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The purpose of *the Oikos - The Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University Bulletin of Ecology, Science Technology, Agriculture and Food Systems Review and Advancement* is to provide a forum for scientific and technological solutions based on a systems approach and thinking as the bedrock of intervention.

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COVID-19 AND THE WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN ZIMBABWE PRIVATE SECTOR COMPANIES

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ABSTRACT

The Coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) has resulted in the creation of a new and complex business environment. Labour markets were interrupted and this ignited an enormous and instant series of trials and testing with flexible work arrangements and new relationships. Research to date has emphasized work-life balance (WLB) in the work and family domains only, whilst overlooking the effects of a pandemic as posed by COVID-19. Henceforth existing knowledge on remote working can be questioned in an extraordinary context. The study aimed to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the WLB in the post-pandemic period and beyond. It also aimed at exploring the projected abnormalities that are driving a foreseeable future policy revolution in the world of work and employment. The study utilised the qualitative research approach. A survey research design was used to select research participants. Snowballing purposive sampling was also used to get further referrals. The research study included 100 white-collar private-sector employees who completed an online questionnaire. Data were presented and discussed qualitatively. The study revealed that although hybrid and flexible work arrangements would be more central in the post-pandemic for nonmanual work, it will not be an —one-size-fits-all solution. The traditional work systems and practices are likely to continue and workplaces will not completely disappear. In addition, those who are engaged in manual labour will continue current work practices with increased demands. Employers' focus on employees' WLB in the new normal will target employees' motivation and achieve a better WLB. The study recommended that new policies for crisis management and Hybrid work culture should be developed and implemented, especially for office workers. Government must also set aside funds or provide aid to private sector companies to prevent future crises.

Keywords: diversity, remote working, working from home, pandemic

INTRODUCTION

The macroeconomic variables, ranging from political, economic, social and technological transformations are strong forces that radically transform many aspects of our lives and this includes the —work environment where societies are often mandated to take proactive steps to adapt to the new norm to remain competitive. One crisis that reconfigured societies and economies was the Industrial Revolution. This revolution changed the way people lived and worked and it also established a Work-Life Balance (WLB). Similarly, the ongoing Coronavirus has produced and continues to produce notable changes in work, work practices and the relationship of workers to co-workers, companies, customers, communities, localities and WLB. As part of the ongoing efforts to curb the transmission of coronavirus disease and help to protect the health and safety of employees, public and private organisations have generally adopted preventive measures like remote work arrangements, social distancing, staggered working hours and other methods to reduce the presence of employees within work environment while also sustaining organisational activities (ILO, 2020).

Even though the above-named practices are now widespread globally, the application of these has not been uniform and consistently varying between countries, sectors, or industries. The practices also vary in terms of implementation and intensity. For example, in most private sectors, white-collar employees (those whose work involves mental work), have enjoyed the health protection of working from home while those engaged in physical activities had to continue reporting for work, often exposing them to greater health risks (ILO, 2020c).

Both public and private sector business endeavour to continuously improve and standardise their business operations and policies with modern-day requirements which aim to attract, motivate and retain employees. However, a lot still needs to be done in terms of the WLB and workplace flexibility. For most private sector companies, the core objective of setting up a business is for maximum profit. However, in pursuit of profit maximisation, private sector companies must not overlook the WLB for their workers in this 21st century. One notable change that from the COVID-19 pandemic is —remote working across occupations (Kramer and Kramer, 2020). WLB is considered to be of great importance to private-sector businesses in Zimbabwe.

In times of calamity, strategic swiftness is required to ensure the achievement of organisational goals (Liu, Lee & Lee, 2020). Lee *et al.* (2020) emphasize that organisations must be proactive in resource allocation and coordination and utilise resources efficiently for the achievement of organisational goals. It is against this background that the uniqueness and the intricacy of COVID-19 presented a major challenge that compromised the achievement of organisational goals in private sector companies in Zimbabwe.

