



Employee Well-Being in the Face of a Pandemic: Organizational and Managerial Responses to COVID-19

Cort W. Rudolph and Hannes Zacher

A White Paper prepared by the Visibility Committee of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology.
440 E Poe Rd, Suite 101 Bowling Green, OH 43402

The work contained herein was funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Table of Contents

Authors.....	1
Abstract	2
Introduction.....	2
Implications for Practice	3
Conclusion	7
References	8

Authors



Cort W. Rudolph
Saint Louis University

Cort W. Rudolph is an associate professor of industrial and organizational psychology at Saint Louis University. He received a BA from DePaul University, and a MA and PhD from Wayne State University. Cort's research focuses on a variety of issues related to the aging workforce, including applications of lifespan development theories, well-being and worklongevity, and ageism/generationalism. He also has interests in statistical and methodological advancements, particularly in meta-analysis, and emerging topics in open science practices. Cort is a consulting editor for *Work, Aging and Retirement*, and he serves on the editorial review boards of the several journals.



Hannes Zacher
Leipzig University

Hannes Zacher is a professor of work and organizational Psychology at the Institute of Psychology–Wilhelm Wundt, Leipzig University (Germany). He earned his PhD from the University of Giessen and subsequently worked in academic positions in Australia and the Netherlands. In his research program, he investigates aging at work and career development, occupational health and well-being, as well as proactive and adaptive employee behavior. Across these research agendas, he employs multiple methodologies, including longitudinal surveys, experience sampling studies, and experiments. His research is well supported through competitive grants and industry funding.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically altered the way in which work is done. Maintaining a healthy workforce and ensuring employee well-being in the face of the pandemic is important for long-term organizational success. In this white paper, we adopt a self-determination theory perspective to address organizational and managerial responses to COVID-19 that are effective at maintaining employee well-being by supporting employee competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Effective organizational responses may include alternatives to layoffs, providing tangible benefits, and implementing safe and motivating work conditions. Likewise, managers should consider goal setting, affording job control, and creating trust through effective communication.

Keywords: COVID-19; pandemic; work; well-being; organizational policy; management strategies; self-determination theory

Introduction

Since it was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization in March of 2020, COVID-19 has remarkably impacted the ways in which work is done, with profound implications for organizations and their members. The changes that the pandemic has imposed will alter the landscape of work into the foreseeable future and beyond. In this white paper, we discuss organizational and managerial responses to the pandemic that bolster the well-being of employees. Borrowing from self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012), we offer advice for organizational policies and practices as well as actionable strategies that managers can implement, even with limited resources, to ensure the well-being of their employees.

Well-being is a multifaceted concept that refers to physical, mental, and social aspects of functioning. Thus, it is important to recognize that well-being is not “one thing” and that it encompasses both physical and mental health, and the perceived quality of social relationships—each of which are of great importance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although important now, supporting the well-being of employees also has a long-term benefit to organizations. Research has suggested that employee well-being is tied to valued organizational outcomes such as productivity (Harter et al., 2002). Organizations that take proactive steps now to maintain a healthy workforce will be better equipped once the pandemic subsides and work returns to a more “normal” structure; they may also be better prepared to navigate future crises.

Background

A large proportion of the global workforce has been disrupted in some way by the COVID-19 pandemic. The International Labor Organization estimates that, since April 2020, four out of five people (i.e., 3.3 billion workers; 81% of the global workforce) have been affected by either partial or full workplace closures (ILO, 2020). Researchers in the organizational sciences have so far noted a number of ways in which work has changed and will continue to change as a result of the pandemic (e.g., Kniffin et al., 2020; Rudolph et al., 2020a). Given wide variability in local, state, and national responses, it is particularly important for organizations to develop effective responses to the pandemic to support their workers. In many ways, supporting the workforce during this pandemic is both a public health and an economic imperative.

