

COVID In The Workplace

Introduction

The way people interacted with each other in the workplace completely changed with the introduction of the coronavirus. Life changed as we know it. Everyone was forced to learn new ways to interact with themselves and their coworkers. This was also the case for Jean McClelland, a manager at a beauty supply company. With the hit of COVID-19, adjusting to a new normal was very difficult. Online sales increased, and in person sales decreased with consumers not going out because of quarantine. The IT department behind all the store and loyalty program systems had changed. Layoffs and managerial changes were also in effect. Mrs. McClelland was not foreign to these changes herself. Everyone in the business and academic world had to adjust to our new normal. The way we communicated, and learned completely changed. A lot of businesses had employees that are used to collaborating in the workplace suddenly working online, and communication styles changed. Mrs. McClelland's team are all in IT, so working alone was not a new concept to them. However, the convenience of getting up and walking to another team member to quickly ask for information disappeared. Instant information and help came slower, having to message, screen share and set up separate meetings to go over topics that take less than 5 minutes. Navigating this change is something her employees and Mrs. McClelland had to do to accommodate new and old learning styles. Our team chose her because of the leadership she showed to her team, bringing them together in times of uncertainty. Although motivation was low, work quality was high. This was inspiring to us and motivated us to ask her methods of management and leadership. The relationship between the team and the manager is a family friend.

Methods

Mrs. Jean McClelland is an IT Application Manager at a Retail Trade store. She is a 53 years old Caucasian/White female who has been working in this organization for 6 years. She works 50 hours per week and as mentioned earlier she holds a managerial position. As a manager she has to organize many things and manage employees who work under her. She has to work with her team in order to reach performance goals and overall growth of the company. She leads a team of 9 employees and she has to work with them on a daily basis. Her organization has a total 27,000 employees and it is a US based organization which is implanted in 52 states. The organization is also implanted in 12 other countries other than the United States. As an interviewer our group members found Mrs. McClelland to be very friendly, well spoken, open minded, outgoing and confident. We chose her as an interviewee because she was the current manager of one of our group members and also because of her being a manager at a retail company. Managers from retail companies have a lot of experience in many sections, they know how to keep their employees satisfied and also how to keep their customers satisfied. The way Mrs. McClelland managed her team during COVID shows a lot about her personality and her leadership styles. She communicated with her team members when everything became virtual,

she gave her employees enough time and space to adapt with the new change, she used new technologies to make the communication process better and kept her employees satisfied by understanding their situations. As an interviewer we saw that she had a clear communication style with her employees, she understood that everyone has a life outside of work and this pandemic was hit hard on everyone. When employees feel that they are heard and understood, they tend to stick to the company more, their performance becomes better and job satisfaction increases. We definitely perceived her as a manager who has good leadership skills, who has situational strength based on her managing the team at a critical time and someone who does not have a communication barrier with her employees.

Our group members analyzed all the 6 steps in order to develop the thematic map. Our group member Asha familiarized with the data to come up with the initial ideas. All of the group members worked together to find the initial theme of the data and we all agreed that the main theme was working during COVID. Jaylen, Tasnim and Alphonse generated initial codes and we found out that initial codes are pros and cons of working during COVID, learning different tools, communication, employee satisfaction, diversity, switching to remote working, managing team members and workload. All the group members together found out the themes by collating codes into potential themes and gathered all data relevant to each theme. Jaylen, Asha, Alphonse defined and named the themes, they generated clear definitions, named each theme and analyzed the overall story. We divided all the named themes and added them one by one on the map. While adding Tasnim was re-reading the data to find out if there are any more important points that we are missing. Our initial map was not that different from the final map as we covered most of the things on the initial map. We changed the layout of the map and added two extra points. Those extra points were our manager talking about how to keep her employees satisfied and also the topic of diversity. Initial obstacle was to find out how our manager's workplace is different from what it used to be before COVID as we mostly talked about how her workplace changed during COVID. Since the main theme of the interview was changes in workplace during COVID we only got to know what are the things that they struggled with during COVID. But when we went through the data more we got to know how shorter commutes helped our manager, how many employees became more flexible at working and how all of them got to spend time with their families more. So initially we mostly saw the Cons but later on we found out many Pros also.

