

COVID-19 and Workplace Transformation in Select Private Secondary Schools in Enugu State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The global response to COVID-19 has resulted in the most rapid transformation of the workplace. The pandemic has mounted a lot of challenges to Human Resources Management (HRM) thereby calling for reintegration of existing human resource practices and procedures into the new normal. Overcoming the crisis would require learning, innovation and adaptation. Employees working from home has become the new normal and this has led to huge transformation in workplace such as moving from digitising the relationship between firm and customer to digitising the relationship between employer and employee. There has been rapid forward and upward movement, fast-tracking trends such as automation, digitalisation, and innovation. This study is on COVID-19 and workplace transformation in selected private Secondary Schools in Enugu State, Nigeria. For the purpose of the study, the researchers randomly selected five private secondary schools in Enugu State. The population for the study was 325 whereas the sample size was 179 which was derived, using Taro Yamane's formula. The findings showed that COVID-19 pandemic has positive effect on e-learning and that the adoption of e-learning tends to solve educational challenges, especially at a time such as the COVID-19 pandemic era. It, was, therefore, recommended that schools should apply those teaching initiatives that have proved to be effective during the remote learning phase and integrate them into the regular education system.

Keywords: COVID-19, Workplace Transformation, Work Flexibility, Human Resources Management

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has really brought to fore the importance of the Human Resources Management (HRM) in organisations and companies, especially with the new challenges created by COVID-19. Now employees obviously need to be supported more than ever, especially with the uncertainties in future created by the pandemic and the high possibility of losing jobs or salary deduction, the psychological impact of COVID-19 on employees, managing the remote work, the working hours, tensions between employees and the social distance. So, employers start depending more on their HR department to obtain the right HR strategy which could face the new challenges the pandemic has created.

According to SHRM (2020), nearly 72% of the workforce is working from home, working a modified schedule or practicing social distancing in the workplace. Recently the global challenges with the outbreak of COVID-19 have affected the employees' performance drastically and Noe & Wright (2007) emphasise that HRM describes all its policies, systems and practices which could adjust employees' attitudes, behaviour and performance. According to Adonu, Opuni, Cedric & Dorkenoo (2020), moving beyond the crisis would require learning, innovation and adaptation. The dependency on HRM to transform the workplace is continuously on the increase in order to handle the complex and turbulent nature of the business environment of this century. COVID-19 has forced some organisations to adopt a total tele-work and virtual teamwork practices. Fisher & Wilder-Smith (2020) state that Social Distancing Strategies (SDS) have shown to be the most successful in controlling outbreaks. In as much as there is a global campaign that social distancing should strictly be maintained in any place of large gatherings, but sticking to that is a serious challenge. The education sector is the most hit as a result of outbreak of COVID-19 virus. In many countries such as Poland, Nigeria not an exception, many people still do not follow social distancing rules, which can be seen in virtually every place - shops, offices, on the streets and masks are worn under the chin instead of on the lips and nose (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Poland, 2020). The aim of this paper is, therefore, to find out how the workplaces of the select private secondary schools in Enugu have been drastically transformed during the COVID-19 era and again ascertain the implications of such on human resources management.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine whether COVID-19 pandemic has positive effect on e-learning in Private Secondary Schools.
2. Ascertain if COVID-19 pandemic has significant effect on work flexibility in Private Secondary Schools.

Hypotheses

The Hypotheses for the study were all formulated in Null thus:

- Ho1. COVID-19 pandemic does not have positive effect on e-learning in Private Secondary Schools.
- Ho2. COVID-19 pandemic has no significant effect on work flexibility in Private Secondary Schools.

