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REVIEWS

REFLECTION ON THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON EMPLOYEES IN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES. REVIEW OF RISKS AND THEIR CONTROL

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: The pandemic has caused significant stress and anxiety among workers in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) due to economic uncertainty, social isolation, and the necessity to adapt to new working methods.

AIM: This article examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of SME employees and offers risk management strategies based on an analysis of the literature.

MATERIALS AND METHODS: Using keywords, a literature review of emerging workplace risks related to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and approaches to addressing them was conducted.

RESULTS: The analyses of existing literature identify the primary mental health challenges faced by employees, including increased levels of stress, depression, and anxiety. In response to these challenges, various strategies for supporting mental health are considered, such as psychological support programs, stress management training, and creating a supportive work environment.

CONCLUSION: The article emphasizes the importance of prioritizing mental health as a key factor for businesses' resilience and efficiency and the need to implement innovation and flexibility to overcome the crisis.

Keywords: *COVID-19, occupational health, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), employee well-being*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic has become a global health crisis. It had a profound impact on mental health. Numerous studies have demonstrated a significant deterioration in the mental status of the population. Around the world, high levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder have been reported (1–4). Negative consequences of the pandemic on mental health are evident both globally and nationally (5).

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The COVID-19 pandemic had also a significant impact on the working population. Large number publication indicate an increase in anxiety due to the uncertainty associated with the pandemic and concerns for one's own health and that of the dear ones (2,4,6,7). As a result of social isolation, altered working conditions, including working from home, and fear of the future, many employees reported a deterioration in mental health.

During the pandemic, many workers experienced difficulties with concentration and focusing on work tasks due to stress and anxiety (6).

Social isolation and changed working conditions also hindered interpersonal relationships in the workplace. People needed more significant support and understanding from employers and colleagues to cope with the emotional and psychological burden of the pandemic (7).

Uncertainty regarding the financial future further influenced the increase in anxiety and depression levels. Some workers faced the burden of new responsibilities related to adapting to the pandemic environment (4).

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are particularly significant in the economic world. In the EU, SMEs account for 99% of all enterprises. They are the backbone of its economy. They provide two out of three jobs, foster entrepreneurial spirit and innovation, and help improve competitiveness and economic growth.

The definition of small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) can vary depending on the country and context, but still, they are generally defined by criteria such as the number of employees, annual turnover, or the enterprise's balance sheet.

In the European Union, SMEs are often defined using the European Commission criteria. According to the European Commission, micro-enterprises have fewer than 10 employees, small enterprises have fewer than 50 employees, and medium-sized enterprises have fewer than 250 employees.

Bulgaria's SME criteria, like those of other EU countries, are similar to those of the European Commission. However, differences may include specific financial and economic conditions and variations in the regulatory environment and business climate. Compared to other EU countries, Bulgaria's differences include the smaller size of the economy and business sector and a lower overall gross domestic product (GDP) per capita.

Considering the outlined facts, psychosocial stress is significant for workers and employees in SMEs.

AIM

The purpose of this review is to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employees in SMEs by identifying key risks to their health, psychosocial well-being, and economic stability and, based on this, proposing effective strategies for managing these risks.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The literature review focused on articles and studies concerning the importance of mental health for employees in general, and how it was affected during different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Risk factors, common across various populations, and specifics depending on the study objectives were identified. Guides for employers were also reviewed along with published successful strategies for managing workplace stress. The sources studied included international and local publications in both English and Bulgarian. The article highlights results from these sources with significant value relevant to SMEs, related to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and approaches to addressing them. This was conducted using keywords. The keywords used were COVID-19, Occupational health, and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), and the databases studied were PubMed, Google Scholar, and MedLine.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Employees in SMEs

During the pandemic, the high workload and pressure on workers in specific sectors, such as healthcare, pharmacy, goods and service delivery, and security, utilities, and public transport, contributed to higher levels of stress and the development of burnout syndrome. These sectors are frequently serviced by SMEs (8). Considering this data, adverse changes in the mental well-being of employees in these sectors are essential both for the individuals themselves and for various areas of economic and social life.

Overtime, extended working hours, and rising fatigue levels negatively impacted employees' mental health. This led to decreased job satisfaction, higher turnover rates, more vacancies, increased sick leave, and other challenges, all of which affected staff stability.

More detailed studies identify the short-term and long-term effects on workload and their connection to deteriorating mental and physical health.

The short-term effects of the changed work and labour organization during the pandemic may include (9–11):

- working under time pressure, stress and irritability;
- disrupted biological rhythms;
- increased physical and mental fatigue;
- sleep disturbances;
- reduced energy levels, diminished alertness, coordination, and operational efficiency;
- extended reaction times;
- difficulties in concentration, decreased vigilance, and higher error rates;
- impairment of cognitive functions, emotional blunting, and mood alterations;
- chronic fatigue symptoms;
- nutritional deficiencies and poor dietary practices;
- substance use, such as alcohol and drugs, as coping mechanisms for stress;
- psychosomatic responses and impaired social interactions (9).

The long-term impact of increased working hours and extended shifts in certain activities during the pandemic were significant factors for adverse changes in workers' mental and physical health. According to most studies, this has resulted in an increased risk of:

- cardiovascular diseases and their consequences, such as stroke and heart attack;
- endocrine disorders, including diabetes and metabolic dysfunction;
- work-related injuries and trauma;
- depressive states, sleep disturbances, and behavioural issues (10–12).

A particular challenge in the professional environment has been the issue of returning to work after prolonged illness or the so-called long COVID-19 syndrome. In this state, symptoms persist for weeks or months after the initial infection (13–15).

Risk Factors for the Mental Health of Employees in SMEs During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Various publications, both locally and internationally, highlight common risk factors for declining mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as being female, having young school-aged children, and age-related factors (16).

