonomy can help mitigate the family-related pressures that tend to arise within remote work environments by providing employees with sufficient cognitive and emotional resources to manage the additional and often incompatible demands (e.g., Golden et al., 2006). Yet, with the spread of COVID-19, many employees are mandated to work from home as opposed to selecting themselves into such autonomous work modes that might have naturally aligned with other employees' needs and preferences. That is, when considering those unaccustomed to working in remote contexts, the extent to which the provision of greater job autonomy will be effective may largely depend on the extent to which an individual values autonomy and associated self-responsibility in the first place (Shin, 2004; Stiglbauer & Kovacs, 2018).

Recent work points to the efficacy of self-affirmation interventions in helping employees align such values and needs with altered environments (Tasselli, Kilduff, & Landis, 2018; see also Dweck, 2008; McQueen & Klein, 2006), which may form a foundation upon which future research can begin to tackle the work-family conflict challenges of today. In addition, the use of inductive approaches, illuminating how employees thrust into such new and dynamic work environments are able to achieve family-work balance, may open new and exciting directions in the work-family conflict literature and provide relevant practical implications for organizations supporting individuals in coping with extreme work-life disruptions.

2.3. Disproportionate effects on alternative family structures

Beyond demanding work-family interconnections, the grand challenge of our current health crisis is likely to illuminate vulnerabilities in an increasingly relevant, yet understudied, segment of contemporary family structure: childless and single employees. Over the past few decades, the rate of childlessness and delayed first-births has increased in the United States and throughout Western cultures (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017; Matthews & Hamilton, 2002), a societal shift that is likely to have important workplace implications. Although organizational scholars have devoted scant attention to this segment of the labor market, the limited existing research suggests that single and childless employees may face unique forms of work-life conflict (Picard, 1997; Swanberg, Pitt-Catsoupes, & Drescher-Burke, 2005). In addition, these individuals may be at particularly high risk of loneliness and feelings of social exclusion (Achor, Kellerman, Reece, & Robichaux, 2018), possibly due to a lack of binding (family) ties, a felt lack of purpose, and isolation.

The current grand challenge we are facing is only likely to exacerbate such socio-psychological issues. For example, there already is some early indications that the societal and organizational measures put in place to combat the current pandemic (e.g., shelter in place orders, shifts to remote work environments) have increased employees' feelings of loneliness and social exclusion (Kopp, 2020; Robinson, 2020). This is not entirely surprising, given that individuals working from home tend to report less inclusion than those within traditional work arrangements (Morganson, Major, Oborn, Verive, & Heelan 2010). But when combined with recent social/physical distancing measures, closure of non-essential businesses, and shelter in place orders, a felt lack of inclusion and belongingness may become especially salient among those who are childless (Miller, 2020) and single (Smith, 2020), thus posing considerable risk to their mental health and well-being, as well as the productivity of organizations.

Accordingly, the challenges brought on by COVID-19 beckons organizations and research to consider the unique challenges and demands childless and single employees face. Organizations may want to begin addressing this issue by adopting a more inclusive and thereby creative approach to supporting all employees, considering various forms of family status. For example, human resource managers may want to look toward enhancing relationship-oriented HR systems in order to combat the greater risk of isolation among childless and single

employees and better prepare them for unanticipated events (such as our current crisis) that can lead to feelings of loneliness and social exclusion. Such relationship-oriented HR systems can help employees build ties both within and outside the organization (Kehoe & Collins, 2017) and thus develop a reservoir of resources needed to cope with possible social shocks like the one we currently face, such as by focusing on network-development, training and feedback. Further options include regularly sponsoring professional and social events, where the childless and singles can find meaning, strengthen purpose, and instituting formal mechanisms (such as regular team meetings) to encourage employees to connect with one another (Collins & Clark, 2003).

In terms of developing actionable insights to frame and tackle this challenge, we foresee several opportunities for future research. Perhaps most importantly, research is needed to understand the work-related antecedents and mechanisms contributing to childless and single employees' feelings of loneliness and social exclusion (Achor et al., 2018) and what buffers stand to mitigate such feelings in general, and during the current context of COVID-19 in particular. For example, researchers might begin by identifying the various ways in which childless and single employees perceive themselves to be stereotyped or stigmatized at work, given that such negative social cues can magnify employees' experience of social exclusion and thereby misfit (Follmer et al., 2018) – an issue that may be especially salient as employees' belongingness and inclusion are further strained in the current environment. Much of the research on family structure has focused on the stigmas accompanying employees with children – particularly women with children – and the negative consequences associated with such stigmatization (Corse, 1990; Fuegen, Biernat, Haines, & Deaux, 2004; for a recent review, see Grandey, Gabriel, & King, 2019). However, research in fields such as social psychology and gender studies, for example, suggests that, childless and single employees may face their own unique set of stigmas (Park, 2002; Remennick, 2000; Byrne & Carr, 2005), potentially contributing to harmful health- and well-being-related consequences (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Maslach & Jackson, 1985).