Review of Related Literature

Most of the workplaces are now being digitised and transformed; all praise goes to HRM departments. McKinsey (2020a) posits that COVID-19 pandemic brought new ways of doing business, as well as revealed the importance of making use of the already existing practices, according to which organisations must change how they operate along with the role of offices in generating secure, successful and rewarding careers (Catalyst, 2020; McKinsey, 2020b; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020a; World Economic Forum, 2020b). According to Mikusova & Horvathova (2019); Gartner (2020b); KPMG (2020d, 2020e), many companies around the world have demonstrated their ability to face the challenges mounted by COVID-19 pandemic by

responding with pre-design crisis management plans. Gartner (2020a) in his opinion noted that remote working has been a key factor in the continuity of business. Unarguably, the outbreak of COVID-19 has exposed many issues that have been existing in business for a long time, particularly the manner in which activities are carried out daily from physical to virtual. Interestingly, companies now are able to identify the roles that need to be executed face to face or the ones that do not require to be carried out by contact and to what extent (BCG, 2020 & PricewaterhouseCoppers, 2020b). Without doubt, COVID-19 has taken us by surprise and the present situation has equally changed drastically from what has been a norm since March 2020, (Ancillo, Val Núñez & Gavrilá, 2020).

Consequently, this has led to serious rethink by HR of what the workplace currently is and what it will be during and after COVID-19 (Economic Forum, 2020b; 2020a). Ancillo, Val Núñez & Gavrilá (2020) note that it is quite understandable that workplaces changed during COVID-19 and such situation has triggered a global transformation which particularly affects the workplace. However, it is too early to categorically state what future workplace is or what it is at present due to the fact that it is considered as a transformation period, nor what could have been under the periods of non COVID-19 conditions, as they will never be the same ever. The authors also noted that it will be more inclusive, more mature and novel, considering employees and businesses need creating a good balance between them.

According to Ancillo, Val Núñez & Gavrilá (2020), the redesigning of the workplace must be based on objective criteria that take into account: safety reasons such as occupational health and safety regulations, social distance, such as the increase of the employees' minimum required working areas and a real estate revolution in the office market, where remote working will require less surface area and new locations need to be found. The presence of COVID-19 has challenged organisations and government to respond to the challenges or crisis posed by virus and this has also made them to quickly rethink their workforce strategies or redesign their workplace in real time. As COVID-19 is unlikely to end anytime soon given the lack of available therapeutics and the uncertain prospects and timing of a vaccine, it becomes imperative for the HR of organisations to respond quickly to these crises by redesigning the workplace emphasising health, essential services and the visualisation of work and education (Deloitte, 2020).

While some organisations are hiring and expanding, others are contracting. The implication is that some may bring back more employees to workplace, while others may apparently be working remotely permanently. Deloitte (2020) notes that those organisations that expanded during the pandemic crisis may reduce their workplaces or a matter of urgency adapt to new environments. It is very important to note that organisations that rest on their existing digital laurels can be surpassed by those that invest in adapting their digital capabilities for the post-COVID-19 future; that is, a future that looks very different from the world pre-pandemic. The governments of various countries such as Nigeria, Kenya and Ghana, have taken steps to sustain private schools and they have, according to Niazi & Doorly (2020) also announced differing measures to bolster the sector with low-interest loans for private school teachers in Nigeria and private schools in Kenya. Unfortunately, schools and teachers have had difficulty accessing these funds and they are far from sufficient to reach all schools in need. Beyond governments, support from the wider education ecosystem for private schools is fairly thin, consisting of case-by-case examples varying across contexts instead of the coordinated, large-scale efforts needed (Niazi & Doorly, 2020).

The *COVID-19* pandemic is a huge challenge to *education* systems. Amir, Tanti, Maharavi, Wimardhani, Juha, Sulijaya & Puspitawati (2020) note that the outbreak of COVID-19 has made teaching and learning activities to fully shift to e-learning. The authors gave the definition of e-learning as learning that makes use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). But the issue is whether the teachers are better equipped to adopt online learning. Ebner, Scho'n, Braun, Ebner, Grigoriadis, Haas, Philip & Behnam (2020) state that the COVID-19 pandemic enhanced the role of remote working, e-learning, video streaming, etc. on a broad scale. Mobile learning, according to, Gonzalez, Rubia, Hincz, Comas-Lopez, Subirats, Santi & Sacha (2020) has become an alternative suitable for some students with fewer technological resources. Some scholars such as Fernández-Cruz & Fernández-Díaz, according to Espino-Díaz, Fernandez-Caminero, Hernandez-Lloret, Gonzalez-Gonzalez & Alvarez-Castillo (2020) have spotted an alarming difference between the competencies that teachers should have to develop digital competence in their students and the ones they truly have. Santisi, Magnano, Platania & Ramaci (2018) note the importance of teachers' involvement in the effective use of ICT tools in the teaching and learning process after the COVID-19 crisis. To ensure the continuity of effective use of ICT, teachers must be trained to assimilate the pedagogical uses of ICT. In this way, the generation of new learning styles would be facilitated. Online teaching is becoming a solution in order to continue with the development of academic curricula. But the implementation of these strategies according to Brossard *et al* (2020) depends heavily on children and adolescents' access to specific resources that allow them to learn at home: availability of books and educational materials at home, availability of a place to study, access to electronic devices and connectivity, and parental support and involvement in the learning process.