Implications for Practice

People are an organization’s most important asset, and it is especially important for organizations to design and implement policies that support their employees during this time of crisis. Such policies should be designed to directly benefit individuals and not simply to shift the burden of well-being maintenance from the organization to the individual. Thus, the focus of organizational intervention should be on person-centered initiatives that provide tangible benefits to individuals (e.g., health-care, family care, hazard pay, paid sick leave; see Agarwal & Sommers, 2020) or on changing organizational structures, processes, and work configurations (e.g., through work design). Regardless of their form, organizational policies should be tailored to “who needs it most,” with an explicit recognition that (a) “one size fits all” strategies are unlikely to be optimally effective, and (b) the pandemic is disproportionately affecting women, minorities, and caregivers (Atkinson & Richter, 2020). Likewise, through the formal enactment of organizational policies and through various informal actions, managers play an important role in promoting the health and well-being of their employees (Rudolph et al., 2020b).

Thus, the focus of organizational intervention should be on person-centered initiatives that provide tangible benefits to individuals



Practical Recommendations Based Upon Self-Determination Theory

There are a number of practical recommendations that can be adopted by organizations and managers for ensuring employee well-being during these challenging times (see Table 1 and Figure 1). To frame these recommendations, we borrow from self-determination theory, which is a metatheoretical model of motivation that specifies various conditions that are amenable to high levels of employee well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Conditions that support employees’ fulfillment of three psychological needs—competence, relatedness, and autonomy—are especially important for well-being at work. Moreover, the degree to which any of these three psychological needs is unsupported has a potentially detrimental influence upon well-being. In various respects, employment can serve to satisfy these basic needs, and maintaining employment is likewise important to well-being. Next, we explore various organizational and managerial responses to COVID-19 that can support these needs with the goal of bolstering employee well-being.

Table 1
Examples of Organizational and Managerial Responses to COVID-19

SDT needs	Organizational responses	Managerial responses
Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take steps to reduce job insecurity Consider alternatives to layoffs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participate in goal setting and (re)evaluation Consider work (re)design, especially increasing task variety
Relatedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create safe return-to-work conditions Consider flexible/hybrid work models 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Show empathy and increase feelings of belonging Set expectations for the management of work/non-work roles
Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balance high workloads and encourage breaks Encourage open discussions of well-being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help employees enact coping strategies Develop trust through effective communication

Note: SDT = Self-determination theory

Competence

Need for competence can be satisfied via feeling a sense of mastery and effectiveness in one's activities. Work variously satisfies the need for competence through providing structure and challenges, as well as opportunities for people to attain their goals; it enhances competence because it offers an environment wherein people can interact proficiently and effectively toward common objectives. Although increasing employees' sense of competence is important for well-being, this can be challenging in the face of growing job insecurity stemming from economic uncertainty. Job insecurity is associated with lower well-being, and job loss is a risk factor for various health concerns (e.g., substance abuse). The negative well-being implications of job loss are further exacerbated by the loss of sponsored benefits that may be tied to employment. To this end, as of June 2020, as many as 7.7 million U.S. workers had lost jobs with employer sponsored insurance, which likewise covered 6.9 million dependents (i.e., totaling 14.6 million affected individuals; Fronstin & Woodbury, 2020). In the longer term, the effects of job insecurity can also manifest in scarring effects passed on to the "next generation" from parents to their children, especially among lower income working adults and their families who have been hardest hit by the pandemic. Thus, maintaining stable employment and providing employees with a sense of job security are particularly important concerns for organizations now and moving forward (Malinen et al., 2020).

Given the economic and public health consequences of the pandemic, organizations may consider alternative means, other than layoffs, to help maintain employee's sense of competence and support their well-being (e.g., partial pay/furloughs). During the pandemic, furloughed workers—especially those in already precarious jobs with high-levels of job insecurity—saw less dramatic declines in mental well-being than nonfurloughed employees (Smith et al., 2020). Moreover, layoffs may have unintended consequences on the retained workforce, for example, the well-being of "survivors" of layoffs may be negatively affected.

