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Introduction to the Virtual Special Issue

The COVID-19 Pandemic: What can we learn from past research in organizations and management?

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The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is having a profound impact on organizations across the world, as businesses and societies face their greatest challenges for many decades. Over the past 20 years, the *International Journal of Management Reviews* (IJMR) has published many reviews of research that bring together the key findings across important bodies of research relevant to understanding how organizations might confront grand challenges such as these. Reflecting on this work, we have chosen a number of recent reviews published in the journal which have relevance both for practitioners and scholars in the current crisis. We invited the authors of these papers to offer some comments, which we have drawn from in the discussion below.

In the first article published in 2018, Anna John and Thomas Lawton focus on the management of political risk from the perspective of state-owned and private enterprises contemplating foreign direct investment. In the context of today's global pandemic, their recommendations remain relevant, for instance, to organizations involved in aid operations. Such organizations transfer financial and non-financial resources across borders, and an ability to navigate political risk is intrinsic to the successful completion of their missions. Inherent in this risk is the need to reconcile the urgency of delivering relief operations on the ground in-country with the need to retain autonomy and avoid dependence on local political agents and geopolitical powers. The three approaches they advance to manage political risk are highly relevant in the COVID-19 context (John & Lawton, 2018). In particular, they note, "as political environments in many countries have become volatile and are destabilized by the pandemic and its emergent economic and social fallout, the proactive resources and capabilities approach may be the best bet for the endurance of many organizations. By contrast, the institutional approach should be used with caution. First, it might lead to withdrawal from countries that have adopted stricter lockdown regimes, such as the closure of frontiers for traveling and tighter migration controls, to prevent the further spread of the coronavirus. These are often countries with challenging natural conditions (e.g. Russia), as well as countries that have recently suffered devastating natural disasters (e.g. the cyclones Idai and Kenneth in Mozambique). Second, survival through institutional embeddedness may be challenging now due to institutional liminality—the situation where the existing institutional arrangements have proved to be futile, but their substitutes are not yet in place. Third, obedience to rules and regulations is required but it is no longer sufficient for survival. For example, as some governments introduced lockdown measures, many or most of their businesses and other organizations had to suspend operations. Despite generous government support for employees of these organizations in advanced economies such as the UK and France, the availability of this support is time limited. Therefore, the passive reliance of businesses on governments does not guarantee survival."

Finally, the authors argue that the resource dependence approach may be useful for identifying new opportunities where the pandemic has varying effects across a nation. This may be the case of larger countries such as Brazil, India or South Africa, which span several climatic zones, possibly a factor contributing to regional differences in susceptibility to the virus. It may be essential to find ways of working with leaders of local communities to make sense of their priorities in this period.

The ability of organizations to respond to external threats, such as COVID-19, is linked with the notion of resilience, and Martina Linnenluecke reviewed research in this area in 2017. She points to differences in how resilience is conceptualised across research streams, and highlights the need to develop generalizable principles for developing resilience (Linnenluecke, 2017). Linnenluecke identifies three important factors for building resilience in the face of such massive external uncertainty. First, organizations need to develop adaptive business models. Such adaptability allows for rapid innovation, such as distilleries shifting to produce hand sanitiser following the onset of the current crisis or organizations implementing online/remote/contactless options as they adjust to the "new normal". Second, global supply chains need to be resilient, and the pandemic has highlighted weaknesses in these. Third, resilience depends on the strength of employees, such as those in frontline healthcare and the food supply chain in recent months. Linnenluecke notes that resilience often requires substantial investment during normal times, and different degrees of preparation are reflected in the performances of different countries as they tackle the unfolding crisis. She argues that "countries with higher levels of resilience are those with better health care systems (e.g., Germany), disaster preparedness plans (e.g., Singapore) and decisive leadership (e.g., New Zealand), which has flow-on effects to the resilience of the private sector".

