



An Investigation into employees motivation during the COVID-19 pandemic at a single private Emergency Medical Services provider in Gauteng

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ABSTRACT

Background: Employee motivation has been identified as pivotal in every organisation, as it assists in the realisation of organisation's vision and mission. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented effect across the globe, which extended into personal and professional realms. It may be argued, though, that it had a compounding effect on healthcare providers. Despite healthcare organisations having a COVID-19 disaster response plan in place, the relationship between employees motivation and organisational performance has been poorly described. The aim of this research was to investigate and describe factors of motivation amongst emergency operations centre (EOC) employees during the COVID-19 pandemic at a single private emergency medical services (EMS) provider in Gauteng.

Methods: The sample included 110 EOC employees, and a probabilistic stratified sampling methodology was utilised. An electronic survey instrument was used to collect data. All recorded data were stored on Google® forms and extracted into an electronic data spreadsheet for analysis (Microsoft Excel®).

Results: A total of 87 participants responded, yielding a response rate of 79%. The majority of participants were between 25-35 years old (n=53), female (n=53), single (n=43), and had a higher certificate as their highest formal qualification (n=60). It was found that organisational reputation (87.4%), the sense of making a difference (87.4%), and job security (85.1%) were amongst the most prevalent motivational factors amongst EOC employees during the pandemic.

Conclusion: The results outline the importance of motivation in a disaster response plan. Employee's motivation should be prioritised and adequately managed in times of crisis. Based on the link between motivation and organisational performance, a failure to do so may have a negative impact on performance. Organisational reputation, the sense of making a difference, and job security were identified as key motivational factors.

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BACKGROUND

Employees are essential in achieving every organisation's mission, vision, and objectives. In an

age of decreasing talent, applicants and employers alike are looking to such factors as employee motivation when considering employment oppor-

tunities. The Corona Virus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) created many challenges in the workplace, economies, and life in general.¹⁻³ The pandemic's impact has changed the way we live and conduct business.^{1,3} It is also postulated that the pandemic had an adverse effect on healthcare providers' motivation. Despite organisations having disaster response plans in place, it has been noted that they do not incorporate such soft factors as employees' motivation. However, due to the link between employees' motivation and organisational performance,⁴ there is a need to investigate employee's motivation during COVID-19.

This study thus aimed to investigate emergency operations centre (EOC) employees' motivation during the COVID-19 pandemic at a single private emergency medical services (EMS) provider in Gauteng. The responsibilities of EMS personnel working in the EOC included taking and logging emergency calls, resource management, dispatching appropriate resources (ambulances, response vehicles, aeromedical and critical care retrieval resources), case management, telephonic medical consulting/advice, ensuring business continuity and employing strategies relating to new business development and continuity.

DESIGN AND METHODS

The research design was correlational and non-experimental, and the subject has been previously researched. For example, there is a known association between employee motivation and organisational performance. However, the relationship was poorly defined and had not been investigated at a single South African private EMS provider during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, variables were not manipulated, and participants were assigned to a single group. The design focused on identifying and discussing relationships, focusing on motivation.⁵

Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from a single private EMS provider (Reference UNIV-2020-0039). Thereafter, ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Regent Business School.

The methodology used to answer the research question incorporated an online electronic survey. The participants were rotational shift workers and could not all be met in person. An electronic survey thus assisted with the removal of barriers in geography, age and marginalisation.⁶

The questionnaire included questions that assisted in the identification and description of employees' motivation during the pandemic. The questionnaire also incorporated closed-ended ques-

tions/statements that required either Likert-scale or multiple-choice-type responses. The Likert-scale agreeability responses included strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree. The structured questionnaire took approximately 5-10 minutes for participants to complete, and data were collected for one week. All recorded data were stored on Google® forms and extracted into an electronic data spreadsheet for analysis (Microsoft® Excel®).

