

COVID-19 and the “Stress By Corona”: A Study from Human Resource Management Perspective

H M R D Kularatne

Department of Human Resource Management
Faculty of Management
University of Peradeniya
Peradeniya, Sri Lanka
Dedunurk0@gmail.com

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Abstract- COVID-19 is the latest precarious catastrophe in which all human beings are suffering physiologically and psychologically. Coronavirus disease which is commonly known as COVID-19 is a deadly respiratory viral infection resulting considerable number of deaths. Following the precautionary ways by World Health Organization, all economies were shut down temporarily and thereby almost every organization is facing a recession. Apart from that, employees are mentally weak with the tension of being affected. It results a number of anxious behaviors. Within this context, it is required to explore the information regards to COVID-19 pandemic with respect to human resource management. Employees experienced a damaged psychological status with the prevailing situation in worldwide. Hence, this paper attempts to gather knowledge about COVID-19 pandemic and its hazardousness, Stress By Corona (SBC) along with several stressors and employee classification on exposure to COVID-19 with the purpose of contributing to existing knowledge body with respect to COVID-19 and human resource management. Method was desk research strategy and this study presented several stressors owing to coronavirus and employees who are at a higher risk and minor risk with COVID-19 pandemic.

Index Terms— COVID-19, Fear, Stress, Strain, Risk, Human Resource Management

I. INTRODUCTION

Human resources become indispensable and crucial for the survival of the organization. Human Resources have unique characteristics thereby employees make things happen while all other resources make things possible (Opatha, 2009). Due to the uniqueness of human resources in an organization, employees are exclusive in the decision making process in the organization. Organizational development is upon the ability to explore innovations, novel opportunities in a volatile environment. The scope of human resource management is built around human resources in the organization. Human Resource Management is one of fields of business administration or organizational management (Opatha, 2019). In the range of human resource management functions, health and safety is one of most important concern. It involves promoting employee's mental and physical health in which

employees are able to perform job related tasks, duties and responsibilities efficiently and effectively (Opatha, 2009).

In the beginning of January, 2020, World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of a novel corona virus which was originated in Wuhan Province, China as an international public health emergency since there was a high risk of getting spread all over the world due to the characteristics of Corona virus. As shocking news, in March 2020, it was stated that COVID-19 has been a pandemic. In response to COVID-19 pandemic, all countries were advised by WHO to follow arrange of public health and social measures such as quarantine in selected areas, social distancing, hand sanitizing, respiratory etiquette, closure of schools, factories and organizations which gather more people together and international travel restrictions (WHO, 2020). WHO has announced guidance including policies and standard operating procedures to be followed by all countries to get adjusted for public health and social measures to prevent the transmission of virus in the work place including employers, employees, labour unions, business associations, health authorities and occupational health and safety practitioners (WHO, 2020).

Within this context, it is required to investigate the risk that work places are in following the severity of COVID-19 among employees in the organization where more people move here and there. Managing people belongs to the specific field of organizational management: Human Resource Management. COVID-19 is one of most serious health hazards that organizations have to cope with nowadays in managing people at the work place. Mental health following corona virus is vital to be studied since a considerable degree of fear, anxiety, worry and stress is induced among people including households, patients, doctors and workers. With unusual livelihoods especially quarantine, most of people got psychologically weak as they felt loneliness, depression, stress and anxiety (WHO, 2020).

This paper attempts to discuss the nature of corona virus, its impact on global and Sri Lankan context and employees, the stress occurred due to corona virus (Stress By Corona) with the concern towards employee exposure to COVID-19.

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Employees were categorized in terms of the exposure to COVID-19 pandemic.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

This research paper developed following research questions and the objective of this paper is to find answers to below research questions.

1. What is Coronavirus?
2. What is COVID-19 Pandemic?
3. How the Coronavirus is Hazardous?
4. What is Stress By Corona (SBC)?
5. What is the Employee Exposure to COVID-19?

III. METHOD

This research paper attempts to contribute to the existing knowledge in the scope of COVID-19 in terms of Human Resource Management by answering research questions developed above. Researcher referred articles in Emerald, Google Scholar, Web of Science and semantic scholar and websites of WHO and other relevant world health care institutions in order to collect information with regard to COVID-19 pandemic, the effect of COVID-19 on individuals, COVID-19 and Psychological concerns such as stress, depression, mental health. In order to answer them, a comprehensive literature review was done by using desk research strategy. Researcher tried to create bridge between COVID-19 and human resource management in the situation where lack of researches have been conducted on the impact of COVID-19 on employee's mental health.

