The impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on management and organisational related issues

Anthony McDonnell & Matthias Beck

Cork University Business School, University College Cork, Ireland

Abstract: While major crises are not uncommon, the rapid spread, scope and both health and economic devastation that Covid-19 brought makes it a unique opportunity in which to examine its impacts. This editorial introduces the five papers that encompass this special issue which focuses on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on management and organisational related issues. In this editorial, we situate the five papers within the Covid-19 context, synthesise the key contributions arising from each piece of work and provide a succinct, broad research agenda as individuals and organisations continue to navigate their way through and out of this global health crisis.

Keywords: *Covid-19; pandemic; entrepreneurs, remote working, job insecurity, well-being, global mobility, job vulnerability*

© Sciendo

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a truly global health crisis that has brought unprecedented levels of illness and death, and disruption to the lives of individuals and major challenges to organisations. Events system theory (Morgeson, Mitchell and Liu, 2015) explains how novel and disruptive events shape individual experiences and there is no doubt that the sudden arrival and rapid scale and spread of the Covid-19 pandemic brought transformational shifts for many individuals and organisations. In effect, the pandemic has brought threats to health, life and financial stability that most never thought possible. Some (e.g. Legrain, 2020) have suggested that the crisis may have negative long-term impacts on the free movement of goods and people and highlight both the unsustainability of globalisation and the need to place greater emphasis on local industries, along with appropriately focused supports for entrepreneurs and small to medium sized enterprises which are at the heart of all economies. However, it has also led to major transformations especially around the rapid diffusion of digital technologies (Karabag, 2020) which provide potential for positive impacts on how individuals live and work, and organisations operate.

We are, however, speaking about the Covid-19 pandemic in the present state given that we are now two years on and it remains a central and pervasive influence on almost all facets of our lives. The rapid development of vaccinations has led to some countries being able to lessen the most negative aspects of the virus, but the unequal supply and distribution and varying degrees of support and doubts regarding efficacy and safety of these vaccines means that any recovery from this pandemic has remained highly uneven. As such, there are likely to be varying degrees of ongoing challenges for organisations depending on the extent to which they are domestically focused or international in nature. Interesting Irish data can be found from a survey conducted by the Irish Management Institute in conjunction with Cork University Business School, University College Cork, during May to June 2021 which

* *E-mail: anthony.mcdonnell@ucc.ie, matthias.beck@ucc.ie*

examined the views of Irish business leaders relating to their organisation's resilience during pandemic (IMI/CUBS, 2021). Overall, the results highlighted the overarching importance of good, frequent, and open communications. Respondents were very positive (acknowledging the potential issue of self-report bias) about how organisations had responded to the crisis with trust levels within their organisations seen as very high (79%). However, interestingly eight in ten respondents also held a view that organisational communications was too focused on challenges and problems than opportunities and the future.

This collection of papers was gathered through an open call for papers on how the covid-19 pandemic was impacting on employees, management, and organisations. The call for papers was kept broad so as not to constrain possible contributions to one domain. Instead, we sought to capture the diverse impacts that the pandemic has across individual and organisational levels. The result is a collection of five papers to which we now turn.

THE COLLECTION OF SPECIAL ISSUE PAPERS

The first paper by Kevin Murphy reflects on the forced and unplanned experiment of remote working for a substantial number of workers arising out of the Covid-19 pandemic. This thought-provoking piece discusses the possible outcomes into the future if there is no return to the office post pandemic. In other words, if remote work was to become more a norm rather than the exception in some industries and occupations. Murphy predicts that in a scenario where remote working becomes the *modus operandi* of working then managers will struggle with such a permanent adjustment. Fundamentally, a move to remote working changes the nature of the employment relationship quite substantially. This type of significant change in how we work may potentially make the performance of tasks more difficult; female employees may face more disproportionately negative effects due to in part to the sectors that have the highest levels of female employment; many (but not all) employees will realise positive benefits; large, successful organizations are most likely to thrive; and managers are likely to have to change substantially, which may see a dilution of managerial roles. There will be a need to learn different ways of doing things both in terms of how people manage and how some tasks are performed. Jobs are likely to need some redesigning to ensure appropriate levels of social connectedness can be created for individuals and teams. Moreover, organisations and individuals will need to consider how remote work may lead to a situation where the parameters of work and nonwork are further blurred. If most of remote work is performed on an asynchronous manner, identification of these issues is likely to be more challenging than in the conventional office environment. Where trust-based employment relationships are firmly in place such issues are likely to be less problematic (Kulik, 2022). This paper concludes with proposing several key research questions around the increased uptake and, perhaps acceptance, of remote working as a viable long-term alternative to the traditional office environment. First, what are the organisational level effects of a move to remote working and what moderates such effects? Second, what organisational processes remain as relevant in the remote work environment as they did in the office context, and what new processes may be required? Finally, what is the impact of such changes on individual employees, families and wider communities, and what factors influence the extent to which these are positive or negative changes?

