

Assessment of Anxieties on Contracting COVID-19 among Employees Working in Gauteng Province, South Africa

Josphine Hapazari

University of KwaZulu Natal, Howard Campus, Private Bag X54001 Durban 4000, South Africa.

**Correspondence email: jbhiri.hapazari@gmail.com*

Abstract

Generally, workplaces are known to heighten people's vulnerabilities to contracting coronavirus (COVID-19). As a result, COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a lot of anxieties among employees globally, thereby making them less productive. This paper sought to assess employees' anxieties regarding contracting coronavirus and their views on how employers could allay their fears. The study gleaned data from a purposively selected sample of 12 employees working in Gauteng province - one of COVID-19 hotspots in South Africa. Gathering of qualitative data was achieved through cellphone interviews. The study is aligned with the theory of workplace anxiety. Moreover, the study is located within phenomenology research design and thematic analysis was utilized to analyze data. The findings of the study indicated that employees were anxious about: contracting COVID-19 at work; not able to adhere to social distancing; being stigmatized once tested positive; and not being able to foot medical bills for COVID-19 related illnesses once diagnosed with COVID-19. Employees expected employers to provide them with PPEs, initiate working in shifts and furnish employees with information regarding the virus. It is envisaged that findings of this study will help combat COVID-19, and mitigate employees' anxieties so as improve their productivity. It is also anticipated that the findings of this study will further contribute making workplaces safer and promote achievement of the first three Sustainable Development Goals, namely; no poverty; zero hunger and good health and well-being.

Keywords: *Anxiety, COVID-19, employees, employers, workplaces, South Africa*

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1.0 Introduction

Most people consider workplace as an essential component of their lives. This is particularly so because workplaces are either the main or the only places where employees earn a living. Furthermore, most employees spend most of their time and a huge percentage of their youthful years at work. Consequently, workplaces significantly affect employees' social and economic wellbeing. Muschalla et al. (2013) observe that the influence of the state of workplace is

twofold: the workplace exerts positive effects on employees' wellbeing through the endowment of identity, social support, and dignity; and on the other hand, it exerts pressure and pose threats that may trigger anxiety.

Unfamiliar cases of patients with pneumonia were reported in the city of Wuhan, China, in December 2019, (Bai et al., 2020). On 9 January 2020, Chinese Centre for Disease

Control and Prevention reported a novel coronavirus as the causative agent of this outbreak (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020). The rapid spread of the virus became a worldwide health threat (Wang et al., 2020). Currently, the world is plagued by the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, COVID-19 is an infectious disease that is still poorly understood because it is still new. For employees, the idea of going back to work after the world imposed COVID-19 lockdown triggered various forms of anxieties. This is because the workplace is one of the places people can easily contract COVID-19. Linden and Muschalla (2007) established that 71% of women and 54% of men complained about work-related anxieties, with 20.5% of participants are suffering from work-related panic.

It is undeniable that the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a lot of anxieties among people, employees included. Telles (2020) expounds that what causes anxiety is the non-linear properties of COVID-19 transmission patterns. Thus, COVID-19 exhibits different patterns of transmission among humans. Telles (2020) further highlights that the vector nature of COVID-19 transmission is due to proximity of other humans and the social interactions. McKay et al. (2020) explain that the stress induced by COVID-19 among community members reduces their ability to absorb anything else apart from simplistic messages, and that people with underlying mental health conditions are more prone to fear than other community members. Kwan and Kemp (2020) elucidate that anxiety is also worsened by the use of emotive language, manifest when scientists argue about the pandemic on a public platform. Chirwa et al. (2020) assessed the effect of perceived risk of catching COVID-19 on Malawians willingness to vote. Their findings revealed that 63% of Malawians

think that they are likely to catch COVID-19 if they vote.

The new pattern of virus transmission through aerosols was confirmed by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020). Kwan and Kemp (2020) highlight that perception is the truth that underpins people's comprehension and fear. It is common to dread the unknown, particularly if it impacts people's health (Kwan & Kemp, 2020). That is why this study embarked on unearthing people's fears regarding contracting COVID-19 because it has a direct bearing on their health and that of the significant others. In this case, the anxieties are heightened by the fact that coronavirus is a deadly disease that affects an individual and has the potential to be passed on to the whole family. The ultimate goal of this study was to search for various ways in which employers can allay employees' anxieties so that they can work in a conducive environment and become more productive.