The ability of firms to adapt to fast-changing environments is also discussed in the 2015 review of organizational improvisation by Allègre Hadida, William Tarvainen and Jed Rose. Their examination of the processes of improvisation across levels, including the individual, interpersonal and organizational, has particular relevance in the current environment (Hadida, Tarvainen & Rose, 2015). The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in organizations facing new business challenges, with individual employees adapting to new ways of working, and interpersonal interactions and relationships being profoundly altered. The challenge facing organizations today is how to manage processes of improvisation across all levels simultaneously.

Leadership during the COVID-19 crisis has been brought to the fore in both political and organizational settings, and Marian Iszatt-White and Steve Kempster's 2019 review of authentic leadership is particularly apposite. They problematize the issue of self-awareness and relational transparency connected with the homespun technology and family interruptions we see in current communications with our leaders (Iszatt-White & Kempster, 2019). This reflects a shift away from presenting oneself as "leaderly" in a professional and emotionally-managed way towards openly showing our humanity by allowing elements of our personal context to seep into our working world. The authors recently comment that, "the current crisis also highlights the questions surrounding the supposed ethical component of authentic leadership by offering us rich data on the complex and varied ways in which ethical decisions are being played out at every level of society. We see this from the macro-decisions concerning economic collapse versus NHS capacity, right down to our own individual decisions about how strictly we are willing to observe the lockdown and what personal priorities might justify us in bending the rules. Our call for a radical return to the existentialist and practice-based roots of authenticity as a strategic platform for a better understanding of authentic leadership as a practice-based phenomenon has rich resonance with our present need to understand who to trust and where to find reassurance in the current crisis".

The current crisis has had a significant impact on the way in which we all interact and communicate, and in 2011 Angelika Zimmerman reviewed research on interpersonal relationships in transnational virtual teams (Zimmerman, 2011). Lockdown has resulted in communications shifting online, and there is potentially much that can be learned from transnational virtual teams, as this has been their predominant mode of collaboration for some time. Zimmermann's review thus provides important lessons for improving virtual collaborations both across and within national borders. Her paper suggests that reliance on virtual communication makes strong interpersonal relationships particularly important, but at the same time particularly hard to achieve in virtual teams, and even more so if national boundaries must be crossed. Besides virtuality and national differences, relationship configurations are seen to be shaped by team leadership, shared goals, and degree of task interdependence between virtual team members. Within the organizational context, organizational culture, localisation- and integration strategies, interdependence between firm units, and supporting human resource practices are influential; and relationships between countries are relevant drivers in the socio-political context. Zimmermann's paper can assist managers in implementing key drivers to yield beneficial relationship configurations, helping to optimise the performance of virtual collaborations at present and in the future.

Karina Van De Voorde, Jaap Paauwe and Marc Van Veldhoven turn their attention to the question of how HRM can foster both individual well-being and higher levels of performance. They note that, "many organizations currently face significant challenges with securing continuity, adding economic value and/or increasing labour productivity while simultaneously safeguarding the well-being of their employees during and after the COVID-19 pandemic."

Reviewing the empirical evidence about how HRM activities can contribute to both employee well-being and organizational performance in 2012, they conclude that, "it is important to consider various aspects of employee well-being, such as happiness, trust and health in trying to optimally balance management and employee interests and in minimizing any trade-offs which exist between them." They show that HRM activities have a positive effect on different aspects of organizational performance (including productivity, profits, customer satisfaction) through establishing positive employee happiness and social well-being effects (including commitment and trust) (Van De Voorde, Paauwe & Van Veldhoven, 2012). However, they also conclude that the same HRM activites tend to negatively affect health-related well-being (including exhaustion, stress, and burnout) of the workforce.

