

Exploring employees lived experiences at NHS England during the COVID-19 Pandemic: the role of meaningful work

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BAM Human Resource Management SIG International Symposium, 13-14th June, 2022.

Abstract

The pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on daily working lives. Lived experiences of the pandemic were complex, with wide variations in experiences, perspectives, and outcomes. Following a human-centred approach and responding to the call for qualitative research, the following abstract discusses the initial findings from semi-structured interviews conducted at NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHSEI) during the pandemic and the national rollout of the UK's vaccination programme. Findings emphasise the importance of meaningful work, highlighting its ability to break down internal barriers to collaboration and cultivating a cultural shift in power dynamics. However, the research also emphasised the call for research into 'too much' meaningful work and its potential negative outcomes (Bailey et al 2017).

Background

The pandemic placed an emphasis on organisational purpose with workers considering their options. Workers started questioning the meaning of their work and the organisations that employed them. There was an emphasis on the 'the subjective experience of the existential significance or purpose of life' (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009: 492). Consequently, there has been a renewed focus on meaningful work and organisational purpose. Meaningful work is described by Bailey et al (2017) as having four main sources; the context of the work tasks themselves, the roles that people perform, interactions either within the organisation or with other stakeholders that foster a sense of belonging, and the identification with organisational values and mission.

The following abstract reports on initial findings from case study research examining the impact of the pandemic on NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHSEI). The aim of the project was to respond to the need to 'grasp the learning' (Bailey & West, 2020) before it is lost under the pressure of crisis management and responds to calls for research to explore the 'lived experiences of the pandemic' (Collings et al., 2021: 10). The COVID-19 pandemic placed unprecedented pressure on health services across the globe. In the UK, the National Health Service (NHS) was under acute pressure from rising numbers of Covid patients.

Methods

Responding to the call for in-depth qualitative research to explore the impact of the pandemic (Collings et al., 2021; Cooke et al., 2022), the project utilised a case study approach, with a focus on the public sector. The research focused on NHS England and NHS Improvement (collectively known as NHSEI since 2019). Utilising a pragmatic approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff across NHSEI. Participants included senior leaders responsible for changes to workforce policies and practices in response to COVID-19, union representatives, staff redeployed to response to the pandemic, and special interest networks. A total of 16 in-depth interviews were conducted alongside analysis of secondary data and observations. The project was undertaken in collaboration with the Involvement and Participation Association (IPA).

Findings

By examining the lived experiences of employees, the four elements of meaningful work (Bailey et al., 2017) were prevalent.

1. Context of the work task

The aim of NHSEI is to support the NHS to deliver improved care for patients by providing national direction on service improvement and transformation, governance, accountability, standards of best practice, and the quality of data and information (Kingsfund, 2021). Participants working in NHSEI often described themselves as working at a distance from the frontline of the NHS, being at an 'arm's length' from patient care and struggling to see how their work contributed. However, during the pandemic, there was a clear focus on the importance of tasks, especially the quality of data and information around covid infection rates, death rates, and vaccination levels.

2. Roles that people perform

A key role of NHSEI during the pandemic was the roll out of the biggest vaccination programme in the NHS' history (DHSC, 2021). This involved comprehensive planning, for example, size and make-up of the workforce, training requirements, guidance, consumables and equipment, and supporting infrastructure, warehousing, transport, logistics and clinic storage. The vaccination programme had political and social impacts. Working to deliver the programme resulted in participants experiencing their role as being important in the eyes of the wider world, consequently finding their role meaningful (see Bailey et al., 2017: 418).

3. Collaboration across internal barriers

Rosso et al (2010) stated that interactions within the organisation and with other stakeholders provided a sense of belonging and connectedness. This was evident across the organisation. Participants talked about coming together to work in collaboration to 'get the job done' in a way that required a cultural change in mindset. Having a shared perspective across internal boundaries, improved collaboration. According to participants, this was a very different way of working for NHSEI which was characterised as being bureaucratic and rigid. Previously, any changes to ways of working were met with strong resistance. Trust throughout the organisation was low, however, the focus on meaningful work broke down these barriers and fostered close working relationships, which provided essential support and friendships.

4. Organisational Values and Purpose

There was a sense of being disconnected from organisational values and due to the political nature of the organisational, often of being disempowered. However, during the initial national lockdown and during subsequent waves that saw infection rates souring, these feelings were replaced with a reconnection to the organisations values and mission. As one participant described, while they were not directly caring for patients, they could now see how everyone in the NHS played a vital part in ensuring the organisation kept running. The focus was on keeping patients alive and staff safe.

Overwhelming nature of meaningful work

The true impact of the pandemic on our mental health is not yet known. For those in the NHS, the emotional impact has been huge and there is discussion around front line staff potentially suffering from PTSD. Meaningful work has been described as 'episodic' (Bailey et al., 2017), yet the length of the pandemic has lengthened these periods and participants were emotionally and physically exhausted. Working excessively long hours, with little time for respite before the next covid variant created a new wave of infections. There was almost a sense of guilt at being able to safely work from home, whilst NHS colleagues were being put at risk working in hospitals and vaccination centres. Consequently, participants felt they 'can't complain about the long hours' as others had it worse, highlighting a different angle on the contextual nature of working from home (Cooke et al., 2022).

Conclusion

The focus of the research was to explore the lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings highlighted the importance of meaningful work in collaborating and changing organisational mindsets. During acute times of pressure and increased levels of infections, the sense of meaningful work and organisational purpose enabled dramatic and uncharacteristic ways of working. However, there was a growing fear that the organisation would return to old ways of working when 'we returned to normal' and that the lessons learnt by the organisation will be forgotten. Going forward, Bailey et al., (2017) calls for empirical research to explore how the management of meaningfulness can lead to successful outcomes for individuals and organisations. To do so, requires qualitative case study research that focuses on the lived experience of employees at all levels within the organisation. As a result, we argue that the concept of meaningful work requires a human-centred focus.

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