The second paper by Marta Konkel and Margaret Heffernan draws on conservation of resources theory to examine how job insecurity affects emotional exhaustion during the early part of the Covid-19 pandemic. Cross-sectional data supports the hypothesis of there being such a relationship. The paper's key contribution however lies in how the authors hypothesise and find support for *rumination* acting as a mediator in the relationship between job insecurity and well-being during the pandemic. As a cognitive process, rumination focuses on negative content which leads to emotional distress. In other words, it is a cognitive state whereby individuals continuously and repetitively have the same thought(s) of a negative affective nature (Cropley and Zijlstra, 2011). The role of rumination in the work context has received limited attention thus the results offer early indications that perceptions of job insecurity amongst employees may create a stress reaction which may lead to them ruminating about such insecurity. This rumination can deplete an individual's resources and bring on emotional exhaustion. The extent of the rumination may have been substantially increased arising from the unprecedented nature of the Covid-19 pandemic and how it tended to be 'impossible' to remove oneself from. The authors also investigate but failed to find support for the hypothesis that psychological capital would moderate the relationship between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion. They postulate that the lack of support may be due to a mismatch between the cognitive nature of the

resource and the emotional strain felt. The early pandemic context may also be noteworthy in this non-relationship in respect to how perhaps an individual's psychological capital resources may have been adequate but there was such limited ability on individuals to control one's own environment given our daily work and non-work lives were so fundamentally dictated by the virus.

Our third paper by Richard Johnston, Ryan Hogg and Kristel Miller explores the concept of job vulnerability and its link with social distancing requirements and demand during the Covid-19 pandemic. The nature of the pandemic has brought the most significant of shocks in terms of employment with major increases in unemployment notwithstanding the supports that different governments provided to try and minimise such employment instability. The paper adopts a point-in-time modelling approach using data from Northern Ireland to demonstrate how reductions in social distancing requirements led to reduced vulnerability for over 30,000 jobs. The analysis provides support behind the importance of regionally and inter-regionally focused policy making during the Covid-19 crisis and how this crisis provided an especially complex context in which to try balance public health and economic recovery. The need for such localised policy making is based heavily on the variable impacts that the crisis had across sectors, geographies, and demography. The public health-economy balancing act may be aided by more localised responses whereby the most vulnerable groups are afforded enhanced supports to facilitate better health and economic outcomes.

The fourth paper by Simon Stephens, Christopher McLaughlin and Katrina McLaughlin examines entrepreneurs' response to the Covid-19 crisis in Ireland. Specifically, the authors interviewed fifteen entrepreneurs to understand the impact that temporary business closures, because of the pandemic, had on their ability and propensity to keep going. This led to the emergence of four key themes, based around psychological well-being; their changing attitudes towards entrepreneurship; changes that they made to their business; and the supports required. These themes evolved in an iterative way throughout the six months of the study whereby the same entrepreneurs were interviewed on five occasions. There were feelings of extreme shock, life standing still, inability to understand, the need to focus on others, needing to search, locate and secure supports, despair, relief, joy, reflection and so forth evident across the different stages. A key insight emerged from when the entrepreneurs started moving from the focus on family, staff and customers to reflecting more inwardly on their own work-life balance and the product or service that they wanted to provide. This raises the role that a forced 'break' that falls outside one's own control can have on the entrepreneurial journey. What emerged was that while there was active consideration of pursuing all options in which to keep their business going, this tended to evolve into a more focused way. Specifically, the focus moved towards where they had the great emotional attachment in respect to seeking to retain and develop their core business. The research again demonstrates the importance of not looking to over-simplify and the dangers inherent in homogenisation. The entrepreneurs faced varying challenges and required different supports to enable them to manage through and emerge from the crisis. As such, there is support behind the general recommendation from the previous paper on the need to localise policy responses and supports as much as possible.