The study was aligned with the theory of workplace anxiety (TWA). The TWA offers a nuanced perspective on workplace anxiety and serves as a foundation for future work (Cheng & McCarthy, 2018). The theory of workplace anxiety unpacks anxiety using various concepts. Muschalla et al. (2010) highlight that one type of state-anxiety is job-anxiety which is a stimulus-bound anxiety, that is, it is related to and occurs when at work or when thinking about work (Muschalla et al, 2010). Heldmann and Fay (2013) note that anxiety can be either stimulus related or general in nature. It can be added that anxiety at the workplace may present in a variety of ways which include panic attacks, worry and phobic reactions among employees. Thus, the workplace can be a source of potentially anxiety-provoking stimuli and a variety of dimensions of anxiety can be provoked at work (Linden & Muschalla, 2007).

2.0 Materials and Methods

This paper sought to establish employees' anxieties regarding contracting coronavirus and their views on how employers could allay employees' fears. The target population was all employed people in Gauteng province, in South Africa. Thus, the study gleaned data from a purposively selected sample of 12 employees working in the Gauteng province - one of the COVID-19 hotspots in South Africa. The study was conducted during level five lockdown imposed by the South African government in March 2020. Participants were purposively selected from two Whatsapp groups where a message was posted regarding the research.

The researcher asked members to send a message in her inbox if they worked in Gauteng province and if they agreed to participate in the study. Employers and representative organizations of the participants were contacted to request for permission to interview the employees and permission was granted. Gathering of qualitative data was achieved through cellphone interviews in an attempt to protect participants from contracting COVID-19. The interviews were recorded in order to use the data during data transcription. A pilot study was conducted first to ensure content validity of the interview schedule.

Qualitative research entails research about persons' lives, lived experiences, behaviours, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movements, cultural phenomena and interactions between nations (Rahman, 2017). Moreover, the study is located within phenomenology research design. Considering that this study entailed dealing with human subjects, the researcher adhered to social science research ethics. The main limitation of this study arose from the fact that it was a purposive sample which limits the generalizability of findings

3.0 Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate employees' fears regarding contracting Covid-19 in post lockdown South Africa. As such, the participants' responses should be understood in the context of existence of COVID-19 regulations; which were arguably very strict. Moreover, this was a moment when COVID-19 statistics in SA were sprawling and escalating, hence heightening the participants' fears of contracting the virus. Furthermore, very little was known about COVID-19 at that juncture.

Demographic profile of the participants

Out of the 12 participants, 7 of them were males while 5 were females. Their ages ranged from 20 to 60 years. In terms of marital status, 4 of them were single, 5 were married, 2 were widowed and 1 was divorced. All the 12 participants were employed; with 10 of them being formally employed and 2 employed informally. The study unearthed five critical themes relating to employees' anxieties pertaining to contracting COVID-19 in post lockdown South Africa as discussed below;

Health related fears

This study replicated health related fears similar to those established by Merton et al. (2020). A number of health related fears were raised by participants. Various employees cited a number of places where they feared contracting COVID-19 and these fears were linked to the nature of their jobs or workplaces as indicated in the following extracts:

The other problem is that I work in a factory where there are people from Cape Town. Some of them come from hot spots of COVID-19, areas such as Sandton, so it is scary because after the lockdown, I cannot stop interacting with

them because my job entails interacting with workers giving them instructions, training them, giving them information. So it is a big risk. (Employee 3. Food inspector).

I am a teacher by profession, teaching at primary school level. According to the information that I have, this virus can affect kids but they might not get sick, which is good, but they can spread the sickness to me and my colleagues. These kids also use public transport daily which make them vulnerable to infections from other passengers thereby passing the virus to teachers. All this brings fear in me. (Employee 4. Primary school teacher).

