The Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Canadian Workforce: Alignment, or Misalignment with the Activities or Protocols of the Workforce and the Unpredictability of the Coronavirus Disease

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Introduction

The Coronavirus disease first discovered in China in 2019, and first identified in Canada in January of 2020, had quickly been determined a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March of 2020; since the first case was identified in Canada, there has been 4.6 million new cases since then (Singh et al., 2024). Since its beginning, the COVID-19 pandemic has had lasting impacts on life as we know it, with drastic changes to many of the social processes we partake in everyday. This pandemic has been said to “create opportunities for sweeping social changes and adaptive design solutions [for challenges facing societal institutions]” (Crozier, 2024, p. 35). One example of an area in which the global pandemic has made a large impression is in the way that our Canadian workforce is conducted. According to Caswell and colleagues (2023), “the COVID-19 pandemic has driven tremendous process changes within places of learning, work, and the broader society” (p. 200). The pandemic has adjusted the ways in which workers are conducting their work, including where and when and the protocols they must follow to ensure their work is being done safely; and, it also impacts an individual’s progression and capabilities in their workplace. With the coronavirus spreading globally, at such a rapid pace as it was, “there [seemed] to be a widening agreement on the need for flexibility and adaptation going forward, (...) committed to developing hybrid frameworks and models in manners expected to deviate across departments and agencies” (Roy, 2022, p. 569); this is calling for a need for a flexible workforce, in which adaptation and accommodation is considered in terms of work being completed to align with the constant unpredictability of the pandemic. In this paper, I will discuss the ways the COVID-19 pandemic impacted individual progression into the field of work, as well as abilities and opportunities within the workplace, and, more specifically, the impacts of the pandemic on our frontline healthcare workers.

Impacts to Workforce Progression

Among the workforce participants impacted by COVID-19, some of the most deeply
impacted are thought to be the younger cohorts that were just finishing or even still finishing their education/credentials that will allow/train them to enter the workforce (Caswell et al., 2023); “postsecondary students have described concerns about [disruptions in their] academic progress, employment opportunities, and financial status, [and], healthcare trainees worry about experience gaps due to reduced physical access to patients” (Caswell et al., 2023, p. 200). There is an increasing concern due to the pandemic causing delays in education/schooling and credential exams, as well as impacting the quality of training students are receiving within their education (primarily receiving training in the form of an electronic/online version). This is a concern when considering jobs that require working alongside patients, like healthcare providers, as the training they are receiving will only be simulated versions of patient care, rather than the hands-on training that others in their profession have received; could potentially lead to the questioning of whether these individuals are actually ready to deal with the in-person experiences and unpredictability their job entails. Individuals in this categorization “described concerns about the impact of the pandemic on training, including missed placements and prolonged time until they entered the profession” (Caswell et al., 2023, p. 205).

In a study done by Caswell and colleagues, 624 graduates from the year 2015 through 2020, considered registered professionals or eligible to write credential exams to become registered professionals, were selected to complete an online survey regarding their pandemic experiences in terms of the progression of their professional careers (Caswell et al., 2023). Responses were recorded for graduates from 2015 to 2020, in order to compare and contrast the differences in responses from the pre-pandemic graduates and the post-pandemic graduates. It was discovered that “[thirty four percent] of respondents indicated (...) effects on job search and described delayed entry (...), fewer job opportunities, and workplace challenges; [also], the pandemic affected employment for [forty four percent] of respondents” (Caswell et al., 2023, p. 200). The ways these participants reported experiencing changes to their employment are through changes to opportunities for in-person training, availability of remote or virtual opportunities, redeployment within their profession, and, the most impactful experience of being laid off from their jobs; experiences of change to monetary compensation, as well as reduced working hours is also largely related to the experience of the working individual in a global pandemic also (Caswell et al., 2023). Within the respondents, there was a significant drop of twenty-eight percent when looking at how many graduates from 2015 have obtained jobs in their profession (eighty-three percent) and how many graduates from 2020 that have obtained jobs in their profession (fifty-five percent) (Caswell et al., 2023); this is evidence that individuals that are graduating post-pandemic are more likely to experience challenges in their job search, compared to those that graduated pre-pandemic. And, those that have found jobs in their profession post-pandemic are also more likely to be working reduced hours, or with reduced pay; the biggest forms that are found in graduates concerns in the workforce are regarding the delayed entry into the workforce, limited opportunities due to pandemic protocols and safety measures, as well as the changed job opportunities (Caswell et al., 2023).

