HUMAN RESOURCES NAVIGATING THE TRANSITION TO A VIRTUAL WORK ENVIRONMENT DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

-The Employees Respond to the Change-

Observational Research of an Educational Institution in the area of Maine, USA

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The aim of the study:
After formulating conceptual and methodological notes on human resources adapting to virtual work because of the pandemic, the paper will study the impact of remote work on employees.

Abstract - On March 11th, 2020 The World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared Covid-19 as a pandemic. According to the WHO, "Covid-19 is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Most people infected with the Covid-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. The Covid-19 virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes."

Thus, the best way to protect people from the virus is social distancing. Leaders around the world had to make urgent decisions to ensure the safety of people. Traveling was banned and schools had to switch to remote classes. Some businesses also had to navigate the transition to a virtual work environment. Others had to close. The changes that businesses implemented may remain in the post-pandemic world. The adaptation to the new situation has been challenging. Not all businesses were able to quickly pivot and adjust. In fact, many employers and employees have struggled to adjust to a surprising and uncertain crisis. The global economy has been affected, causing social disruption and uncertainty to the labor market.

The pandemic is rapidly changing the way people work. Many people stay at home to avoid spreading the virus. However, many people cannot work remotely. The number of workers applying for unemployment insurance has increased unprecedentedly. (Goldsmith-Pinkham and Sojourner, 2020). There has been no crisis as influential as the Covid-19 pandemic in the world that has had an impact on remote work, replaced direct work participation, and strengthened communication and coordination through the Internet. However, the evolution of remote work began long before Covid-19 hit, and even before modern technological advances, such as the Internet. "Workhome" has been familiar since the Middle Ages. Although, throughout history, work culture was developed out of the necessity for in-person communication and work in offices to respond to social, cultural, and technological factors.

In 1997, the EU launched a commission to study the effects and problems that telework will have on the economy. Although, there is a lack of sufficient resources of theory regarding the evolution and history of the virtual workplace, which makes sense as this phenomenon is still fresh and developing.

Since the beginning of the crisis, there have been many challenges in human resource management and leadership in decision-making. Lack of communication culture and non-participation of all employees who are important to identifying problems and system efficiency have become obvious. (Erik Brynjolfsson John J. Horton Adam Ozimek Daniel Rock Garima Sharma Hong-Yi Tue, 2020).

However, the pandemic has accelerated and forced some of the human resources management norms. The remote organization had been representing a new form of structure where modern technology is used to connect people and reach communication business performance, but also accomplish tasks (Damnjanović et al., 2020). It is important to continually improve and adjust different dimensions of management tools as a system. These tools and processes coordinate different aspects of human activities, with economic, sociological, psychological, and technical dimensions (Erik Brynjolfsson John J. Horton Adam Ozimek Daniel Rock Garima Sharma Hong-Yi Tue, 2020).

Working from home is related to an increase in employee's motivation, job satisfaction, and how committed they are to the organization (Kurland 2002; Collins 2005). Working from home has also been shown to decrease distractions, and increase productivity at work (Baruch 2000; Xixi 2008). Working from home can also help with an employee's work-life balance (eg

Felstead et al. 2002). In fact, the concept of work-life integration (Haeger and Lingham 2014) shows that work and life issues usually can be managed through technological development, which may have a significant impact on the labor market.

The field of interest of human resource management science is not only to create abstract theories but also to solve organizational problems. This field of science is a collection of various disciplines and subdisciplines, leading to the existence of multiple paradigms and methodological methods, lack of its own methodological tools, and the use of the results of many other scientific fields.

Due to the lack of in-depth research on the methods used in the management field, resulting in insufficient knowledge, the significance of research in this specific field is very important. The aim of our research is to study the impact of remote work on employees. We will be analyzing observations in the education field. The managers and employees have adapted to the demands of the Covid-19 pandemic in various ways. We will also analyze data to study, and then compare, with the Bureau of Labor Statistics. We will be applying observational research which is a qualitative research method where the management of the remote work was observed and analyzed. The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex descriptions of how employees experience a given research issue, in our case, the impact of remote work on the employees. It provides information on the often contradictory emotions, relationships, behaviors, beliefs, and opinions of individuals.

OBSERVATION

The Covid-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the public educational institutions in Maine, and this impact is still ongoing. The abrupt switch from in-person teaching to remote teaching was a difficult transition for both teachers and students. Teachers had to learn how to transform lessons into a digital format, figure out how to teach classes online through Zoom, as well as maintain a fair and equitable grading system, keeping in mind that this pandemic was directly affecting the mental and physical health of students and the lives of people in their community. School employees adapted to this monumental challenge by relying on others. Many teachers shared their best practices and figured out how to do online, and then later hybrid (half remote/half in-person) classes together.

The institution set up a few ways to help or keep track of employee work. Teachers were required to update a Google Doc version of a Class Syllabus that contained all assignments, content covered in class that week, and next week's topics and assignments. This was very difficult to maintain because it was time-consuming and everything was new. Teachers had to revamp their entire curriculum, and it was just an uncertain time in employees' personal lives. Faculty and staff had to complete a Google Form every day, where they reported themselves present and whether or not they had symptoms related to Covid-19. This was for contact tracing purposes but was tedious and many forgot or failed to comply.

At the onset of the pandemic, back in March to June of 2020, there was a large outpouring of support for teachers. But, over that summer of 2020, emotions towards teachers turned when schools started announcing the possibility of remote schools or only hybrid schools. Many teachers were hesitant to go back to school. This was before vaccinations were even out to the public.

There has been a massive emotional strain on teachers since the beginning of the pandemic. Some teachers thrive off the energy of a classroom, classroom discussions, and the questions students ask in class. Many rely on the Socratic Method to teach a lot of their content. The transition to teaching through online platforms was challenging because classroom dynamic and group discussions changed. Teachers and students found classes to be much drier, less engaging, and less satisfying. Long conversations were difficult to maintain, and a lot of non-verbal communication such as body language was lost. Teachers found the full-remote days much more exhausting than the in-person days. Although the days were technically shorter, they had to work harder to convey the same material through Zoom.

School leaders would be the assistant principals, the principal, the superintendent, and the school board. The superintendent and the school board could have listened to students' and parents' concerns more during the decision-making process of whether to go back to in-person learning before vaccines were made readily available. The principal and assistant principals advocated for teachers, but they also created policies that required more work from teachers, such as the weekly syllabus update policy. The biggest thing that school leaders could have done to make the transition to remote and hybrid work easier would have been better at communication. The school utilized a robocall system as well as email. These two systems were effective, but the actual communication themselves were often vague, unclear, or contrary to reality or current trends in the news.

Overall, communication is the key, and school employees were often the last to know when a big decision was made. Unstable mental health in times of uncertainty helped neither one to make reasonable decisions and take time to learn and adjust to the change. The fact that we are facing a challenge that is difficult to compare with any other ones from the

past can justify a certain degree of confusion, but it remains questionable why many of our employees, in the age of all kinds of information and other achievements, find it difficult to accept our changed reality.

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