

Covid-19 in New Zealand: HR Observations, Implications and Reflections

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KEYWORDS: Human Resource Management, Covid-19, Flexible Working Practices, Work-life Balance, Technology.

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the changes that have been accelerated from the cascading effects of Covid-19 for Human Resource Management. It examines past observations, present implications and future reflections for three domestic sectors within the New Zealand business environment that have been largely affected since the characterisation of Covid-19 as a pandemic in March 2020. The paper presents an overview of the Tertiary Education, Health, Hospitality and Tourism sectors, the nature of the workplace evolution and considerations for HR practitioners. The study applies the qualitative methodology with an interpretive paradigm embedding the themes identified. Transformational and technological changes, intergenerational workplaces, adaptability and flexibility of phygital working environment and working from home arrangements are discussed. The study perceives emerging sectoral challenges for work-life balance dilemma, physical, mental and emotional wellbeing, work-related stress and fatigue leading to severe occupational burnout. It has also noted some intensified opportunities and obstacles for the workforce. The paper has put forward the following five recommendations:

- *A recalibrated tailored strategic approach to support organisational performance and changing workplace dynamics;*
- *personalised training and development opportunities;*
- *redefining and redesigning jobs to reflect increased demands;*
- *developing and maintaining impactful initiatives for the physical, spiritual, mental health and wellbeing; enhancing participation, collaboration and dialogue;*
- *nourishing a sense of purpose and meaningful work in the changing work landscape resulting from Covid-19.*

1. INTRODUCTION

'Be kind, stay home, stay safe, save lives' - The reinforced positive and imperative message from the Prime Minister and Director General of Health, during the 2020 lockdown's daily 1 pm Press Conferences to New Zealand. It is not an overstatement to acknowledge that extraordinary times called for extraordinary measures in response to the national fight against Covid-19. One and a half years on, the country has collectively navigated through highly difficult times and uncharted waters, to successfully respond to the growing and challenging endogenous and exogenous variables cascading from Covid-19. This paper investigates the variation of trends and challenges facing Human Resource Management (HRM), that have been accelerated and ramified by the global pandemic. Past observations, present implications and future reflections will be explored within the contextual frame of three key domestic sectors: Tertiary Education, Health, Hospitality and Tourism that have been largely affected since the characterisation of Covid-19 as a pandemic in March 2020.

1.1 Context Overview

New Zealand's post-Covid-19 business environment has witnessed progressive transformation within the Tertiary Education, Health, Hospitality and Tourism sectors. The processes of rethinking, reshaping, reskilling, retraining and rebuilding workforces have been critical for the Covid-19 sequential domestic recovery (Armougom, 2020). These processes have supported industrial, organisational and occupational HRM changes. Forward-thinking approaches strongly influenced by robust evidence-based and solution-focused initiatives have been on the forefront within these sectors. It is important to consider the implications for HRM amid fast-evolving sectoral changes. Situational drivers of change that have been redefined and magnified under Covid-19 will be examined. A tour d'horizon of the Tertiary Education sector will observe and review opportunities and obstacles for HR practitioners based on technological and demographic changes, working from home and flexible working practices. Implications of work-life balance, employee wellbeing and influences on performance will be discussed within the Health sector. The acceleration of automation, digitalisation, robotisation and employee turnover will be explored within the Hospitality and Tourism sector.

2. TERTIARY EDUCATION SECTOR

2.1 Overview

The provision of Tertiary Education in New Zealand is governed by the legal framework of the Education and Training Act 2020. The primary agencies with key roles in the Tertiary Education sector are the Ministry of Education responsible for the development of policies, the Tertiary Education Commission responsible for the management of government's funding, and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority providing the overarching quality assurance for the sector. Prior to Covid-19, the sector was responsible for the provision of Tertiary Education to over 380,000 enrolled candidates (PricewaterhouseCoopers [PWC], 2020). The sector remains a pivotal and integral part of the economy rebuild with offerings through eight Universities, Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, sixteen Institutes and Polytechnics newly amalgamated as Te Pūkenga, and multiple smaller Private Training Establishments (TEC, n.d.). New Zealand international borders remain closed except for the intermittent Trans-Tasman travel arrangements with Australia. With travel restrictions in place, the international tertiary education market has been significantly impacted. Prior to Covid-19, around \$5 billion was annually contributed to the economy from the international education market (PWC, 2020).