Results

After interviewing and analyzing the responses, we gained a very in-depth depiction of McClelland's experience working in Information Technology. McClelland's position title is IT Applications Manager, in which she coordinates and manages a team of employees. Her position comes with many responsibilities. When asked about some of the main challenges that she and her team encounter, McClelland states, "...being able to manage and juggle everything that the business throws at us on a daily basis." (5) Her organization's approach to these issues is to shift priority amongst main and small projects. According to McClelland, the organization's approach

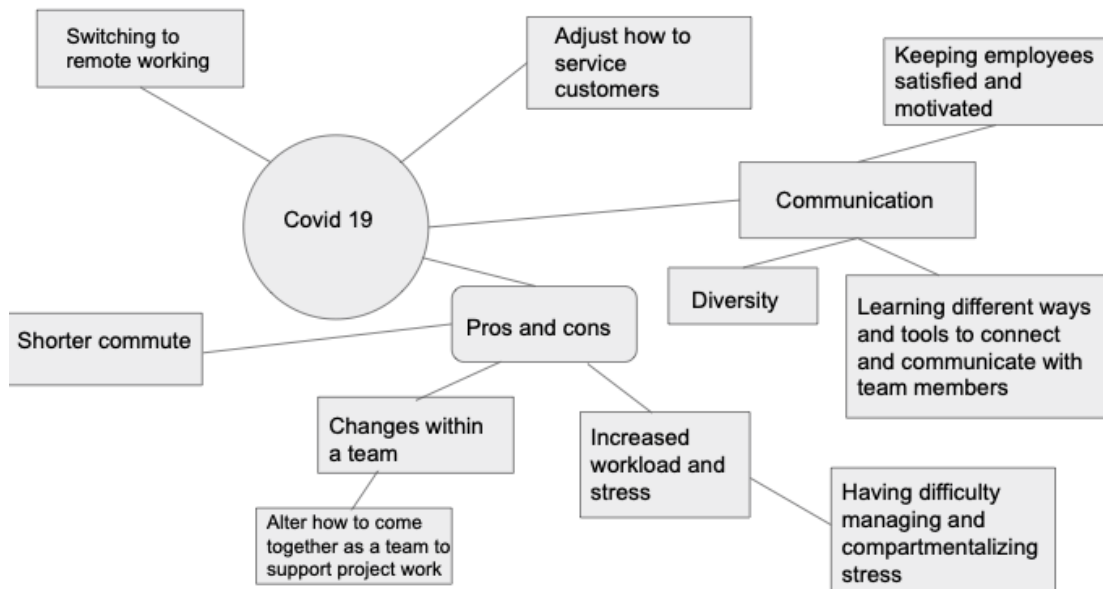
can cause time concerns. She states, "Let's say we want to accomplish 4 main projects...throughout the year priority shifts and a lot of small projects come up...sometimes that pushes back the main projects that we're trying to work on." (7) McClelland also mentions, "To handle the extra things that come in...we have to constantly go back to the business and reprioritize things as the year moves on." (10)

This issue of having a lot on her plate is a common theme regarding difficulties that she faces regularly. These difficulties were exacerbated by the pandemic. She specifically mentions how her team "had to adjust and make a lot of changes when COVID hit" (14) which we coded as our central theme. Due to COVID-19, many businesses had to resort to remote working, this included McClelland and her team. The way that she communicated with her team was severely impacted. McClelland states, "...One week we're in the office working together and we could meet in person and we could write things on a whiteboard...for the last year and a half we've been working remotely and it has certainly changed the way we communicate ." (23) As a result of resorting to remote working, McClelland and her team had to use different means to communicate and complete projects. McClelland related her team's adjustment to remote working to our (students) adjustment to remote learning. She relays, "...just like you guys have done with school work...you were forced to work remotely for a period of time as well and that has forced you to change how you learn and so the same thing with our teams." (31)