Demographic factors that elevate the risk of worsening mental health during the pandemic include:

- **Age:** Elderly individuals face higher stress and anxiety levels because of heightened health concerns and increased susceptibility to illness.
- **Gender:** Women frequently encounter challenges in managing work-family balance, resulting in elevated stress levels.
- **Socioeconomic status:** Individuals with lower socioeconomic status experience more significant financial burdens, contributing to increased stress and anxiety.
- **Marital status:** Unmarried individuals experience higher stress levels compared to those who are married.
- **Ethnicity:** Individuals from marginalized ethnic groups encounter additional challenges, which exacerbate stress and anxiety.
- **Employment and occupation:** Individuals in specific occupations, such as healthcare workers, delivery personnel, or service employees, are exposed to greater risks, contributing to increased stress levels.
- **Prior experience and work tenure:** Individuals with limited prior experience or shorter job tenure experience heightened stress due to uncertainty and the challenges of adapting to new work environments.
- **Personal health issues:** People with pre-existing health problems experience more stress and anxiety due to increased risks of illness.
- **Location:** Individuals residing in regions with a higher incidence of illness feel increased anxiety and stress.

- **Social support:** Individuals with weaker social support and smaller networks of friends and family experience a greater sense of isolation and loneliness, which contributes to the deterioration of mental health (17).

Economic risks are no less significant. The COVID-19 pandemic affected SMEs in several ways. Many struggled with a significant drop in demand due to movement restrictions and business closures, leading to decreased revenue. Some required financial support to survive the period of economic uncertainty. Thirdly, SMEs operating in sectors like tourism and the food industry faced substantial difficulties, as their activities were seriously impacted by the pandemic.

Post-COVID-19 Workplace Health Risk Management in SMEs. Effective Practices

The COVID-19 crisis placed significant pressure on employers and employees in SMEs, necessitating rapid implementation of new procedures or temporary suspension of operations. In response, EU member states introduced various workplace measures. A reviewed literature suggests a comprehensive strategy to facilitate employees' return to work successfully:

1. **Maintain communication**: Keep in touch with employees during their absence to ensure they remain connected and informed.
2. **Prepare for reintegration**: Plan for the employee's return by organizing the workplace and ensuring they have what they need to resume their duties.
3. **Engage in discussions**: Have open conversations with the returning employee to discuss expectations, any concerns, and a gradual plan for reintegration.
4. **Provide initial support**: Help during the first few days back to help the employee adjust to the work environment and any new practices.
5. **Ensure continuous support**: Regularly evaluate the ongoing needs of the employee and adjust measures to ensure their continued wellbeing and productivity.

This holistic approach aims to foster a supportive environment that promotes smooth reintegration and addresses the evolving needs of returning employees.

Given the prolonged nature and effects of post-COVID symptoms, it has been determined that employees require a gradual return to employment, referred to as a *phased return*. A conventional phased return shortly after short-term illness may not be suitable for long-term COVID-19, which may necessitate several weeks or even months of adjustment (19). For employees experiencing fatigue, remote work and maintaining a steady pace – with breaks matching symptom severity – are crucial. Some employees may manage to work full-time; however, for others, a planned reduction in hours could prove more beneficial. Those dealing with long COVID are at risk of exacerbating their condition if overexerted (20). Therefore, direct supervisors should rely on feedback from the employee and acknowledge that the employee is concurrently learning to cope with and manage their symptoms

Adjustments should be tailored to the individual, considering their specific symptoms and limitations, how these affect their ability to perform tasks, and their workplace responsibilities. Personalized recovery and rehabilitation plans are essential. Some of the modifications listed below might seem self-evident, yet they remain pertinent as measures during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- adjustments to work schedules (start times, end times, and breaks);
- changes in working hours, such as shorter workdays or rest days between workdays;
- modifications to shift patterns, such as considering the suspension of late or early shifts and/or night duties, allowing individuals to work when they feel their best;
- alterations to work patterns, such as working at a steady pace with regular and/or additional breaks;
- adjustments to workload, for instance: assigning fewer tasks than usual within a given timeframe, providing more time to complete regular tasks, and avoiding tight deadlines;
- temporary changes in duties or tasks (modified tasks);
- providing support, such as a clear assistance framework – directing inquiries to or conducting checks within a peer-support system and

avoiding working in isolation due to medical appointments (18,19).

Temporary modified tasks are a subject of discussion in some sources. According to them, changes in job requirements are needed, depending on the nature of the work process, to facilitate adaptation upon returning to work:

- **cognitive requirements** – necessitating intense concentration, rapid task-switching, complex decision-making, quick and high-risk decision-making, and managing multiple tasks or reports;
- **physical requirements** – repetitive movements, static positions, or occasional relocation of patients or heavy objects;
- **emotional requirements** – working with vulnerable individuals/children or patients/their relatives, the potential for aggression or violence, and the need for emotional flexibility and resilience (18–20).

A key factor in supporting employees is providing access to appropriate mental health services and support for workers in SMEs to cope with these challenges. Employers can play an important role by offering mental health support programs, counselling, and other resources to help their employees manage stress and anxiety (9,20.)

CONCLUSION

Employee mental health has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with marked increases in stress, anxiety, and depression observed among workers in SMEs. Economic uncertainty and social isolation are key factors contributing to the deterioration of mental health, necessitating targeted efforts to support employees in these areas. Mental health management strategies should be integrated into SME business models, incorporating psychological support programs and stress management training as an integral part of organizational culture. Flexibility and innovation are crucial for successfully adapting to new working conditions and ensuring the resilience and long-term effectiveness of the business. Prioritizing mental health not only enhances employee well-being but also supports productivity and engagement in the work process, which is essential for overcoming crisis situations.

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