Merten et al. (2020) pointed out that some people unknowingly spread the virus as alluded by employee 4. Employee 3, a food inspector, was worried about the fact that her colleagues were in COVID-19 hotspots during the lockdown, and yet her job entailed working closely with such people - coaching them on how to handle food. The nature of interactions made maintaining social distancing very difficult, hence exposing her to the risk of contracting the virus from infected workmates. Employee 4 was frightened of contracting the virus from the primary school learners.

If you work at a university, you always work in big crowds. You interact with students and colleagues on a daily basis. You meet in classes, laboratories and in various meetings. We also

share the spaces at the university's sanitary spaces, the bathrooms, the kitchens and all these areas, and one is afraid that maybe you could get into contact with a surface that has been infected by the virus. (Employee 6. University lecturer).

Understanding of the whole process of sanitising the workplace is and will be a major challenge post lockdown. Imagine the door handle to a common office area, the handrails to a staircase, the door to the sanitary rooms, the coffee machine, canteen utensils, a shared printer/photocopier, the landline phones within the pool offices, shared staplers, bundles of paper moving from one office to another, shared drawings. (Employee 11, Insurance broker).

I use public transport when going to work so I might catch it from passengers or the money we pass around (Employee 12. Domestic worker).

I do not fear anything because I trust in God (Employee 1. Truck driver).

For participant 11, going back to work was challenging given that he was going to be sharing a lot of facilities and equipment with his workmates. All the cited scenarios had a high capacity to transmit COVID-19 virus from one employee to the other. It is also worth noting that some of the things mentioned by participant 11 are very difficult to sanitise since once they are contaminated with the virus, it will be quite easy for it to be

transmitted to the next employee. The knowledge that if one were to contract the virus from the work environment, then he or she may expose their immediate family members was also a serious cause of fear. This finding resonated with Schimmenti et al. (2020) observation that people fear that their significant others might be infected. Public transport increases the chances of contracting COVID-19 as articulated by the domestic worker. The university lecturer feared getting the infection from common facilities utilised by other workmates and students. This stems from the fact that at a university, there were more people mixed in smaller groups, engaging in physical interaction and in contact. All these were major fears from a point of view of the work environment. The only outlier was employee 1 who does not have any fears due to his religious convictions.

Loss of hygiene

COVID-19 virus requires the maintenance of high levels of hygiene through washing of hands using soap and sanitisation of hands with an alcohol based sanitizer. Employee 8 predicted a slackening of hygiene conditions within her household after the lockdown, which is likely to present changes in terms of staying safe from the virus:

Being four in the family, chances of one of you coming back with the virus are very high. This is different from what we have during the lockdown where only one member of the family goes out for shopping (Employee 8. Secondary school teacher).

Since I am a domestic worker, I fear that when I go back to work, the whole family at my workplace will expose me to corona if they are not careful

about hygiene (Employee 12. Domestic worker).

What participant 8 stated holds water given that shopping is a duty that is normally done once in two weeks? During level one lockdown, most households were very cautious about hygiene and they had time to practice and monitor hygiene traits in and around the house. For instance, when a family member comes back from shopping, it was the duty of all family members to ensure sanitisation. It also entailed reminding family members coming from town to change their clothes and wash them.

Participant 8 stressed that after the lockdown, family members were now free to go out. In that case, she expressed fear that COVID-19 virus can easily be brought to their houses since family members seem to be too busy to ensure meticulous monitoring. In the majority of cases, parents may be too tired after a day's work and children might be focusing on their homework. Overall, the strict monitoring that was being observed during lockdown may slacken or might be non-existent in most households. Participant 12 is equally anxious about hygiene issues since household members where she works are likely to increase her vulnerability to contracting the virus. Merten et al. (2020) also observed that people will not follow rules after the lockdown. All these cited scenarios might increase employees' chances of contracting COVID-19 virus.

Social distance challenges

In sociology, social distance is a concept applicable to groups of people. However, with regard to COVID-19, it is applicable to individuals. Since physical distance can prevent the spread of COVID-19 virus, one of the regulations imposed by the WHO is that people must maintain a social distance of at least one meter apart. Some of the participants highlighted fear regarding the

failure to observe social distance that might occur after lockdown:

To ensure the expected social distancing at the workplace, our employer must rotate employees so that we do not all go to work at once (Employee 9. Barman).