Finally, now is the opportune time for scholars to heed the call from prior research to integrate the study of childless and single employees in the literature on work-life conflict (Casper, Weltman, & Kwesiga, 2007). Doing so could help illuminate, for instance, whether and to what extent childless and single employees face increased work expectations and responsibilities (Picard, 1997), how these additional demands interfere with non-work demands (e.g., care-taking of elderly parents, voluntary engagements), and how the current health crisis may be exacerbating or weakening these effects.

3. Insights from entrepreneurship

The above discussion highlights suggestions for practice and research in navigating some of the challenges today's organizations face as they respond to the grand challenge of COVID-19. In addition, we believe further guidance for how organizations can adapt their HR practices in ways that can alleviate the issues above and enhance employees' ability to thrive during such dynamic and uncertain times can be gleaned by looking across disciplines. In particular, the field of entrepreneurship, which focuses on the discovery, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities occurring in inherently ambiguous and dynamic environments, is likely to offer some valuable insights.

As illustrated above, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely having profound socio-psychological, physical, and technical implications for employees as they attempt to adjust to their drastically altered work environments. Although some of these challenges are undoubtedly unique, and thus will require new methods and theories to address, some of the issues employees are currently facing resemble entrepreneurs' daily work experience. After all, entrepreneurs are often confronted with demanding work conditions including high levels of uncertainty and responsibility (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006), a need to flexibly and continuously adjust to new situations (Rauch, Fink, &

Hatak, 2018), and a strong interrelatedness of the work and family spheres (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003; Jennings & McDougald, 2007). Yet, despite those occupational specificities, many entrepreneurs are highly effective in their job and often report higher levels of subjective well-being than employees (e.g., for an overview see Stephan, 2018).

Accordingly, organizations may find inspiration for addressing the issues surrounding employee adjustment and well-being in the current work environment by considering the ways in which entrepreneurs tackle similar challenges. For example, one reason why entrepreneurs often thrive despite operating in highly uncertain and demanding environments is due to the value they place on autonomy (Prottas, 2008; Van Gelderen, 2016) and their ability to craft the “perfect job” (Baron, 2010). Might employees in today’s dynamic environment be able to leverage some of the characteristics of entrepreneurs in order to better adjust to their new work conditions? Prior research suggests that adopting characteristics typically found among entrepreneurs (e.g., valuing autonomy, tolerance of uncertainty, approaching new situations openly and proactively) can be beneficial for employees in traditional employment settings (e.g., Gawke, Gorgievski, & Bakker, 2017). Toward this end, research on the role of job design in facilitating employees’ entrepreneurial qualities (De Jong, Parker, Wennekers, & Wu, 2015) coupled with recent work demonstrating the malleability of personality and values in response to drastic life events (Tasselli et al., 2018) may provide a foundation for future research to explore and inform organizations how to best help employees adjust and thrive in the current turbulent work environment.

Likewise, organizations might consider how entrepreneurs manage reduced physical and social interaction as a fruitful area for helping employees navigating the limited physical and social interaction they currently face. Recent research suggests that some entrepreneurs may be highly susceptible to feelings of loneliness, social exclusion, and reduced well-being (Fernet, Torrès, Austin, & St-Pierre, 2016). Although social support from others at work can generally mitigate these downsides (for an overview see Stephan, 2018), entrepreneurs typically have far fewer sources of work-related social support relative to traditional employees (Rahim, 1996; Tetrick, Slack, Da Silva, & Sinclair, 2000). Nevertheless and interestingly, some entrepreneurs overcome these limitations by leveraging alternative, domain-specific sources of social support – such as positive feedback from customers – ultimately enhancing their well-being (Anderson & Hughes, 2010; Lechat & Torres, 2017). Using such inductive approaches to identify such overlooked or untapped sources of social support is likely to be necessary to understand how best to help employees cope with and adjust to the current dynamic work environment.

4. Conclusion

Though the long-term implications of COVID-19 are currently unknown, there is little reason to believe its impact on organizational life will be short-lived. As health experts have cautioned, not only are the effects of the current pandemic far from over (Hixon, 2020), but the risk of future health crises of this far-reaching nature are almost guaranteed (Desmond-Hellmann, 2020). Accordingly, our focus must be forward thinking, building on the assumption that the grand challenge we currently face is not a singular, anomalous event, but rather constitutes a “new reality” that offers new opportunities to which organizational scholars and practitioners alike will need and want to remain attentive. Toward this end, the current discussion provides a step in that direction by highlighting some implications of COVID-19 for employee adjustment and well-being.

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