**Impacts on Ongoing Workforce Activity**

But, not only has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted entry progression and credential
training into the workforce, it has also been found to cause many challenges and changes regarding positions that were already being held at the time of the onset of the pandemic. Respondents of Caswell and colleagues study on the impacts of COVID-19, “[forty-four percent] of respondents indicated that the [pandemic] affected their [current] employment” (Caswell et al., 2023, p. 205). Participants indicated changes in their area of work, the nature of their work, hours they work and, often consequently, their pay, and there has also been notice of a change in deployment within their career (Caswell et al, 2023). The workforce as a whole was beginning to face challenges as a consequence of COVID-19, as the economy began to struggle alongside it. Institutions and businesses have had to adjust the way their businesses were being run; this includes where an individual was doing their work, as it had now become unsafe for individuals to work in close contact with their coworkers (as determined by the regulations and protocols to be followed at the time the pandemic was happening) like they typically would in traditional office settings. Society saw an increase of remote work during the pandemic, in which individuals were given the option to work from the comfort of their own homes when it was possible. Workers also experienced a loss of income in two ways: as a result of a loss of hours and a restriction on having multiple jobs for some professions, and through a direct decrease in pay due to reduced business financial profit resulting from the pandemic. “For every respondent who experienced increased hours, two respondents experienced reduction” (Caswell et al., 2023, p. 205); while you will see some positions, typically those in the higher positions on the business hierarchy ladder, experiencing an increase in their paychecks, this is often not the case for most. It is typically the lower-level, or entry-level employees of businesses that are experiencing pay cuts.

Remote Work Opportunities

One of the main, and I believe to be largest, impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on our Canadian workforce is the increasing availability of remote work opportunities. As the pandemic grew, and spread quickly, we were seeing more traditional style offices move towards remote work with their employees, as an attempt to stay in touch with the COVID-19 guidelines set for society. Stated by Roy (2022), “whereas the physical setting has long been the bedrock of public sector operations, COVID-19 starkly disrupted this reality with an unprecedented reliance on remote work” (p. 569). Before the pandemic, “only [four percent] of Canadian employees performed their job duties remotely” (Crozier, 2024, p. 35), and this number has increased to forty percent in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, showing the drastic increase in remote work opportunities made available (Crozier, 2024). An increase of remote opportunities typically will lead to an introduction of adaptability into the workplace, for employer and employee. This adaptability ensures that a position can adjust to pandemic conditions and protocols of isolation/quarantine and on-off lockdowns smoothly, and in a timely manner when needed, as this was a time of unpredictability regarding the happenings of the pandemic. Offering remote work opportunities to potential employees reduces the challenges faced by employers when they are following the pandemic protocols and safety measures/guidelines put into place by health officials. Along with the adaptability to changing protocols and guidelines to be followed, employers also experience benefits in the pay of their employees; when work is remote, often it is thought that it
is deserving of reduced pay as the job is not performed in the same way anymore, or employees will find themselves working reduced hours or even increased hours without an increased pay. Another speed-bump to the delivery of remote work is the requirement of private space that can be used to privately work without the distractions of any pets, housemates/family members, or other noisy and/or needy distractions (Crozier, 2024). Often this is not always accessible from home for everybody, and this displays a class consequence of remote work guidelines. Lower income individuals are typically the ones that have less closed space to use when finding available workspaces within their home. Along with challenges associated with remote work, individuals also had found positive consequences to working from home; one example would be an experience of decreased fear of virus infection, as well as decreased fear for loved ones as the risk of workplace infection is no longer there. And, although there seems to be more negative consequences than positive for at least a partial return to an in-office workplace, “there is also trepidation for some about doing so safely” (Roy, 2022, p. 570); it has now become a reality for in-office settings of “[tensions] between protocols and safeguards to limit the spreading of COVID-19 infections, versus the benefits of in-person venues and gatherings” (Roy, 2022, p. 570). There is a large debate surrounding whether the workforce should make a complete return to in-person work, or if the risk for infection spread is too large to justify. Participants are being torn between the decision of a return to business as usual, without any restrictions or safeguards to protect their work, and a fear of infection or spreading the virus any further. According to a study done by Linda Duxbury in 2022, she had found that “one-quarter of all workers who were in on office prior to COVID-19 are keen to return full-time, one-quarter would remain full-time at home (...), and roughly one-half would prefer some mixture of both settings” (Roy, 2022, p. 570).

Post-COVID Effects on Workforce Activity

COVID-19 did not only have an effect on the individual through the indirect workings of the workforce, but it also created direct impacts to the abilities of the individual worker in the workforce. Here, I will look at the ways COVID-19 left lasting marks on the workforce through the efforts of individual workers who had been infected by the coronavirus. By lasting effects, I am referring to the health condition individuals are left in after the recovery of the infection; at times, individuals find themselves at a lower ability level when they are making their return to work, than what they had been pre-COVID. This lasting condition has been termed “long-COVID”, to identify the persistent symptoms patients suffer post-COVID (Descatha et al, 2023); the symptoms included in this “post-COVID” categorization are feelings of “malaise, fatigue, musculoskeletal pain, anemia, and other respiratory, neurocognitive, mental health, metabolic, cardiovascular, and gastrointestinal disorders, [with a general impairment on everyday functioning]” (Descatha et al., 2023, p. 165). This can negatively impact the workers, as they experience challenges in attempting to return to work at the same capacity as they had before their illness. Even possibly preventing or postponing their return to work, resulting in loss of income and reduction of hours. In fact, “asthenia/reported loss of memory and sleep disorders [resulting from “post-COVID’”] were associated with the longest duration of work absence (>three months)” (Descatha et al., 2023, p. 166). This return to work rate is even smaller when compared to return to work rates of flu-like syndromes, with a one hundred percent return to work rate three months
after, and only a ninety-three percent return to work rate after three months with COVID symptoms (Descatha et al., 2023).

