

EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION IN CRISIS SITUATIONS: THE CASE OF A SELECTED ORGANIZATION IN THE FOOD AND RETAIL SECTOR IN CAPE TOWN

Nteboheng Patricia Mefi, Walter Sisulu University
Samson Nambei Asoba, Walter Sisulu University

ABSTRACT

This study considered employee motivation in crisis situations with specific reference to the Covid-19 pandemic. A case study approach was adopted to investigate the employee motivation techniques implemented by a selected organization to ensure continued productivity. The case organization was selected following the convenience sampling technique and data was collected through telephone interviews with the human resource manager of the organization. Telephone interviews were appropriate following the restrictions implemented to prevent the spread of the virus. The results of the study indicate that the crisis situation required an adaptation of historical or old employee motivation techniques in order to suit the crisis situation. Employee motivation strategies such as employee recognition and goal setting took a changed direction involving both digitalization and significant decentralization. It was found that structural hierarchies had to be removed to effectively give autonomy to employees and empower them in order to remain productive. Following the evidence gathered in this study, organizations were recommended to be agile and be able to adapt all dimensions of employee productivity during crisis situations.

Keywords: Covid-19, Virus, Employee Motivation Strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Organisational crisis and business disruptions have psychosocial implications on employees as they create uncertainty and tend to signal unexpected changes (Pourron, 2020). Crisis situations in organizations create interruptions and imbalances between organizational expectations and employee behaviors. Whereas, employees may prioritise their health and welfare, organizations may expect productivity. This study considers the management of crisis situations to balance off employees' concerns as well as those of the organization. Azizovic et al. (2015) commented that crisis management involves the appropriate handling of risks and practicing risk aversion as well as realizing continued production in organizations. This study considered the crisis presented by the Covid-19 pandemic and employee motivation given the stress, emotional suffering, uncertainty and fear that was induced by the crisis. The International Labour Organisation [ILO] (2020) observed that the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in frontline workers experiencing burnout due to long working hours, reduced rest hours as well as concern for their safety while those working from home experienced isolation, domestic violence as well as the lack of boundary between workplace and home. As such, there was a challenge to motivate both those who were physically at their workplaces and those who were working from home. There were also fears of losing jobs, unemployment and pay cuts. As a result ordinary

techniques of employee motivation seemed challenged. This study explored the strategies for employee motivation in crisis situations that were applied by a selected organization in the food retail sector in Cape Town. The food retail sector was considered an essential service and employees in the sector worked throughout the lockdown and other restrictions that were implemented by government. Given the above, the objective of the study was to explore how employers can motivate employees in crisis situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The study question was: What are the employee motivation techniques relevant to crisis situations such as those presented by the Covid-19 pandemic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Motivation is a constructs that has received significant consideration in organizational psychology and industrial behavior studies (Gagne et al., 2010; Robbins et al., 2009). Major theorists (such as Herberg, Locke, McGregor and McClelland) have dominated the literature owing to their significant contributions to the theory and practice of employee motivation. Gagne et al. (2010) recognised that these motivation theories are broadly classified into intrinsic and extrinsic theories. Motivation during crisis situations represents a special niche within motivation studies (Gigauri, 2020). During crisis situations, employees are faced with challenging situations that demand special consideration from normal case situations. Wang and Hutchins (2008) observed that the term 'crisis' attract different definitions from different stakeholders. It is often unexpected and significantly affects organizations both internally and externally and they are triggered by a wide array of events. Gagauri (2020) observed that Covid-19 induced notable internal failures in organizations as it affected both the psychological and the physical aspects of people in organizations. The human dimension of the crisis included the inducement of stress, uncertainty, fear and cognitive limitations among employees in organizations (Caligiuri et al., 2020). The human dimension of a crisis can be considered from Bandura's (2001) agentic view of the social cognitive theory. Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory explains human psychosocial processes in terms of cognition, behavior and the environment. The theory informs that the relationship between these three elements is reciprocal. It should be noted the Covid-19 crisis presented all these three elements to employees in organizations. Employees in organizations had to respond to the environment presented by the pandemic which included stress, burnout, emotional strain, fear and other negative emotions. These in turn influenced the behavior of most employees. The environment continued to be characterized by information and misinformation which further affected cognition and behavior. Major crisis situations in the form of disease outbreaks, terrorists attacks and natural disasters had affected both the structural or operational side of organizations as well as the human side (Wang & Hutchins, 2008). Responses to the Covid-19 crisis have mainly been the adoption of digital and other electronic systems that comply with business closures and lockdowns (Gazauri, 2020).

