



TITLE: What were the employee experiences during the Covid-19 epidemic in a New Zealand tertiary educational institute?

Alan Lockyer (Primary Supervisor, Senior Lecturer, Senior Fellow)

Susan George (Unitec MAB Student)

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This session

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Introduction

- ▶ The outbreak of Covid-19 was first reported in New Zealand (NZ) and most other countries during late February 2020.
- ▶ This resulted in immediate action being taken by the NZ Government involving a series of lockdowns and border closures.
- ▶ Educational institutions in NZ had to quickly adapt to changes in where and how staff worked due to the lockdown rules.
- ▶ Students were instructed that they would be taught off-site and on-line using appropriate technologies.

Introduction

- ▶ This research was conducted after two years of NZ experiencing the initial Covid-19 epidemic.
- ▶ Data was collected by interviewing employees, some whom were managers, from seven departments and one school of a NZ educational institution.
- ▶ The data was collected using face to face semi-structured interviews. Ten participants were interviewed. The data analysis process involved both narrative and thematic approaches.

Introduction

- ▶ The research question for this study is:
- ▶ **What were the employee experiences following two years of the Covid-19 epidemic in a NZ tertiary educational institute?**
- ▶ **This research will be focusing on the following issues:**
- ▶ The key changes experienced in the workplace due to Covid-19;
- ▶ The types of support services provided (e.g., training, technology, new policies, other);
- ▶ Effectiveness of the communications to help staff adapt to the changes;

Introduction

- ▶ The level of difficulty or ease for staff to adjust to the changes;
- ▶ Staff preferences to working from home or being back in the workplace post lockdowns;
- ▶ Identifying the issues around job security, workloads, staff resignations.

Motivation Behind The Research

- ▶ Research is lacking in this area of study considering the Covid-19 epidemic was a first to the world and staff who weren't used to working remotely had to learn very quickly.
- ▶ The aim of this research was to find out how staff coped during the Covid-19 lockdown in conducting their work off campus and on-line and in some cases using technology they might not have been familiar with e.g., Zoom.

Literature Review

- ▶ The global Covid 19 pandemic has been catastrophic and has instigated lockdowns and border closures throughout the world.
- ▶ During the lockdowns educational institutions globally had to quickly come up with changes in how they kept their employees safe and how they would deliver their services to their students in midst of the crisis.
- ▶ These changes needed to follow newly designed government Covid-19 regulations and guidelines in respect of keeping its citizens, employees and students safe.
- ▶ Using new technology and working remotely was forced to be adopted in almost all businesses and higher educational institutions throughout the world.

Literature Review

▶ **Remote working**

- ▶ This became a common theme once the Covid-19 pandemic spread worldwide. When New Zealand recorded its first coronavirus case in February 2020 (Abernethy, 2020), most NZ organisations followed suit for remote work within a week (Carroll, 2020) to respond to the New Zealand government's lockdown announcement.
- ▶ Traditionally, working from home was not welcomed by management and some employees, due to the nature of the work and other aspects such as lack of social interaction and technological constraints. But, with the covid pandemic, this change was forced upon people, and many organizations and educational institutions went on-line within weeks (Green et al., 2020).



Literature Review

- ▶ **Pros and cons of remote working:**
- ▶ There are mixed employee views regarding working from home as a result of the pandemic. Some welcomed this as it provides flexibility and more time to spend at home with kids, while others considered these matters in a negative way.
- ▶ The negativity arises from being technologically disadvantaged, lack of infrastructure and not having quiet workspaces at home, possible work-home conflict, increased workload leading to stress and burnout, other reasons (Eddleston & Mulki, 2015). All this can build up and lead to mental health issues (Garner, 2022). Lack of social interaction and loneliness (Guta, 2020).

Methodology Approaches

- ▶ The data was collected using face to face semi-structured interviews.
- ▶ Ten participants from a large New Zealand educational institution were interviewed.
- ▶ Participants were selected from 7 departments and 1 school.
- ▶ The specific departments and school were not be disclosed in this research due to confidentiality.
- ▶ Four of the 10 participants were managers.
- ▶ The data analysis process involved both narrative and thematic approaches.

Results and Discussion

► Q 1: What were the key changes you experienced due to Covid-19 in your workplace?