For many organizations, the pandemic has greatly slowed the pace of work. Thus, it is important for managers to help employees maintain a sense of competence by guiding them toward realistic performance goals. Managers

Figure 1
Infographic of Self-Determination Theory-Informed Responses to COVID-19



can help bolster employees' sense of competence by helping them set specific, obtainable, and meaningful goals, and providing clear feedback and expectations for their performance. Research on active coping strategies from the lifespan development literature offers that a set of strategies (i.e., selectively (re)prioritizing goals, optimizing available resources to obtain such goals, and compensating for lost resources) can be especially helpful for maintaining high levels of well-being and functioning, including work performance (Moghimi et al., 2017) in the face of challenges. Thus, managers should help employees "rethink" their most important performance goals, take stock of available resources or seek new resources for obtaining such goals, and develop the means of making up for lost resources. At the same time, it is important to encourage employees to maintain a positive focus on future occupational opportunities, which is especially important for employee well-being and performance outcomes (Rudolph et al., 2018). Competence can also be engendered through increasing task variety, and managers should consider how the scope of work offered to their employees can be (reasonably) broadened. To this end, Shockley et al. (2020) find that increased task variety is associated with higher levels of work performance during the pandemic.

Relatedness

Need for relatedness can be satisfied through feelings of connectedness and belonging, which are often experienced within the social context of the workplace. As organizations contemplate returning to in-office work, they should consider innovative ways of doing so while maintaining social distancing and virus-safe working conditions, and ensuring that employees' need for relatedness is satisfied. For example, office-remote rotation systems entail that a small group of employees work in the office whereas the majority of employees work remotely; the "remote" and "office" groups rotate work locations, taking turns on a daily or weekly basis (Mauras et al., 2020). As conditions improve and working (at least partially) on-site again becomes a tenable option, organizations should consider carefully which work tasks can be done remotely and which require one's presence in the office. Managers are especially encouraged to consider the introduction of "hybrid work" arrangements, which entail flexible shifting between the office and WFH depending on work requirements and employee preferences (e.g., Wang et al., 2020). Interventions to increase safety knowledge, safety motivation, and safety climate to reduce infections should also be implemented (see Sinclair et al., 2020). Employees' perception that their organization cares for their health and safety has been shown to be a key job resource that is positively linked to well-being during the pandemic (Malinen et al., 2020).

Managers can help support employees' sense of relatedness by exhibiting empathy and conveying to their employees that they are important members of the organization. They can also take steps to foster feelings of belongingness within their workgroups. Arguably, satisfying these social aspects of the need for relatedness has become more challenging during periods of social isolation resulting from physical distancing measures.



Managers are especially encouraged to consider the introduction of "hybrid work" arrangements, which entail flexible shifting between the office and WFH depending on work requirements and employee preferences



Indeed, the primary means of addressing concerns about the spread of the virus within many workplaces has been the implementation of mass work from home (WFH) policies. To this end, Shockley et al. (2020) show that feelings of social isolation increased stress and reduced performance during remote work. To support employee well-being, managers should take steps to increase feelings of relatedness (i.e., connections among employees) through regular check-ins within individuals and during team meetings.

Research also shows that the well-being of employees is positively affected when they are afforded latitude about when (time) and where (place) their work is accomplished (Malinen et al., 2020; Rudolph & Baltes, 2017). Of note, since March 2020, employees have reported working an extra 48.5 minutes/day on average (about 4 more hours per week; DeFilippis et al., 2020). Thus, although flexibility is important, it is also essential to recognize that WFH is a double-edged sword for well-being; although clearly important for mitigating the spread of the virus by limiting in-person contact and in many cases satisfying employees' need for autonomy, it is important to avoid "professional isolation," overwork, and the blurring of work-home boundaries. A related consequence of higher working hours is an increase in the potential for employee burnout and reduced mental well-being due to higher job demands. To encourage employee well-being, it is important for managers to convey realistic expectations about work hours and to model appropriate work hours themselves. Managers should also encourage employees to take breaks, and to specifically schedule "down time" to recover from work.

