

COMMENTARY

A workercentric view of COVID-19

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By examining 10 content areas of organizational research and practice, Rudolph et al. (2021) provide readers with a rich array of considerations associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Others have provided similar thoughtful topic-driven implications (e.g., Sinclair et al., 2020). In this commentary, we take a workercentric rather than topic-driven approach. In doing so, we make the distinction between frontline workers and stay-at-home (i.e., remote) workers, as well as identify key dimensions upon which they vary and implications for each. With this framework in mind, we discuss implications for the future of work. We close with a call to action.

Two types of workers

The pandemic has been taxing for workers. The *American Psychological Association Stress in America* survey conducted April 24 to May 4, 2020, found that 70% of employed adults reported work as a significant source of stress in their lives. Beyond the pervasive issue of stress and other relevant content areas (e.g., job insecurity), we propose that insights into the effects of the pandemic can be had by considering types of workers and main threats that are associated with each. In the COVID-19 work world, among those fortunate to remain employed and working, two major categories of workers have emerged: those who transitioned to remote work and those considered frontline and/or essential workers. Those who transitioned into remote work due to the pandemic include many in education, technology, and government. Frontline workers include healthcare providers, delivery drivers, manufacturing plant workers, corrections officers, and so on. There are unique health and safety issues for these two types of workers. Specifically, we identify three threats, which are described below and graphically illustrated in Figure 1.

Types of threats

Three threats by which remote workers and frontline workers differ include virus exposure, work location change, and social isolation. To be clear, we do not intend to suggest that these are the only threats but that these are salient threats in the context of COVID-19.

Virus exposure

The most dangerous threat is exposure to the virus. By virus exposure, we refer to the likelihood that one will be exposed to the coronavirus in the course of carrying out job-related tasks.

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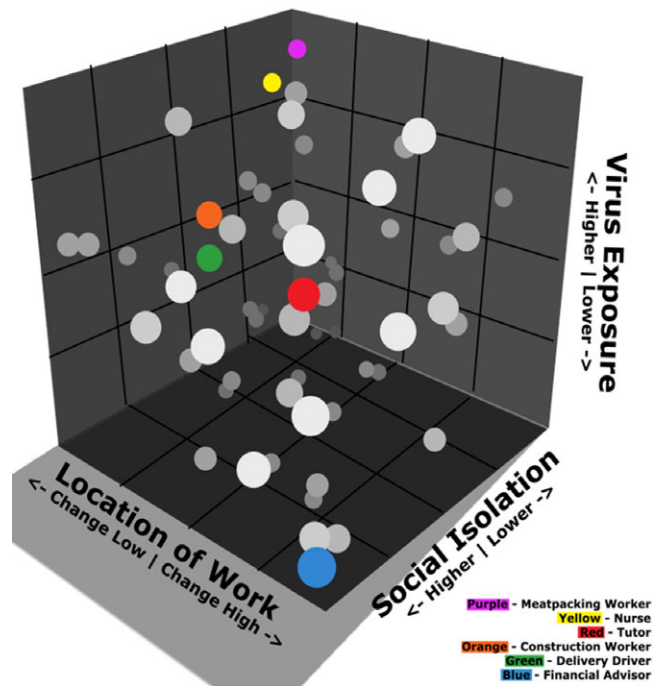


Figure 1. COVID-19 Dimensions of Threat Across Workers.

Relocating a large segment of the workforce into the home reduced virus exposure for millions of workers, but those in essential and frontline jobs remain at risk. Within the frontline group, some workers are more at risk than others are. The risk to healthcare workers is well known. As of December 18, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that more than 280,000 healthcare workers have been infected by COVID-19 (2020a). In particular, nursing homes have been major hot spots for both workers and residents. At least 100,000 residents and workers have died (data are not disaggregated for workers versus residents) at nursing homes and long-term care facilities (*The New York Times*, 2020). Another hot spot is prisons, with over 62,000 correctional staff infected with COVID-19 (The COVID Prison Project, 2020). Meatpacking facilities are a third major virus exposure hot spot. Over 50,000 meatpacking workers have been infected with COVID-19 in the United States. (Douglas, 2020).