Changes experienced	Key comments
Remote working	<p>*All participants agreed it was the most significant change experienced.</p> <p>*7 participants admitted being digitally savvy so using technology/digital sources so not too challenging.</p> <p>*One week to transition from the workplace to working at home.</p> <p>1/10 participants), became a huge shock, was challenging to learn and do on-line work that involved all team members, attend virtual meetings and supporting students with on-line devices.</p>
Technology	<p>*All participants experienced a need to adapt to using technology in such a short time.</p> <p>*1 participant stated the staff new change was coming so staff were trained in Zoom.</p> <p>*Becoming familiar with new ways of doing things (7/10), going from face to face to on-line was challenging,</p> <p>Developing on-line tutorials and workshops to help students was time-consuming but students used them and they gained popularity (1/10).</p> <p>Hence, staff were generally confident with learning new technology to enable remote working.</p>
Social interaction	<p>*All participants agreed-Lack of physical social interaction with peers due to remote working, was replaced with daily on-line meetings during early stages, helped keep team together, enabled assisting each other in how to adapt to working remotely.</p> <p>3 participants stipulated that on-line weekly meetings kept team members connected, share information, discuss issues, kept up to date.</p>

Results and Discussion

- ▶ **Q 2: What support services (e.g., psychological, training, technology, new policies, etc.) were provided by your organisation to help you adapt to the changes?**

Support Services Provided	Key comments
General Statement	*All participants agreed the organisation provided great support to ensure staff and students could adapt to changes with ease.
Well-being	<p>*All commented about HR made calls to enquire about personal and professional well-being during initial stages of the first lockdown period.</p> <p>Psychological well-being was the central focus (1/10). Many staff were called to check on their coping capabilities due to changes in how and where they worked (1/10). Just talking to someone helped and made it seem that someone cared and this was motivating (1/10). 4/10 mentioned the organisation provided counselling through Employee Assistance Programmes and on-line well-being seminars.</p>
Policy Changes	<p>*1 participant mentioned a new special sick leave allowance-20 days extra if staff member or family member tested positive for covid-19.</p> <p>*A more flexible policy shift involving blended learning (teaching on-line and on-site) once the first lockdown was lifted. This involved discussion with the teaching staff to get agreement. More face to face with undergraduate diploma courses but more on-line teaching with 600 and 700 level undergraduate; and 800 and 900 level PG/Masters courses.</p>
Technological	<p>*All mentioned organisation provided equipment for staff to use remotely, including laptops, headsets, screens. Some participants mentioned staff training for using digital technology e.g., Zoom, Microsoft teams, some staff trained themselves/consulted specific videos on you tube.</p> <p>2 participants said hybrid meeting rooms enabled staff to join meetings when at work and for those working remotely.</p>

Results and Discussion

► Q 3: Were the changes appropriately communicated to you to help you adapt to any changes?

Communication	Key comments
Issues with communication	<p>*3 participants stated that communication related to the Covid-19 vaccine was not communicated well.</p> <p>1/10 noted communication relating to vaccine mandate was vague. It was implied but not written down that it was mandatory. Student added they could not complete their enrolment for second semester for part-time studies because they did not have a vaccine pass.</p> <p>1/10 stated that mostly changes communicated by managers but that become less and we struggled to receive the information needed.</p> <p>1/10 commented they did not have enough information to pass onto staff. Focusing on problems as they happened.</p> <p>Lecturer: Hands-on practical courses were challenging for remote learners. Some schools could choose their own schedules but this was not communicated to all schools.</p>
Regularity of communication	<p>*Lecturer: reported regular updates about changes communicated as e-newsletters, e-mails.</p>

Results and Discussion

► Q 4: What was the level of difficulty or ease for staff to adjust to the changes?

Adjustment to change	Key comments
Pros of remote working	<p>*Flexibility: All participants agreed remote working enabled flexibility and freedom of how to conduct their work.</p> <p>*5/10 realised how much work they could do remotely on-line.</p> <p>8Trust between managers and staff: Remote working provided limited micromanagement leading to a shift in mindset, more trust in staff and more acceptance of personal circumstances. More concentrated work time: Some managers agreed remote working helped them concentrate on their work, getting things done more quickly without distractions.</p> <p>Better time management: All stated they could do more engaging activities since time was saved by not having to commute.</p> <p>Exercise: Working remotely enabled time for working and exercising by going for walks both during the day and evening.</p> <p>Covid-19 instigated remote teaching: A lecturer stated the Covid-19 epidemic changed some people's mindset to enable staff to work remotely on-line and brought their thinking into the 21st century.</p>
Cons of remote working	<p>*Home environment issues: Remote working difficult for participants who lived alone and those who had young children. Two participants found it hard to motivate themselves working from home and being sociable people. Another participant was tired of attending meetings on-line.</p> <p>Training issues: 1 participant stated it was not possible to train new staff remotely and on-line, especially a team which needed physical equipment.</p>

Results and Discussion

- ▶ Q 5: On reflection of the pandemic is there a preference to working from home or being back at work?