In the context of the current pandemic, their 2012 paper suggests that organizations may be facing different scenarios, and hence different trade-offs. “One scenario can be found in organizations that are threatened in their continuity by the Corona crisis. These organizations may need to carry out cost-cutting actions involving reducing labor costs (for instance by freezing hiring and wages, reducing training budgets, lay-offs as well as reducing contracted working hours) rather than making long-term investments in their employees to survive this crisis.” Following the findings of their review, they argue that, “management needs to be aware that in this situation the short-term performance gains from lowering investments in HRM might come at the costs of reduced happiness and social well-being of employees. If such investments concern critical skills and abilities that employees need to cope with the crisis, the lack of investments might also entail reduced health. Another scenario is likely to be found in organizational contexts where the Corona crisis causes an increased demand, for example in the health care sector and in manufacturing of medical equipment and supplies. Here, the potential risk of the current pandemic is reduced health well-being because of the intensification of work or - in some cases - even the dramatic increased exposure to the virus because of a lack of adequate protection.” Hence, the authors argue that it is vital to consider how to manage the trade-off between short-term measures, with the likelihood of damaging effects for the well-being of employees and long-term measures in order to safeguard survival, positive morale among staff and employees’ health.

Michael Zanko and Patrick Dawson reviewed the literature on occupational health and safety in organizations (Zanko & Dawson, 2012), an issue which again comes to the fore during the current COVID-19 crisis. Never more so than in a COVID-19 world, organizations must address a range of new arrangements and procedures to minimize risk and maximize safe working practices. The authors recently note that, “tentative pandemic preparations may be present in a small number of companies but, for many, this is a novel situation requiring rapid adaptation and significant change. Practical actions organizations are taking include restrictions on nonessential travel, greater flexibility on working arrangements (home working), adequate resourcing (masks, hand sanitizer), training and information to raise awareness, illness notification, a robust monitoring system, and emergency response procedures in case of an outbreak… However, in all circumstances, planning, implementing and monitoring new arrangements and practices that support the well-being, health and safety of people at work, including non-payroll stakeholders (visitors, customers, volunteers), is essential. Organizations should clearly define responsibility for each ongoing aspect as well as establish interim emergency procedures for response and recovery. The studies that arise in the face and aftermath of this pandemic need to take context seriously, and we would argue, that process oriented approaches are best suited for understanding the effects of COVID-19 in developing theory and practice on OHS management in organizations."

Finally, as a research community, the COVID-19 crisis presents considerable challenges for all of us, as we adapt to this, and prepare for the next crisis, there are important lessons to be learned. David Buchanan and David Denyer (2013) foresaw many of these in their review of methodological innovations in researching crises. In their paper, they stressed the need for longitudinal studies of crisis management, with the researcher becoming both detective and historian as they track the crises through stages of incubation, event, crisis response, investigation, organizational learning, and implementation of lessons (Buchanan & Denyer, 2013). The authors comment that, "this pandemic gave researchers the opportunity to explore how the crisis was managed over time in different jurisdictions. Some commentators and political figures sought to attribute blame for this crisis to a limited number of issues, agencies, or countries. Conjunctural reasoning takes a process perspective, looking at how many factors at different levels of analysis combine and interact over time to influence the shape and outcomes of a crisis". In this process, the researcher needs to be skilled in managing information overload and weighing the evidence including 'fake news' and disinformation. The authors further note that "it will be interesting to monitor whether and how recommended actions are implemented. Much is known about crisis leadership, but it seems that in some settings this pandemic was poorly managed, and crisis leadership capabilities were absent. A further argument from 'tomorrow's crisis' concerns action to strengthen links between research and practice in this field."

As a journal, IJMR welcomes reviews that address important issues facing organizations today and into the future. A common feature highlighted by authors across these papers is the need for research to adopt a multi-disciplinary approach in the study of grand challenges, such as the COVID-19 crisis. As a journal we have called for reviews which take such a multi-disciplinary approach (Jones & Gatrell, 2014; Gatrell & Breslin, 2017). In concluding this editorial, we would like to quote the words of one of our authors Martina Linnenluecke, "we know from the best available scientific predictions that there is an urgency to act on a multitude of grand challenges, including global health challenges, lowering our impact on the environment and the urgent need to address climate change to lower the risk of devastating large-scale disasters such as the bushfires. We should listen”.

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