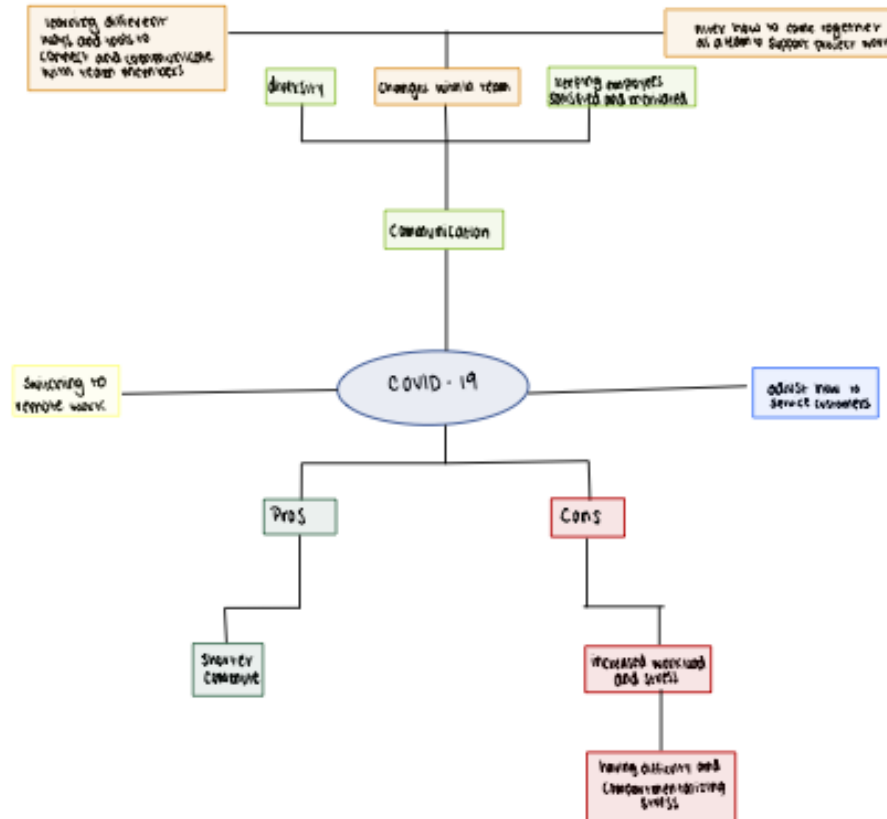
Another issue that McClelland and her team had to address was how they were going to adjust their service for their customers. Prior to the pandemic, McClelland's organization would service their customers like a typical retail store, "customer comes into the store and makes purchases or they purchase online." (38) However, in response to the pandemic, her organization had to consider alternative options to satisfy their customers' wants. McClelland states, "Do they pull up and we deliver the product to their car?... Do we ship items out of the store so the store personnel stay busy and they can get items to people a lot quicker?.." (39)

Alongside these issues come stress. Due to working remotely, McClelland's work life has mixed with her personal life, which has been a stressor for her. According to McClelland, during her hour commute to and from work, she would use that time to destress, however since her work is at home now, she has no time to destress. McClelland states, "...that commute gives you time to kind of destress and think...but now with COVID and having to switch from work to home immediately, there's no time where you can kind of decompress." (61)

