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An International Perspective on Changes in Work Due to COVID-19

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The very nature and format of work, along with its social and psychological dynamics, the labor market, and economic conditions within which it is embedded have undergone a large change in the months since COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic (Kniffin et al., 2020; Rudolph et al., 2021). No country has been spared the spread of disease and nowhere are workers free from the impact and aftermath of COVID-19. Industrial and organizational psychology (I-O) faculty and practitioners have been keenly observing, tracking, and studying the changing nature of work, but few have been doing so from a cross-cultural and international lens. Given the global nature of the pandemic, here we take a deliberate *global, international* perspective to understanding the disruption and opportunities for the world of work. An international perspective is imperative to developing a complete and holistic understanding of (a) work psychology in the face of pandemics, (b) the consequent challenges faced by workers and organizations, (c) the future of work post-COVID-19, and (d) how I-O can meaningfully contribute to ease work-oriented disruptions and better prepare for similar future challenges. We apply a cross-cultural and international lens to focus on four areas where scholarship and practice in I-O could help in matters related to employment and the workplace: (a) informal workers, workers in poverty, and precarious work around the world; (b) technology, human resources; (HR) practices, and the digital divide; (c) the intersection of culture, work, health, and well-being; and (d) learning from crises and crisis management during a global pandemic.

Informal Workers and Workers in Poverty and Precarious Work

I-O has traditionally focused on work performed in for-profit organizations, largely ignoring informal workers and those who live and work in poverty (Saxena, 2017). The need to deliberately incorporate 62% of the world's workforce into our research and practice has never been more pressing. Workers in poverty, those engaged in precarious work, and informal workers have been hit the hardest in the face of the ongoing global pandemic. The numbers are too large to ignore—over 2 billion workers earn their livelihood in the informal economy, representing as much as 90% of total employment in low-income countries (ILO, 2018). Global South countries are facing the brunt of the COVID-19 aftermath (UN, 2020). The least industrialized countries are at serious risk of falling behind the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals timeline, with far reaching adverse consequences for policy and development (UN, 2020).

It is estimated that COVID-19 will increase relative poverty by 50% in low-income countries with 1.6 billion informal workers at risk of losing their livelihoods forever (ILO, 2020). Workers in the informal economy, such as those in sales, migrant work, and generational work as seen in highly skilled artisans and the gig economy, typically do not hold formal office jobs within the regulated economy (Saxena, 2017, 2018). Due to the disruption in infrastructure, breakdown, and slowdown of supply chains; lower demands in the face of lockdowns; bans on community gatherings and local bazaars for sale purposes; and the reliance on primary sector roles, informal workers and those in poverty face the most fundamental stressor: economic tenuousness. Relying on daily wages to survive in the absence of income replacement or savings, impoverished informal workers at the base of the pyramid are experiencing a disruption to work and their livelihood that is threatening the continuation of their work and their survival.

Precarious Work

Precarious work is characterized by poorly compensated work engagements, ill-defined work schedules, poor and unsafe working conditions, vague reporting structures, social isolation, and limited to no access to employment protection standards, job security, work benefits, and secure payments (Milczarek et al., 2008). Precarious workers (e.g., those in domestic work and migrant workers) face an increasingly unstable labor market and heightened vulnerability. Often deemed "essential workers," they are susceptible to increased exploitation by the expectation to report to work with minimal or no personal protective equipment. In addition to poverty and reduced access to healthcare, migrant workers face the added challenge of being viewed as the "other" and ensuing discrimination at the hands of the local population.

Volunteers

Volunteer workers are another overlooked working population. They are an essential group of workers that enable nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and not-for-profit organizations (NPOs), such as the Red Cross, Red Crescent, Red Star of David, or United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to provide services in hard-stricken areas. Volunteers often face serious health and safety risks, and the pandemic has put a spotlight on just how necessary and how vulnerable this group is, as well as the unique safety challenges faced by these workers. Volunteers must develop a sensitivity to a variety of national policies and circumstances, including societal cultural divides, making work itself a serious threat to their health and well-being.