Gigauri (2020) notes that the extraordinary changes caused by COVID-19 have seriously enforced companies around the globe to accelerate transition to digital business processes. Unarguably, Human resource management (HRM) is in the heart of these transformations helping organisations to navigate in the vague present and unforeseeable future. HRM needs to manage people in companies during the crisis in order to enable business continuity and ensure work-life balance (Gigauri, 2020). Since the future will bring more flexible, remote-friendly, digital working norms, the changes in policies, processes, workspaces, collaboration systems, and employee wellness are of increasingly urgent importance. This shift has compelled the human resource management (HRM) to navigate employees in this extraordinary situation. Human Resource Management has an important role to play on the one hand to help employees in using digital platforms to access to their jobs, and on the other hand to support organisations in their efforts to continue business processes. COVID-19 has intensified digital transformation for companies and many workers around the world need to have necessary skills to use technologies (Sheppard, 2020) in order to perform their jobs remotely. The digital technologies enable virtual work as well as to automate tasks and make decisions (Parry & Battista, 2019). Digital transformation is more than just the implementation of a new technology. It requires the adoption of a digital workforce mindset (Chattopadhyay & Sahana, 2016). According to Savic & Dobrica (2020), digital transformation of the workforce requirements includes digital literacy, technical knowledge; lifelong micro learning and personal development; engagement; mobile force and remote work; generation gap and digital ethics.

Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, the World Economic Forum (2018) estimated that by 2022, over 50% of all employees would require significant reskilling and upskilling. This will

be a huge task for HR and other managers, especially since 85% of 2030 jobs do not yet exist (DELL Technologies, 2018). The pandemic has made it visible that the most demanded skills for the employees are digital, but also collaborative (Sheppard, 2020). Any problems happening in the interconnected world encourage organisations of any size to respond and adapt to the change, as well as manage their employees accordingly (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped extraordinary demanding conditions for human resource management. HR managers have to help their employees to handle with the rapid changes in both the workplace and the society (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). The studies from previous years confirmed that emerging technologies including digital platforms, Artificial Intelligence, robotics, augmented reality, and block-chain – would change the functions HR professionals perform (Parry & Battista, 2019). To adapt to the digital work, employees should learn new skills that increase their employability (Sheppard, 2020). Based on the study of Parry & Battista (2019), it was demonstrated that human resource management should help employees to use the advanced technologies in organisation. Since employees alone cannot cope with all the challenges the recent pandemic crisis brought, HR professionals are encouraged to help them to upgrade their digital skills, and to arrange their wellbeing. Obviously, social isolation has a negative impact on employees. For this reason, HR practitioners need to maintain social interaction among employees who are working remotely. Small-group meetings, networking, virtual connections should be arranged to conquer isolation as work relationships are source of motivation (Singer-Velush, Sherman & Anderson, 2020).

