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Career Development Impacts of COVID-19: Practice and Policy Recommendations

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Abstract

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in drastic changes to employment around the globe. In the present article, we identify four emerging impacts of the pandemic and how career development professionals might respond through policy and practice. Specifically, we focus on four distinct but related domains: unemployment, worker mental health, the work–family interface, and employment disparities. For each domain, we offer recommendations for policy and practice with the hope that career development professionals might reframe the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity for a renewed commitment to supporting worker well-being.

Keywords

COVID-19, mental health, unemployment, work–family interface, employment disparities

Introduction

The swift development of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in life-altering employment shifts across the globe. With workers around the world facing drastic vocational changes practically overnight, the work of career development specialists has become more imperative than perhaps ever before. Millions of workers are facing sudden and unexpected job loss (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), while millions more are adjusting to the "new normal" of working in isolation (Noguchi, 2020). In addition to health risks, essential workers face psychological strain from conducting their work while distancing from others, wearing protective gear, and constantly sanitizing, all regular reminders of the serious public and personal health threat of human contact (Centers for Disease

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Table 1. Summary of COVID-19 Impacts and Practice/Policy Recommendations.

Impact	Practice Recommendations	Policy Recommendations
Unemployment	Be knowledgeable about current policies Educate clients about their rights and benefits Support clients through process of accessing benefits Provide interventions that are appropriate for populations with restricted work choice Implement targeted interventions for specific worker groups (e.g., older adults)	Collective action on the part of career development professional organizations Provide widespread and sustained economic support for unemployed workers Create social safety nets that include paycheck guarantee Implement targeted interventions for specific worker groups (e.g., older adults)
Worker mental health	Integrate mental health services into career counseling Use trauma-informed approaches to career counseling Use interventions that target basic survival, social, and self-determination needs	Expand mental health service delivery, especially access to telehealth services at the state and federal level Expand family and sick leave for essential workers at the state and federal level
Work–family interface	Recognize unique needs of each individual/family Assess for access to resources and the extent to which restricted access impacts work-family relations	Create opportunities for decent work that affirms importance of family relationships Disentangle work from financial sustainability Provide financial and health care support for unpaid care workers
Employment disparities	Work with community partners to assess needs Incorporate critical lens into career counseling conceptualization and interventions	Work with community partners to assess needs Develop targeted supports for low-resourced communities Provide accessible COVID-19 testing and treatment centers Strengthen protections for essential workers

Control, 2020). Although the nature of COVID-19 impacts may vary, we anticipate that few workers will escape this pandemic without radical changes to their vocational landscape.

In many ways, we view the pandemic as a vocational magnifying glass, bringing knowledge previously demonstrated by career development scholars to the forefront of public life. For example, we know that work life and family life are not separate entities but are deeply intertwined and overlapping (Richardson, 2012), a fact that is currently amplified by at-home video calls and parenting during one's workday. We know that working helps people satisfy basic needs including material, social connection, and self-determination needs (Blustein, 2019); this leaves questions about how to respond to a workforce in which many are facing various forms of deprivation. The decades of research documenting work as an essential aspect of optimal human functioning and wellness (Blustein, 2019) speaks to the important contribution career development professionals may make to combating mental health impacts of the pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis has evoked considerable challenges but also an opportunity to draw on this previous work to reinvent resources, practices, and policies to positively change the landscape of the labor market. In the current article, we aim to provide recommendations on four distinct but closely related impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic: unemployment, worker mental health, work–family interface, and employment disparities (see Table 1 for summary).

Unemployment

At the time of this writing, the unemployment in the United States is at 14.7%, the highest rate since The Great Depression, and the International Labor Organization (ILO; 2020) has projected that the

pandemic will destroy 195 million jobs worldwide. Workers who were vulnerable before the pandemic are likely to be among the hardest hit; in the first month of the crisis, income from informal work dropped by 60% globally, leaving workers who already faced low wages and lack of protections at an even higher risk (ILO, 2020).

As career development specialists prepare to deal with widespread and long-term unemployment, it is important to remember the collateral damage often incurred by unemployment. Previous research shows that unemployment is associated with a host of negative mental health outcomes (e.g., anxiety, depression, low self-esteem) and that these effects are stronger for vulnerable workers (e.g., blue-collar workers, workers in developing nations; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009).

One group of workers that may face unique barriers regarding unemployment is older adults. Those who were nearing retirement prior to the pandemic may face loss of savings and difficulty reentering the job market. In addition to age discrimination, technological skills needed to enter a remote job market may be harder for older adults to access than those who grew up in the digital age (Alwin & Schramm, 2020). Further, because adults over 60 are at high risk of coronavirus complications, there may be health risks to reentering the workplace. Unique worker groups like this will need targeted advocacy; for example, unemployed older adults may need stronger social safety nets as they transition into retirement. Additionally, older adults who aim to reenter the workforce may have specific counseling needs such as skill-building in emerging technologies (Ford & Orel, 2005).

