

ANTECEDENTS OF EMPLOYEE DISENGAGEMENT AMID COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Moyo N.*

Abstract: The covid-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on various aspects of people's lives around the world. It has threatened the general public health, crippled the economies and caused panic all over the world, influenced turnover intentions among employees and caused employee disengagement. Amid the pandemic, some employees have been experiencing longer working hours, increased workload, irregular work shifts, and shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE). Although many researchers have examined the issue of covid-19 pandemic, little attention has been directed towards exploring the concept of employee disengagement amid the era of covid-19. The researcher addresses this gap by identifying and exploring the key antecedents of employee disengagement. The study adopted a quantitative approach, and primary data was collected through a survey technique and then analysed on Smart PLS3. On Smart PLS3, PLS Algorithm and Bootstrapping were utilised to determine the strength of the developed variables of this study, while at the same time assessing the reliability and validity of the constructs. Based on the findings of this study, all proposed hypotheses are proven significant, but with different strengths. The researcher implies that; catering for the health and safety needs of employees during the era of covid-19 is likely to boost employee engagement; while on the other hand; failure to fulfill this obligation may result in employee disengagement. As a new novelty, employers are encouraged to cater for the health and safety needs of employees in order to influence the positive behavioural outcomes among employees; such as engagement, commitment, job satisfaction, enhanced organisational citizenship behaviour and loyalty.

Key words: Covid-19 pandemic, employee disengagement, working conditions, perceived risk of covid-19 pandemic.

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Introduction

Covid-19 research has become a dominant theme of inquiry among several scholars around the world. The pandemic has affected the operation of businesses and the management of human resources (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020; Carnevale and Hatak, 2020). Regardless of the risk of the pandemic, some workers have still been reporting for duty as usual (Business and Human Right Resource Centre, 2020). Most of these workers have been highly concerned about their working conditions (Fernandez, Lord, Halcomb, Moxhama, Middletona, Alananzeha, and Ellwood, 2020). They have been anxious about the perceived risk of contracting

* Ngqabutho Moyo, NM Professional Consultants, South Africa: Founder & CEO.

✉ corresponding author: ngqabuthoemoyoe1@gmail.com

the virus, the transmission of the virus to their relatives, the stigma at work, including the threat towards their personal freedom (Fernandez, 2020; Chiang, Chen, and Sue, 2007; Koh, Lim, and Chia et al, 2005). These workers have also been inundated with an increased workload and longer working hours (Mhango, Dzobo, Chitungo and Dzinamarira, 2020).

Poor working conditions are associated with negative behavioural outcomes among employees at work, such as; the intentions to leave the work (Arnoux-Nicolas et al., 2016), disengagement, dissatisfaction and the declined level of commitment (Luturlean et al., 2019). Several researchers have tried to understand the causes and effects of corona virus pandemic on various aspects of life. However, fewer researchers have focused on the key factors influencing employee disengagement amid covid-19 pandemic. To address this gap, the researcher seeks to explore the key factors influencing employee disengagement during the time of the pandemic. In other words, this study is attempting to raise awareness about employees' grievances amid coronavirus pandemic, the risks associated with covid-19 pandemic, and the significance of catering for the health and safety needs of employees amid the era of the pandemic. This will help in protecting employees while at the same time boosting organisational performance as it will influence the positive behavioural outcomes (Husaini, Pirzada, Saiful, 2020). Most researchers have mainly focused on the causes, cure and prevention of coronavirus pandemic, but forgetting to address the pandemic ramifications on the physical environment of work, working conditions and employee behaviour. The physical environment of work (Raziq and Maulabakhsh, 2015; Ayoko and Ashkanasy, 2020) and the working conditions have a significant effect on employee behaviour. Hence, there is need for researchers to examine the extent to which the pandemic has affected employees at work.

Literature Review

Employee disengagement has become a serious challenge and a significant theme of research enquiry among several scholars around the world (Bhebhe, 2020; Barros, Costello, Beaman and Westover, 2016). This research is grounded on two major theories which are typically used to explain the concept of employee engagement and disengagement. The first theory is: Kahn's (1990) framework of personal engagement and disengagement at work, which distinguishes disengagement from engagement. Based on this framework, disengagement is associated with the lack of commitment and attachment towards the execution of work, whereas; engagement is concerned with the motivation and commitment that employees have towards their role performance (Kahn, 1990; Moyo, 2019; Bhappu, and Schultze, 2018).