Initial Thematic Map



Final Thematic Map



Discussion

As discussed in the results, the COVID pandemic can be tied to a majority of the challenges faced by the organization, which is why it is coded as our main central theme. Tied to this is one of our themes on communication which is one of the OB concepts discussed in class. Communication is the act and ability to exchange information and meaning between two parties. Communication was discussed extensively in chapter 8 with subtopics like different ways of communication, richness, verbal and nonverbal communication, all of which can be applied in this context. Due to the pandemic, McClelland's team had switched from working in person to working online in adherence to state policies. This switch changed a lot of how the team communicated with each other, relying more on e-communication like emails, online meetings and phone calls. McClelland even states that she herself that her workdays now consists of at least "8 to 13 meetings a day" and that she is "on the phone every single hour of the day." With this switch comes a lot of changes in the way that the team may interpret and comprehend messages from each other as well. For example, meeting online or through phone calls hinders a lot of the nonverbal cues that would've been picked up by the team if they met in person. The team would need to consider internet stability, application capabilities, background noises as well as any supplemental materials that need to be incorporated in the meeting (like PowerPoint slides) all of which take away from the main task at hand. This is because the richness, or the ability of the media (that being the electronic devices) to convey messages, doesn't compare to the ability to communicate in person. Having meetings at the office face to face eliminates a lot of distractions as opposed to working at home as stated by McClelland. Not only does the switch affect intergroup communication, it also affects the way the team interacts with customers as well in terms of getting products into the customer's hands in a safe manner.

It was mentioned during the interview with McClelland how stress-inducing the transition to accommodate for the COVID policies were for her team and the organization. This was coded as a sub-theme for stress and stress management. Stress management is also an OB concept discussed in class during chapter 7, consisting of subtopics such as potential work related stresses and methods of managing stress. Stress is an urge to fight or flee in response to environmental pressures termed as a stressor. Regardless of the workload, any job will always have its inherent stresses and that remains true in McClelland's position as well. Her stress comes mainly from leading and juggling many small projects that require a lot of multitasking and micromanaging, especially considering the changes COVID brought upon her. She also experiences role stressors as McClelland is a mom of two kids. Having her work from home makes this role stressor more apparent as it is harder to separate work life from her personal life. It is then important to manage this stress in hopes that it doesn't lead to bigger, personal issues like employee burnout. McClelland states that she actually used to recollect herself during her long commutes to work. However, since COVID, she doesn't have any more time to decompress because of the switch from in person to online, rendering the need to commute to work pointless. Additionally, her organization doesn't provide as many opportunities to relax beyond the normal lunch breaks and a nature area where employees can reside for their break. This is important

because her current situation doesn't allow for stress management. Excessive amounts of negative stress can lead to employee burnout and eventually, decreased motivation and performance. This harms the productivity and quality of work not only for her team but for the organization as well which is why it shouldn't go on unaddressed.

While the organization doesn't have many resources for employees to use to destress, this doesn't necessarily imply that McClelland's team motivation is lackluster. The next OB topic that we have identified is employee motivation and satisfaction (coded as keeping employees motivated and satisfied). Employee motivation was discussed in chapter 5 with subtopics such as benefits of motivation, how to boost motivation in a group, and its ties to satisfaction, employee behavior and performance. Motivation is the willingness to act and perform in accordance with organization or team requirements. Especially in a team and organization, employee motivation should be a priority for managers, leaders and the organization as a whole because motivation is what gives employees a reason to not only to complete the task but also to go beyond what their job requires them to do. In theory, this would lead to efficient group work and cohesion, high productivity and high qualities of performance and it is pretty apparent that McClelland implements some strategies to help employees feel motivated to continue their work based on her responses and understanding of team management. She believes that while there are other components to employee motivation, employees are also motivated because "they're actually there during a paycheck" and "because it supports their lifestyle." This falls under Maslow's physiological needs and security needs. Employees work out of necessity to earn money to spend on their vast financial needs. McClelland also states that for employees, "they just want to feel appreciated" which can be tied to the upper three sections of Maslow's needs: belonging, esteem, and self-actualization needs. Employees want to feel a sense of belonging with their organization and be recognized for their achievements. Having leaders and managers evaluate and recognize quality work by their employees would make them feel more willing to work even harder in hopes to gain recognition and possibly even to advance in the organization.