Risk for workplace exposures is not unique to COVID-19. Risk is mitigated through protective personal equipment (PPE). For example, construction workers wear hard hats and healthcare providers wear masks. The shortage of PPE, which is ongoing in some cases, exacerbated the disruption of the pandemic on workers. Lack of PPE among healthcare workers was well publicized, but shortages occurred within other sectors. Those in the gig economy such as grocery shoppers and rideshare drivers struggled to obtain gloves, sanitizer, and masks (Dickey, 2020). Correctional staff also reported limited access to PPE (Eiserer & Trahan, 2020).

COVID-19 brought attention to existing problems within these occupations. With regard to the gig or contract workforce, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) investigations show some employers use temps to avoid meeting safety obligations. Temporary and/or gig workers are more likely to be injured than are nontemporary workers (Johnson, 2016). Workers under nonstandard work arrangements often do not receive the safety training and the health protections afforded to full-time workers. Similarly, prior to COVID-19, occupational injury rates among meatpacking workers were high (Wasley et al., 2018). Meat processing workers are subject to repetitive strain injuries, exposures to chemicals and pathogens, and traumatic injuries such as amputations from machines and tools (United States Government Accountability

Office, 2016). Safety within these plants tends to fly under the radar because marginalized communities provide the labor. Correctional officers also face a myriad of work-related risks, including assaults and violent injuries (Goldstein, 2015). Both meatpacking and corrections can be considered “dirty work” and are subject to stigma (Ashforth et al., 2000), which can exacerbate the risks these workers face.

Location

The second factor that differentiates remote and frontline workers is the location of work. The location has not changed for frontline workers. However, for newly remote workers, many of them were thrust into the unfamiliar situation of working from home and doing so over an extended period. Working from home means virus exposure is lower, but the change in location requires an adjustment to the new way of working. Some of the changes include a modified daily routine, adapting to use of new technology, and, for many working parents, caring for children while also working from home.

The change of location and the merging of work and nonwork into the same physical space results in a blurring of work and nonwork boundaries. Boundary management refers to the strategies that individuals employ in order to create, maintain, or change boundaries in an effort to cope with the world around them (Ashforth et al., 2000). The differentiation of physical spaces (office versus home) and temporal routines (work from 9 to 5, nonwork from 5 to 9) traditionally serve as guideposts as to where and when different roles are enacted. Without these guideposts, newly remote workers have to create new strategies for maintaining boundaries. Moreover, blurring may be intensified for those who are also sharing their “place of work” with nonwork role members (i.e., partners, children) rather than with coworkers, requiring additional negotiation and strategic management.

Adjustment to remote work may also depend on the home environment. There is extensive variation in the physical spaces in which individuals live. For example, some workers have a space dedicated to and equipped for working at home (i.e., room with door, high speed Internet, desk, computer with monitor, etc). Others may work from their bed, kitchen table, or living room couch, without basic office furniture. In addition to making the adjustment to remote work difficult, the lack of an ergonomically sound workstation may result in muscular-skeletal disorders, headaches, and other physical disorders (Robertson et al., 2016). Although workplaces are held to OSHA standards designed to help ensure safe worksites, OSHA does not conduct inspections of home offices, hold employers liable for employees’ home offices, or expect employers to inspect the home offices of their employees (United States Department of Labor, 2020), thus placing the onus on employees rather than on employers to ensure safe working environments. The effects of remote work on physical health have received little attention in the research literature (Allen et al., 2015).

Social isolation

The third type of threat is social isolation. The threat of social isolation is lower for frontline workers who continue to go to their place of work and connect with coworkers. However, COVID-19 has created unique circumstances in terms of remote work and social connections. Although offices are first and foremost a place of work, they are also a place where individuals make friends, find mentors (or mentees), develop social support networks, and form romantic bonds. Social isolation was a threat associated with remote work prior to COVID-19 (Allen et al., 2015), and those vulnerabilities are elevated under the current situation (Shockley et al., 2020). Specifically, in more standard circumstances, those who telecommute seldom do so 100% of the time (Analytics, 2018). In addition, remote workers typically have structured options (e.g., school, daycare) available for childcare, may have the home to themselves throughout their

workday, and are more likely to have planned in advance for remote work, with a dedicated space (home office or rented coworking space) and equipment at the ready. Feelings of loneliness might be mitigated by a busy household and the wide availability of video technology to connect with managers and coworkers. However, they may also be exacerbated by the lack of informal chats or face-to-face connection typical at work, as well as reduced ability to nurture social connections outside work hours due to social distancing. Loneliness is associated with a myriad of health concerns (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020b), and teleworking can result in professional isolation consequences such as reduced wage growth, interpersonal networking, informal learning, and mentoring (e.g., Golden & Eddleston, 2020). Moreover, a study of over 500 remote workers found that these employees often reported feeling mistreated and ostracized, with little ability to handle workplace politics and resolve conflicts in a timely manner (Grenny & Maxfield, 2017).