Overall, multiplicative stressors and extenuating circumstances highlight the necessity of I-Os with cross-cultural and international competencies to pay greater attention to marginalized working populations to fully understand how they are affected by the pandemic. Just as with formal jobs, there is an urgent, critical need to actively and deliberately consider how cross-cultural and international I-O research and practice can be more inclusive of all types of workers, particularly those who are most in need of our knowledge, skills, and expertise.

Technology, HR Practices, and the Digital Divide

Technology-Based Selection Implications

Web-based technologies are increasingly employed in various HR functions due to the pandemic. A critical functional area, employee selection, is likely to be particularly transformed. Management in most countries use some form of interviews in their selection systems (Ryan et al., 1999). A recent U.S.-based survey (Handler et al., 2020) of talent acquisition professionals found that 57% of respondents indicated that the use of video interviewing has increased since the beginning of the pandemic and that changes in talent acquisition will be long lasting yet may lead to particularly pernicious unintended consequences. Proper use of synchronous video interviews requires stable, high-speed, broad bandwidth Internet connections for both employees and applicants. Unfortunately, there remains a "digital divide" such that many in low-income countries do not have widespread access to high-speed Internet and that this lack of access will likely not be solved anytime soon (Hilbert, 2016).

There are global implications for this lack of access. The lack of Internet access may exacerbate global income inequality as low-income job seekers may be locked out of jobs with upward mobility potential. Given the consistent relationship between race/ethnicity and income *in*equality, the increased use of video interviewing may hinder organizations' plans to implement effective affirmative action/employment equity programs, which many countries throughout the world espouse to varying degrees (Myors et al., 2008). At the organizational level, perhaps organizations can opt for asynchronous video interviews, cognitive and noncognitive self-reports, reference checks, or even short job tryouts.

Trust

The technology and oversight challenges companies now face have important implications on trust in the workplace. Creating a sense of "shared meaning" (Cooke & Szumal, 2000) or "shared understanding" is more difficult in the virtual space, yet they are the backbones of culture and essential for creating and maintaining trust. Moving to a virtual space, much of the "in-person" cultural norms might continue, at least for a while, but the changed nature of interaction means that culture will change, which consequently affects trust. Interpersonal trust in a team requires belief that the other team members will continue to perform at the same level of quality and timeliness in their contributions in the virtual environment as they did in the in-person environment. However, in a number of Asian cultures, for example, where the implicit work contract is much more dependent upon interpersonal relationships than upon written documents, attempting to develop and maintain trust via technology can be compromised (Kwantes & Glazer, 2017). Moukarzel and Steelman (2015) detail recommendations for providing effective feedback across cultures and global teams. Future studies could investigate the effectiveness of these recommendations, particularly with respect to maintaining trust amongst members of global virtual teams (GVTs).

Another related area to note is possible cultural differences in employee appraisals of organizations' remote monitoring systems to assess work behaviors. In countries that are hierarchical (or higher in power distance), such oversight may be more acceptable than in countries in which egalitarian values are endorsed (Schwartz, 1999). Executives of multinational organizations, therefore, must be attuned to these appraisal differences in order to maintain a positive organizational and/or team culture, support trust in employees, and encourage employee trust in the organization.

The Intersection of Culture Work, Health, and Well-Being

Global Virtual Teams and Stressors

In today's connected economy, workers were already accustomed to a reality of working in global virtual teams (GVTs; Glazer et al., 2012), and the science and practice of implementing effective teams has been under study (Glickson & Erez, 2019; Zakaria & Yusof, 2020). COVID-19 has amplified the necessity to understand new kinds of stressors and strains employees might experience by being proximally and temporally distant. On the one hand, GVTs have advantages for organizations, such as reduced travel and personnel costs (e.g., employing workers living in low-cost areas for less pay than in high-tech hubs), and for employees, such as less international travel, less disruption to diet and routine, and less strain on family. On the other hand, current restrictions on travel and reliance on GVTs might instigate stressors as yet anticipated due to the unique circumstance. The pandemic therefore compels researchers to study the implications of working in global virtual teams on employee performance, particularly with respect to cultural factors, such as communication style and values in the experience of stressors (Glazer et al., 2012).

