

**Post-Pandemic Impacts on the Average Employee: Understanding How COVID-19
Reshaped the American Workforce**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

America has historically maintained the reputation of being a country of immense economic opportunity for the everyday worker. Fueled by the long-standing philosophy of “the American way,” the worker was always thought to come out winning. Now, we hear countless instances of wage discrimination, workplace abuse, and unacceptable working conditions. The flame of prosperity that once lit the middle- and lower-class economies has seemingly withered, as people in these socio-economic groups have found it harder and harder to sustain a means of providing and even surviving in the past decades. When COVID-19 emerged, the struggles only seemed to worsen for many. However, another change also took place; the world’s mentality and attitude seemingly shifted away from focusing exclusively on work, and people began assessing what they truly value in a job.

When the pandemic began, the world was engulfed in complete uncertainty, as it was perhaps the first time in history that nearly every person on earth felt the effect of something simultaneously. Many things changed and will never be the same. The first thing that was noticeably and drastically different in most people’s lives was their work. The labor force took a hit like no other. In May 2020, a staggering 49.8 million people reported that they were unable to work at some point within the past month due to their company being closed or not having enough business to operate because of the pandemic (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). Many industries were exhausted far more than usual, most notably the field of healthcare. Other parts of the employment spectrum saw a record number of layoffs (i.e., restaurants, hotels, airline services, etc.) (Vidovic, 2022). It was an exceptionally unorthodox time, and many people began

questioning their work and its worth. Even those who were fortunate enough to keep their jobs saw extreme stress and panic in the workplace, as many industries faced volatility in navigating a socially distanced or online workplace format. For those who continued to work, especially in fields where functioning online was not a feasible option, there was a constant threat to safety and comfort for many during that time, particularly those who personally had or had family with health conditions. For many, work became stressful and scary, and to some, it even started to feel unrewarding or not worth it. As a result, many Americans completely stepped away from working, and employers began questioning how to retain and recruit talent.

Still, labor shortage is a palpable concern in many industries, and it has never been more challenging for the average employer to maintain stability. Now, in a weird turn of events, it appears as though the American employee has found itself back on top. Through the trials and tribulations of the pandemic, corporations and employers alike have realized the worth of obedient and good-natured employees. Unfortunately, many companies still suffered the loss of great talents due to concerns about the pandemic or fears of navigating through the unknown. Moving forward and looking beyond COVID-19, the goal of keeping employees happy and fulfilled has become a priority for many companies. Now corporations are analyzing the new normal and trying to determine what steps are necessary to take in order to make employees feel more engaged and valued.

In the post-pandemic world, the desires of employees have irrefutably shifted. Numerous things have been permanently altered in the wake of COVID-19, yet perhaps the most remarkable is the ongoing impact that has occurred on the workforce. In many cases, the day-to-day of employees has been forever changed and looks entirely different than before. In response, employees have also changed, and many are seeking more from their careers. In this paper, I

explore how the pandemic has reshaped the workforce, the key actors at play in the labor network, and how the various needs that employees seek have shifted over time. Additionally, I examine the challenges that have persisted following the pandemic and how these issues have affected the corporate environment within the United States. The primary factors that I address are the disparity between gender in the workplace, the disproportionate effect that COVID-19 has had on minorities, and the physical workspace changes that have resulted from the pandemic. Furthermore, I analyze the workforce system using Latour's actor-network theory. To understand the current labor trends, it is essential first to examine what the workplace entails.

Actor-Network Theory

During the pandemic, everyone was all in it together, regardless of whether they were employees or employers. It shifted how things were viewed and made clear that the complexity and meaning of labor were much more than many people had realized. It revealed that labor is far less straightforward than the recipe between the ingredient of work and the product of money. It is vastly complex, socially influenced, and intrinsically alive. It is not the product of what humans do but rather what drives us to do things. Just like the ideas reiterated in Actor-network theory (ANT), labor is an actor in the social network, much like the employer and employee. Actor-network theory is particularly relevant in this research, as everyone gained a sense of the intersectionality of their life, work, and colleagues during the pandemic. As all are equally influential on one another in the network, many truly learned that we either win together or lose together.

As Bruno Latour articulates in his 2005 work *Reassembling the Social*, each actor in the actor-network is subject to an immediate reaction if another actor takes action that disrupts the

synergy of the network. Latour articulates this point in the section titled “No work, no group” by saying, “However, the situation is entirely different for ANT because neither society nor the social exists in the first place. They have to be retraced by subtle changes in connecting non-social resources. Thus, every choice of a departure point will lead to the drawing of a completely different animal, fully incommensurable with the others” (Latour, 2005, p. 36). Considering the vast complexity, social influenceability, and innately living characteristics of labor, it is irrefutably one of the most important actors in the social network of the workplace. Identifying additional actors in the workplace and understanding the magnitude of impact that each has on the network is essential for exploring how the companies of today value and care for their employees.