The target population for this research was all the EMS provider's employees, which amounted to 1300 employees nationally. The study sample included all employees at the EOC, as they were most accessible to the researcher. They comprised inbound call takers, outbound resource management coordinators (dispatchers), critical care operations coordinators (specialised dispatchers), and support services, including customer services and the technical department. All the EOC employees were approached to participate in the study, irrespective of their roles or responsibilities. An email containing a link to the electronic survey was sent to prospective participants. Participation was voluntary, and there were no negative implications should the participant/s elect not to participate. The research sampling strategy was probabilistic, and a stratified sampling technique was used.^{5,7}

RESULTS

Response rate

A total of 87 EOC employees consented to participate in the study (of the 110 comprising the sample). Despite aiming for a 100% response rate, factors such as absenteeism and unwillingness to participate may have affected the final response rate.

Demographics

A majority of the participants had a higher certificate as their highest formal qualification (n=60; 69%), had between 1-5 years of experience within the EOC (n=35; 40.2%), were female (n=53; 60.9%), between 25-35 years old (n=53; 60.9%), and worked within critical care operations dispatch (n=27; 31%). Further details are outlined in Table 1.

Factors of motivation

Generally, the participants agreed with the proposed factors of motivation outlined in Table 2. The motivational factors (Table 2) strongly agree and agree mean responses were 30.9% and 38.7%, respectively. The results consistently had a sum of the two responses, strongly agree and agree, >57%. Participant's responses are outlined in Table 2.

Table 1: Participant's Demographic Data

| <i>Variable</i> | n (%) |
|-----------------------|--------------|
| Qualification | |
| Higher Certificate | 60 (69) |
| Diploma | 14 (16.1) |
| Undergraduate Degree | 9 (10.3) |
| Postgraduate Diploma | 2 (2.3) |
| Masters Degree | 1 (1.1) |
| Doctoral Degree | 1 (1.1) |
| Experience | |
| < 1 year | 14 (16.1) |
| 1-5 years | 35 (41.2) |
| 6-10 years | 17 (19.5) |
| > 10 years | 21 (24.1) |
| Gender | |
| Female | 53 (60.9) |
| Male | 32 (36.8) |
| Not Disclosed | 2 (2.3) |
| Age | |
| < 25 years | 1 (1.1) |
| 25-35 years | 53 (60.9) |
| 36-45 years | 26 (19.9) |
| 46-55 years | 6 (6.9) |
| > 55 years | 1 (1.1) |
| Functional Department | |
| Inbound | 24 (17.6) |
| Outbound | 23 (26.4) |
| CCO | 27 (31) |
| Customer Services | 3 (3.4) |
| Technical | 1 (1.1) |
| EOC Management | 9 (10.3) |

CCO = Critical Care Operations, EOC = Emergency Operations Centre

The most prevalent factors of motivation (based on strongly agree and agree responses, cumulatively) during the COVID-19 pandemic amongst EOC personnel were organisational reputation (87.4%), the sense of making a difference (87.4%), and job security (85.1%). Further, employee's health and safety initiatives were also identified as a prominent factor of motivation during the pandemic.

There were also two outlier (strongly agree and agree cumulatively) factors of motivation, namely receipt of constructive feedback (48.2%) and employee's salaries (31%) during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to note, however, that the two outliers had almost equivocal neutral responses ([roughly equal]40%). Whilst 10.3% of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that constructive feedback was a motivational factor, 28.7% strongly disagreed or disagreed that their salaries were a source of motivation during the pandemic.

The implications are that feedback may not be commonplace or inconsistent. Moreover, salaries remain a contentious topic among all employees. The neutral responses may indicate uncertainty, and employees may feel remuneration was fair. Alternatively, responses may be viewed in light of the healthcare crisis, and employees may have sought an additional allowance.

DISCUSSION

A sense of achievement derives from within and can be described as an intrinsic factor of motivation.⁸⁻¹¹ A sense of achievement drives employees to act in a certain manner, not the prospect of a reward. Further, it has been described as a strong factor of motivation within the workplace.⁸⁻¹¹ Thus, the literature supports the findings of achievement being an important motivator in the workplace.