Working preferences	Key comments
Hybrid working	<p>*Aftermath: All participants agreed they prefer a hybrid working environment due to Covid-19 creating the opportunity to work from home. And, regardless of working from home or at work, their job still needed to get done.</p> <p>*5 participants stated coming on campus enabled spending time together and doing work that required a physical presence. Whilst working from home enabled them to get work done that required absolute concentration without being distracted.</p> <p>3 staff mentioned that their teams are split, so when working from home enabled them to also deal with personal responsibilities such as looking after their children returning from school.</p>

Results and Discussion

► Q6: Were there any issues concerning own job security, workloads and staff resignations?

Any issues concerning:	Key comments
Own job security	<p>4 staff had worked for the organisation for a long time, were experienced in what they did, <u>had been through many changes and were not worried about their job security.</u></p> <p>Some staff were planning to save money in case they lost their job. Some team members were not concerned about their job security.</p> <p>One participant manager was willing to leave their job to sacrifice other staff and save the organisation money.</p>
Own workload	<p>Most participants agreed <u>there was an increase in their workload because of adapting to new ways of doing their work</u> including carrying out new responsibilities because of staff who had resigned.</p> <p>Other departments had reduced workloads for some staff but they were given more work from other departments who needed the help.</p>
Staff resignations	<p>6 participants mentioned <u>some team members had left.</u> Their responsibilities were shared among other staff. This would have been a result of the institutions attrition stance to save on labour costs. Others were relocated to other departments. Some staff who were <u>given other work opportunities elsewhere left.</u> Some left because of the unknown surrounding Te Pukenga.</p> <p>Another participant knew of someone who was asked to leave because they would not get vaccinated.</p>
Cost cutting	<p><u>Cost cutting was mentioned by all participants as a result of revenue decline due to a large reduction in international students (down 30% at the time)</u> because the border was closed by the government. It also caused <u>a cut in contractor numbers</u> in some areas of the business.</p>

Conclusions

- ▶ All the participants in this research agreed that they would prefer a hybrid working approach to be the workplace model. This is supported by the 2022 Global Benefits Attitude Survey findings that showed a large majority of employees preferred remote or hybrid work.
- ▶ Despite strong support for hybrid working, all participants did mention a lack of social interaction was a significant challenge of remote working, and flexibility is a major advantage. Even though online meetings tried to replace social interaction on campus, the disconnection feeling was experienced by participants. This is also supported by Ashenden (2021).
- ▶ This study found trust between managers and staff when working remotely. However, managers directed the usual protocol to staff where they expected the team to produce quality work and on time, irrespective of their personal challenges and where they work. Employees were still to be appraised based on the quality of what they produced.

Conclusions

- ▶ As significant consequence of Covid on staff was increased workload due to lengthy and more frequent online meetings and additional responsibilities to reduce costs when a staff or team member resigned and were not replaced. This is typical of most change involving staff reductions or resignations, creating a 'survivor syndrome' and is well reported in the literature (e.g., Cascio, 2019).
- ▶ Clear communication and frequent check-ins to ensure employees are not overworked during change is important for all staff and survivors should the current staffing numbers be reduced (Courtney, 2020). However, in this research, the frequent check-ins to ask if staff were coping only occurred when Covid first appeared/was reported, in March 2020.

Recommendations

- ▶ In this research and other research conducted on this issue, there is strong agreement that staff want to be given the option of working off-site. A hybrid working model needs to be designed, discussed, agreed to and signed off by managers and staff to enable it to be successfully implemented, respected by all staff, for it to be effective.
- ▶ In this research it was found that communication with staff happens only during the early stages when staff were working remotely. In future, communication during change needs to be stepped up and become more regular to check that staff are coping and if not, for what reasons, so that expert advice and help can be given without delay.

Future Research

- ▶ Future research is would be useful by researching what the business world has learnt in the important area of unplanned change and crisis management under the Covid-19 restrictions, and how it has impacted on staff and their levels of productivity and mental health. This needs to be conducted using a large sample size, include different industries within New Zealand and perhaps approaches taken by other countries.
- ▶ It would also be useful to find out because of Covid-19 restrictions, how national culture has had an influence on decision making, leadership, political systems and what staff wanted to change regarding their organisation's current policies, organisational culture, organisational strategy and structure.
- ▶ Revisit the same organisation in 1 years time to see if the proposed changes regarding working using a hybrid structure has been successfully implemented and whether staff are still in favour of flexibility both when and where they work. This can be conducted using a longitudinal study that uses a large sample size, preferably researching tertiary educational departments and schools.

THE END

▶ THANK YOU!