Autonomy

Need for autonomy can be satisfied by feeling that one is in control and has a sense of choice and freedom in the decisions that they make. To this end, job autonomy, including employees' sense of control over their work and decision latitude, is a core job characteristic that is associated with employee well-being. Importantly, autonomy can be fostered by managers in their day-to-day interactions with employees. Especially for employees who are working from home, managers can convey autonomy by showing them that they have control over when, where, and how their work is done (Malinen et al., 2020). At the same time, there is a delicate balance to be struck here, as autonomy has been associated with higher workloads. Organizations should be aware of the potential negative effects of overwork and encourage paid leave/breaks from work to avoid overwork and burnout and to allow for recovery. Organizations should likewise foster autonomy by empowering their employees to openly discuss and act upon concerns about their well-being (e.g., encouraging regular "well-being" check-ins; discussing strategies for reducing stress) and to recognize employees' extra efforts to accommodate changes due to the pandemic (Malinen et al., 2020).

Managers are also encouraged to help their employees to enact active coping strategies to maintain a sense of control, especially viewing the pandemic as a controllable challenge rather than an uncontrollable threat, which is associated with higher levels of well-being during the pandemic (Zacher & Rudolph, 2020). Moreover, affording employees autonomy requires trust. Indeed, there is a great deal of trust (e.g., between managers and their employees; between employees and their organizations) required to facilitate the mass move



To encourage employee well-being, it is important for managers to convey realistic expectations about work hours and to model appropriate work hours themselves.

to WFH. Shockley et al. (2020) find that supervisor trust facilitated better work–life balance, higher sense of belonging at work, and lower stress levels while working from home. To maintain trust, it is important that managers facilitate open lines of communication. For example, research finds that communication in the form of daily job-related information sharing is an important driver of performance among employees who WFH during the pandemic (Shockley et al., 2020). Effective communication facilitates the development of trust, especially among virtual work groups. It is important for managers to introduce new ways of communicating (e.g., via chat programs, collaborative work environments, videoconferencing) and also to communicate clearly to employees the expectations for using these various channels. Likewise, to convey trust, managers should avoid surveilling/monitoring employee performance through “micro-management.”

Conclusion

Despite rapid progress being made in the development and deployment of vaccines, current projections suggest that COVID-19 will not be eradicated any time soon. However, it is still important to recognize that the virus itself is not a permanent feature. Still, it is likely that organizations and the nature of work, careers, and employment will change profoundly and permanently as a result of the virus. Although many of the specific strategies we outline here pertain to professionals engaged in WFH, our general advice for organizations and managers to focus on employee needs at this time applies broadly to any number of work environments, including those with essential/frontline workers. Major crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, including novel, disruptive, and critical events such as “lockdowns,” offer organizations and individuals manifold opportunities to learn from challenges and setbacks and to acquire metacompetencies such as resilience and adaptability. It is important to embrace these opportunities for learning and adaptation and to build capacity to successfully manage future crises.

It is important to embrace these opportunities for learning and adaptation and to build capacity to successfully manage future crises.