Table 2: Employee's Motivational Factors During COVID-19

| <i>Motivational Factor</i> | Strongly Agree n (%) | Agree n (%) | Neutral n (%) | Disagree n (%) | Strongly Disagree n (%) |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Sense of achievement | 27 (31) | 42 (48.3) | 16 (18.4) | 2 (2.3) | 0 |
| Managerial recognition | 27 (31) | 32 (36.8) | 21 (24.1) | 6 (6.9) | 1 (1.1) |
| Sense of making a difference | 52 (59.8) | 24 (27.6) | 7 (8) | 4 (4.6) | 0 |
| Constructive feedback | 11 (12.6) | 31 (35.6) | 36 (41.4) | 8 (9.2) | 1 (1.1) |
| Being challenged | 30 (34.5) | 39 (44.8) | 14 (16.1) | 2 (2.3) | 2 (2.3) |
| Salary | 5 (5.7) | 22 (25.3) | 35 (40.2) | 12 (13.8) | 13 (14.9) |
| Organisational culture | 16 (18.4) | 34 (39.1) | 30 (34.5) | 6 (6.9) | 1 (1.1) |
| Clientele satisfaction | 22 (25.3) | 37 (42.5) | 23 (26.4) | 4 (4.6) | 1 (1.1) |
| Employee health & safety | 30 (34.5) | 35 (40.2) | 19 (21.8) | 2 (2.3) | 1 (1.1) |
| Job security | 42 (48.3) | 32 (36.8) | 10 (11.5) | 1 (1.1) | 2 (2.3) |
| Organisational reputation | 34 (39.1) | 42 (48.3) | 10 (11.5) | 1 (1.1) | 0 |

Recognition is another intrinsic factor of motivation and entails either personal or public recognition of one's achievements.⁸⁻¹¹ Similar to achievement, recognition (public or in-person) has been shown to improve employee's motivation and performance.⁸⁻¹¹ Thus, the literature supports the findings that recognition is an important motivational factor in the workplace and a determinant of overall performance.

Should employees feel connected to their tasks, for example, that they are making a difference, they would be more inclined to perform specific functions, thereby intrinsically being motivated to perform.^{8,12,13} A sense of making a difference drives meaning and adds purpose to the fulfilment of one's duties, and individual satisfaction would thus improve and thereby drive intrinsic motivation.¹⁴

The implications of feedback as a motivational factor could be perceived in the wrong context, for example, micromanagement. This is concerning, as feedback is pivotal in ensuring organisational standards are upheld and performance maintained. Alternatively, feedback is inconsistently received despite employees deriving motivation from feedback. The results are in contrast to Pink and Souders' findings,^{8,15} who both advocate performance feedback as a significant mechanism of motivation within the workplace when compared to tangible rewards. Ultimately, the survey also outlines that management's recognition was a motivational factor among the EOC employees.

It may be argued that recognition and feedback could be deemed similar, as recognition often incorporates feedback and vice versa.¹⁶ Line manager's feedback on individuals' performance has been described as a strong motivational factor within the workplace.^{8,15} Thus, the organisa-

tion needs to prioritise performance feedback and make it a positive factor of motivation among employees.

In addition, being challenged and feeling a connection in the completion of a task are intrinsically linked; both factors are elements of intrinsic motivation and affect performance directly.^{8,12,13} Being challenged and having a sense of making a difference drives meaning and adds purpose to the fulfilment of one's duties, improving individual satisfaction and motivation.¹⁴ Thus, the organisation needs to prioritise and create a dynamic environment where employees can thrive and stay motivated.

The survey results outlined that few participants believed their respective salary was a motivational factor during the pandemic; a large portion of the participants remained neutral or was not of the opinion that their salary was a motivational factor during this time. Several factors may be associated with this finding, such as the completion of routine tasks needing to be extrinsically rewarded.^{8,15} It may also be argued that call-taking is a routine task, thus the prospect of an extrinsic incentive may seem more rewarding. A further consideration may be the economic effect of the pandemic, in terms of the unemployment rate, debt relief schemes, global supply chain disruption, and small and medium enterprises liquidation, among others.^{1,3,17,18} These factors may have put a strain on the financial status of EOC employees.