The motivation of employees can also be viewed as a cognitive element which can be understood through cognitive processes such as goals within Locke and Latham's (2006) goal setting theory. Motivation is the process that explains an individual's intensity, direction, and persistence of effort toward attaining a goal (Robbins et al., 2009). Jones (1955) cited in Steers & Porter (1991) define motivation as '...how behaviour gets started, is energised, is sustained, is directed, is stopped, and what kind of subjective reaction is present in the organism while all this is going on. Therefore motivation covers how organisationally beneficial behaviour can be started and maintained. Motivation includes the vigour and persistence of action (Atkinson (1964) cited in Steers & Porter, 1991). Goals serve as standards of self-satisfaction with harder

goals demanding higher accomplishment in order to attain self-satisfaction than easy goals (Locke, 1995). Goals are often used within the concept of management by objectives (MBO) which means converting overall organisational goals into specific, measurable, time framed and attainable (SMART) objectives for organisational units and individual members. Since objectives make work meaning and challenging, they can be viewed as intrinsic motivators in Herzberg's two-factor theory. Objectives as motivators are also supported by McClelland's need theory because they are associated with a need to achieve. An employee would be motivated to achieve the set objectives. Furthermore, MBO involves subordinates in the setting of goals, by so doing; the employees would expect to achieve their own objectives. Vroom's theory argues that such expectancy is a source of motivation (Pritchard, 2009). Following these assertions, it can be argued that employee motivation during crisis situations can be viewed from the perspective of the goals of the organisation as well as the goals of the employee. The Covid-19 pandemic created a situation where the goals of individuals were mainly those of survival and health while organisations by nature of their profit motive pursued sustainability and viability during the crisis. Bandura' (2001) agentic perspective of the social cognitive theory argues that humans in crisis situations can be viewed as agents of themselves as well as as agency of their organisations and their behaviour can be assessed from intentionality and forethought, self-regulation by self-reactive influence, and self-reflectiveness about one's capabilities. In the same way the intentionality of organizations in crisis situations together with that of the employees are at stake in crisis situations. Employees are likely to self-regulate and self-reflect on the crisis and their behaviour and that of the organization. From the above discussion, it appears that motivation during crisis situations should serious consider the objectives of employees and moderate them with those of the organization. It is, therefore important to consider how organizations ensure a balance between their desires and those of employees so that they remain motivated (Pritchard, 1995).

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Organisations in crisis usually face the challenge of balancing certain organizational objectives and employee objectives of safety and protection during the crisis. As such the nature and techniques of motivation becomes a challenge. In an analysis of the organizational responses to Hurricane Katrina and Rita in the Gulf Coast (Wang & Hutchins, 2008) observed that employee motivation and development in times of crisis has received little attention in research. The Covid-19 pandemic created a crisis involving the upkeep of employee health and wellness and the organizational desire to maintain minimum performance levels. Employers were faced with the challenge of motivating their employees to perform both physically and virtually. Furthermore, the adoption of remote and teleworking posed further challenges on how to motivate employees working from home given the novelty of the situation (Lunenburg, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

