

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the workforce: from psychological distress to the Great Resignation

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The COVID-19 pandemic resulted not only in the increased morbidity and mortality due to the virus but also in significant health, lifestyle, economic and societal changes. After the 2 years of the pandemic, there is a consensus that the mental health of the populations has been adversely affected, albeit to a varying degree in different demographic groups.¹ One of the important predictors of mental health difficulties has been a disruption of employment and income loss associated with country-wide lockdowns and restrictions. Previous research has focused particularly on the situation of healthcare workers. The demands of treating COVID-19 patients lead to significant levels of stress, burnout and symptoms of depression and anxiety among this group.² However, workers in other sectors also experienced significant increases in psychological distress. Among the most affected were workers in professional and technical industries, hospitality, customer service, small employers and self-employed as well as female workers.

The groups of workers that have experienced the largest increases in psychological distress share several characteristics. First, they were employed in occupations and industries heavily affected by the governmental measures to contain the pandemic, including lockdowns and facility closures. For example, 81% of businesses in the hospitality sector were temporarily closed and over 1,5 million hospitality workers were on furlough in the UK during the spring 2020 wave.³ Second, they were employed in occupations that cannot be performed remotely, including manufacturing, construction, hospitality, retail, and food services. Baker⁴ points out that approximately 75% of the US workforce is employed in such occupations and that these occupations tend to be lower-paid. Lastly, and related to the previous point, job and income loss along with the associated psychological impact has been concentrated among groups already vulnerable before the

pandemic.⁵ These groups include workers on zero-contract hours, those in the gig economy but also self-employed workers and small business owners. Governments spent considerable financial resources to protect businesses and workers from the financial shock resulting from the shutdown of the economy. For example, the price tag of the US CARES Act that included stimulus checks for households, enhanced unemployment benefits, and aid for small businesses and corporations was approximately 2.2 trillion dollars.⁶ The analysis by Donnelly and Farrina⁷ shows that supportive social policies indeed can weaken the link between income shocks and the worsening of mental health.

Given the adverse impact of employment loss on financial and psychological well-being, one would expect that workers will be motivated to return to their jobs as soon as the restrictions are relaxed. However, contrary to the expectations, at least some workers are reassessing their job and career options instead. Data from the Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey show that the monthly resignation rates in the United States during 2021 were the highest in the 20-year history and that the number of job openings far exceeds the number of hires.⁸ At the same time, workers were sharing online their frustration with working conditions during the pandemic, ranging from the lack of protective gear to virtual micromanagement or the impossibility of combining work demands with their children's remote schooling. For example, r/antiwork, a leftist subreddit criticising working conditions and employment, gained over 1 million new subscribers between January 2019 and February 2022, slightly decreasing in popularity only after an embarrassing Fox News interview with one of the subreddit moderators.⁹

Media has quickly picked up on this trend, dubbed the Great Resignation, and commentators, journalists and researchers have speculated about the reasons behind it. Some wonder whether the widespread uncertainty led workers to reassess their work and life priorities, consider alternatives they would have never thought of

before the pandemic, or simply realise that their work conditions have been unacceptable. With people being creatures of habit, only a major disruption of their routines may make them realise that their current situation is untenable and in need of revision.^{10 11} Paradoxically, despite the well-established link between unemployment and mental health difficulties, psychological factors such as burnout have often been mentioned as reasons for quitting.¹²

Of course, the Great Resignation may be just a short-lived trend amplified by media. We simply do not have enough data at this moment to make any conclusions on this matter. However, it illustrates just how complex and unpredictable the impact of the pandemic on the workforce and the workplace may be. The course of the pandemic has taught us a lesson about making hasty predictions. However, the events of the past 2 years resulted in such a disruption of the status quo, that the world of employment might be changed forever. The precise form of these changes will only unfold in the years to come.

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