Although the threat of social isolation is greater for remote workers, many essential workers, although physically present in their workplaces, must cope with the novel circumstances of remaining at least six feet apart from coworkers and customers as often as possible and communicating while wearing masks. Those in service and caretaking roles often thrive on the social connectedness their job provides. These rewarding aspects of work are less available in our current COVID-19 reality. Similarly, those in customer-facing roles might cope with negative client interactions by venting with colleagues and build skills or new techniques from observing mentors and supervisors, which may be less feasible due to social distancing. As such, social and professional isolation are likely to be concerns for some frontline workers as well.

Future of work

The vast changes in work spurred by COVID-19 will undoubtedly change the future of work as we know it. Especially for frontline worker jobs, we may see the acceleration of automation as organizations rethink processes. The use of robotics within the food service industry has been escalating. For example, McDonalds has announced self-serving kiosks at all locations by the end of 2020 (Hafner, 2018) and robot baristas are at work in South Korea (Reuters, 2020). Automation could also be accelerated in the meatpacking industry. Denmark has one of the largest and most modern pig slaughterhouses in the world (Molteni, 2020), and among 8,000 workers, only 10 have tested positive for the coronavirus. By comparison, meat processors in the US have been slower to innovate, instead relying on low-cost labor. Robots and other automated technology could help keep workers safe and plants operational.

Although technology can create a smarter and safer workforce, especially beneficial during a pandemic or even a virulent flu season, it could also lead to the elimination of many jobs. The McKinsey Global Institute has estimated that up to 375 million people will need to transition careers due to advancing technology by 2030 (Manyika et al., 2017). COVID-19 has highlighted the safety and efficiency concerns in certain industries, potentially accelerating this transition. With this in mind, workers will need to be trained in new skills. Some skills that may be of increased demand are the ability to fix, operate, and even work alongside new forms of technology. One example of what these changes may look like can be found at Amazon, where fulfillment centers that were once driven by human labor and physical exertion are now staffed by both humans and robots. In these centers, the actual “labor” is now largely done by robots, whereas the workload of the humans has pivoted to monitoring and controlling their robot “coworkers” (Simon, 2019). Human–robot pairings of this sort could become more common in order to allow for proper social distancing while allowing businesses to remain operational, thus, making reskilling programs of greater need in the immediate future.

With regard to remote work, increased work from home options seem likely. Recognizing that productivity is not unduly negatively affected by remote work and that overhead costs can be saved, companies like Facebook and Twitter have begun to embrace remote work (Thompson,

2020). However, from the employee side, there may be less demand than expected. Current studies indicate that workers prefer spending some time working at the office and some time working from home (Miller, 2020; Shockley et al., 2020). This hybrid type of arrangement is consistent with what prior research suggests is the ideal (Allen et al., 2015). Thus, it could be problematic to force large number of employees into full-time remote work.

For those who do return to the office, the office will look different. The new realities of social distancing mean rethinking the way in which offices are designed. Organizations have the major challenge of mitigating the risk of virus transmission, including putting in place temperature checks, enhanced cleaning, staggered break times, reduced elevator capacity, and improved ventilation systems, and so forth (Richtel, 2020). These changes have implications for how employees navigate the office. Although social support can be provided, it may now need to be done from six feet away. Similarly, although meetings can occur, the number of people who can attend a meeting may be reduced in order to follow guidelines. Additionally, although individuals will be colocated with coworkers, these coworkers may now be wearing masks that prevent nonverbal forms of communication such as smiling. Through these changes, clear verbal and written communication will become even more imperative if offices are to properly function throughout this crisis. These challenges may be a short-term setback for some organizations but could also lead to identification of strategies to improve communication quality both during, as well as after, the pandemic.

Call for action

COVID-19 has brought to light the existing vulnerabilities and the poor working conditions that exist for frontline workers who historically have not received a lot of attention by industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists. It has also provided the opportunity to rethink old assumptions about the way and where work should be done. These lessons can be used to promote worker health and contribute to sustainable work. I-O psychologists have historically focused on employee performance and organizational effectiveness. Now more than ever, it is time to put the health, well-being, and safety of workers at the center of our mission and values as I-O psychologists.

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