COVID-19 is a global public health emergency that resulted in lockdowns and disruptions of many businesses and people's livelihoods across the world (Muhammad, Khan, Kazmi, Bashir, Siddique, 2020). The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economic landscape, business environment, employment and the way people work have been far-reaching. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2020), COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SAR-COV-2). The coronavirus was discovered in the Wuhan Province of China in 2019. Within a short space of time, the virus had rapidly spread worldwide due to the transit of

people. It is transmitted from person to person when people breathe in air contaminated by droplets and small airborne particles containing the virus (Muhammad *et al.*, 2020). Transmission is more intense when people are near. However, the infection can occur over longer distances, particularly indoors (Pierantoni, Pierantozzi and Sargolini, 2020).

COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the WHO on 11 March 2020. Following the declaration, a state of disaster was proclaimed in Zimbabwe by President Dr. E.D. Mnangagwa on the 20th of March 2020. Early efforts to contain the pandemic were put in place in the form of lockdowns or travel restrictions and this had a resultant negative effect on social gatherings and economic welfare (Gumbo, 2020). Gumbo further asserts that a national lockdown and prohibition of gatherings was legislated for 21 days, commencing 30 March 2020. Lockdowns were aimed at containing the rate of transmissions by buying time for public officials to enhance their health capacity systems and improve their preparedness to deal with the anticipated full impact of the pandemic (*ibid.*)

Globally, governments took varying degrees of action to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. It was in the midst of this storm that private sector companies suffered heavily due to the closure of their businesses. According to Mann (2014), the private sector exists to make a profit. Hence, the virus created an unfamiliar environment where their profits significantly dwindled whilst expenses ballooned. Furthermore, the pandemic created an exceptionally complex scenario for private sector employers, as they faced not only a severe economic downturn but also a sharp health and safety crisis requiring extraordinary steps to protect their employees from the virus (Elsafty and Ragheb, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

The study utilised the Self -Determination Theory (SDT) of motivation to understand the rapid transformation and adaptation of employees to the COVID-19 crisis. The SDT is a motivational theory of personality, development and social processes that looks at how social contexts and individual differences facilitate different types of motivation, especially self-directed motivation and organised motivation and in turn predict learning, performance, experience and psychological health (Ryan and Deci, 2000). The theory proposes that all human beings have three basic psychological needs, namely the need for competence, autonomy and relatedness. This means workers, apart from fulfilling their need for achievement, also need to strike a balance between work and social life. The satisfaction of the mentioned needs is essential for the efficient and effective functioning of the body toward achieving personal and organisational goals. This is because the satisfaction of these basic needs promotes maximum motivational characteristics and states of autonomous motivation and intrinsic aspirations, which facilitate psychological health and effective engagement with the world.

The use of the SDT for this study was essential because it enabled the researchers to understand how employees survived mentally during and after the pandemic. The theory attributes survival in a crisis to self-determination and discretion to make individual development choices.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE CONCEPT OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE

The concept of the WLB emerged as early as the 1970s when employees endeavoured to strike a balance between career, family and other areas of their lives. This concept also gave birth to telecommuting where employees

performed their work duties in different locations with the aid of technology. Telecommuting replaced work-related travelling and since the early 1970s, the term has gained popularity, especially in developed nations (Niles, 1997). Chung (2018) posits that the concept of telework gave birth to the notion of Working from Home (WFH).

DEFINITION: WORK-LIFE BALANCE

According to Cox (2018), WLB refers to how an employee finds the equilibrium point between different work roles and various aspects of life to achieve wellness. The WLB, therefore, is a state where an employee enjoys maximum happiness, self-fulfilment and job satisfaction. Jyothi and Jyothi (2012) posit that it is achieving a balance between employees' family or personal life and work lives.

The work-life balance phenomenon is premised on the notion that a balance must be struck between one's work and social life for self-fulfilment. Jyothi and Jyothi (*ibid.*) argue that the WLB has a negative or positive effect on an employee's performance. This means an imbalance between work and personal life can negatively affect productivity levels and also decrease an individual's performance (Konrad and Mangel, 2000) since employees are often stressed when they fail to meet company goals and family roles.

WORK STRESS

According to Kim *et al.* (2019), work stress refers to a condition that affects the emotions and cognitive processes of employees at the workplace. Workplace stress is, therefore, the gap between various job demands and available resources. If resources are short in supply, workers are likely to be negative and stressed. Consequently, workplace stress may cause role ambiguity, overwork, role conflict and time pressure during working from home, which can reduce job

satisfaction (*ibid.*). Work stress is another key predictor that affects and has a significant effect on job satisfaction (Hsu *et al.* 2019).