The second theory is: the theory that focuses on the exchange relationships, which regards true relationships as having the "rules" that govern the exchange relationships, which are characterised by trust, loyalty and mutual commitments

between parties involved (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005:875). Apart from altruism, rationality, status consistency and competition (Meeker, 1971), the most dominant rules in exchange relationships are; the reciprocity and the negotiated rules. As an exchange relationship, the “employer-employee” relationship is characterised by the clearly stipulated rules and obligations that govern the relationship of both parties. In this regard, employee engagement can be attained through the fulfillment of the employer’s obligation towards the employee, for instance; through the protection of employees from poor working conditions and against any potential risk amid covid-19. Fulfilling this duty is likely to boost employee engagement, as it is a sign of showing appreciation for the services rendered by employees, whereas failure to do so may influence employee disengagement (Sasongko, Huruta, Pirzada, 2019).

The pandemic has threatened the general public health and caused panic all over the world (Lai, Shih, Ko, Tang and Hsueh, 2020; Ali, Baloch, Ahmed, Ali and Iqbal, 2020; Chauhan, 2020; Harapan et al., 2020; Rothan and Byrareddy, 2020). With its adverse effects on the human existence, it has created a mayhem (Liu, Kuo and Shih, 2020; Ali, and Alharbi, 2020; Chang, Yan and Wang, 2020). Coronavirus is regarded as a highly infectious and pathogenic disease (Shereen, Khan, Kazmi, Bashir and Siddique, 2020; Ali, and Alharbi, 2020). Amid its outbreak, some workers have been exposed to poor working conditions (Pirzada, Mustapha, & Alfani, 2017). For instance, there have been concerns about the shortage of the protective equipment, the situation of being around patients who are infected, the increased workload and failure to speed up the process of controlling the infections, which have contributed to the risk of corona virus transmission and employee disengagement (Mhango et al, 2020). In other words, the disease has contributed to poor working conditions. As such, the following hypothesis was developed:

Hypothesis 1: Covid-19 has a significant positive effect on poor working conditions.

The working conditions can be understood as the environment within which employees perform their work, including all the situations which affect the execution of work (Songstad et al., 2011; Manyisa and van Aswegen, 2017; Manyisa, 2015). Some workers have been faced with the risk of infection (Mhango et al, 2020). Increased workload, longer working hours and irregular work shifts (Holden et al, 2011; Al-Momani, 2008; Tomic and Tomic, 2008; Lockley, Barger, Ayas, Rothschild, Czeisler and Landrigan 2007), shortage of the equipment that can be used in the protection of employees from the pandemic, exposure to infected patients and lack of advanced measures to control the infection, have contributed to an increased perception about the risk of corona virus transmission (Mhango et al, 2020). As such, poor working conditions are raising fears about the risk of contracting covid-19. Therefore, the following hypothesis was crafted:

Hypothesis 2: Poor working conditions have a significant positive effect on the perceived risk of covid-19 pandemic.

Employees are highly concerned about the risk of contracting coronavirus. At the present moment, no specific treatment has been found for the disease. Instead, the disease can only be managed and prevented in order to provide relief to its outbreak (Ali and Alharbi, 2020; Tang, Tambyah and Hui, 2020). The pandemic is highly contagious (Rothan and Byrareddy, 2020) and it may lead to death and excessive health complications such as severe pneumonia and abdominal pain (Salazar et al, 2020; Azer, 2020). Some employees are afraid that they might contract the virus, and transmit it to their family members (Fernandez, 2020; Koh, Lim, and Chia et al, 2005). The perceived risk of coronavirus pandemic is associated with employee disengagement (Mhango et al, 2020). Based on this analysis, the following hypothesis was developed:

Hypothesis 3: Perceived risk of covid-19 has a significant positive effect on employee disengagement.

Research Methodology

The researcher adopted a quantitative approach on a targeted population of 961 adults from Matabeleland South Region, Zimbabwe. The researcher utilised a non-probability sampling technique to select the most appropriate respondents. Out of 223 survey questionnaires which were distributed to the targeted population, 193 were returned. From those 193 questionnaires, 177 were considered appropriate and valid. A Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Version 20) was used for the process of entering data and data management. The analysis was then conducted on Smart PLS3. The process also involved testing the measurement items of this study for validity and reliability. The construct variables of this study include; covid-19 pandemic, poor working conditions, perceived risk of covid-19 pandemic, including employee disengagement. To prove the hypothesized effect, the constructs were measured on a scale with a range of: (1) strongly disagree up to (5) strongly agree. Based on the aim of this study, and the developed constructs of this research, the following model was developed:

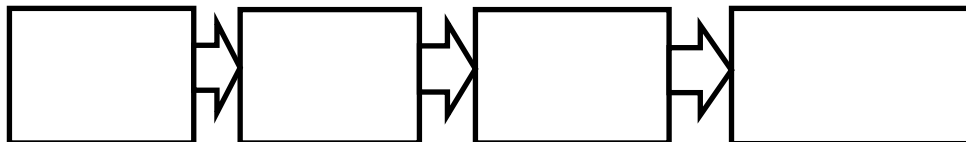


Figure 1: Research Framework

Results

Real-time data was collected from June 2020 to October 2020 through a cross-sectional survey technique. Out of 177 respondents, 96 (54.2%) were females, while 81 (45.8%) were males. Focusing on age, 23 respondents (13.0%) were aged below 20 years, while 110 (62.1%) were aged between 21 and 30 years. Moreover, 41 respondents (23.2%) were in the age category of 31 to 40 years, while 3 respondents (1.7%) were in between 41 and 50 years. With regards to the highest level of education, 24 respondents (13.6%) were holding high school certificates, while 46 (26.0%) were in possession of diploma certificates. 104 (58.8%) respondents had obtained bachelor's degrees, while 3 (1.7%) were holding masters degrees. On employment status, 129 respondents had been employed for less than 5 years, while the other 48 had been working for over 6 years. Zimbabwe is divided into 10 Provinces, and Matabeleland South is part of the Matabeleland Region, which is located in the Western Part of Zimbabwe.

Based on the data which was collected from 177 respondents and analysed on Smart PLS3, the researcher found out that all the proposed hypotheses of this study are proven significant, with different strengths, as illustrated in figure 2 and figure 3. The results of the PLS Algorithm have also proven that all the measurement items of this study are valid and reliable.

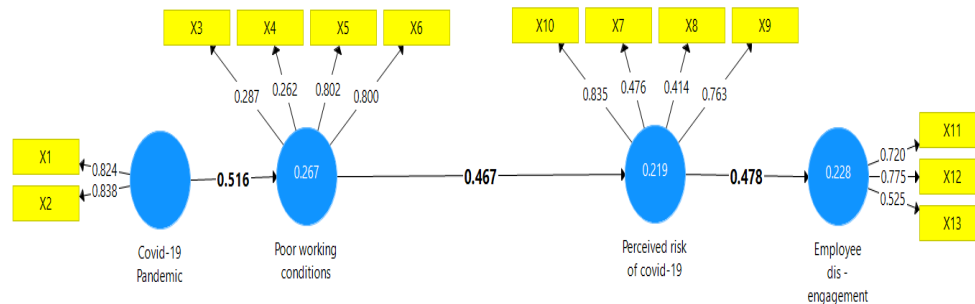


Figure 2: Result of PLS Algorithm

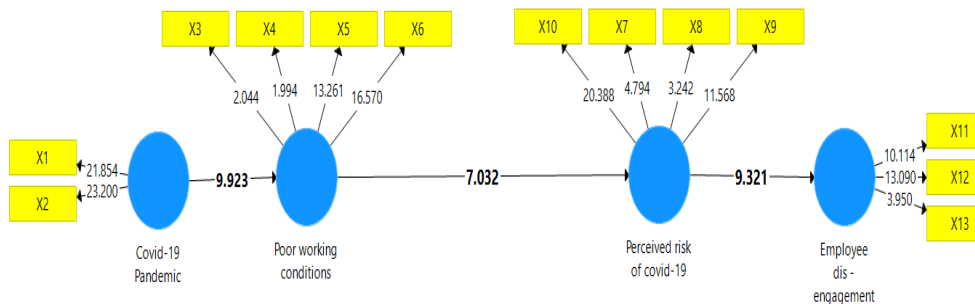


Figure 3: Result of Bootstrapping

The results of bootstrapping have established that all proposed hypotheses of this study are proven significant. The strength of covid-19 pandemic on poor working conditions is 9.923, indicating that coronavirus pandemic has contributed to poor working conditions. The strength of poor working conditions on perceived risk is 7.032, proving that poor working conditions have a significant effect on the perception about the risk of the disease. With the strength of 9.321, the perception about the risk of the pandemic has a significant effect on employee disengagement. Most employees have expressed fear towards the perceived risk of the pandemic, and this has resulted in their disengagement. In other words, the existence of covid-19 pandemic has influenced the negative behavioural outcomes among employees. Table 1 shows that all proposed hypotheses of this study are proven significant. The pandemic has a significant effect on poor working conditions, with the value of: t-statistics = 9.923 and p-value = 0.000. Having obtained the value of: t-statistics = 9.321 and p-value = 0.000, poor working conditions has a significant effect on the risk that is perceived of the disease. Perception of the risk of the pandemic has a significant effect on employee disengagement, with the value of: t-statistics = 7.023 and p-value = 0.000.