IV. CORONA VIRUS AND COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak was firstly originated in a sea food market in Wuhan in Hubei province where around 58.5 million people live in Central China in December, 2019 and as of march, 2020, it has been spread worldwide becoming a pandemic. World Health Organization has announced whole world is in a high risk due to COVID-19 pandemic in terms of uncertain human lives as well as stagnated global economy. COVID-19 is known as different name callings: SARS-CoV-2; Wuhan pneumonia; Wuhan Coronavirus; 2019-nCov acute respiratory disease (Ellepolá & Rajapakse, 2020; WHO, 2020).

Coronavirus is spread through droplets or tiny particles of saliva and discharge from nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes. COVID-19 is one of infectious diseases from Coronavirus family which is transmitted from animal to human and human to human which resulting respiratory problems basically and the people who are older and have chronic diseases such as cancer, diabetics and chronic respiratory disease are more likely to get serious illnesses and death. Although this is a deadly disease, most of infected people with superior medical conditions will develop mild symptoms and get recovered without special treatments.

Symptoms of COVID-19 include fever with cough, tiredness with muscle pain, shortness of breath, sore throat, rarely diarrhea, nausea or vomiting, a runny nose and new loss of taste or smell (WHO, 2020). World Health Organization (WHO) advices to people to be self-isolated and contact

medical support when there is a difficulty in breathing with fever and dry cough (WHO, 2020).

According to the situation report published by WHO in 2020, A special vaccine or medical treatment has not been found yet and WHO advices to be safe by wearing face masks when in a public, keeping a good hand hygiene, been isolated from family members if suspected corona symptoms are appeared and continuous medical experimental measures by medical service providers.

V. HAZARDOUSNESS OF CORONA VIRUS

Coronavirus has swept 213 countries and territories around the world in a short while which resulted total confirmed cases of 15, 656, 924, total deaths of 636,583 and Recovered of 9,545,317 as of July 24, 2020, 06:30 GMT (Worldometer, 2020). It was reported that most of countries were shutting down due to the fast spread of coronavirus. United States of America is facing a critical situation following inadequate medical facilities and even health care workers were resigning to be safe from coronavirus. Another developed country: Italy also is facing a tragic situation with COVID-19 as their death toll was rising uncontrollably (Worldometer, 2020).

According to Opatha (2020), hazardousness of coronavirus can be explained in terms of organizational context. In organizations, occupational hazards include occupational accidents, occupational stress, occupational diseases and poor work-life balance. As WHO has announced in 2001, potential health hazards include air contaminants (dust, mists, fumes, aerosols and fibres) gas and vapour contaminants, chemical hazards, biological hazards (bacteria, virus, fungi and other living organisms which make acute and chronic infections), physical hazards (excessive noises, temperatures, vibrations, illuminations, and electromagnetic radiations, ergonomic hazards (lifting, moving, holding and reaching, walking, pushing, pulling and etc) and psychosocial factors (boring, stress, production pressure, repetitive tasks, low pay and low recognition). Among these types of hazards, biological hazard can be taken in to consideration in COVID-19 pandemic situation where a virus is spreading rapidly and employees get infected. In order to prevent the spread, organizations have to take necessary actions which resulted a negative impact on the whole organization. Increasing absenteeism has become one of negative effects of COVID-19 on workplaces (OSHA, 2020).

When an employee is affected or suspected owing to coronavirus, whole department/ unit or even the organization needs to be closed and there by overall organizational productivity hinders following increased cost for medical care, reduced market share, sales and consumer consumption and reduced profits. Organization is required to allocate funds to ensure the occupational health of employees.

WHO (2020) has defined that Occupational health is “*the protection and promotion of the health of workers by preventing and controlling occupational diseases and accidents and by eliminating occupational factors and conditions hazardous to health and safety at work*”. Each and every organizational has to maintain a continuous

occupational hygiene practices over another couple of years due to the risk of getting affected from coronavirus in future. By concerning above factors, it can be stated a severe hazardousness of coronavirus in the organizational context.

VI. STRESS BY CORONA (SBC)

The employee who is healthy today may be unhealthy due to corona. If an individual is get affected, his/her physical health will be weak as well as being afraid of getting affected will result a weak mental health (Opatha, 2015). With that fact, range of fears which are in a healthy person can be found which make people mentally unhealthy along with coronavirus. Fear of corona has been defined as “*an unfavourable feeling the employee has when he or she thinks that he or she is in danger owing to the corona*” (Opatha, 2020). Along with the fear of corona, individuals face a stress called “Stress by Corona”.

