

# Perceived Risk of COVID-19 and Employee Decision-Making

Subjects: Behavioral Sciences

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COVID-19 has negatively affected public health, crippled economies, and transformed social and business environments across the globe. The pandemic has intensified the precariousness of work and the challenge of managing employee performance. There is a convincing need for organizations to develop strong and supportive management and leadership systems, particularly for frontline workers given their atypical and straining work conditions. To do so, it is prudent for managers to continuously interact and engage with these employees to offer emotional support and encouragement, address any issues of concern, and demonstrate care for these workers and their families.

Keywords: employee decision-making ; employee disengagement ; low morale ; COVID-19 ; turnover intention ; burnout ; psychological distress ; perceived risk of COVID-19 ; employee performance outcomes

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## 1. Introduction

The novel coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, is a highly transmittable and pathogenic disease <sup>[1]</sup>. It has instigated fear and caused panic all over the globe <sup>[2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9][10][11][12][13][14][15]</sup>, negatively affected public health, crippled economies, and transformed social and business environments <sup>[16]</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic, which is regarded as one of the worst pandemics in human history <sup>[17]</sup>, has also had an unprecedented effect on the living conditions and deaths of human beings. Globally, as of February 2022, more than 400 million cases of COVID-19 had been confirmed, including almost 6 million deaths, even though more than 10 billion doses of vaccines had been administered <sup>[18]</sup>. Control measures, such as mandatory lockdowns and social distancing, have also affected the mental health of the public at large <sup>[19]</sup>.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, most employers have been implementing measures such as the washing of hands, use of hand sanitizers, closure of operations, and social distancing <sup>[20][21]</sup>. Many have also adopted hybrid and remote work arrangements <sup>[22][23][24]</sup>, which allow employees to be geographically dispersed and physically distanced <sup>[25]</sup>. While hybrid and remote work appears to have become a new normal in many corporations <sup>[26]</sup>, employees in essential sectors, such as healthcare, have been required to increase their work hours and physical presence, in order to support operational demands. Most healthcare employees, particularly nurses, not surprisingly, are more psychologically disturbed and overworked. Some employees have also been exhibiting negative performance outcomes, such as burnout, disengagement, psychological distress, and low morale <sup>[27]</sup>.

Globally, employee engagement decreased by 2%, from 22% in 2019 to 20% in 2020 <sup>[28]</sup>, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Around 45% of employees indicated that their lives had been significantly affected by the coronavirus, and workers' daily stress levels reached a record high, increasing from 38% in 2019 to 43% in 2020 <sup>[29]</sup>. Therefore, understanding how these factors affect employee decision-making should be a priority for organizations because their effectiveness is highly dependent on employees' willingness to perform <sup>[29][30]</sup>. Furthermore, organizations should be looking for better ways to adapt to complexity in their environment <sup>[31]</sup>. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and all other infectious disease outbreaks, employers ought to protect their employees and cater to their wellbeing because they are the most valuable assets of an organization. When employees are treated well, they become loyal, engaged, committed, and attached to their organization <sup>[32]</sup>.

## 2. COVID-19 Pandemic and Employee Behavior

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted normative work arrangements and influenced employee behavior in many ways <sup>[33]</sup>. It has been associated with job insecurity, financial losses, social exclusion, and stigmatization <sup>[20]</sup>, as well as uncertainty about the future of work, lower job attitudes, and performance <sup>[34][35]</sup>. Globally, it remains the major workplace transformative event that has forced many organizations to adopt new work arrangements, such as allowing employees to

work from home [33]. However, employees in essential sectors, such as healthcare, had to increase their working hours and physical presence, in order to meet operational demands [36]. Healthcare employees have complained about the scarcity of resources, insufficient support, and poor leadership and communication during the COVID-19 pandemic [37].

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused severe psychological effects among healthcare workers [38][39][40][41]. Although it resulted in the employment of more medical practitioners and increased medical research funding [21], healthcare workers are more vulnerable, since they work in an environment where COVID-19 infections are more likely to occur [42][43]. As a result, healthcare workers have experienced emotional fatigue, aggression, and depersonalization [44][45]. In fact, most employees have been exhibiting mood swings, depressive thoughts, headache and gastric disorders, isolation, demotivation, and poor performance at work [46]. In addition, employees have been experiencing psychological distress, which has been associated with exhaustion and cynical attitudes [45][47][48]. Prolonged exposure to stress and inadequate coping strategies can result in emotional exhaustion [49].

### **3. Employee Perceived Risk & Psychological Distress**

The perceived risk of COVID-19 is regarded as a key driver of psychological distress [20] because it is associated with a wide range of stressors that drain the mental health of employees, especially fear and panic [20]. Other stressors include the threat of infection [50], uncertainty [51], quarantine and confinement [52], exclusion from the society and stigmatization [52], job insecurity, and loss of finances [53]. Employees in the health sector have been the most affected frontline workers during the pandemic [54]. This has been largely attributed to their level of exposure, given the nature of their job [55] and risk of interacting with patients suffering from COVID-19 [56], as well as the risk of being infected by work colleagues [57]. It is, therefore, important to understand how the perceived risk of COVID-19 influences employee decision-making.