Table 1. Path Coefficients

Hypothesized Effect	T Statistics	P Values	Result
<i>Hypothesis 1:</i> Covid-19 has a significant positive effect on poor working conditions.	9.923	0.000	Positive
<i>Hypothesis 2:</i> Poor working conditions have a significant positive effect on perceived risk of covid-19.	9.321	0.000	Positive
<i>Hypothesis 3:</i> Perceived risk of covid-19 has a significant positive effect on employee disengagement.	7.023	0.000	Positive

Table 2. Strength to work amid covid-19 pandemic

Amid the era of the pandemic, I no longer have the strength to work

Category	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Quantity	3	5	7	48	114	177
Percentage	2%	3%	4%	27%	64%	100%

Table 3. Safety at work amid covid-19 pandemic

I no longer feel safe at work as a result of the pandemic.

Category	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Quantity	2	5	6	47	117	177
Percentage	1%	3%	3%	27%	66%	100%

Table 4. The working environment amid covid-19 pandemic

My work environment is no longer pleasant because of the pandemic.

Category	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Quantity	7	11	34	109	16	177
Percentage	4%	6%	19%	62%	9%	100%

Based on table 2; most employees are no longer feeling strong and capable to perform their work due to the fear of contracting the disease. Focusing on table 3, most respondents are no longer feeling safe at work because of the fear of contracting the virus. Based on table 4, most respondents believe that their work environment is no longer pleasant due to covid-19.

Discussion

Amid the pandemic, most employees have been lacking engagement in their work processes due to the fear of the perceived risk of the disease. For instance, they have been having the perception that the covid-19 pandemic is a highly transmittable disease and it may lead to excessive health complications and death (Lotf, Hamblin and Rezaei, 2020; Liu, Kuo and Shih, 2020; Harapan et al, 2020; Liu, Kuo and Shih, 2020). The pandemic has contributed to negative behaviour outcomes among employees. It has affected employees' level of engagement, commitment, motivation and employees' level of job satisfaction (Ferdian, Luturlean, Zhafira, Izumi, 2020). Moreover, it has influenced increased turnover intentions among employees. Owing to the perceived risks, most employees are afraid of contracting the virus, as they believe that it could lead to death, excessive health complications and the possibility of being transmitted to their loved ones. As a result, they become demotivated and disengaged at work. Some of these employees are also complaining about irregular work shifts, increased workload and longer working hours (Manyisa and van Aswegen, 2017; Barger et al., 2009). The pandemic has contributed to poor working conditions. Poor working conditions are linked to the perceived risk of the covid-19 pandemic. The perceived risk of coronavirus pandemic is associated with employee disengagement. As such, covid-19 pandemic has negatively affected employee behaviour.

Conclusion

This study has uncovered the key antecedents of employee disengagement amid covid-19 pandemic. It has established that employee disengagement is attributed to poor working conditions and the perceived risk of covid-19 pandemic. Most employees are concerned about their protection and the protection of their family members from the perceived risk of the corona virus. Long working hours, shortage of PPEs and an increased workload have been identified as the key drivers of employee disengagement. Most employees perceive that an unsafe physical environment of work is likely to be associated with the risk of corona virus transmission. As a recommendation, employers are advised to protect their employees amid the pandemic through the adoption of drastic measures such as extensive testing and the provision of adequate PPEs. Amid the pandemic, employees are also encouraged to protect themselves against any possible risk. Managers are encouraged to treat employees with respect and humanity, as they are the most valuable assets of the organisation. This will contribute to positive behavioural outcomes, such as employee engagement, commitment and increased organisational citizenship behaviour. Companies should be prepared to set aside long term budgets that will assist in the acquisition of personal protective equipment; in incentivizing workers, and in ensuring that workers have the operational health and safety care insurance schemes. This will help in guaranteeing the health and safety of employees, while at the same time motivating employees to commit and engage towards their work. Companies should also consider funding the scientific research projects or programs that are aimed at finding the best solution to coronavirus disease, since it is also negatively affecting the health and safety of employees. Furthermore, future researchers should come up with strategies that can be utilised by companies in their response to the overwhelming predicaments or any unforeseen occurrences in the future. Since the virus keeps evolving, countries around the world should advance their pandemic surveillance systems and improve their readiness and response operations. In the field of strategic human resource management, future researchers are highly likely to direct their research focus on: examining the effect of covid-19 pandemic on employee behaviour; investigating changes in the physical work environment and on the working conditions; assessing changes on the working arrangements, for example; flexible working arrangements and the expansion of the gig work; the development and usage of artificial intelligence at the workplace, while at the same time evaluating its impact on industrial and employment relations. Due to the lockdown restrictions, the researcher only focused on Matabeleland South Region. In addition, the researcher only focused on a limited number of factors affecting employee behaviour amid covid-19 pandemic. Hence, future researchers should also examine other factors.