2.2 Technological Change

The Tertiary Education sector transitioned to technological and innovative modes of teaching and learning remotely, empowered by a digital transformation. With the nationwide lockdown in place during 2020, organisations have had to quickly adapt to new technological updates for the virtual delivery of education. Job duties and organisational expectations have risen to meet the required technological change to adequately address the growing domestic demands. This has enhanced the productivity of highly skilled employees but paradoxically, created a more challenging condition and further training required for low skilled employees (OECD, 2017). There have since been higher expectations to retain some degree of adaptability and flexibility between various teaching delivery modes from face-to-face, remote to blended (PWC, 2020). Additional training and development programmes were tailored to meet respective organisational needs, to ensure new technical knowledge, digital skills and competencies supported the capability of a multi-generational workforce during the nationwide teaching and learning online transition.

Information, communication and technology services have long been available for remote work across the Tertiary Education sector, but Covid-19 has been the catalyst for major technological transformation, with further developed teaching and learning practices within the sector. The expansion and utilisation of online virtual environments were maximised and the technological movement supporting eLearning remains strongly active through multiple virtual platforms. For example, licensed Adobe Creative Cloud software, Big Blue Button Conference for virtual presentations, lectures and tutorials. Such applications are well connected with the long-established Learning Management systems from Blackboard, Canvas, Moodle to Stream.

2.3 Demographic Trend

The domestic workforce employment changes have been driven by New Zealand's ageing population. The age structure comprised of 19.6% (0-14 years), 65.1% (15-64 years) and 15.2% (65 years and over) equivalent to 715,200 people in 2018. The demographic trend is projected to be 1.37 million people (65 years and over) by 2043, equal to 23.1% of the population (Stats NZ, 2018). The increased proportion of older people reflects the ageing population trajectory (Stats NZ, 2018). Changes in the ageing population structure are expected to continue, attributed to the combined transition of lower birth rates and people living longer (Stats NZ, 2020). Simultaneously, the five working generations present a multi-generational workforce with varying characteristics, attitudes, values, motivation factors, organisational expectations and career aspirations (Barclays, 2013). Covid-19 expedited compelling and challenging ways of thinking and working while adapting to new work systems in the Tertiary Education sector, to manage five generations with different behavioural patterns for the Traditionalists, Baby Boomers to Generations X, Y, Z. Murray (2002) argues that age discrimination is a particular workforce issue with stereotypical assumptions based on either age or retirement and noted as a 'barrier to participation in work'. Recognising the increasing trend of the ageing population post-Covid-19, wider economic benefits can be derived from the extended generational workforce, and participation in meaningful work by senior workplace members that would contribute to their physical, psychological and financial well-being (Beard et al., 2012; Ford & Orel, 2005; Hinterlong et al., 2007).

2.4 Working From Home

Covid-19 has remodelled and tailored how and where work is now performed and managed. From setting up home workspaces, to working and collaborating online via Microsoft Teams, Google Meet and ritualised Zoom conferences, while balancing personal commitments, parental responsibilities and home-schooling obligations during the lockdowns. It is acknowledged that employees and employers have had to progressively adjust to the then 'new' normality while working from home for extended periods with increasing workloads. Different needs and support were simultaneously required to find the 'right' professional versus personal sense of equilibrium. Fast forward one and a half years later, the adaptation and normalisation of working from home have been embedded into organisational practices. HRM has a critical role to play in ensuring that employees are well supported physically and psychologically for their performances while balancing work and work-family blurred boundaries (Kahn, 1990). It is imperative for employee wellbeing to be the focal point and for organisations to 'walk the talk of genuine engagement' (Spiller et al., 2010) and especially contribute to 'perceived organisational support' (Alfes et al., 2013) while navigating through Covid-19. Organisations have witnessed the rapid evolution of 'working from home' to 'working from anywhere' where leaders also require capabilities and competencies to lead from anywhere (IBM, 2020). The opportunity is here for the sector to endorse the ongoing development of 'phygital' environments with hybridised elements of physical and digital working worlds (Mikheev et al., 2021). Covid-19 lockdowns have demonstrated that being physically in the office is not a primary requisite to achieve organisational performance. The shift in restructuring the workforce with a strategic move to allow for more flexibility will contribute to greater productivity (IBM, 2020).