In the framework of Actor-network theory, every actor has its own agency and effect on the rest of the network. In order to apply ANT to the realm of work, it is essential to consider both physical and non-physical influencers. Within the workplace, there are many elements, each with a mutually powerful impact on the working environment, and these factors determine the characteristics of how the network operates. Some of the prevalent non-physical actors within the workplace network are communication, engagement, and purpose. Each of these elements determines the nature of the workplace and how efficiently it can function as an entity. If any of these aspects experience alteration within the workplace, the entire network is subject to change. From a physical standpoint, the two main actors within the workplace are the employee and the employer. However, there are varying levels of autonomy within each of these groupings, which is not to suggest that any counterpart is more integral than another within the network. It simply means that some of the actors in the same category (i.e., employee A and employee B) have vastly different characteristics and functions within the network of the working environment.

Maintaining a harmonious equilibrium between the actors within the work network is vital for achieving a successful workplace.

Methods

To gather research, I conducted a comprehensive literature review using the UVA library's VIRGO platform. Furthermore, I used an additional library service offered through Radford University to gather a broader range of articles. In order to obtain relevant source material for the paper, I searched the keywords "employee retention," "workplace satisfaction," and "labor challenges" in conjunction with "COVID-19" and "pandemic." For the section regarding gender and employment, I used keywords such as "women in the workplace," "gender gap," and "family and childcare," along with "pandemic" and "COVID-19". Similarly, for the section on minorities in the workplace, I used the keywords "racial gap," "minority representation," and "race," which I searched along with the phrases "COVID-19", "pandemic," and "employment." The analysis consisted of reading each article and extracting relevant points, which were spread throughout the text. Generally, the results and conclusions sections were particularly useful. The date of publication was verified to be within the past ten years for each article used; however, this was not much of an issue considering how recent the pandemic is.

Gender and Employment During the Pandemic

Despite the plethora of negative consequences that resulted from the pandemic, it served as a mechanism for exposing the obstacles pertaining to equity in numerous systems. It clarified the conditions of hardship for many groups and highlighted the drastic inequalities of everyday life. One of the most profound effects of the pandemic was the impact that it had on the way in

which families operate (Yavorsky, 2021). Due to nationwide school and daycare closures, an increased burden was placed on many parents, as childcare responsibility fell upon working-class mothers and fathers (Yavorsky, 2021). Moreover, an even greater pressure was placed on women, as mothers were determined to be 1.5 times more likely to spend three hours or more on childcare or housework each day (Yavorsky, 2021). Furthermore, research indicates that 33% of employed mothers are reported to be the sole contributor of childcare for their family, as compared to 11% of employed fathers (Yavorsky, 2021). The increase in working from home posed additional complications for working parents, as many found it difficult to separate between the demands of their home and work life (Yavorsky, 2021). In the process of attempting to balance the responsibilities of work and home, many employees sacrificed their quality of work at the expense of multi-tasking (Yavorsky, 2021).

The coupled demand of childcare and work was exceptionally overwhelming for parents, and many chose to leave their work entirely. There was an observable disparity in the number of men and women who made this choice, as approximately 250,000 more mothers with children under the age of 13 chose to leave, as compared to fathers (Yavorsky, 2021). Between April 23 and July 21, 2020, there was a 5% increase in the number of women who were not working due to childcare requirements; however, there was no increase in the number of men who stopped working for this reason (Yavorsky, 2021). By July 2021, 32% of unemployed women aged 25-44 cited childcare demands as their reason for not working, compared to the 12% of unemployed men who claimed that reasoning (Yavorsky, 2021).

In terms of unemployment and job recovery following the pandemic, there was a disproportionate impact on men and women (Yavorsky, 2021). For instance, women experienced a higher degree of job loss as compared to men following the onset of COVID-19, yet only 43%

of the jobs added to the U.S. economy in September 2020 were occupied by women (Yavorsky, 2021). Additionally, the December 2020 payroll employment for women was 5.4 million lower than it had been in February 2020, contrary to the same figure being 4.4 million lower for men (Yavorsky, 2021). Women of color have particularly struggled following COVID-19, as their job recovery has been significantly slower than white men and women (Yavorsky, 2021). “These gendered (and racialized) patterns of job recovery may have far-reaching consequences for social inequalities because longer periods of unemployment are associated with food and housing insecurities, greater difficulties finding another job, and larger wage penalties when workers re-enter the labor market” (Yavorsky, 2021, p. 2).