Employee's salaries have long been a contentious topic among organisations and individuals. Souders⁸ posited that compensation and a 'stick and carrot' approach have historically been used as a motivator within the workplace. However, this can hamper performance.⁸ Thus, the organisation needs to investigate the salary package indiffer-

ence and identify any shortfalls to avoid any negative ripple effect on motivation and performance. The culture of an organisation can also affect employees' motivation and performance within the workplace.^{12,19} Further, it attracts and retains talent, and is associated with employee well-being.^{12,19} Thus, the organisation needs to investigate the indiscriminate factors of culture and provide clarity, as necessary, to optimise overall performance.

Although praise is considered an extrinsic motivator, it may instil a sense of pride, which is intrinsic. The survey results outlined that participants thought client satisfaction was a factor of motivation during the pandemic. According to Frey *et al.*,²⁰ the sense of achievement derived from client satisfaction affects individual's motivation and performance. Thus, the organisation needs to provide the necessary tools or knowledge to give employees the opportunity to experience client satisfaction. Moreover, any feedback on satisfaction must be communicated to employees.

The concepts of employee health, safety and well-being are contentious among many organisations, yet Seifert *et al.*,²¹ produced demonstrable results of the correlation between well-being and employee's intrinsic motivation. Study results demonstrated that the participants felt health prioritisation and COVID-19 safety measures within the workplace were a source of motivation during the pandemic. The importance of this finding is linked to the close association between employee motivation and organisational performance.²² Thus, organisations need to prioritise health, safety, and employee well-being.

Given the forecasted economic contraction, small and medium enterprises' liquidation, and increased unemployment rate,^{1,3,18} it is not surprising that job security was a prominent motivational factor amongst EOC staff. Also, according to Fosu,²³ job security remains prudent among healthcare workers, especially since it impacts their motivation or performance. Thus, job security needs to become a priority in organisations, during the pandemic and beyond.

An organisation's reputation is important as it relates to non-financial measures of performance, and is a motivational factor according to McClelland's theory of needs; for example, affiliation.^{12,24-28} Reputation can be described as both internal and external based on stakeholder's views of an organisation.²⁹ An organisation's culture is linked with its reputation and associated service delivery levels. The brand of a company can affect services rendered (for example, employee's moti-

vation and performance), as well as the cadre and number of applicants that apply to work for the organisation.^{26,27} Thus, organisational culture and image need to be upheld to afford opportunities for employee motivation and uphold performance.

Limitations

The research sample included EOC employees at a single private EMS provider in South Africa. The delimitation was imposed due to time constraints and ease of accessibility. Hence, findings may not be representative of job performance and employee motivation across EMS operations within South Africa or globally. Furthermore, findings are limited to the private sector.

The research was survey-based; thus, findings were based on data that were self-reported by participants and recall bias may have limited the research findings. In addition, due to the blind nature of data collection, questions posed were open to individual interpretation, which may have led to bias. Participants may also not have answered honestly due to fear of reprisal. Moreover, not all the questionnaires were returned, potentially due to COVID-19 or the impacts thereof; for example, infection and lockdown. A further consideration may be geographical limitations, for instance, limiting the invitation to participant's work email only.

CONCLUSION

There are several motivational theories that aim to decipher the methodology of individuals' motivation and how it is affected or obtained. The root of each theory stems from the requirements to fulfil some form of a need.^{12,30} In addition, each factor of motivation stems from either intrinsic or extrinsic aspects. Employee health prioritisation, a sense of achievement, and a sense of being challenged were consistent motivational factors mentioned amongst EOC employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results ultimately outline the importance of factors of motivation in a disaster response plan. Employees' motivation should thus be prioritised and adequately managed in times of crisis. Due to the link with organisational performance, a failure to prioritise employees' motivation may have a negative impact on performance.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author reports no conflicts of interest.

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