You will observe that some operations are pretty impossible to perform while

employees are a metre or more apart. In as much as employees may try their best to maintain distance from each other, for the purposes of completing a critical task, they may be forced to reduce that distance to a point where sweat droplets, humid air droplets from heavy breathing will somehow escape even from the masks and end up landing on the other employee(s) (Employee 10. Electrician).

Sharing the same staffroom with my colleagues. The room is not that big. Its fine when things are okay, but we do not have enough space to maintain one meter apart. The fear is that, because we will be sharing the same room, one might contract Covid-19 as a result of being close to each other (Employee 5. Secondary school teacher).

On my way to work, I pass through a number of spots where traffic officers usually mount some roadblocks. Thus, I am going to be uncomfortable to talk to these

traffic officers after being stopped since social distance may be compromised (Employee 11. Insurance broker).

The issue about social distancing is a huge challenge since failure to ensure it might endanger the lives of people. However, most workplaces did not provide adequate facilities to ensure employee-to-employee and employee-to-client social distancing given that the facilities were never designed with any anticipation of a scourge such as COVID-19. In most facilities social distancing can only be achieved by strategies such as rotating of workforce, which entails scaling down production unless the rotation was accompanied by introducing night-shifts where they did not exist under normal situations. Employee 9 cited that the bar was too small to accommodate three barmen and numerous clients.

This explains why the study suggested rotation of employees. The impact of that solution to business is that service may be slow and this might endanger the health of clients who might have to wait for longer periods to get service. Employee 10 is an electrician so he feared that maintaining a distance of one meter from other workmates was at times impossible since some of the work required team effort. For instance, he may need assistants to hand him tools or to perform tasks that require manpower to be much closer than the designated one metre.

Employee 5 was afraid that the staffroom she shared with other teachers did not allow spacing of tables to ensure social distancing. Spacing learners was also a challenge since it required the construction of new buildings or staggering of lessons. The school might not be having enough space for expansion. Employee 11 raised an interesting issue that it is challenging to ensure social distancing when stopped by a traffic officer at a

roadblock on the way to work. When traffic officers mount road blocks, they usually talk to drivers through car windows, at close proximity.

Uncommitted employers

In the event that no precautions are taken by employers to prevent the spread of COVID-19 at the workplace after the lockdown, participant 11 felt that she would be hesitant to go to work:

Sharing the office with colleagues and serving clients whom I'm not sure of their COVID-19 status is scaring. If my employer does not test workers or provide sanitisers, I will not be happy (Employee 11. Insurance broker).

If the employer does not show any commitment to fight this COVID-19 at my workplace, I will be very scared to go back to work. (Employee 9. Barman).

Indeed, there may be some employers who fail to commit resources to the fight against Corona virus and it scares employees. Schimmenti et al. (2020) acknowledges this fear of inaction. This concern is understandable given that during the lockdown, employees were staying in different locations with some of them having tested positive to COVID-19 but recovered, while others may have been in contact with relatives and friends who might have tested positive to COVID-19. For such employees, going to work usually put the other employees at the risk of contracting COVID-19.

Stigma and loss of income

Other participants were afraid of the stigma associated with being quarantined and also

the loss of income that follows after contracting coronavirus. These are some of the most common statements from participants:

I am afraid that if I catch COVID-19, I will be taken to hospital or isolation. When I come back, my neighbours, students and workmates may run away from me or talk bad things about me (Employee 5. Secondary school teacher).

My fear regarding contracting COVID-19 is that if I catch it, I might be quarantined. When in quarantine, I will lose a lot of income (Employee 9. Barman).

Economic impacts were highlighted as serious concerns to employees. Similar findings were established by Taylor et al. (2020), that the coronavirus was associated with fears about economic consequences. Employee 9 was worried about his health, being quarantined and losing income. Being employed by a local entrepreneur in a small bar, there was no financial security to cushion employee 9 if he were to be admitted in hospital after contracting coronavirus. Furthermore, with no medical aid, paying for his medical expenses was likely to be a challenge. Thus, employee nine's fears ought to be understood in this broader context.