Racial Disparities in Employment During the Pandemic

Just as the pandemic highlighted the disparity between gender within the workplace, it also revealed the disproportionate impact that minorities faced in the realm of employment following the onset of COVID-19. In order to quantify the effect on employees of color during the pandemic, Dias (2021) analyzed the discrepancy between white and non-white employees in terms of workforce representation, as well as the layoff probability for each group. The timeframe for this analysis spanned from January to August 2020 and used data for prime-working-age men and women (Dias, 2021). Between February and May 2020, the gap in employment between white and black men increased by 43.7% (Dias, 2021). The employment gap between white and Hispanic men more than doubled, as it jumped from -3.0% to +3.4% (Dias, 2021). Moreover, the disparity between employed white and Asian men increased by an even greater margin, at 2.3 times as much as it had previously been, changing from -3.8% to +4.7% (Dias, 2021). For women, many of the same trends held true, as white workers dominated

the spectrum of employment. The gap in employment between white and black women more than quadrupled, as it rose from 1.3% to 5.4% (Dias, 2021). Additionally, the racial gap between white and Hispanic women almost doubled, increasing from 6.3% to 12.2% (Dias, 2021). Lastly, the gap between white and Asian women experienced a 62% increase (Dias, 2021). Despite a continual rise in employment rates following economic recovery, the white vs. non-white employment gap was higher in August 2020 than it had been prior to COVID-19 for all demographics except between white and Asian women (Dias, 2021).

In addition to the widened gap between employment rates, minorities also faced higher threats of layoff during the pandemic. In the months following the outbreak of COVID-19, there was a 10.9% increase in layoff rates for black men (Dias, 2021). Similarly, the rates of layoff for Hispanic and Asian men increased by 12.3% and 12.2%, respectively (Dias, 2021). Conversely, the increase in the likelihood of being laid off was substantially lower for white men at 6.3% (Dias, 2021). White women were laid off at an increased rate of 10.2%, while black women were laid off at a 12.4% greater frequency (Dias, 2021). Furthermore, Asian and Hispanic women were laid off at the increased rates of 13.1% and 16.1%, respectively (Dias, 2021).

Emergence of Telecommunication

One of the most tremendous consequences of the Coronavirus was the unprecedented change in the setting where paid work was performed. Before the pandemic, approximately 25% of the labor force in the U.S. reported occasionally working from home (Yavorsky, 2021). As of May 2020, approximately 42% of the working class reported that they had been working at home full-time (Yavorsky, 2021). The establishment of hybrid work, which is defined as a mix of working from home and on-site, became exponentially more popular during the pandemic (see

Dowling et al., 2022). In a survey conducted by McKinsey & Co., 75% of respondents were determined to favor hybrid work, while 25% remained in support of traditional, on-site work (Dowling et al., 2022). Furthermore, non-binary employees had a 14% greater chance of choosing hybrid work, while disabled employees were 11% more likely to opt for this style of work (Dowling et al., 2022). LGBTQ+ employees were also discovered to have a 13% higher likelihood of preferring hybrid work (Dowling et al., 2022).

The normalcy of hybrid work has created an expectation for companies to maintain these options for their employees going forward and has even pushed employees away in cases where these desires would not continue to be met by companies. In fact, 71% of respondents who favored hybrid work claimed that they would search for another job if these work options were not maintained (Dowling et al., 2022). Specifically, younger employees (18-34 years old) were found to be 59% more likely to leave a non-hybrid job as compared to older employees (Dowling et al., 2022). Women were about 10% more likely to consider leaving a job without hybrid options, while non-binary identifying individuals had an 18% greater chance of making this decision (Dowling et al., 2022). Furthermore, black and LGBTQ+ employees who would not have hybrid work options were discovered to have a 14% and 24% greater chance of leaving their jobs, respectively (Dowling et al., 2022).

Workplace Engagement

Higher levels of workplace engagement correlate with benefitting both the organization and the employee; however, levels of engagement at work are a primary concern for many employers, even before COVID-19 (Wang, 2022). According to 2017 research data, only 33% of employees were reported to be actively engaged with their work (Wang, 2022). Moreover, 51%

of employees were determined to be unengaged with their work (meaning they were simply present), while 16% were found to be actively disengaged in their work (Wang, 2022).