On a broad policy level, we urge career development specialists to advocate for policies that protect unemployed workers. For the most impact, it is imperative that our professional associations take an active, collective role in political advocacy. Governments across the globe have varied in the extent to which they have acted to support unemployed workers. The United States, for example, passed several relief packages (e.g., Coronavirus Aid, Relief, & Economic Security Act) that included a onetime stimulus check, expanded unemployment benefits, and paycheck protection for some small businesses (International Monetary Fund, 2020). While this aid has provided some short-term relief, it is unlikely that it will mitigate long-term impacts on unemployed workers in the United States (Gerken & Boshart, 2020). Several nations in Europe have enacted fiscal programs that cover a portion of workers' paychecks, avoiding the massive unemployment numbers the United States has seen (Zarroli, 2020). At the time of this writing, a bipartisan bill that would provide a similar paycheck guarantee is being introduced in the United States (Edmonson, 2020). It is imperative that career development professional associations stay abreast of these policies and collectively advocate for those which result in the most social and economic protection of the unemployed.

It is also important for career development practitioners to understand how policies impact individual clients. Perhaps one of the most important services that career development practitioners can provide is education about social benefits and guidance through the often confusing and complicated process of accessing them. Although reemployment is an obvious goal for most seeking career services, understanding available short-term solutions (e.g., filing for unemployment) is essential. Traditional career counseling modalities like provision of job search skills (e.g., resume writing, networking skills), exploration of interests and values, and assessment of experience and expertise will continue to be important during the pandemic and recovery from it. However, the decimation of large portions of the labor market means that career counselors must be especially sensitive to workers' basic survival needs, knowledgeable about existing social welfare programs, and prepared to serve populations that have reduced occupational choice.

Worker Mental Health

In addition to the mental health impacts of unemployment, the pandemic presents several threats to the mental health of those currently employed. As employers look to cut expenses, workers who had a relative sense of job security prior to the pandemic may now be facing uncertainty about the stability

of their jobs. Even workers without risk of total unemployment may face underemployment caused by reduction in hours and pay. Previous research shows that job insecurity may be just as harmful to mental health as unemployment and is consistently linked with increases in depression and anxiety disorders (Benach et al., 2014; Sverke & Hellgren, 2002).

Another widespread change that is likely to have mental health impacts is the increased number of people working in isolation. Work facilitates well-being, in part, because it acts as a pathway for fulfilling the human need for social connection (Blustein, 2019). The number of people currently working remotely is unprecedented, and it is unknown what impact it will have on workers' social connection needs. However, based on previous research suggesting that in-person communication prevails as the most effective way to create and sustain emotional bonds with others (Sherman et al., 2013), we anticipate that a vast number of workers may suffer from unmet social connection needs; this lowered social support may in turn exacerbate other mental health impacts of the pandemic.

Finally, it is likely that there will be mental health needs unique to certain populations of workers. For example, essential workers who risk their health on a daily basis may experience increased stress and anxiety related to contracting the virus. Further, health care workers who, in addition to risking their health, are exposed to the trauma of treating the very sick and dying with dwindling resources are at increased risk of trauma-related disorders and acute stress. Early reports have shown symptoms of psychological distress in COVID-19 health care workers, including sleep disturbance, anxiety, depression, somatization, and obsessive-compulsive symptoms (Pappa et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020).

Career counselors will be required to integrate career and mental health counseling interventions in their work with clients impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, there will likely be an increased need for career development professionals who are proficient in trauma-informed care. Trauma-informed career counseling approaches include (a) establishing an environment of trust and safety, (b) assessing for trauma-related symptoms, (c) use of ecological frameworks to conceptualize associations between traumatic experiences and work, (d) developing healthy coping strategies, and (e) promoting career adaptability (Barrow et al., 2019).

Career counseling interventions might also target basic survival, social, and self-determination needs that have been eroded by pandemic-related precarious work or underemployment, as these all relate to psychological well-being (Duffy et al., 2016). For example, helping clients identify avenues outside of work to fulfill social connection needs may be necessary to mitigate the effects of social isolation caused by remote work. Working with clients to identify personal strengths and prior acts of resilience may aid in developing coping strategies for current work-related stressors and foster a renewed sense of self-determination. Finally, helping clients broaden their social support networks may supplement survival needs that have been jeopardized by furloughs, salary reductions, or layoffs.

In the short term, emergency legislation that expands practitioners' ability to provide telehealth services to individuals on Medicare will be necessary to ensure access to career services. Continued advocacy directed toward state regulating bodies, governors, and insurers will be necessary to sustain and extend legislative efforts to expand service delivery. Career development professionals may also advocate for expanded family and sick leave protections for emergency responders, health care providers, and other essential workers as many of these workers were exempt from previous federal legislation designed to prevent economic hardship due to COVID-19-related work absences. Although some states have already instituted such protections for workers, career professionals may ensure clients are aware of additional federal legislation, such as the Occupational Safety and Health Act, National Labor Relations Act, and Families First Coronavirus Response Act, that may offer protection should they feel unable or unsafe to return to work (Carlisle, 2020).

