

COMMENTARY

# The COVID-19 pandemic: A challenge to performance appraisal

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The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world order: Suddenly, the fear of the unknown overwhelmed societies that, despite the volatility and complexities of a changing work world (developing technology, globalization, and increasing competition), were beginning to confront and adapt to those contemporary developments. Now, however, people were suddenly struck with the distress of this new and unknown virus over which the medical world and the politicians had (initially) no control. Feelings of unrest and uncertainty, among other consequences of the virus, lead to excessive levels of stress and anxiety.

Over and above the stresses and strains resulting from concerns about health, individuals are particularly worried about their future sustenance, especially with respect to their work situation. Following Hart and Cooper (2001), we note that occupational stress associates with aversive emotional states such as tension, frustration, anxiety, anger, and depression, all of which fall under the umbrella of psychological distress. Moreover, Rudolph et al. (2020) have observed that there are several major *work-related* stresses that have derived specifically from the pandemic crisis, such as health care workers working with (possibly infected) patients; elevated levels of work–family conflict; and, markedly, job insecurity. Of note, not all employees are equally affected: For example, there are opportunities for many employees to work from home.

Notwithstanding those who have been able to take advantage of the pandemic to make a living, the vast majority of employees (in their masses) are asking what will be the future of their jobs—including those now working from home.

In that unnerving context, one primary source of work-related anxiety in the current period of the pandemic is the practice of performance appraisal of employees by their managers. This issue is particularly germane to those employees finding themselves operating from home, many for the first time during the pandemic. Because of impending cutbacks and layoffs, this subpopulation is at high risk in terms of their future employment. Specifically, and with that perspective, we would like to draw attention to an aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic viewed through the lens of the performance appraisal domain.

## COVID-19 serves as an accelerator of stress in the process of performance appraisal

The lockdown and restrictions of social distancing have significantly increased the number of people working from home—through virtual/digital interactions and by remote control (Rudolph et al., 2020). Notably this mode of working generated several challenges to the domain of performance appraisal. These include:

1. *Managerial stress* rooted in (a) managers' needs to achieve objectives via employees working by remote control and (b) the challenges thereby of appraising their workers' performance.

Managers, who are used to overseeing their employees in both a centralized fashion and close physical proximity (usually the same office), under the conditions of the pandemic are required to achieve their job assignments with work conducted by distant workers, without close supervision. These managers are thus forced to trust and empower their workers more than ever before. Indeed, after Francovich et al. (2008) and Hossain and Wigand (2004), we can assert that trust is the main challenge in virtual interactions that include information and communication technologies [ICT] tools such as email, WhatsApp, social networks, electronic forms, and video conferences.

- a. This assertion was echoed by Lee-Kelley et al. (2004, p. 656), who acknowledged that “Trust is a critical factor in the development and performance of virtual teams [more] than in their non-virtual counterparts, as many of the trust-building social representations, rituals, and behaviours are absent.” Moreover, many managers fear that their “distant” employees will shirk their jobs (Ross et al., 2017, p. 18). Yes, managers can use technologies to follow and monitor their employees’ work legitimately, but these monitoring activities could ultimately damage the trust between managers and employees (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018).
2. *Workers’ stress* contemplating that their work from home is underappreciated. When managers cannot see their employees’ work, they tend to undervalue it and appraise it severely (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995; Tziner & Rabenu, 2018). This phenomenon is especially true for contextual performance, invisible to the superior when employees work from home. The employee activities that the supervisor might miss include, for example, politeness to a client, assistance to someone having difficulty with technology, and morale-raising among colleagues. Thus, during the coronavirus epidemic, the possibilities for distant staff to promote themselves and to ensure that their performance is recognized are reduced significantly, especially when their efforts most need to be appreciated.

It is paradoxical that despite the many digital communication channels available, employees’ possibilities to promote themselves from home are reduced. In practice, however, everyone is on email and WhatsApp, and everyone is holding meetings on Zoom. The reality is that the surplus information from these various channels eventually decreases the attention of the supervisors (and other colleagues) to a meager level (Simon, 1971). There is no doubt that it is easier to focus attention on employees’ work and contributions in a face-to-face meeting. For example, Nunamaker et al. (2009, p. 115) recorded that, “It only takes about ten minutes for some virtual team members to forget with whom they are working, something that never happens with face-to-face teams. It is therefore important to establish and maintain virtual presence—reminders of who is participating.”

Moreover, when managers attempt to appraise their workers through electronic monitoring, the very acts of digital supervision, and being under constant surveillance and appraisal, can cause employees additional stress, over and above the issues of trust (see above). Indirectly, these measures could descend to the resolution of checking how long employees spent at lunch (or even in the bathroom) or whether they read all the pages of a report, a degree of oversight that creates not only stress but also damage to workers’ performance (Tziner & Rabenu, 2018).