The study followed the qualitative research design which was based on telephone interviews with the HR manager of an organization selected in Cape Town. Convenience and purposive sampling techniques were used to select the relevant organization. Convenience sampling is based on the easy with which a research can be feasibly undertaken while purposive sampling ensures that the study addresses its objectives. The chosen organization was such that

it was willing and consented to participate in the study and it had been classified as an essential service such that it had to remain operational during the lockdown periods. The choice to rely on interviews to collect data was also in line with the restriction protocols and health guidelines provided by the government of South Africa to tame the spread of the coronavirus. Two lunchtime telephone interviews of one hour duration were held with the HR manager of the food retail outlet. The aim of the first interview was to: establish the structural changes to the nature of work that were implemented to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic (Scarborough, 2009). On the other hand, the second interview was set to: establish the employee motivation strategies that were implemented to maintain optimum employee performance during the crisis. The interviews were based on an interview guide who was developed based on the literature and the study objectives. The interview guide was based on open ended questions which were broad and allowed the research to provide as much information as possible including revealing in depth contextual factors. The interview guide for the first telephone interview was based on the question: What structural changes have you implemented at the workplace to ensure continuity productivity during the Covid-19 period while that for the second interview was: What employee motivation techniques have you implemented at the workplace to maintain employee productivity during the Covid-19 period Aquinas (2006).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The selected organization implemented various strategies to cope and adapt with the crisis. In the first telephone interview held with the HR manager of the organization, it was indicated that the structural changes to the nature of work which are shown in Table 1 were adopted to respond to the crisis.

Structural change to the nature of work		Motivational techniques implemented to support structural change	
Structural change 1: We reduced the number of employees physically reporting to work by 50% across all departments. The other employees reported to work electronically via an application on our website at 0900 hrs and at 0930 departmental managers were required to allocate electronic based work for the employees who had reported for work electronically. The work included looking for clients online or being a brand ambassador for the organization on social media platforms.	Coding	Managers kept a personalized to communication and constantly reached out to their subordinates to provide support	Coding
	Increasing flexibility		Motivation through social support
	Work re-alignment		Adaptable motivation
Structural change 2: A grievance, feedback and communication platform between top management and floor level employees was established. Hierarchies were cut and any issue could be brought directly to the attention of top management through the electronic platforms	Blended work structure	Everyone was involved in the matters affecting the organization and timely handling of matters by cutting old hierarchies and old procedures.	Shared involvement
	Flattening the organizational structure		
Structural change 3: the organization adopted crisis response merchandise. We adopted new lines of products that were responsive to the needs of the crisis for example we started selling face masks, protective clothing and		All employees of the organization were provided with free crisis response paraphernalia and benefit packages.	Crisis aversion benefits

sanitisers which used to be out of how merchandise			
Structure change 4: we changed our performance target and asked employees to start setting their own targets. Employees were given greater autonomy to their work, to set their own objectives and seek to achieve them in view of the crisis	Management through own-set goals.	Goal setting mover from being determined by the supervisor and the employee to being set by the employee alone.	Consultative goal setting
Structure change 5: Tasks were organized based on teams. Work which used to be done by one person was modified to ensure that it is performed by a team or a group. Group leaders were empowered to communicate directly to top management on the needs and welfare of each group	Decentralization of work to empower the worker	Autonomy and decision making was decentralised	empowerment
Structure 6: All work was linked to the organization intra-website and other Microsoft applications and matter of concern had to be immediately place on the intra-website to ensure that it is attended.	Digitalization of all work directly and indirectly	Promoting employee engagement and satisfaction. Ensuring employee safety and healthy is promoted	Concern for employee welfare
Structure 7: Short work days were employed and employees were required to just meet their targets and go back home		Employees' achievements were posted daily on the intra website	Employee rewards

The study used methods of qualitative data analysis related to theoretical sampling and constant comparison (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Glaser and Strass's (1967) work on grounded theory proposed the use of theoretical sampling methods to constantly select theoretical building relevant constructs from a data set. Kolb (2012) explains that constant comparison is a method of data analysis that involves iterative data reduction through coding and categorizing the data for further coding and grouping. In this study in-vivo codes were first developed from the data set before the codes were grouped and further refined to give meaning (Pritchard, 2009).

There were indications from the interviews that the crisis situation created uncertainty, resulting in two-pronged work arrangements involving both old systems and new systems. Such blended work structure enabled the organization to change completely if it becomes necessary and also to revert to old methods if the situation stabilized. This led to a fragmented workforce composed of tele-workers and physical workers. Adaptable motivation techniques involving strong reliance on communication and social links to support employees were adopted (Závadský, 2015).