Our final paper draws from real-time, self-reporting blogs to provide snapshots into the lived experiences of the Irish diaspora during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Marian Crowley-Henry, Kim Coogan, Cora Redmond and Niall Sheil's content analysis of almost sixty individual blogs provides fascinating insights into how the Irish diaspora managed their work and mobility during this global health crisis. There were three key themes (work-life blend, global communications and working from home) that were independent, co-and inter-dependent in nature. The role of technology was omnipresent in respect to its enabling potential around global work and communication, but also it inhibitive nature depending on the technological and communications infrastructure that was available. A key contribution of the paper is the future research agenda that the authors propose. While there are many important and interesting aspects highlighted the following appear especially apposite. How will telecommunications infrastructures influence the decision making of individuals in making international relocation decisions in the years ahead? While advancements in such technologies provided much positivity during the pandemic, a major challenge was that the quality of such infrastructure was not universal. As such, the quality and availability of telecommunications infrastructure may become an additional key consideration in individual global mobility decisions. Continuing this theme is the question around whether working from home is now a more viable option rather than uprooting and relocating. This however raises many pragmatic questions around taxation and benefits in terms of compliance with local and international laws and regulations. The final element we pull out is the need for more fine-grained analysis of the personal characteristics, family status and nonwork supports of individuals' global mobility decisions.

CONCLUSIONS

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to impact all aspects of the lives and experiences of individuals, organisations and wider society. The hit that individuals and organisations have taken over the past two years has been unprecedented and the end point is not yet clearly in sight. With the forced changes that the pandemic has caused to the way many organisations operate and employees work, there has been much comment about the emergence of the 'new normal'. This concept refers to the idea that the behaviour and nature of organisations and employees has fundamentally changed due to the lived and now longstanding reality of the impacts arising from Covid-19. The extent to which a new normal is truly emerging remains open to debate, critique and in need of ongoing research. We would argue that it is too early to truly talk about a new normal given the pandemic remains a live and ongoing event and which may still have several new storylines to unfold. With such fluid and dynamic conditions, the future of work for individuals and how organisations operate is likely to continue in a state of flux and evolution.

This collection of papers provided a snapshot of the effects of Covid-19 in the early months of the pandemic in 2020. These provide useful indicators and insights of how employees, entrepreneurs and organisations reacted and dealt with the shock trust upon them. In looking to the future, it is especially evident to us that longitudinal research designs that capture how the pandemic unfolded over time are going to be especially valuable in advancing knowledge of major health events and provide key lessons to enable greater preparation for future pandemics and epidemics. However, we also urge a degree of caution with the rush to publish research that focuses on the Covid-19 context. It is vital that research provides appropriate contextualisation rather than major generalisations given the unequal impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is also important that research explores the impact of Covid-19 across macro, micro and meso levels to enable holistic understanding of this crisis.

References

Cropley, M. and Zijlstra, F. R. (2011). Work and rumination. In Cooper, C. L. and Langan-Fox, J. (Eds.), *Handbook of Stress in the Occupations*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar.

IMI/CUBS (2021). Organisational resilience survey. Available at https://www.imi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Final_IMI-Pulse-Infographic.pdf

Karabag, S.F. (2020). An unprecedented global crisis! The global, regional, national, political, economic and commercial impact of the coronavirus, *Journal of Applied Economics and Business Research*, 10, 1-6.

Kulik, C. T. (2022). We need a hero: HR and the 'next normal' workplace, *Human Resource Management Journal*, 32, 216-231.

Morgeson, F., Mitchell, T. and Liu, D. (2015). Event system theory: an event-oriented approach to the organizational sciences, *Academy of Management Review*, 40, 515-537.