Opatha (2020) has labelled the stress caused by the fears of coronavirus as Stress By Corona (SBC). SBC has been defined by Opatha (2020) as “*what the employee experiences internally in response to Corona he or she finds difficult to deal with*”. He has further noticed that when the normal stress level is combined with SBC, it would be disastrous. Normal stress would occur from different levels including job related stressors such as lack of empowerment, lack of resources, role ambiguity, unclear job duties and responsibilities, inadequate pay, person related stressors including family issues (divorce concerns, children’s concerns), financial instability, work-life balance issues, organizational stressors including inadequate feedback, mal communication, organizational politics, internal rules and procedures, poor working conditions and environmental stressors such as economic changes, political changes, natural environmental disasters, technological changes and life pattern changes (Opatath 2010 & Opatha, 2020).

Opatha (2020) has figured out 15 types of employee fear owing to Coronavirus including fear of getting affected, fear of getting quarantine, fear of getting affected by loved ones, fear of getting stigmatized, fear of getting affected by others, fear of be a cause of spreading, fear of attending the work, fear of getting sanction/s, fear of peer pressure, fear of harsh customer, fear of loss of pursuits of pleasure, fear of losing the job, fear of continuity of business, fear of implementing plans and fear of formulating new plans.

According to a recent research out from MetLife (Mayer, 2020), it was mentioned several stressors that human being are suffering in response to COVID-19 such as the daily cost of living (41%), stock market declines (34%), debt belongings and the insecurity of getting a debt (32%), job insecurity and income (30%) and lack of emergency funds (28%). People in between 16 to 69 years old were most affected by stress, anxiety and boredom after the lockdown of countries. They were unable to make plans and spend the day effectively. Most of under 70s worried about the health of their loved ones (BBC, 2020).

Griffiths & Mohammed (2020) have identified five main stressors during Covid-19 pandemic including 1) “*Perception of safety, Threat and risk of contagion*” which mean the fear

of their own health and the health of loved ones when the number of new cases increases, 2) “*Infobesity and the Unknown*” which is the stress following the overloaded information and misinformation spread through social media reporting, 3) “*Quarantine and confinement*” which is the stressor along with the s boredom, loneliness, anger emotional burden due to the separation from family and communities, 4) “*Stigma and social exclusion*” means the stress which occurs when individuals who are suspicious of being affected are isolated and avoided by others blaming new outbreaks on them and the last stressor is 5) “*Financial loss and job insecurity*” following business disruption, loss of income, inadequate insurance and compensation, reduction of working hours during COVID-19. Above stressors lead employees to have a poor mental health owing to coronavirus and show a poor performance in both task and contextual aspects.

Curfew declaration to stop the spread of coronavirus could be an environmental stressor which made employees alone at home. Employees were separated from loved ones and had to wait in long queues to buy household items especially food, had to face financial difficulties with cut salaries and experienced inflated prices of goods and services. When employees at outside for essential purposes: reporting to work on shift basis, going to buy a medicine and etc., they were stressful regarding medical concerns and police supervision.

When the stress becomes too much, individuals faces a strain where numerous psychological consequences happen including lower job satisfaction, lowered emotional well-being and anxiety (Robbins et al., 2019). Strain will result a range of physiological consequences including heart attack, blood pressure, depression, lowered immunity and several musculoskeletal disorders. Drawing on insights from the behavioural perspective, people who suffered from strain tend to use more dosage of alcohol and tobacco to mitigate the feeling of being stressful. As well as they gain low nutritious while showing a poor task and contextual performance, higher absenteeism, higher turnover and lower productivity in the workplace (Opatha, 2020).

Continuous and prolong stress would lead individuals to experience burnout and people with burnout are hypertensive and mentally depressed (Aswathappa, 2017). According to Reece et al., (2008), burnout will result a fully shutdown of individual’s mental and physical health. With COVID-19, employees were baring both normal stress and SBC thereby organizational productivity and the success will be negatively impacted considerably. Employees feel insecure about their jobs especially in the private sector and some of them feel unsafe to come to work with the fear of corona. Although they work from home, they wouldn’t perform well as they are not observed. When this continuous and intense stress is unable to managed, people will experience psychological depression and distress (Marchand, 2004, Cummins et al., 2015 & Drapeau et al., 2011). Hamouche (2020) has mentioned that this COVID-19 is an intense stress to whole world population. Some may lead to suicide as a result of depression (Cummins et al., 2015). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition occurs due to terrifying events, nightmares and severe anxiety. Following COVID-19 pandemic, the rate

of having lifetime PTSD is considerably less since it has been reported only 2.0% in Sri Lanka (Ellepolu & Rajapakse, 2020).