The use of goals which was implemented was in line with the literature. Goals and objectives affect performance by affecting the direction, the degree of effort exerted and the persistence of action over time. Goals serve as standards of self-satisfaction with harder goals demanding higher accomplishment in order to attain self-satisfaction than easy goals (Locke, 1995). It appears however that the Covid-19 crisis required the personal will of the employee to achieve them hence employees were required to set their own goals. Objectives as motivators are also supported by McClelland's need theory because they are associated with a need to achieve. An employee would be motivated to achieve the set objectives. Furthermore, management by objectives involves subordinates in the setting of goals, by so doing; the employees would expect to achieve their own objectives. Vroom's theory argues that such expectancy is a source of motivation. The study also found that the organisation resorted to employee recognition

electronically. In the Cutting Edge Public Relations Forum, Harrison (2012) stated that employee recognition is the timely, informal or formal acknowledgement of a person's or team's behaviour, effort or business result that support the organisation's goals and values and which has clearly been beyond normal expectations. Formal employee recognition programs include; outstanding employee awards, productivity/production/quality awards, employee suggestion awards, customer service awards, sales target awards, group and teal awards long service awards, attendance and safety awards and recognition for departing employees. Informal ways include, just 'a thank you,' or casual praise. It was also noted that employee involvement in decision making became more important and it was decentralised to the employees. The concept of employee involvement means the participative use of the entire capacity of employees to increase their commitment to organisational objectives (Robbins et al., 2009). Employee involvement programmes taps on the full potential of employees by involving them in decision making, increasing their autonomy and increasing their control over their own work. Examples of employee involvement programs are: representative or participative management, employee stock ownership, work councils, board representation and quality circles (Robbins et al, 2009).

The software for qualitative data analysis, Atlas.ti, was used to depict relationships between the final codes that emerged in this study. The output from this analysis was a code chart as shown in Figure 1. Figure 1 provides a summary of the motivation techniques for crisis situations that were found in this study.

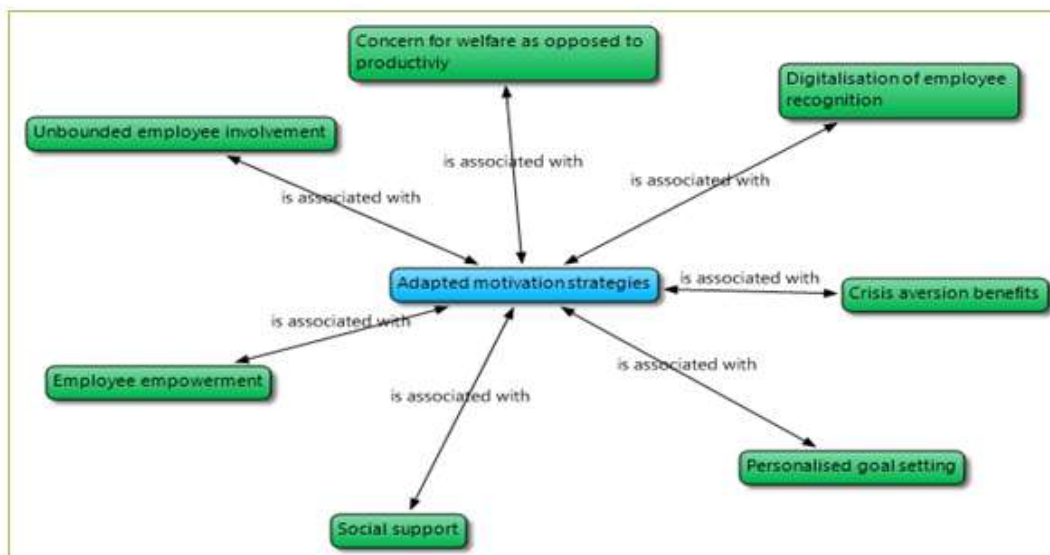


FIGURE 1
ADAPTED EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION STRATEGIES IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