2.5 Flexible Working Practices

Flexibility is no longer recognised as a luxury but a necessity. Changes in working practices, patterns and flexible benefits have increasingly led to a rethink of the strong challenging ties between working arrangements and employee engagement. In the continuously evolving post-Covid-19 business environment, it is important for organisations to consider and continue developing personalised flexible working arrangements. This may be integrated as one driver to improve employee engagement, preceding and driving individual performance (Saks, 2017). During the extended lockdown periods, there was the need to quickly adopt and adapt to

flexible working schedules that suited the needs of both employees and employers, across multiple home workspaces. This led to work intensified individualisation, which witnessed the modification of working practices to meet and continuously adapts to changing environmental, organisational and individual needs. A conservatively universalistic approach with a high degree of standardisation certainly could not be espoused given the circumstances and stakeholders' changing requirements. The shift in flexible working options saw the transition from work offices with homely amenities to designated workspaces within homes. This has become an essential reality to adapt to, for the effective management of the workforce's abilities and competencies, enabled by flexibility. Atkinson's flexible firm model (1984) documented how a review of the workforce recomposition of core and peripheral groups can further help organisations achieve desired outcomes from flexibility. Beardwell and Holden (1997) also explained this is gained through four areas: distancing, functional flexibility, numerical flexibility and pay flexibility.

3. HEALTH SECTOR

3.1 Overview

The Ministry of Health oversees the operations and specific funding of the public health system strands including community health services, allied health services, aged care services and mental health services. The Ministry of Health is responsible for 20 District Health Boards (DHBs), all working to provide and fund health services in respective wider districts across New Zealand. The entire region of Auckland metropolitan area is covered by three DHBs: Auckland, Counties Manukau and Waitematā. Over 20 years ago, the DHBs were established to improve, promote and provide community health and wellbeing services, to meet local, regional and national health needs. The DHBs have strongly fostered societal inclusion and participation for healthier outcomes in the community (Ministry of Health [MOH], 2020). Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC, 2021) reported that the Minister of Health commissioned a Health and Disability System Review, to allow the Health system to progress and continue to meet the needs of New Zealanders. In response to the review, the Government announced that all 20 existing DHBs will be disestablished and replaced from 1 July 2022, by one unified entity, Health New Zealand, with operational functions at local, regional and national levels (MOH, 2021).

3.2 Work-Life Balance

The Health sector was already facing concerns prior to the spread of Covid-19. These concerns have been exacerbated with a litany of work-life challenges and enormous pressure throughout Covid-19. Since New Zealand declared a State of Health Emergency and nationwide lockdown from 25 March 2020, followed by resurgence plans and revised health protocols, it has been all systems go in the sector. The commended frontline employees have worked tirelessly to keep the health care system running and supporting all communities. There have been little to no control over working time schedules, given the situation's urgency. It is acknowledged that significant shortages of frontline workers were experienced across the sector. Extended working weeks, overtime and double shifts, isolation from families and friends were intensified during the health sector's rigorous fight against Covid-19. New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO, 2021) has reported that the increased workload and extremely stressful work conditions have resulted in individual and organisational challenges. The New Zealand Department of Labour (2004) highlights the significance of work-life balance through fostering a positively harmonious workplace culture, to minimise potential tensions. Forsyth and Polzer-Debruyne (2007) posit that 'perception of effective support' for work-life balance would result in the reduction of work-related pressure, increased job satisfaction and organisational performance.

3.3 Employee Wellbeing

HRM has a key role in monitoring and ensuring ongoing compliance with workplace health and safety requirements. Frontline workers have exercised the utmost duty of care in delivering health services to the public, while 'putting them and their patients at risk'. These are concerns regularly raised in the Health sector, plagued with unsafe work-life imbalance conditions, inconsistent staffing levels, performance-pay disproportionality and equity issues (NZNO, 2021). In May 2021, the Ministry of Finance (MOF, 2021) announced the pay restrictions in the wider public sector for the next three years, which further ignited the nationwide strike action of 9 June 2021 (NZNO, 2021). The International Council of Nurses (ICN, 2021) reported an alarming rise in mental health distress and post-traumatic work-related stress disorder since Covid-19. The physical, mental and emotional well-being continue to be in dire straits. Symptoms of depersonalisation, worsening sleeping patterns, emotional exhaustion and occupational burnout have augmented. It is understood these may lead to more frontline

workers leaving the profession in the future, with an anticipated future global shortfall nearing 14 million nurses.