Culture and Communication Styles

Cross-cultural psychology research shows that in-person interactions are particularly important in many cultures, such as those characterized as high-context cultures (Kwantes & Glazer, 2017). People in high-context cultures not only attend to intonation and voice inflections but also to body language as communication cues. Lack of personal contact reduces access to these cues and further challenges relationship building and understanding communication conventions in different cultures. For example, in Japan, lack of eye contact connotes deference and respect towards someone, but without physical proximity, these cues are lost and might threaten the relationship dynamic. Thus, although media richness (i.e., synchronous and visible connections) could help mitigate stressors from becoming strains, a loss in context-dependent cues might exacerbate "Zoom fatigue" (i.e., increased cognitive load when trying to observe and make sense of nonverbal cues in video conferencing platforms; Wiederhold, 2020).

Blurred Lines and Respite

Another COVID-19 fallout affecting international collaborations are blurred lines between work and home, particularly as related to worksite and respite. When it comes to worksites, Japanese employees are reluctant to work from home, even when their counterparts in other parts of the world do, because of an emphasis on collective decision making (Jozuka, 2020), as well as a belief that it is important to demonstrate long work hours (McCurry, 2020). By the end of February 2020, only 70% of Japanese organizations had implemented or planned to implement telework, but still most people believed that "telework isn't real work" (McCurry, 2020). However, as more companies have now *required* remote work, it is important to understand how beliefs might affect work engagement.

Additionally, taking time to rest and decompress has been hampered, and the sense of demand associated with expectations that one must always be accessible has heightened, creating anxieties (Wolf, 2020). Add to this mix cultural differences in the domain of respite, and even more intense work strain may ensue. For example, under normal circumstances, Americans take very few vacation days compared to the French, for whom August is a sacred holiday time (Schrag, 2007). However, during this period of mandatory or suggested stay-at-home orders, Americans may work even more, whereas animosity may grow toward colleagues who take their vacations.
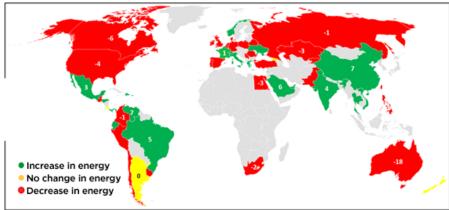
Physiological Strain

Another imperative area for research is the implication of COVID-19 on work-related stressors and subsequent physiological health and well-being. Glazer et al. (2012) reported that working at all hours of the day and night (which can be a reality in GVTs) has adverse effects on weight, cholesterol, and cardiovascular disease. The anxieties associated with required remote working, coupled with having to work around the clock, are connected to weight gain (Bhutani & Cooper, 2020). More cross-cultural comparative research on physiological implications of a constantly accessible remote work environment on physiological health and long-term implications is warranted. Are people in some cultures more prone to developing physiological health problems, and what are the associated predictors of ill health?

Coping

Coping is also ripe for research as a result of living through a global pandemic. The global pandemic is both a macrolevel stressor and a microlevel stressor. People have legitimate societal-level worries about it and personal worries. How people cope with those worries is likely to differ across cultures. Findings from a matched sample survey assessment initiative by a multinational food and beverage organization that captured employee energy (i.e., "I feel energized by my work") at two time points (September 2019 and April 2020) illustrates this point. 10,260 employee responses across 53 countries revealed that energy levels across countries differed, suggesting different levels of resilience or tolerance to COVID-19 (see Figure 1). Employees in traditionally collectivistic countries (e.g., China, India, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, and Brazil) appeared to be more resilient and had an increase in energy following the onset of the pandemic, compared to employees in more individualistic countries (e.g., Australia, USA, Canada, and South Africa) who had a decline in energy. Greater stress tolerance and increased social support from a stronger social