Along with the subject of team management, we also included in our themes this idea of how the team comes together to support the overall project. We can make this connection between this and group cohesion. Teamwork and group cohesion was discussed in many different chapters, mainly in chapter 9 with subtopics consisting of cohesion, roles, and employee creativity. A team (though used interchangeably with group but has small differences) is a group of people with complementary skills and abilities to work towards a common goal or in this case, a project. Cohesion is how united or the degree of closeness the group is with each other. We can see some degree of cohesion to one of McClelland's responses when asked how she motivates her team. She states that she is "not much of a micro-manager," letting her team members "do what they need to do" as long as the work gets done. This is not only easier on herself, this is also easier on the employees as they don't have a manager supervising them while they work. This shows a decent degree of trust which plays an important part in cohesion. This team dynamic has proven to work for her team because everyone understands their roles, tasks and what is required of them when they're on the clock. This also allows for other things like

employee creativity not only in the way they work but also how they work. Employees can choose whenever they can take a break without any repercussions, they can set their schedule and order their tasks in the way they see fit for them. All of these points contribute to the freedom that employees have within the workplace, resulting in higher motivation, satisfaction and performance.

Along with teamwork and cohesion topics discussed in the interview, we have to also talk about how McClelland's managerial style played a role in bringing together the team. Leadership and management is discussed to a great extent in chapter 12 with topics like differences between a leader and a manager and types of leaderships. A leader is someone who guides and directs the behavior of their employees, providing suggestions and changes to problems that may arise. A manager however, is someone who advocates for the status quo, focusing on stability and day to day operations. It is important to highlight that the manager style isn't ineffective compared to a leader but it depends on the context of the role. We think McClelland's supervisor role falls under more of a manager style, overseeing projects passed down by the organization because of the nature of her role in overseeing projects. We also say this because of how she doesn't seek to micro manage her employees, allowing them to do however they please as long as deadlines are met and their work is being completed. We can also describe McClelland's manager style as being slightly transformative as well. This type of leadership goes beyond just simple work exchanges (unlike transactional which uses power and coercion) to bring about high performance. We can see this as well because of the way McClelland allows her employees to work the way they see fit. It is individualized, focusing on each employee's needs so that the team can get their tasks done.

Conclusion

After the interview with Mrs. Jean McClelland, we gathered a lot of useful information for our project. However, there are a few details about the OB concepts and theories that we did not go over with her. Therefore, for the future interview, we need to spend more time on research to come up with questions that relate to the topics we want to interview her about. One of the concepts we picked but we did not ask her was the performance concept, thus it makes it a little harder for our discussions. By doing more research and preparing in depth questions about OB concepts will make it easier for our management paper. We learned a lot about Mrs. Jean McClelland business and understood how hard it was for businesses during COVID time. From the material we learned in class we had an overall understanding of how business struggles with communication, stress and stress management, employee motivation and satisfaction, teamwork and group cohesion, and lastly leadership. Moreover, we learned a lot about communication, how to arrange the meeting with the time conflict. Also teamwork, how we divided tasks among the team members and made a great project at the end. Throughout this project, we learned a lot about our team members and it also improved our teamwork skills.

Appendices

APPENDIX A

Participant information and Consent form (to be signed)

Responsible Faculty: Dr. David Arena, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Management, Department of Management, College of Business, University of Texas at Arlington, 701 S W St, Arlington, TX 76010 (<https://blog.uta.edu/cob/management-department/dr-david-arena-jr/>). Contact: david.arena@uta.edu

Name(s) of student(s) conducting the interview: Asha Marla

What the study is about: The purpose of the interview is to help students of the course MANA3318 Managing Organizational Behavior to internalize the major concepts of the course by applying them to concrete experiences in the workplace. De-identified transcripts of the interviews will be transcribed. Results will be presented by students in an oral presentation and in a written report. Quotes or paraphrases will be used in the presentation and report. This research is done with a learning purpose and no professional consultancy will be provided. Oral presentations will be accessed only students enrolled in the course and the responsible Faculty, and written reports only by members of that group and the responsible Faculty.