Even though workers are experiencing illness that greatly affects their performance in their work everyday, it is not always easy for these workers to find compensation for the time and income they lost due to the infection. Often depending on income and job position, “many workers don’t or won’t have a choice but to [use] their vacation time in the event they are forced to stay home for two weeks or more” (Macdonald, 2020, p. 4); typically, it is the lower-class, lower-income individuals, and specific industries in the workforce that find trouble in receiving time off due to COVID-19. In fact, “only [thirty-eight percent] of illness or disability leave and [twenty-three percent] of family leave was paid by employers in 2019, compared to [seventy-two percent] of vacation leave” (Macdonald, 2020, p. 4); workers are being forced to misuse their paid vacation hours, as they are unable to book the correct time off for the two week period of their illness and they can not afford to experience the change in income resulting from such a drastic loss of hours.

Challenges to the Workforce from Different Sectors

Workers from different industries and sectors of the workforce may experience different consequences in regards to the effects of COVID-19; some experience more benefits in their work than others might, while some will experience more hardships on the frontlines of the pandemic. Different individuals will experience different COVID-related fears, depending on the work they partake in and the restrictions/protocols placed upon the work they are doing. Those in positions of office work, in which a remote form of work is possible and easily done experience less impactful challenges to their health well-being, while still experiencing the challenges of adjustment to remote work, including consequences to their income and hours; while those in positions that are more hands-on, like childcare positions or positions in healthcare experience more hardships along with challenges to hours/income. Workers in hands-on jobs, in which remote work is not a possibility, experience more COVID-related fears that have to do with the possibility of catching illness from their workplace and bringing the illness home to their loved ones, or the challenges associated with the enforcement of COVID-19 safety protocols.

Challenges to the Workforce Sector Regarding Public Health Care

Among those experiencing increased challenges to COVID-19 and its protocols, Canadian public health care workers are one of the, if not the, most affected groups of workers in regards to the COVID-19 pandemic. This group of workers, I found, experience a great deal of distress and unsafety compared to others from different professions. “As the pandemic progressed, [health workers faced] numerous challenges, including higher patient volumes, a higher assumption of personal risk or contracting COVID-19, the limited availability of resources and increased rates of burnout, [and many more]” (Gamble et al., 2022, p.2). As these workers are mostly responsible for the planning for, prevention of, implementing of safety measures and ensuring protocols are being followed by all to stop the spread, “there has been growing concern over the risk of burnout among the public health workforce in Canada” (Singh et al., 2024, p. 2); here, ‘burnout’ is
characterized as an occupational health syndrome where emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of achievement is experienced due to stress from the workplace (Singh et al., 2024). These workers are not experiencing the same passion, or want to work in the same way that they once did. This can lead to many negative consequences to the individual's work, including an increase in absenteeism, and a growing dislike and reduced performance of their job due to an unwillingness to provide the same amount of effort. One large consequence of on health care providers, thought to be contributing to the prevalence of burnout, is the harassment that they face everyday; “a total of [forty-nine percent] reported being threatened, assaulted, or bullied because of their work during the pandemic” (Singh et al., 2024, p. 4). There was a tremendous increase in the harassment our public health workers experienced at the onset of COVID-19, as they were the middle-man/messenger of a lot of the pandemic protocols that weren’t welcomed or liked by other individuals. Because they were the ones to enforce many of these safety measures, they got a lot of the abuse that was paired with society’s resistance. Along with the harassment they faced, they faced many other issues like “excessive workloads, misinformation/miscommunication, shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) [and other supplies], and a lack of support from health care leadership/management [affecting their work]” (Gamble et al., 2022, p. 2). Unfortunately, this is likely to take a toll on anyone in this position, and the mental health of our health professionals is at large risk, and they are more likely to develop some sort of psychological distress in their lives, whether large or small.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the effects of the global coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19, to our workforce in Canada has been massive to the individuals in our society, and the economy as a whole. More specifically, it has had massive impacts on the workers within the healthcare profession and the mental well-being of these workers. COVID-19 has shifted the economy of our workforce and the ways that it can be played out; it has introduced a variety of new guidelines and protocols that must be considered when discussing the way that work is done, whether it is in-person or remote. Many of the new measures put into place during COVID-19 are still in place in most workplaces as precautionary measures, and they will continue to do so. In this way, the pandemic has changed the way we see safety measures as a necessity in our workplace, and the prevention measures we see fit to partake in to reduce the spread of infectious diseases.
References