Suicidal behaviour among couples has been discussed in COVID-19 prevailing situation in the world (Griffiths & Mohammed, 2020). Mental instability results suicidal thoughts, suicidal attempts and actual suicides which happened in previous pandemics: SARS which can predict current COVID-19 pandemic can report higher suicidal rate. Griffiths & Mohammed (2020) has done a case study present couple suicides and attempted couple suicides in India, America, Bangladesh and Malaysia in 2020. It was concluded that most of couple suicides have been happened due to the fear and tension, anxiety, stress owing to coronavirus rather being affected. In the organizational context, loss of key employees is a risk and a single couple suicide in workplace may lead others to imitate it.

Another component of fear of corona is the panic created by social media (Abhay Sachin, 2020). In India, people were collecting face masks, sanitizers and other requirements as soon as possible once they got to know through media about the risky country prevailing situation owing to corona. Most of that news was fake and irresponsible. When people get panic, they tend to use N95 surgical masks for daily travelling and thereby a sabotage of N95 masks were arose when actually corona virus was spreading in India. Griffiths & Mohammed (2020) has mentioned that although social media does an important role in communicating updated information to communities, social media is not a trusted source of information at all during covid-19 pandemic. When relatives are quarantined and far away, social media is really supportive to share information. Since they are isolated, fake, unclear and unfound information lead people to confused, be stressful and anxious (Griffiths & Mohammed (2020).

VII. CLASSIFICATION OF EMPLOYEE EXPOSURE TO COVID-19

Coronavirus is causing infections among humans working in organization despite the gender, age, race, status and educational background. Along with the symptoms of COVID-19, serious negative impact on worker's physical health, mental health and emotional well-being has been recognised by almost every organization worldwide. Although employees are not affected by corona, they all are in a risk of getting exposed to coronavirus since all employees are in a vulnerable situation with COVID-19.

According to the classification of worker exposure to COVID-19 done by OSHA in 2020, four types of employee categories could be able to identified as risk is "Very High", "High", "Medium" and "Lower/ Caution". Employees who are at very high risk include healthcare workers and laboratory personnel including doctors, nurses, dentists, emergency medical technicians and paramedics, and morgue workers (OSHA, 2020 & Opatha, 2020). Employees who are at high risk include healthcare staff members, therapists, patient attendants, public health inspection officers, medical transport workers and mortuary workers (OSHA, 2020 & Opatha, 2020). High-population-density-work environments, schools,

public transportation and high-volume retail settings can be classified as employees who are in moderate risk of being exposed to coronavirus while employees who have a lower risk of getting infected include employees who have minimum level of contact with public and other co-workers in the work place (OSHA, 2020 & Opatha, 2020).

VIII. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

COVID-19 is an infectious respiratory disease caused by coronavirus originally found in China. It has speedily spread worldwide reporting considerable number of patients and deaths by indicating the severe hazardousness of this viral infection. Countries were locked down to avoid people gathering which led virus spread. As a result of that, almost every country faces an economic recession with financial crisis and thereby global economy was weak. Besides the negative impact towards the economy, individuals experienced both poor physical and mental health owing to corona. People who are not affected become psychologically down due to the fear of corona.

Employees bared a combined stress of normal stress and stress by corona during this epidemiological catastrophe. There were several stressors during and after COVID-19 pandemic including various fears owing to corona, daily cost of living, stock market declines, debt belongings and the insecurity of getting a debt, job insecurity and income, lack of emergency funds, Perception of safety, Threat and risk of contagion, Infobesity and the Unknown, Quarantine and confinement, Stigma and social exclusion, Financial loss and job insecurity, curfew declaration and the panic created by social media with fake and misinformation. Healthcare workers and laboratory personnel are the more exposure to COVID-19 as they work directly with infected patients.

Within this context, organizations are required to take appropriate interventions by adhering to health measures given by WHO to protect the workplace from virus spread and mitigate the negative consequences of COVID-19. One infected employee is enough to shut down all operations of the organization therefore it is a must to ensure a healthy and safe working place from coronavirus before employees get infected. In fact, organizations have to formulate strategies to ensure occupational health and hygiene. Occupational stress is inevitable but the combined stress with SBC is challenging to maintain a productive workforce within the organization. Since this research paper limits the scope for a literature review, future researcher can pay attention towards the ways of mitigating the SBC and the role of HRM in COVID-19 prevailing situation worldwide.

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