### ***Training managers to be better appraisers***

In the present era of COVID-19, which creates an abnormal work situation, we propose that supervisors understand that when appraising their workers under these circumstances, they have to “deduct” employee situational factors in their employee assessments. They need better focus on the workers’ inputs, namely, what the employees bring to the job in the way of effort, skills, and knowledge, and so on. That this approach is viable was established in Jawahar’s (2005) study that indicated that managers are capable of understanding (and being lenient) when their employees

are performing under challenging conditions. The severe conditions incorporated much of those extant during the coronavirus period, such as

1. *Working from home.* People found themselves working from home without available workspace: in a shared family space, such as the dining room, with all the prevailing disturbances that entailed, such as children requiring supervision. Others who have a workspace at home may have discovered that it was not adequately equipped for prolonged work. For instance, regarding their computer: The computer screen was old and hard to look at for long periods; there were no speakers; or the space itself, and the mouse and keyboard, were not ergonomically designed. All these factors, among the other anxieties and inconveniences at home, build up the frustration and pressures, all the more when the employee is now expected to work additional long hours in a family environment.
2. *Adapting to new technologies that require swift adjustment.* Under the conditions and restrictions of the pandemic, many workers are required to operate ICTs in their new domestic work situations, actions previously performed in a physical workspace. These ICT activities include, for instance, lecturers now teaching classes on Zoom or office receptionists who have to switch their service, employing electronic measures. It is by no means uncommon that workers, apprehensive about using technology, are forced to leave their comfort zone by learning to acquire new skills. Learning new skills removes “rust” and refreshes the mind, but that innovative process also involves performance anxiety (“Will I succeed?” and “What a shame it if I fail!”). Not surprisingly, the older generations’ concern about employing technology is at a higher level than that of the younger generations (X and Y). The latter populations, who were born into the technology, feel at home with communication systems (e.g., Bencsik et al., 2016; Gallup, 2016; Gilson et al., 2014). Furthermore, and not unexpected, is the finding that techno-stress (in the work context) is higher among people for whom technology is not their primary occupation. For example, human resources workers who have to conduct interviews online or university professors who have to teach classes using Zoom are more anxious about using the technology than ICT workers who communicate electronically on a regular basis (Maier et al, 2015). Notably, many employees are afraid that using technology that is available 24/7 will cause work intensification (Ross et al., 2017). They are wary that their supervisors will expect them to work beyond regular work hours (because they can log on from home) or to find (nonessential) solutions to issues late at night, just because they possess work laptops in their homes.
3. *Quantitative overload.* Employees defined as *essential* workers, especially medical personnel, are forced to work long hours, often without enough sleep hours to recover from the stress. Recovery from work pressures constitutes an essential factor in maintaining employee mental and physical health (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2018). In the course of a workday, however, many cannot afford a lunch break or a short rest. Significantly, during this crisis, workplaces reduced the workforce and many employees are on unpaid leave, leaving the remaining staff to do the work of many. Some of these latter employees may be exceedingly stressed by the increased significant quantitative and qualitative overload and are likely to make more mistakes or wrong decisions more frequently.

That is not to say that under normal circumstances when work conditions are relatively straightforward, managers should go easy on their employees’ work; they should, indeed, appraise their employees strictly. The point is that, for example, during lockdown periods, *all other things being equal*, managers should deliver job appraisals to workers who are parents (that do not manage to achieve their expected outputs) that are on par with those of the childless employees. The manager thus “deducts” the external effects and focuses on the employees’ input. Having stated this, however, employees may yet be concerned and stressed out when contemplating that their managers are unaware of their harrowing

conditions and, consequently, may not make the necessary adjustments to their performance appraisals.

The pressurized environment created by the coronavirus has opened up opportunities for managers to improve and highlight the soft people skills needed in the process of performance appraisal. They could now better exhibit caring and empathy, be attentive to difficulties and fears, and, in the face of the stressful and touchy circumstances, serve as role models of vigilant conduct while exhibiting creativity, optimism, hope, and resiliency (e.g., Rabenu, 2017). They could, perhaps, with enhanced consciousness, now get more familiar in person with each of their employees and their particular needs (e.g., pregnant, anxious, in a financial bind, with young children at home). In general, they could divert their attention to providing their workers with appropriate emotional support and maintenance, beyond their concerns of achieving their organizations' productivity goals.

### COVID-19 serves as an accelerator of improved performance deserving to be appraised

Although we have, so far, recounted negative consequences arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic actually provides opportunities for workers to elevate both their performance and their subsequent performance appraisal. Examples include

1. *Proving skills that were not previously evident.* Notably, some people are less charismatic, friendly, or accepted. Now, however, may be their chance to express themselves in a medium that can accentuate their strengths. Similarly, young people who have a strong command of the Internet can help or support older or senior colleagues. Someone with a good sense of humor can raise morale in the office WhatsApp group.
2. *Uninterrupted work.* Workers in shared workspaces often complain (among other issues) about reduced performance at work because of repeated disturbances from colleagues, conflicts, negative interactions, and difficulties of focusing (e.g., Morrison & Macky, 2017; Ross et al., 2017). In contradistinction to those whose homes are crowded or chaotic because of knockdowns, there are those workers who are consigned to homes with fewer interruptions than experienced at work who may actually enjoy working from home and are more productive there than in their workplaces.
3. *Learning and developing.* Especially among those given "leave without pay," or whose workloads were minimized on account of COVID-19, spare time has offered possibilities to study new and developing topics. Through the Internet, webinars, or old-fashioned perusal of books, confined workers could thus improve their general knowledge, keep up with their professional literature, and sharpen professional skills.

To summarize, the coronavirus has moved everyone out of their comfort zones, which involves personal circumstances that should be monitored via performance appraisal. Managers should be trained how to accurately evaluate performance (Roch et al., 2012) in these new circumstances. There is a good chance that by leading managers to be better appraisers, we can better grow out of the crisis as organizations and as performing individuals.

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