References

- Agarwal, S. D., & Sommers, B. D. (2020). Insurance coverage after job loss—the importance of the ACA during the COVID-associated recession. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 383(17), 1603–1606. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp2023312>
- Atkinson, T., & Richter, A. (2020, November 10). Pandemic disproportionately affects women, minority labor force participation. Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas [Press Release]. Retrieved from <https://www.dallasfed.org/research/economics/2020/1110>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2012). Self-determination theory. In P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of social psychology* (p. 416–436). Sage Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446249215.n21>
- DeFilippis, E., Impink, S. M., Singell, M., Polzer, J. T., & Sadun, R. (2020). Collaborating during coronavirus: The impact of COVID-19 on the nature of work (No. w27612). *National Bureau of Economic Research*. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w27612>
- Fronstin, P., & Woodbury, S. A. (2020, October 7). How many americans have lost jobs with employer health coverage during the pandemic? *Commonwealth Fund*. Retrieved from <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-briefs/2020/oct/how-many-lost-jobs-employer-coverage-pandemic>
- Harter, J. K., Schmidt, F. L., & Hayes, T. L. (2002). Business-unit-level relationship between employee satisfaction, employee engagement, and business outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87(2), 268–279. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.87.2.268>
- ILO (2020, April 7). COVID-19 causes devastating losses in working hours and employment. International Labor Organization [Press release]. Retrieved from http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_740893/lang-en/index.htm
- Kniffin, K. M., Narayanan, J., Anseel, F., Antonakis, J., Ashford, S. P., Bakker, A. B., Bamberger, P., Bapuji, H., Bhawe, D. P., Choi, V. K., Creary, S. J., Demerouti, E., Flynn, F. J., Gelfand, M. J., Greer, L. L., Johns, G., Kesebir, S., Klein, P. G., Lee, S. Y., . . . Vugt, M. v. (2020). COVID-19 and the workplace: Implications, issues, and insights for future research and action. *American Psychologist*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/amp0000716>
- Malinen, S. K., Wong, J. H. K., & Näswall, K. (2020). Effective workplace strategies to support employee well-being during a pandemic. *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations*, 45(2), 1-16. <http://dx.doi.org/10.24135/nzjer.v45i2.24>
- Mauras, S., Cohen-Addad, V., Duboc, G., la Tour, M. D., Frasca, P., Mathieu, C., Opatowski, L., & Viennot, L. (2020). Analysis of mitigation of COVID-19 outbreaks in workplaces and schools by hybrid telecommuting. *medRxiv*. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.11.09.20228007>
- Moghimi, D., Zacher, H., Scheibe, S., & Van Yperen, N. W. (2017). The selection, optimization, and compensation model in the work context: A systematic review and meta-analysis of two decades of research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 38(2), 247-275. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2108>
- Rudolph, C. W., Allan, B., Clark, M., Hertel, G., Hirschi, A., Kunze, F., Shockley, K., Shoss, M., Sonnentag, S., & Zacher, H. (2021). Pandemics: Implications for research and practice in industrial and organizational psychology. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 14(1).
- Rudolph, C. W., & Baltes, B. B. (2017). Age and health jointly moderate the influence of flexible work arrangements on work engagement: Evidence from two empirical studies. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 22(1), 40–58. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0040147>
- Rudolph, C. W., Kooij, D. T., Rauvola, R. S., & Zacher, H. (2018). Occupational future time perspective: A meta-analysis of antecedents and outcomes. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 39(2), 229-248. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2264>
- Rudolph, C. W., Murphy, L. D., & Zacher, H. (2020b). A systematic review and critique of research on “healthy leadership”. *Leadership Quarterly*, 31(1), 101335. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2019.101335>
- Shockley, K., Allen, T. D., Dodd, H., & Waiwood, A.M. (2020). Rapid transition to remote work during COVID-19: A study of predictors of employee well-being and productivity. *iWill*. <https://iwillugaresearch.wixsite.com/website/publications>
- Sinclair, R. R., Allen, T., Barber, L., Bergman, M., Britt, T., Butler, A., Ford, M., Hammer, L., Kath, L., Probst, T. & Yuan, Z. (2020). Occupational health science in the time of COVID-19: Now more than ever. *Occupational Health Science*, 4, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41542-020-00064-3>

- Smith, N., Taylor, I., Kolbas, V., & McManus, S. (2020). Monitoring socioeconomic and mental health trajectories through the COVID-19 pandemic. *NatCen*. Retrieved from <https://natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/monitoring-socioeconomic-and-mental-health-trajectories-through-the-covid-19-pandemic/>
- Wang, B., Liu, Y., Qian, J., & Parker, S. K. (2020). Achieving effective remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic: A work design perspective. *Applied Psychology*, 70(1), 16-59. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12290>
- Zacher, H., & Rudolph, C.W. (2020, In Press). Individual differences and changes in subjective Well-being during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. *American Psychologist*, 76(1), 50-62. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/amp0000702>