fabric owing to collectivistic leanings may be a possible explanation for the findings. People in Anglo countries are likely to endorse power and achievement values more so than benevolence and universalism values and thus experience COVID-19 as a personal, micro worry (Schwartz et al., 2000). The diverse fluctuations in employee energy at a country level points toward the need for deeper consideration of cross-cultural or global nuances in the impact of the current pandemic on work behaviors. Future research could examine the role of organizational values and congruence with national values to examine how people around the globe appraise and cope with stressors associated with COVID-19, as well as how effective these strategies are in thwarting strain.

Figure 1
Change in Employee Energy Between September 2019 and April 2020 by Country

Note: A minimum of 5 responses to each survey was required for country reporting.

Learning From Crises and Crisis Management Across Cultures

Crisis Management

Coombs and Laufer (2018) noted that multinational companies must attend to crisis management, particularly as more countries, and thus distance, enter the supply chain. The current crisis has revealed that not only are local and international organizations affected but so are supply chains and the workers within these supply chains. The questions they pose are apropos for the current situation: "Do stakeholders in different countries react differently to a crisis and to crisis response strategies? [and]... how should a multinational respond to a crisis in its different markets?" (p. 199). Lee's (2007) analysis of Hong Kong government's crisis management during the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak revealed that political and international factors affect the crisis management process. Crisis management involves prevention (and preparation), intervention (taking action in response to crises), and evaluation (learning from the response and revising prevention plans). In the current crisis environment, executives are scrambling to make decisions that affect the survival of the organization and the continued employment for their workers. According to a July 2, 2020 McKinsey report, 52% of executives are concerned over their faltering national economies, and between 20% to 60% of executives around the world are worried for their own jobs. They are simultaneously trying to address current needs through "quick fixes and workarounds" while also planning for returns to the workplace. Unfortunately, many large and small businesses across many sectors are having to lay off employees and close offices around the world (Borden & Akhtar, 2020). The crisis intervention strategies companies use will yield different responses from their employees and consumers around the world (Coombs & Laufer, 2018), and it behooves I-O professionals (scholars and practitioners) to evaluate cultural implications on crisis management strategies (Stern & Sundelius, 2002) employed around the globe in order to create prevention strategies.

Work, Endemics, Epidemics, and Pandemics

Our field is somewhat new to examining infectious diseases as occupational safety hazards associated with work itself. However, the current global pandemic highlights the need for I-O to expand beyond the traditional boundaries of the field to consider the many ways in which *work itself* exposes individuals to disease epidemics that have the potential to become massive global pandemics. For instance, using the experience sampling method, Saxena (2015) identified local cultural factors associated with rice farming in rural, remote villages that facilitated the transmission of Japanese Encephalitis, an endemic communicable disease with high mortality rates in South and Southeast Asia. We believe that I-O can play an important role post-COVID in terms of understanding, and possibly preventing, future disease epidemics through basic and applied cross-cultural I-O research and policy efforts informed by the same (e.g., Saxena & Burke, 2020).

Conclusion

The current global crisis is impelling I-O to take a close look at how best to contribute to both science and practice and to do so from a global perspective. Within the USA, I-O is coming to the realization that it is not us versus the rest of the world but "we." Around the globe there are job shortages, increased reliance on computer technology, and stressors beyond most people's (in high-income countries) imaginations. Entire livelihoods and occupations face the threat of permanent extinction. How we handle and study these challenges will be a defining moment for our profession. Will we be reactive, or will we see this world pandemic experience as a window for re-envisioning work (formal and informal), guiding inclusive HR practices and policies, and preparing for unfathomable crises as informed by best practices from around the world?

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