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PRZECIWDZIAŁANIA REZYGNACJI PRACOWNIKÓW WOBEC PANDEMII COVID-19

Streszczenie: Pandemia COVID-19 siała spustoszenie w różnych aspektach życia ludzi na całym świecie. Zagroził zdrowiu publicznemu, sparaliżował gospodarkę i wywołał panikę na całym świecie, wpłynął na zamiary pracowników dotyczące rotacji i spowodował ich brak zaangażowania. W czasie pandemii niektórzy pracownicy doświadczyli dłuższych godzin pracy, zwiększonego obciążenia pracą, nieregularnych zmian pracy i braku środków

ochrony indywidualnej (PPE). Chociaż wielu badaczy zajmowało się kwestią pandemii COVID-19, niewiele uwagi poświęcono badaniu koncepcji rezygnacji pracowników w erze COVID-19. Badacz zajmuje się tą luką, identyfikując i badając kluczowe czynniki poprzedzające brak zaangażowania pracowników. W badaniu przyjęto podejście ilościowe, a dane pierwotne zostały zebrane za pomocą techniki ankietowej, a następnie przeanalizowane na Smart PLS3. Na Smart PLS3 wykorzystano algorytm PLS i Bootstrapping do określenia siły opracowanych zmiennych w tym badaniu, jednocześnie oceniając rzetelność i trafność konstruktów. Opierając się na wynikach tego badania, udowodniono, że wszystkie zaproponowane hipotezy są istotne, ale mają różną moc. Badacz sugeruje, że; zaspokojenie potrzeb pracowników w zakresie zdrowia i bezpieczeństwa w erze COVID-19 prawdopodobnie zwiększy zaangażowanie pracowników; podczas gdy z drugiej strony; Niedopełnienie tego obowiązku może skutkować zwolnieniem pracownika. Jako nowa nowość, pracodawcy są zachęceni do zaspokajania potrzeb pracowników w zakresie zdrowia i bezpieczeństwa, aby wpływać na pozytywne wyniki w zakresie zachowań pracowników; takie jak zaangażowanie, zaangażowanie, satysfakcja z pracy, lepsze zachowanie obywatelskie organizacji i lojalność.

Słowa kluczowe: pandemia Covid-19, zwolnienie pracowników, warunki pracy, postrzegane ryzyko pandemii COVID-19.

员工离职的情况COVID-19大流行

摘要: covid-

19大流行对世界各地人们生活的各个方面造成了严重破坏。它威胁到公众健康，破坏经济，在世界范围内引起恐慌，影响员工之间的离职意图并导致员工离职。在大流行中，一些员工的工作时间更长，工作量增加，工作轮班不规律以及个人防护设备(PPE)短缺。尽管许多研究人员研究了covid-19大流行的问题，但在covid-

19时代，很少有人关注探索员工脱离接触的概念。研究人员通过识别和探索员工离职的关键先因来解决这一差距。该研究采用定量方法，通过调查技术收集了原始数据，然后在SmartPLS3上进行了分析。在SmartPLS3上，PLS算法和自举法用于确定本研究开发变量的强度，同时评估构造的可靠性和有效性。根据这项研究的结果，所有提出的假设都被证明是有意义的，但是具有不同的优势。研究人员暗示：在covid-

19时代满足员工的健康和安全需求很可能会促进员工敬业度；另一方面不履行此义务可能导致员工离职。作为一种新奇事物，鼓励雇主满足员工的健康和安全需求，以影响员工的积极行为成果；例如敬业度，承诺，工作满意度，增强的组织公民行为和忠诚度。

关键词: Covid-19大流行，员工脱离接触，工作条件，covid-19大流行的感知风险。