Perceptions regarding the risk of a disease, also known as the perceived susceptibility and severity, affect an individual's behavior [58]. Deciding on whether or not to adopt safe precautions is highly dependent on people's perceptions of their vulnerability to illnesses [58]. According to the Health Belief Model (HBM), one of the well-established models of health behavior, perceived risk or severity can be understood as a person's subjective assessment of the seriousness of a disease, which is affected by different types of factors, such as future expectations and current reality [59]. An increased perception regarding disease severity is associated with proactive precautionous health behaviors [58][60]. Individuals who trust that they are not at risk of falling ill are less likely to take safe precautions, thereby exposing themselves and others to hazard, compared to those who strongly believe that they are at risk [61].

The perceived risk of COVID-19 has challenged the psychological resilience of workers [62] and increased their psychological distress [20][38][63]. Based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional stress model, threatening situations, such as pandemics, ignite anxiety [63]. On a similar note, an emphasis of the influential role played by a situation in building anxiety is made by Cheng and McCarthy's (2018) theory of workplace anxiety, as well as Gross' (1998) process framework of emotion regulation [63][64][65]. Psychological distress is defined as the state of person's emotional suffering, consisting of symptoms of depression, such as sadness and anxiety [66], as well as somatic symptoms, such as insomnia [20][66]. It is an indicator of mental health problem [66] because it may result in major depression if not identified [20][66]. Psychological distress is triggered by a person's inability to cope with a situation outside of their control [66], such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **4. Employee Perceived Risk & Negative Performance Outcomes**

The conservation of resources (COR) theory suggests that stress arises when (a) there is a threat of losing essential resources, (b) there is loss of key resources, and (c) an effort to achieve central or key resources has been made, but no resources have been attained [67]. In this regard, a sense of purpose and meaning in life, family, health, wellbeing, self-esteem [67], and social support are among the frequently valued resources [68]. When these resources are exhausted, employees tend to enter a defensive mode, in order to preserve themselves and guard against aggressive, duplicitous, and irrational behavior [67]. When threatened, individuals tend to use a coping strategy, in order to overcome the threat [63]. For instance, when feeling anxious, they are likely to develop a defense mechanism, in the form of a fight or flight response, as a way of overcoming the threat [69]. A fight response is activated when a threat is deemed manageable, whereas a flight response is ignited when a threat is hard to overcome [70].

COVID-19 is a highly contagious disease, which can cause severe health problems, such as abdominal pain, pneumonia [71][72], and even death [73]. Most workers are worried that they might get infected, be stigmatized at work, infect their relatives and coworkers, and lose personal freedoms [27][74][75] because the virus has no cure [76][77]. Therefore, the perceived risk of COVID-19 is believed to induce a flight response [63] and negative performance behaviors among

workers [78]. Organizations tend to experience increased levels of absenteeism and poor work performance during epidemics and pandemics [79]. Stress and poor working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic have increased negative performance outcomes [80][81][82], such as employee turnover intention, disengagement, low morale, and burnout [24][83][84][85].

Turnover intention is defined as the probability that a worker will quit an organization [86][87]. When employees quit their jobs, organizations tend to bear the loss of human capital. They also suffer from the costs associated with the loss of productivity [88][89]. Turnover intention is usually attributed to work-related factors, such as poor working conditions, the lack of safety at work, and individual and external factors [90]. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, turnover intention among employees has been influenced by higher levels of psychological distress [37][91]. Psychological distress is the key driver of increased turnover intentions at work [83][92][93]. In addition, the perceived risk of COVID-19 has been examined, in relation to employees' wellbeing and mental health outcomes [94]. The perception of this disease as a serious threat increases the fear of COVID-19 among healthcare workers, hence their intention to leave [95][96]. As such, the pandemic is forcing workers to think about quitting their jobs.

Due to the pandemic, most workers have been exhibiting a lack of engagement [83]. Disengagement is concerned with the lack of motivation and attachment towards the achievement of organizational goals and objectives [97][98]. The risk and fear of contracting COVID-19 has also resulted in low morale among employees [99]. Employee morale is regarded as the epitome for business success and a key antecedent of achieving organizational competitiveness. Low morale among employees is viewed as a threat by organizations that seek to achieve their goals and objectives [100].

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, most employees have also been experiencing high levels of burnout [1][101]. Burnout is defined as a syndrome that emanates from the chronic stress at work, with adverse effects on employees' psychological well-being [102], as well as their work behavior and physical health [103]. Burnout is usually attributed to hostile working conditions, which result from prolonged stress at work, with negative effects on employee performance [104]. As a result of burnout, employees may display behaviors such as negative attitudes, lack of commitment, dissatisfaction, and poor performance at work [102].

Organizations should thus help their employees manage pandemic-related stress by providing psycho-social support through counseling and wellness programs. While this may require additional investment, it should limit negative employee performance outcomes and related costs during this uncontrollable pandemic. Furthermore, employees should feel more motivated and engaged when they are reassured that their employer is trying to help them cope in a difficult circumstance.

To improve working conditions and reduce employees' burnout, organizations should also provide their workers with additional resources, such as personal protective clothing and products, health insurance, and medical leave, as well as financial compensation for working extended and extra hours. With such resources, employees should be able to pay more attention to and focus on job details, despite their perceived risk of COVID-19, which will enhance their work performance during the pandemic. Organizations should also conduct risk assessments in order to determine if their employees are exposed to any possible threats, and review their safety rules in order to ensure an effective response to infectious diseases outbreaks.

It can be affirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented effects in the world of work, especially among frontline healthcare employees who are most vulnerable to this contagious disease. Turnover intentions are amplified among this group of researchers due to their perceived risk of COVID-19 and induced psychological distress. The latter reduces employee morale and engagement, with burnout becoming predominant as workers worry about contracting the coronavirus due to the poor working conditions that frontline employees face.

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