BENEFITS OF WORKING FROM HOME WFH IN THE POST-PANDEMIC PERIOD

Research studies conducted in the United States unmasked that 37% of private sector jobs could be completed at home during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dingel and Neiman, 2020). Working from home in this country was possible for those offering financial services, professional mastery, business management and scientific services. However, some jobs in other sectors like health care, farming and hospitality suffered immensely since they could not be done at home. Although there has been a significant increase in WFH, academics still weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the concept.

Empirical evidence suggests that WFH has many advantages for companies in the private sector because it results in increased job performance since employees are always on their jobs around the clock regardless of location, (Vega *et al.*, 2015). It also results in improved job satisfaction since WFH can support the WLB positively. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity for the co-existence of both private and public sectors in Zimbabwe to work harmoniously by adapting flexible work arrangements.

Furthermore, WFH is advantageous because it positively impacts the WLB (Wessels *et al.*, 2019). Working from home has been viewed as a way of improving an employee's WLB because it accords employees an opportunity to take care of their family members (Ammons and

Markham, 2004). There are many advantages and drawbacks associated with working from home, as such Human Resources Departments must manage this arrangement properly for tangible benefits.

Moreover, Kazekami (2020) stipulates that WFH is significant to an employee's working life because it enhances the quality and competencies of employees. It also increases employee happiness and openness to creativity will lead to innovation. Research to date has shown that teleworking increases job performance, lessens work family imbalance, reduces stress levels and lessens turnover intentions (Contreras *et al.*, 2020; Kossek *et al.*, 2006; Fonner and Roloff 2010; Anderson *et al.*, 2015). However, this benefit can be proven if employees can obtain managerial support, peer support and technological support. Working from home support helps to reduce any potential negative impacts arising from social isolation and mitigates work-family and work-life balance conflict (Contreras *et al.*, 2020).

In addition, remote working in the private sector post-pandemic period is essential because it provides better flexible work arrangements in this busy economy. WFH during the post-pandemic period enabled workers to deal with family matters since work can be done from any location. This also helps to strengthen the family bond and allows employees to harmonise the freedom of time management and their personal and job duties (Coenen and Kok, 2014). Furthermore, remote working during the COVID-19 period allowed workers to work without immediate supervision as compared to a formal workplace, thereby decreasing employee stress levels. Moreover, it eliminated the individual and organisational burden of absenteeism.

Remote working also led to the digitalisation of the workplace in private sector companies. Legner *et al.* (2017) defined digitalisation as a socio-technical, developing process that occurs at the individual, organisational, societal and global levels in all sectors. Digitalisation uses tools to convert analogue information into digital information. In Zimbabwe, since the beginning of the pandemic, the private sector witnessed a quick movement of digitalisation and the adoption of digital technologies. As a result, more employees migrated to work from home. However, the WHO (2020) cites that digitalisation is not evenly spread across the globe, with less developed nations struggling with the lack of broadband, internet connection and available information and communications technology (ICT) tools to enable teleworking. For example, only a quarter of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa has access to the internet (Gómez-Jordana Moya, 2020). The situation is further worsened by regions with regular power cuts and weak internet services.

The post-COVID-19 pandemic period is likely to be characterised by increased productivity in the private sector. Indeed, the mentioned benefits lead to greater employee loyalty and commitment to the organisation, job satisfaction, and improved work-life balance and well-being. WFH has benefits for both employers and employees. Delanoetje and Verbruggen (2020) posit that telework can reduce turnover rate and increase employees' productivity, job engagement and job performance.

CHALLENGES OF WORKING FROM HOME

Several challenges are likely to be faced by Zimbabwean private sector employees post-pandemic as far as the WLB is concerned. Purwanto *et al.* (2020), highlighted that the post-pandemic period is likely to be marred by increased social isolation, work and family distractions and employees shouldering the

costs associated with WFH. They further point out that employees may bear additional costs like internet and electricity costs. Furthermore, Collins and Moschler (2009) argue that WFH increases employee alienation and isolation from colleagues due to increased social distancing measures, thus straining the relationship between co-workers.