3.4 Impact on Performance

Such projected employee turnover would have a direct consequence on organisational performance. Employee wellbeing comprehensively encompasses a range of areas previously noted from working conditions, job-related stress, burnout and anxiety, all associated to employee physical, emotional and mental health. Macky and Boxall (2008) indicate that work intensifies when there is a discrepancy between job demands and job resources to meet such demand. These have direct implications for HRM based on the increased physical, emotional and mental health risks for employees from stress, fatigue and deteriorated work-life balance. Individual performance will vary in the sector within multiple health providers across different geographical regions. Bakker and Demerouti (2007) argue that the job demands-resources (JD-R) model has been utilised for predictive purposes linked with burnout, job-related stress, absenteeism, organisational commitment and work engagement. It is noted that the combined process and application of the JD-R model if applied in the health sector, would highlight the imbalance between demands on employees versus available resources, having a combined effect on employee wellbeing, and indirectly influence performance (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014).

4. HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM SECTOR

4.1 Overview

The reverberations and decimating effects of Covid-19 are still being felt in the Hospitality and Tourism sector one and a half years on. The harm and hurt that has been experienced across the sector are irreversible, but there have been slow but positive rejuvenating signs, since the rebuilding of the economy. In recent years, the Tourism industry, on its own, was considered as the country's largest export in 2019, injecting \$40.9 billion to the domestic economy and the largest contributor to foreign exchange earnings at 21%. An upward shift from 2018, where at the time, the Tourism industry was the second-largest export earner at 17.1% of total export earnings (Stats NZ, 2019). This complemented the Hospitality industry with direct and indirect flow-on effects in employment, sales, business development opportunities in the country. Collectively, the Hospitality and Tourism sector supported 8.4% of the domestic workforce, with 225,384 people employed for the

period ending March 2020 (Stats NZ, 2020). Tourism New Zealand (TNZ, 2020) reported that the sector had generated \$23.7 billion from domestic tourism. Australia, China, the USA, the UK, Germany, and Japan are the six largest sources of New Zealand's tourism market.

4.2 Response and Measures

Since 11 March 2020, when the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020) declared the global Covid-19 outbreak a Pandemic, border closures, limitations and restrictions on international travel have been necessary to contain the pandemic. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2020) reported a 98% decline in international tourism following the global impact of Covid-19. International travel restrictions have significantly impacted the sector at local, regional and national levels. Since nervously preparing for earlier nationwide lockdowns, enterprises have either temporarily shut down or have taken an extended hiatus to date. There have been regular announcements of wage subsidy schemes, restructures, redeployments, redundancies within the sector's wide spectrum of operational enterprises ranging from: airlines, airports, transport and tour operators, accommodation, dining to music and arts. It is noted that the \$400 million Tourism Recovery Package from the Budget 2020 was highly welcomed to support organisations and job losses (Ministry of Tourism, 2020). From May 2020 to March 2021, the New Zealand Government, in partnership with Tourism New Zealand, have focused on the development of several campaigns, that would support employment in the sector while boosting domestic tourism by an additional \$1.1 billion (Stats NZ, 2020). The Government priority for the Covid-19 economic recovery plan has a clear focus on "jobs, jobs, jobs" (NZ Government, 2020).

4.3 Employee Turnover

The ripple effects of the pandemic on domestic employment in the sector resulted in a high rate of employee turnover in 2020. Lawson Williams (2020) reported that the sector presented with one of the highest turnover rates in the country at 38.6% employee turnover for six months to June 2020, with 16.3 % involuntary and 22.3 % voluntary. For HR practitioners, it is observed that the challenge of employee turnover in the sector has been catalysed by Covid-19. High employee turnover in the sector has long been normalised (D'Annunzio-Green et al., 2005). Increases in employee turnover have been linked to employees seeking more opportunities, skills and having reduced expectations to remain within one Hospitality

and Tourism organisation (PWC, 2011). High employee turnover is not desired as it negatively contributes to organisational performance. This 'standardised' practice in the Hospitality and Tourism sector has developed into an undesirable employee turnover culture, adopted by new, and future employees (Deery & Shaw, 1999). The sector is unique and diverse with frontline employees supporting businesses in the provision of quality-driven service. Knowledgeable and valuable employees with the technical skills and savoir-faire in the Hospitality and Tourism sector are precious, critical resources and strategic assets to be retained (Nankervis et al. 2019). While operating in a Covid-19 environment, the significant dilemma is to effectively balance sectoral changes and revised organisational strategies, while managing financial strain and reducing employee turnover.