Work–Family Interface

Another emerging impact of the pandemic is the increasingly obscured boundary between work and home. This phenomenon is inseparable from the role technology is now playing as many workers shift the totality of their work to tech platforms that they may access around the clock. There are certainly benefits to this increased use of technology. For example, the ability to work remotely adds a layer of job security, and for those who are unemployed, technology offers a critical means of obtaining unemployment benefits and seeking jobs. However, working (or looking for work) from home has also resulted in increasingly blurred boundaries between work and leisure time. Parenting and other caregiving responsibilities are also more daunting when people are out of work, engaged in essential work, or working from home.

We urge practitioners to explore the nature of work and family for each client and student who presents during this period. Variability in volition with respect to work and family obligations needs to be thoughtfully understood as practitioners develop new ways to support people in balancing work and family roles (Cho, 2020). Each individual and family will have their own pathway in making meaning and managing these overlapping aspects of life. Moreover, the role of inequality and poverty are critical factors that are creating very different work–family experiences during this crisis. The public policy agenda should include efforts to provide work for all that is decent, dignified, safe, and that affirms the importance of family and relationships as core aspects of life (Blustein, 2019). In this context, we support efforts to create better working conditions and supports for people and their families that will reduce stress and disentangle financial sustainability from work (e.g., introducing basic income guarantees and guaranteed jobs). We also propose policies that provide financial and health care support for unpaid caregivers.

Employment Disparities

Finally, the multifaceted nature of working during the COVID era has illuminated the pervasive role of inequality in the workforce. For each of the COVID-19 impacts we have discussed, the role of financial and social capital, as well as culture, has created significant differences between workers. In particular, racial, gender, and social class disparities play exacerbating roles. For example, the blurring between work and family roles may be more burdensome for women workers, who tend to carry the bulk of unpaid care work, and low-income families living in smaller spaces (Lewis, 2020). White-collar workers are more likely to maintain employment by working from home and have access to health care when faced with physical and mental health impacts of the pandemic (Lewis, 2020). Furthermore, many essential services (e.g., sanitation, meatpacking, farm work, grocery supply) are performed by low-wage workers (Lowrey, 2020). While these services are deemed as "essential," the workers who perform them are often treated as expendable (Coleman, 2020). The U.S. economy is based on neoliberal capitalism, which fuels people in positions of wealth and power to rely on consumption of goods. The consumption of goods requires mostly low-wage workers to produce these goods. No industry has been exposed quite as much as the food industry with meatpackers, agricultural workers, and service workers left in the most vulnerable positions.

In the U.S., meatpackers are one group of workers who were thrust into the spotlight when COVID-19 cases exploded in meat processing plants, and the president invoked the Defense Production Act to declare meat processing an essential activity. In rural communities, where employment centers on the meat processing industry, workers must make the decision between risking the lives of themselves and their family or losing necessary income. On top of being grueling and risky work that draws on vulnerable immigrant populations (Deckert et al., 2018), meat processing work is especially conducive to spreading the coronavirus because work conditions provide little room for social distancing. In

addition to fearing for their physical safety and health, these workers face anxiety and depression related to community outbreaks of COVID-19 and loss of friends, family, and coworkers.

While we are currently in the midst of the pandemic and cannot fully appreciate the scope of the situation, it is becoming clear that there is a need for advocacy and service provision to communities that face social injustice. It is important that career specialists incorporate a critical lens as practitioners and advocates for vulnerable workers. Working directly with community partners who understand local issues for workers is a viable way to promote policies in state and local governments to support workers of color, women workers, and economically marginalized workers. We also urge career specialists to advocate for public supports in low-resourced communities. This could include advocating for accessible coronavirus testing and treatment sites as well as increased mental health resources. Finally, we recommend advocacy for strengthened protections for the physical and psychological safety of essential workers. This pandemic has illuminated the fact that society rests on the shoulders of essential workers; we argue that their positions merit respect, dignity, and care that should be reflected in policy and practice.

Conclusion

In sum, career development specialists have a vital role to play in both understanding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and in practice and policy responses. In particular, advocacy for worker protections with regard to unemployment, mental health, work–family interface, and employment disparity lies at the heart of what our field might offer in the midst of this crisis. The global pandemic has brought a profound and widespread sense of uncertainty, fear, and loss. However, an emerging sense of hope centers on the belief that our society can reinvent itself to be more caring, just, and equitable. Through the work of collective advocacy and efforts of individual practitioners, we hope career development specialists engage this time of crisis as an opportunity to help shape a world where decent, supportive, and dignified work is possible for all who want it.

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