How the employers can allay the employees' fears

Study participants were asked to spell out what they want their employers to do in order to alleviate their fears as employees who are expected to go back to work amidst a pandemic of this nature. Various suggestions were made concerning the employer in light of the fears expressed by the employees regarding going back to work after the

lockdown. The suggestions fall into five themes as presented below.

Preventive measures

Just like in the current study, McCarthy (2020) found out that most participants feared coronavirus. Since the employees were afraid of being infected by COVID-19, most of the suggestions made were aimed at preventive measures and also restoration of health, as shown by the following excerpts:

Meetings should be done virtually and all purchases ought to happen online (Employee 2. Researcher).

I also feel that employers can initiate testing of workers at work to ensure that we are free of COVID-19 instead of continuing to go to work and yet we have people with COVID-19, it does not help. It is better to take prevention. I always think prevention is better than cure (Employee 3. Food inspector).

Employee 2 is who collects data from participants through interviews. However, due to COVID-19, he was suggesting that his employer should provide alternative means of collecting data. Technology was seen here as offering the much needed solution in the wake of a pandemic that has destabilised everything research methods notwithstanding. Employee 3 thought that testing employees may allay employees' fears since those infected get detected and quarantined. That way, other employees might not be infected.

Provision of face masks, face-screens and hand sanitizers, regular talks on hygiene practice (Employee 4. Primary school teacher).

Availability of soaps and running water so that employees can frequently wash their hands (Employer 5. Secondary school teacher).

The most vulnerable, the aged and the physically challenged should be saved quickly wherever they need to get help so that they do not get exposed to this deadly COVID 19 (Employee 11. Insurance broker).

There is nothing the employer can do to prevent me from contracting COVID-19 because I do not think that masks and sanitizers are helpful. The solution is for me to pray to God for protection (Employee 1. Truck driver),

In order to safeguard health and wellbeing, most employees made suggestions for preventing the spread of the virus. Merten et al. (2020) warns that fears can be an unhealthy burden. Employee 11 pointed out that her employer ought to provide face masks, face screens and hand sanitizers. In this case, masks and screens are meant to protect the employees since the virus is said to be contracted through the mouth and/or eyes. However, employee 1 believes that protection does not come from masks but from God. Such religious beliefs may endanger others if the employee fails to comply with COVID-19 regulations.

Psychological preparedness

Other employees were of the view that there was need to psychologically prepare the employees by providing them with counselling, keeping them updated with current information, and assuring them that employers will protect them from COVID-19:

First of all, the employer must do a risk assessment and provide proper personal protection equipment for each and every employee. Counselling must be provided for all employees. Employees must be made aware of the importance of a lockdown in order to alleviate the impact of the pandemic (Employee 7. Miner).

The employer needs also to assure the staff that they are doing everything in their power to ensure that we don't contract the virus (Employee 3, Food inspector).

Counselling and assuring employees were both crucial. Lack of assurance may breed uncertainty regarding any genuine efforts an employer might be pursuing. Carleton (2016) highlights the dangers of uncertainties. Additionally, the availing of counselling services to employees seems a worthwhile procedure given that both the infected and uninfected need the help of professionals to be able to deal with outcomes of COVID_19. COVID-19 is an unprecedented pandemic, hence employees require professional counselling to cope as they live in a world engulfed by this pandemic. The risk assessment mentioned by employee 7 is also essential because it helps organisations to determine the status quo regarding their preparedness to deal with the pandemic and identify strategies to reduce risks if any.

Employee 3 raised a very strong point about the need for employers to assure employees that they will protect them from contracting COVID-19. It is the duty of management to hold meetings with employees, reassuring them and reiterating that they have their best interests at heart so that the employees' fears

might be allayed. However, it is worth noting that assuring employees should not just be verbal. There is need for employers to be practical and proactive. They should be seen to be implementing preventive measures. Employers must be ready to put aside a budget to be utilised for fighting COVID-19 pandemic. They have to align their assurances with discernible actions, otherwise the employees may become disillusioned. It is only a good match between promises and visible undertakings that is likely to boost the morale of the employees and ultimately reducing their fears.