With limited time to adjust to new working arrangements, many organisational leaders turned to Human Resource Development (HRD) practitioners for assistance to implement agile workforce strategies (Yawson, 2020). As agents of organisational change and experts in uncertainty, HRD practitioners are strongly positioned to provide leadership and relevant advice in times of crises (McGuire, Germain & Reynolds, 2021). The same authors assumed that the COVID-19 pandemic has had and will continue to have a substantial and real effect on how Human Resource Development is conceived, framed and delivered in the years to come. In this article, we consider the implication of COVID-19 on HRM and effectiveness of the approaches adopted to salvage the situation posed by the pandemic. The ethics of care approach offers the opportunity for a readjustment of core HRM values, which in turn, may enable a redesign and transformation of work practices which invariably causes transformations in the workplaces.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the theory of crisis management. This Theory of Crisis Management Teams (CMTs) was developed by Mitroffin in 1988 ‘as cited’ in Wang (2007). The main reason for this theory is that organisations are confronted with unstable and unforeseeable environments and as such, should have permanent CMT’s (Waller, Lei & Pratten, 2014). One remarkable merit of this theory is that it emphasises the vital role of establishing teams consisting of all business units across the organisation that can adjust to severe challenges organisations are facing. These teams are responsible for creating an adequate yet flexible response plan (Don, 2000). According to Waller *et al* (2014), the theory supports the value of networked organisational structure and distributed leadership, as well as the importance of an emergent leadership team, the so-called nerve centre assigned with the task of stress-testing of several simulation-driven scenarios. Ganatra, Hammond & Nohria (2020). note that companies that respond and adapt quickly to

unpredictable threats are characterised by networked structure, flexible and straightforward guidelines distributed workforce and leadership and less inter-dependence. Obrenovic, Du, Godinic, Tsoy, Shafique Khan & Jakhongirov (2020) state that organisations with a networked structure are more responsive, agile, and resilient in the face of adversity. And the authors also noted that digitalisation and ICT utilisation, which is an indicator of adoption, acceptance and diffusion of innovation, is a key component for sustainable enterprise operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Human Resources division has to perform a dual role, balancing the business and the staff. The private schools in an attempt to survive the pressure and uncertainties created by COVID-19 pandemic adopted many approaches and practices that could contribute to the sustainability of their school. Suffice to say that these are not without challenges.

Methodology

The researchers adopted survey design. The area of study was in five select private secondary schools in Enugu State. The private secondary schools randomly selected for the study were Pinecrest Schools, Spring of Life International Schools, Seat of Wisdom Secondary School, Bethel Schools and Pinnacle Model School. The population of the study was 320 and the sample size for the study 179. The proprietors of the select private secondary schools were interviewed as well as some select teachers. The researchers conducted test retest and the reliability of the instrument was calculated to be 0.9 which showed that the instrument was highly reliable. In addition, content validity was adopted in the study. Purposive and simple random technique were used in the study. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the schools. This was done based on the fact that they were believed to be in a better position to give information on the subject matter, while simple random sampling technique was used to administer the copies of questionnaire to the respondents. The method of data collection was through instruments structured in 5-point Likert Scale of SA, A, U, D and SD. The hypotheses were all formulated in null and were also tested using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. However, the population is presented in the table below:

Table 1: Population for the Study

S/No	Class	Population	Sample Size
1	Proprietors	5	-
2	Teachers	320	179
	Total	325	179

Out of the 179 copies of questionnaire distributed, 171 copies were returned, while only 164 copies were found useful; thus, the analysis was based on the 164 copies.

Data Presentation

Testing of Hypotheses

Ho₁: COVID-19 pandemic does not have positive effect on e-learning

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. deviation	N
COVID-19 pandemic	5.17	1.373	179
E-learning	3.86	1.390	179

Correlations

		COVID-19 pandemic	E-learning
COVID-19 pandemic	Pearson Correlation	1	**0.806
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.001
	N	179	179
E-learning	Pearson Correlation	**0.806	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	
	N	179	179

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Ho₂: COVID-19 pandemic has no significant effect on work flexibility in Private Secondary Schools.