CONCLUSION

The results of this study have shown that crisis situations have significant implications on both the structural organization of work as well as on the human element. Employee motivation therefore had to fit the changes in the nature of work presented by the organizational crisis. In other words, organizations should practice adapted employee motivation techniques. In respect of the Covid-19, it was found that there was need to adapt both work and motivation techniques to the digital imperatives induced by the pandemic. As such techniques such as digital employee

recognition and involvement as well as goal setting were implemented. There was also need to ensure the empowerment of the employees as well as the provision of social support. The Covid-19 pandemic also called for the removal of organizational hierarchies to ensure direct communication between the employees and top management. This study has been essential in attending to the research niche related to motivational techniques for crisis situations. The literature on motivation has often focused on normal situations and context but this study has addressed a key research agenda of crisis situations. It should be noted that the frequency of crises that affect organizations seems to have been increasing over the years. Therefore this study makes essential contribution and inspires further studies. Future studies can adopt other methodologies such as surveys and structural modelling to analysis motivation in crisis situations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The evidence gathered in this study suggests that organizations should improve their capacity to adapt to crisis situations. It is recommended that organizations should have a crisis management procedure that considers employee motivation. Employee motivation cannot be ignored in crisis situations and adaptability mechanisms should be strengthened to avoid collapse of organizations or losing talent.

REFERENCES

- Aquinas, P.G. (2006). *Organisation Behaviour: Concepts, Realities, Applications and challenges*. Delhi: Excel Books.
- Azizovic, E., Dzogovic, A., & Azizovic, M., (2015). Leadership and motivation in crisis situations.
- Bandura, A., (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52(1), 1-26.
- Caligiuri, P., De Cieri, H., Minbaeva, D., Verbeke, A., & Zimmermann, A. (2020). International HRM insights for navigating the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications for future research and practice. *Journal of International Business Studies*. 51, 697–713.
- Gagne, M., Forest, J., Gilbert, M.H., Aubé, C., Morin, E., & Malorni, A. (2010). The Motivation at Work Scale: Validation Evidence in Two Languages. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 70(4), 628–646.
- Gigauri, I. (2020). Effects of Covid-19 on Human Resource Management from the Perspective of Digitalization and Work-life-balance. *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Economy*, 4(31), 1-10.
- Kolb, S. (2007). Grounded Theory and the Constant Comparative Method: Valid Research Strategies for Educators. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 3(1), 83-86.
- Locke, E.A., & Latham, G.P., (2006). New directions in goal-setting theory. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 15(5), 265-268.
- Lunenburg, F.C., (2011). Goal-setting theory of motivation. *International Journal of Management, Business, and Administration*, 15(1), 1-6.
- Locke, E. (1995). Motivation through conscious goal setting. *Applied and Preventive Psychology*, 5,117 – 124.
- Locke, E.A., & Latham, G.P. (2006). New Directions in Goal Setting Theory. *Association for Psychology Science*, 15(5). 265-268.
- Leech, N.L., & Onwuegbuzie, A.J. (2007). An Array of Qualitative Data Analysis Tools: A Call for Data Analysis Triangulation. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 22(4), 557–584.
- Pritchard, R.D., Roth, P.L., Jones, S.D., Galgay, P.J., & Watson, M.D. (1995). Designing a Goal Setting system to enhance Performance: A Practical Guide. In Shaw, D.G., Schneir, C.E., Beatty, R. W. & Baird, L. S.(eds). (1995). *The Performance Management and appraisal Sourcebook*. Massachusetts: human Resource Development Press.
- Pourron, A. (2020). Why Is Employee Motivation So Important In Crisis Situations? International Labour Organisation. 2020. *Managing work-related psychosocial risks during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Geneva: ILO
- Robbins, S.P., Judge, T.A., Odendaal, A., & Roodt, G. (2009). *Organisational behaviour; Global and Southern African Perspectives*. Cape Town: Pearson Education South Africa.

- Scarborough, M. (2009). The rewards of recognition: six strategies for successful employee programs, *18* (1), 24-27.
- Wang, J., & Hutchins, H.M. (2008). What Does HRD Know About Organizational Crisis Management? Not Enough! Read on. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, *10*(3), 299-309.
- Závadský, J., Hitka, M., & Potkány, M., (2015). Changes of employee motivation of Slovak enterprises due to global economic crisis.