What we will ask you to do: After having answered general questions online about yourself, your employment situation, and your organization, you will take part in a one-hour recorded interview, either face-to-face or by Skype, conducted by one or two undergraduate students. The questions cover various topics, such as demographics, your employment, organization's current challenges.

Risks and discomforts: Some of the questions may be considered personal, and thinking about them may cause some discomfort. You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to, if perceived as an intrusion on your privacy; however, there are no known harmful effects of participating in such an interview.

Benefits: There may be no direct benefit to individuals for their participation. Interviews can provide the opportunity to reflect on the current challenges you are facing at work.

Payment for participation: There is no payment for taking part in this interview.

Privacy/Confidentiality: The information collected during the interview will not be connected with your name at any time, and so your responses will be anonymous. You can decide if you are willing to share the name of your organization with students enrolled in the course, or if you prefer, it can be made anonymous (in that latter case, it would appear as "ORGANIZATION NAME" in the written transcription, and we will use a general description of the organization such as "an Italian restaurant with around 20 employees"). The interview recording will be destroyed at the end of the semester (Fall 2021) and only the anonymous written transcription will remain.

Taking part is voluntary: Your involvement in this research is completely voluntary. You may refuse to participate before the study begins, discontinue at any time, or skip any questions/procedures that you don't want to answer, with no penalty, and no impact on your relationship with the university or other organization or persons who may be involved with the research.

☒ I HAVE READ THIS INFORMATION AND I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDENT PROJECT.

Initials:

JM

Signature:

Jan McCluand
10/1/2021

APPENDIX B

Socio-demographic questions for the participant (to be completed)

Please answer the following questions. All of your responses will be kept confidential. Thank you!

About you:

1. What is your age in years? 53
2. Gender
 - a. Male
 - ☒ b. Female
 - c. Other/does not wish to answer
3. Which one of these groups best describes you?
 - a. Asian
 - b. African American/Black
 - ☒ c. Caucasian/White
 - d. Latino/Hispanic
 - e. Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native
 - f. Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
 - g. Multiracial

About your work:

4. What is your job title? IT Applications Manager
5. How long have you been working in your current organization? 6 year(s) and 0 month(s)
6. How many hours per week do you work? 50
7. Do you hold a managerial position? Yes
8. If #7 yes, do you lead ... a team? ... a department? Team
9. If #7 yes, how many employees are you managing? 9

About your organization:

10. How many employees are working in your organization? 27,000
11. Is your organization based or active in the U.S.? ☒ Yes ☐ No
12. If #11 yes, in how many U.S. states is your organization implanted? 52
13. In how many countries is your organization implanted? 18
14. What year was your organization founded? 1964
15. What industry does your organization belong to?
 - 1 Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting
 - 2 Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction
 - 3 Utilities
 - 4 Construction
 - 5 Manufacturing
 - 6 Wholesale Trade
 - ☒ 7 Retail Trade
 - 8 Transportation and Warehousing
 - 9 Information
 - 10 Finance and Insurance
 - 11 Real Estate and Rental and Leasing
 - 12 Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services
 - 13 Management of Companies and Enterprises

- 14 Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services
- 15 Educational Services
- 16 Health Care and Social Assistance
- 17 Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation
- 18 Accommodation and Food Services
- 19 Other Services (except Public Administration)
- 20 Public Administration

Do you agree to share the name of your organization with the students enrolled in the class? If yes, the name would appear in students' oral presentation and written report.

☐ Yes, the name of my organization is: _____

☒ No