On the other hand, WFH is likely to cause performance management challenges for Human Resources Management Departments. Most managers cited that it is often difficult to manage the performance of someone who is working from home, hence managers showed great concern for reduced production levels (Purwanto *et al.*, 2020).

Another challenge posed by WFH is employees' lack of concentration due to home disturbances and distractions. Employees might be distracted by the presence of young children or family members and noisy environments without proper office tools while working at home (Kazekami, 2020). It is therefore imperative that Human Resources Departments draw clear demarcation boundaries between work and family if WFH is to yield tangible benefits.

Another challenge that is likely to emerge as a result of WFH is the failure of employees to collaborate and work together for the achievement of organisational objectives (*ibid.*). This is further worsened by the fact that innovation and creativity are stifled due to a lack of teamwork. Furthermore, synchronous communication decreases, making it difficult for workers to exchange and share information.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND WORKING FROM HOME IN ZIMBABWE

Many places have been adopting different means to deal with and defend themselves against the COVID-19 pandemic and Zimbabwe is no exception. Research findings indicate that Zimbabwe was among the first African countries to be affected by the pandemic. However, quick measures were put in place to contain the virus. The private sector, however, suffered immensely as a result of the imposed lockdowns. Some companies closed, whilst others struggled to meet their expenditures and failed to pay their employees on time. In trying to alleviate the situation, some companies ended up rationalising their staff and restructuring to a lean organisational structure. Marawanyika (2021) has reported that the Commercial Bank of Zimbabwe (CBZ) instigated voluntary retrenchment due to failure to meet its operational costs. In addition, most private sector employees in Zimbabwe were ill-prepared for the novel coronavirus in terms of resources such as ICT gadgets to enable working from home. Most companies struggled to provide their employees with access to the internet for continued services. Some employees were caught up in lockdown restrictions and failed to access their various places of residence. As a result, this halted most work procedures in the private sector.

Working from home during the COVID-induced lockdown for most private employees in Zimbabwe was quite challenging. Irrespective of whether they were living on their own or with family, employees had to get involved in some household chores. During the lockdown, coordinating between work and family demands was a difficult task for every employed individual. According to the Boundary Theory, employees create and maintain physical, temporal and psychological boundaries around them to enable them to simplify their functioning in the world around them (Allen *et al.*, 2014). Formation of such

boundaries enabled employees to minimise the interference of work and non-work life with each other. Drawing on the Boundary Theory, it is posited that while working from home during the lockdown, employees struggled to create and maintain temporal, physical and psychological boundaries and consequently maintain the WLB.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research utilised the qualitative research methodology approach. The use of a qualitative research approach was significant because it allowed the researcher to get an in-depth analysis of employees' feelings and perceptions about the post-COVID-19 period and the WLB. Data was collected using primary and secondary data collection tools. Online questionnaires were used to collect primary data. Secondary data obtained from academic articles and journals complemented the primary data. Further, data was collected from the private sector employees in Zimbabwe who were working from home during the COVID-19-induced countrywide lockdown.

RESULTS

The study revealed that COVID-19 gave birth to the rise of online collaborations and virtual meetings. The study participants hinted at the maximum benefits derived from online collaborations. For instance, one participant emphasized that —online virtual meetings are more structured and with clear agendas which allowed participants from geographically dispersed teams to work together closely, thereby improving employee cohesion.¶

In addition, some participants emphasized that such collaborations with the outside world were also made easier since online platforms bring users in different locations closer together. The study revealed that the Human Resources

Management (HRM) Departments are crucial for the physical and mental health and well-being of employees since a healthy employee is a productive human being who contributes significantly to the achievement of organisational goals. It further revealed that most private sector employees did not provide any psychological or mental health support for their employees. However, this is in contrast with the findings were done by Cheng *et al.* (2022) whose findings revealed that traumatic events such as a pandemic affect an employee's mental health. His findings suggested that interventions are necessary and may be carried out to minimise the pandemic's negative psychological consequences. Other studies also show that COVID-19 prompted various psychological phenomena such as moral harm, extreme anxiety, fear of disease, depression and acute stress (Gibson and Janikova, 2021; Phillips and Kucera, 2021; Lewis and Zauskova, 2021).