4.4 Transformational Change

To rebuild a competitive advantage in the sector, organisations needed to reimagine, recreate and offer diversified products and services in response to the ongoing Covid-19 challenges. It was critical to progressively identify and adopt innovative modifications to business models, integrate technological changes from automation, digitalisation to robotisation at various levels in the sector. This was also made possible through the reskilling and retraining of the domestic Hospitality and Tourism workforce. Creative digitalised methods were sought and marketed to deliver the 'dine-in' experience to customers' homes. Alternative customers engagement was recrafted through social media platforms and live digital online media for virtual mixology classes or cooking classes with delivered pre-portioned kits.

On the global stage, robotisation has been on the rise in the sector with signs of robots carriers, robotic butlers and housekeeping robots supporting the transition from 'novelty to necessity'. This has for example been the case in some Californian hotels, operating as 'social distancing ambassadors'. Similarly, a 'Covid-19 awareness-raising' robot was introduced at Dubai United Arab Emirates' International Airport in 2020 to assist with customers' enquiries. That said, it is reported that 'humanoid robots' were integrated across a range of sectors in Japan decades ago and have been on the rise since the Japanese Government launched the 2015 'Robot Revolution Initiative' (The Manufacturer, 2015).

On the national scene, domestic travel momentum steadily improved with relaxed restrictions observed during Covid-19 Alert Level 1 in late 2020, which supported local accommodation enterprises with declining

occupancy rates. Automation has also been adopted in response to Covid-19 and supporting physical and distance measures. Accommodation enterprises have integrated touchless technology and contactless experience to enhance customers' experience through self-service check-in check-out stations, mobile check-in check-out applications and personalised solutions (Legrand, 2021; NEC, 2021). These allowed for more time to adequately develop employees' capabilities through training and personalised development. Redeployment may also occur in organisations within cross-functional departments, where additional value can be added through growing interactive digital support and enhancing a customer-centric culture.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The contextual dimensions presented in this paper have observed the backdrop of the Tertiary Education, Health, Hospitality and Tourism sectors since the Covid-19 roller coaster ride ascended one and a half years ago. New Zealand's key priorities have been to keep everyone safe, in and out of lockdowns, from robust restrictive isolation for elimination plans to vaccination as the solution plans to ensure people, businesses and communities can operate safely and securely in a Covid-19 working landscape. It has certainly been challenging and overwhelming to traverse complex situations, adapt to intensified personal and professional commitments, embrace hybrid teams and flexible ways of working in the office or working from anywhere. 2020 to 2021 has witnessed a series of highs and lows, where the nation has been fighting the good fight, and uniting against Covid-19 together with care, consideration, kindness and respect. The transformational and technological changes have instilled further opportunities for HR practitioners to reconsider and recalibrate a strategic contribution through these changing times, to support organisational performance as well as enhance skills, knowledge and competencies of the workforce.

A generalised set-and-forget approach cannot be adopted to maintain organisational survival and viability, amid the strenuous sink-or-swim environment and financial market pressure. It is recommended for organisational policies, procedures, processes and practices to be reviewed, tailored to better fit the changing environmental conditions. HRM, organisational and competitive strategies are to be realigned in a cohesive synergistic fashion, as examined by Schuler and Jackson (1987) and Storey and Sisson (1990). Accelerated changes in the sectors require

innovation-driven practices for adaptable interaction and coordination, rewarding achievements/results-based individual and collective performance. Integration of quality enhancement practices through revising, redesigning and redefining jobs to reflect the increased demands resulting from Covid-19; provision of training and personal development opportunities to support the reskill, reshape and rebuild of the workforce. Cost minimisation practices through effective and efficient management while keeping abreast of sectoral changes, financial governmental assistance and Covid-19 leave financial support schemes available.

The growing awareness is to foster and maintain a consistent and healthy work-life balance, expand the ability to regularly engage, recognise and proportionately remunerate the workforce. This will influence performance and reflect on the effective behaviour portrayed individually and collectively while adopting agile work practices. Armougum (2021) suggests the development and nurturing of impactful organisational initiatives to genuinely support the physical, spiritual, mental health and wellbeing of the workforce while navigating the Covid-19 crisis. Building and strengthening trust and openness; enhancing participation, collaboration and dialogue; nourishing a sense of purpose and meaningful work, will all contribute to positive dynamics and transparent productive organisational practices. With redefined expectations, the workforce evolution and Covid-19's new semblance of normalcy have created an avant-garde reality that champions creativity and doing more with less. There is the mandate for reinforced collective shared responsibility, cultivation of a positive mentality to support organisational continuity and guiding the way forward in these trying times with the people, by the people, for the people.

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