Descriptive Statistical

	Mean	Std. deviation	N
Covi-19 pandemic	4.26	1.431	179
Work flexibility	3.34	1.414	179

Correlation

		COVID-19 pandemic	Work flexibility
COVID-19 pandemic	Pearson Correlation	1	**0.971
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	179	179
Work flexibility	Pearson Correlation	**0.971	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	179	179

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Interpretations and Discussions of Findings

For hypothesis 1, it shows the descriptive statistics of the COVID-19 pandemic and e-learning with a mean response of 5.17 and standard deviation of 1.373 for COVID-19 pandemic and a mean response of 3.86 and standard deviation of 1.390 for e-learning and number of respondents (164). By careful observation of standard deviation values, there is not much difference in terms of the standard deviation scores. The implication of this is that there is about the same variability of data points between the dependent and independent variables. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient for COVID-19 pandemic and e-learning has the correlation coefficient to be 0.806. This value indicates that correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2tailed) and that implied that there is a positive relationship between COVID-19 pandemic and e-learning ($r = 0.806$). The computed correlations coefficient is greater than the table value of $r = 0.195$ with 164 degrees of freedom ($df = n-2$) at alpha level for a two-tailed test ($r = 0.806, p < .05$). However, since the computed $r = 0.806$, was greater than the table value of 0.195we rejected the null hypothesis and concluded that COVID-19 pandemic has positive effect on e-learning in the selected private secondary schools in Enugu State, Nigeria ($r = 0.806, p < 0.05$).

This finding is in tandem with the finding of Ebner, Scho'n, Braun, Ebner, Grigoriadis, Haas, Philip & Behnam (2020) which states that the COVID-19 pandemic enhanced the role of

remote working, e-learning, video streaming, etc. on a broad scale. In addition, the result is in support of the finding of Gonzalez, Rubia, Hincz, Comas-Lopez, Subirats, Santi & Sacha (2020) which states that mobile learning has become an alternative suitable for some students with fewer technological resources since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. This simply means that various e-learning platforms have been adopted by schools to ensure a continuous interaction between teachers and students, and, in some cases, national television shows or social media platforms are being used for education. According to Gohiya & Gohiya (2020), some studies argued that the feedback of e-classes given by students, point out to the fact that students were satisfied with the teacher's way of delivering the lecture and that the main problem was poor internet connection whereas in some cases the challenges were enormous as were mentioned by the respondents.

Hypothesis two shows the descriptive statistics of COVID-19 pandemic and work flexibility with a mean response of 4.26 and standard deviation of 1.431 for COVID-19 pandemic and a mean response of 3.34 and standard deviation of 1.414 for work flexibility and a number of respondents (164). There is no much difference in the standard deviation scores. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient for COVID-19 pandemic and work flexibility shows the correlation coefficient to be 0.971. The implication is that COVID-19 has significant effect on work flexibility ($r = 0.971$). Since the computed $r = 0.971$ was greater than the table value of 0.195, we rejected the null hypothesis and concluded that COVID-19 pandemic has significant effect on work flexibility in the selected Private Secondary Schools in Enugu State, Nigeria ($r = 0.971$, $p < 0.05$). The finding is in line with that of Baeza (2020) which reveals that the COVID-19 crisis has proven to be a catalyst for workplace flexibility. Companies around the world urgently accelerated their digitisation processes in order to first cope with the lockdown measures established in the early days of the pandemic, and going forward to design a new approach to the world of work. The researchers also discovered that some schools still combine both face to face contacts, that is class room teaching and learning together with ICT. The implication is that they make use of flexible work arrangements with students even during holidays.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The researchers conclude that adoption of e-learning tends to solve educational challenges, especially at a time such as the COVID-19 pandemic era. Again, the current COVID-19 pandemic has made work flexibility possible, though not on a large scale based on the interactions with some interviewed teachers. The recommendations are given thus:

1. Schools should apply those teaching initiatives that have proven to be effective during the remote learning phase and integrate them into the regular education system. It is very pertinent to empower teachers, investing in the necessary skills, regular training and development and capacity building to exploit the full potential of remote and blended learning. Since COVID-19 pandemic has been proven to have positive effect on e-learning, there is the need to put coursework online so that students and teachers can master the use of the online facilities. This they can do even while at home.
2. HRM should help companies to transform their business processes into the digital space by upgrading employee skills, create organisation culture for adaptability to digitalisation, and to maintain employee health, motivation, and efficiency. Also for employees to still be relevant in their workplaces they need to adapt to the new normal as well as their resultant new roles created by the pandemic.

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