Availing technology and money

Employee 2 thought that his employer needs to create a conducive atmosphere by availing to them technology necessary for remote research:

The employer should provide a good environment for us to continue research remotely, by making sure researchers have all the requirements, for instance, laptops, and internet. In addition, the employer should pay for other software and Apps to use remotely, such as Skype, Zoom and Microsoft teams. This will facilitate ease communication, continued research and perhaps a bit of interaction with the participants (Employee 2. Researcher).

The employer ought to give employees money to cushion them from the impact of COVID-19 (Employee 12. Domestic worker).

My employer must provide me with data to teach online

(Employee 5. Secondary school teacher).

The software and Apps suggested by employee 2 comes in handy when employees work from home. As a researcher, he was no longer able to collect data directly from study participants. The use of technology to conduct research was found to be useful in tertiary institutions. The money pointed out by employee 12 cushions employees from the debilitating financial effects of COVID-19. However, it might not be feasible since employers were equally affected negatively by the pandemic. Employers were also not spared; they also have their own fears and need financial assistance from either banks or the government. Schools ought to buy data for teachers since they use it for work purposes given that employees cannot subsidise employers.

Confining employees

In a bid to contain COVID-19 pandemic, curtailing the movement of people can be a solution since it minimises the passing of the virus from one person to the other. Employee 10 suggested that employers can restrict employees' movements so that they do not contract the virus from the public:

Where reasonably possible, some employees will have to be kept in some restricted areas for a certain duration so that they do not mingle with the public until such time that the virus is contained at national level (Employee 10. Electrician).

Evidence has shown that COVID-19 virus is spread through human interactions, particularly in crowded areas. In as much as confining employees in certain areas for periods of times might curb the virus, it seems that it is quite a drastic measure which

borders on infringing employees right to free movement.

4.0 Conclusion

A lot of fears were associated with the return to work after the different levels of lockdown in South Africa. Most of these anxieties were due to the fact that COVID-19 is a new disease which people have little information about. Furthermore, this disease has caused a lot of deaths worldwide, hence everyone is afraid of catching it. South African employees revealed that they were afraid of going to work after the lockdown due to a number of reasons. Firstly, the study found out that health-related fears. Some of the participants expressed that they were afraid of contracting COVID-19 from their workmates and clients, as well as the police and other people who they interact with in public spaces as they go to work. The fear of contracting COVID-19 was aggravated by knowing that there was no medication to cure the disease yet millions of people who caught it have died worldwide, hence COVID-19 is perceived as some kind of death sentence.

The end of the lockdown was associated with loss of hygiene monitoring within households. Consequently, it was seen as a huge trigger to the transmission of the virus. Other participants were afraid that maintaining social distance was going to be a challenge. After the lockdown, a lot of people will be occupying limited spaces at work and some will be carrying out duties in groups, making social distancing difficult to accomplish. Furthermore, provision of a conducive atmosphere to workers amidst COVID-19 requires financial commitment from employers. However, participants were of the view that some employers will not be keen to provide the necessary things needed to curb the spread of the virus. That lack of commitment by employers invoked anxiety among employees. The other cause of anxiety was that of stigmatisation. COVID-19 is an

infectious disease and this contributed to the stigma attached to it.

Participants expressed their views on how they expected employers to allay employees' fears.

Among the solutions given were: effecting preventive measures, making employees psychologically prepared to go back to work, and also confining employees so that they do not move back and forth between home and their workplaces. This last solution is fraught with human rights violations since employees will be losing their freedom of movement. It is also worth noting that stigmatisation was due to the infectious nature of coronavirus which made it impossible for health professionals to adhere to the principle of confidentiality and anonymity. Those infected with coronavirus had to be

quarantined, whether they agreed with that measure or not. Even though they would not mention names of patients to the public, their results had to be made known to the employers. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- i. employers ought to avail PPEs to employees
- ii. employers need to intensify counselling services to their employees,
- iii. employers are expected to be proactive in dealing with the pandemic
- iv. and government should make the treatment of COVID-19 related illnesses free

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