Employers are now questioning how to promote workplace engagement and increase employee fulfillment. As of 2022, most workers were found to desire higher salaries; however, over two-thirds of employees claimed that they were in search of a greater sense of fulfillment at work (Wang, 2022). Based on employee feedback, work-life support, team building, and mutual respect were determined to be among the most sought-after areas of improvement in the work model (Dowling et al., 2022). Work-life support is an acknowledgment made by an employer to support the interests and duties that employees have outside of work (Dowling et al., 2022). Examples of work-life support include extended leave for parents, flexible schedules, and the option of working from home (Dowling et al., 2022). Additional areas of significance for employees are job security, opportunities for learning and development, and employee wellness (Wang, 2022).

From the perspective of the employer, there are many suggestions out there for how to keep employees best engaged. One recommendation is to establish clear timeframes in which communication is permitted and prohibited for the members of a company, to ensure that both employers and employees have a chance to disconnect entirely from their work (Wang, 2022). Given the constantly shifting work environment, experts suggest that teams perform routine check-ins to promote cohesion and to express any issues or concerns colleagues may have (Wang, 2022). Furthermore, employers are encouraged to offer educational opportunities within the workplace to ensure that employees remain well-trained and have a competitive edge (Wang, 2022). Additionally, a suggestion for boosting employee engagement is to incentivize employees with rewards that have meaning, such as respect, praise, and recognition (Wang, 2022). Another

idea is to personally cater engagement strategies for each employee by considering what motivates them in the workplace (Wang, 2022).

There are also several recommendations for behaviors that employers should avoid entirely. The first suggestion is to refrain from using inauthentic or over-generalized expressions of gratitude, as these can come across as meaningless or non-genuine to employees (Roberts Gibson, O'Leary, Weintraub, 2020). Another mistake that managers should avoid is neglecting the standard procedures of a company, such as annual reviews, check-ins, and employee award nominations (Roberts Gibson, O'Leary, Weintraub, 2020). Generally, employees greatly benefit from these activities being prioritized and feel undervalued in cases where they are disregarded (Roberts Gibson, O'Leary, Weintraub, 2020). Another proposition is to avoid creating isolative situations within a company in which employees feel that they lack connection with the rest of their team (Roberts Gibson, O'Leary, Weintraub, 2020). Instead, employers should consistently remind employees of their skills and value, as well as the redeeming qualities that other members of their team possess (Roberts Gibson, O'Leary, Weintraub, 2020). Lastly, managers should mitigate inconsistencies in how they communicate appreciation, as this can be off-putting and confusing for employees (Roberts Gibson, O'Leary, Weintraub, 2020). In cases of overcompensating for past shortcomings, employees often see through these tactics and regard these actions as offensive and insincere (Roberts Gibson, O'Leary, Weintraub, 2020).

Analysis and Discussion

The spectrum of labor in the United States is a matter that touches the lives of most; however, the COVID-19 pandemic created an entirely new reality of work for numerous industries. As a result, it is critical to examine the shifts that occurred following the COVID-19

pandemic. Some of these factors are directly related to people, while other changes had a more significant impact on the physical working environment. Upon researching the transformations that occurred following the outbreak of the pandemic, it is highly apparent that many groups struggled far more than others. The two primary demographics that faced significant marginalization in the labor market following the pandemic were racial minorities and women. The significantly higher rates of unemployment and layoff for employees of color suggest that considerable discrimination occurred with respect to the labor practices of many companies during the pandemic. The disparities in the employment of white versus non-white members of the workforce following the onset of COVID-19 are profound and suggest that employers were basing their decisions of hiring and layoff upon race. Additionally, the probability of being laid off was considerably higher for black, Asian, and Hispanic employees, suggesting that these groups were targeted more in terms of job reductions.

There was also a significant impact on women during this time, as many female workers were obligated to leave their jobs due to the demands of childcare or family responsibilities. For many of the women who continued to work, the burden of balancing a career and family was extremely taxing and resulted in a moderated ability to perform these combined obligations effectively. With heightened rates of employment following the nation's economic recovery, women continued to struggle, emphasizing the need for increased support of working mothers. Additionally, the increased role of telecommunication in the workforce suggests that employers need to maintain flexibility for their workers and cater to the individual needs of employees. Lastly, it is essential for employees to feel engaged with their jobs, which is achievable through personalized and communicative management styles. The elements of gender, race, communication, and engagement all have an immeasurable influence on the working

environment and modify perceptions of the structures relating to work. As shown through actor-network theory, it clarifies how interconnected these features are with the workplace and emphasizes its subjectivity to change based on how these components coexist. By noting the factors of gender, race, communication, and engagement, it is apparent that each profoundly influences the operation of labor within the work setting. Practicing techniques that promote improved engagement, catering to the work-life needs of employees through telecommunication, and being aware of the increased marginalization faced by female and minority workers is incredibly vital for any employer and will be greatly beneficial to the labor industry if these conditions are better understood.

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