The research revealed that the WLB can be enhanced by working from home. Similarly, Grant *et al.* (2013) revealed that e-working would improve the WLB and e-workers found it possible to combine work life and non-work life. Furthermore, the collapse of work-life boundaries and the fear of being under surveillance from employers, have all led to people working harder for longer (Ajith & Patil, 2003).

The research also unmasked that most employees went through severe stress during the COVID-19 period while balancing their work and personal life and this influenced their performance, not only in their workplaces but on the domestic front as well. The struggle to juggle work and family responsibilities emerged as one of the sources of emotional exhaustion experienced by employees during the COVID19-induced nationwide lockdown. This is likely to persist in the postcode era as employees try to cover their backlogs. Hence there's need for

employees to balance their gender roles and working life. This is affirmed by Bloom *et al.* (2015) who learned that job satisfaction increased by working from home.

Furthermore, the researchers discovered that 75% of employees in the private sector in Zimbabwe did not have access to an internet connection while others did not have funds to purchase data which is expensive in the country. Furthermore, the study revealed that the few that had internet access lacked the basic training and skills required to operate and use virtual platforms like Google classrooms, Zoom and Google Meet to successfully deliver their different work mandate. The study also revealed that demographic factors like age and marital status impact the WLB. Young employees supported the idea of working from home, whereas older employees preferred to be in a familiar work environment. These findings are similar to Sharma & Bajpai's (2013) findings that age, marital status and several dependants have a high impact on the WLB. Further, most respondents highlighted that they are likely to face financial difficulties in the private sector as opposed to their counterparts in the public sector. This was attributed to the fact that the private sector suffered a great downturn due to the recession induced by the pandemic.

CONCLUSION AND OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The post-pandemic recovery period in the Zimbabwean private sector, must address the interruptions in labour markets, interruptions that have given rise to numerous experimentations with remote work, flexible work arrangements and new relationships to centralised working environments. Moreover, achieving a WLB for private sector companies in the post-COVID period is significant for mental and physical health and long-term economic success. Flexible work arrangements are a new work paradigm that governments and businesses should embrace to promote business continuity. In developed continents such as the

European Union, member states are being advised to implement policies that support the WLB in the post pandemic period.

The private sector must develop and review its crisis management policy. More funds must be devoted towards this fund in preparation for future occurrences. The policy must be the blueprint to be used in future. It is important to note that no situations are the same and do not require the same responses, but it is essential to have guidelines that ensure continuity of work even in the face of catastrophic disasters. Employers need to come up with new ways of monitoring performance and managing productivity when employees work from home. Also, new ways of managing the WLB must be devised.

According to Hamouche (2020), training plays a significant role in a period of crisis, such as a pandemic. Training and education help to develop the needed skills for employees, increase COVID-19 awareness, reduce the risk of the virus spreading and prevent mental health issues. Furthermore, training helps to support employees in the process of transition toward remote working. In reality, not all employees have the proper digital skills to cope with these changes generated by the use of ICT, hence the need to train them on the utilisation of ICTs. Employees need to be trained in ICT because this helps with the facilitation of their work and communication with their manager and peers while they are away from their workplace (Greer & Payne, 2014).

The study further recommends that the private sector must develop, design and implement creative methods of the WLB to ensure their survival. Communication strategies that are correlated to employee participation, involvement and continuous communication with employees virtually must be developed. Improved communication and availability of ICT tools will go a long

way in modernising the workplace environment and creating an ideal environment for work to be done at home.

PROMOTING THE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELL-BEING OF EMPLOYEES COVID-19 ushered in the development of new routines like isolation and quarantine. These developments increased the employees' anxiety levels, fears, stress and psychological problems. So the study recommends that HRM must develop strategies that improve the physical and mental health of employees. An employee's mental wellbeing and physical health are the cornerstone of effective performance, service quality and employee motivation which help to achieve the organisation's mission and productivity and increased customer satisfaction, sales and profitability.

- The right time to resort to other working alternatives for the continuity of business operations in these uncertain times.
- The study proposes the implementation of effective HRM policies like staff rationalisation and restructuring to reduce staff costs and ensure employees contribute meaningfully to the achievement of organisational goals.
- There is need for government funding for private sectors to help combat calamities that may hinder their operations for continued survival. A fund can be set up to deal with a crisis such as the one posed by COVID-19.

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