THE IMPACT OF THE CHANGE IN THE WORK ENVIRONMENT ON EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: TEACHERS WORKING FROM HOME DURING THE PANDEMIC IN SRI LANKA

L.P.D. De Silva[*]

Department of Management, The Open University of Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Similar to many countries that responded to the pandemic, the government of Sri Lanka locked down the country in March 2020 and urged people to adhere to all the given health guidelines to mitigate this outbreak. Furthermore, to prevent the economy from collapsing or entering a recession, the government highly recommended that different organizations work from home. As a result of this lockdown, in Sri Lanka, all schools were closed for more than four months. It is important to note, "school closures impact not only students, teachers, and families, but have far-reaching economic and societal consequences" (Mustafa, 2020, p.1). The closure has affected more than 1.5 billion students at schools and universities in the world (UNESCO, 2020). Therefore, the entire education sector including primary, secondary, and higher education, had to adopt online-teaching methods via various applications such as Zoom, Google Teams, webinar sessions, etc. Shifting from physical classes to virtual spaces was a significant challenge for both teachers and students. Though this was a new experience for the majority, online teaching has become one of the prevalent methods in Sri Lanka and other countries.

Whether employees work from home or office, their engagement is essential to any industry's growth, including the education sector. Satisfied employees are not always fully engaged in their jobs, but engaged employees are satisfied with theirs (Reynolds, 2016). Therefore, employees' satisfaction is also a part of their engagement. It causes the customers to be satisfied, which leads to profitability as they are the biggest asset in any organization (Mulcahy, 2013). Thereby, in the education industry, teachers tend to be the employees, and students are the service customers. Therefore, the success of the overall education system depends on the committed engagement of satisfied teachers. In the study by Muhammad, Rehman, and Ahmed (2015), there is a solid and positive relationship between the work environment and teachers' satisfaction. This study proved that the employer-employee relationship had a significant impact on the job satisfaction of teachers. But given the ambiguity of finding a thorough cure for the COVID-19 pandemic and the possibility of future difficulties such as lockdowns, even though the government is reluctant to impose a total lockdown, distance education might be here to stay. In Sri Lanka, it will be interesting to understand whether the teachers in this new normal atmosphere have been fully engaged and are satisfied when their means of work have been changed from classroom to work from home through online platforms.

The following research questions were used as a significant guide throughout the study:

1. What are the factors that affect the teacher's level of engagement in conventional methods of teaching?
2. Why teachers prefer / are reluctant about online teaching?
3. What are the challenges they have faced due to the change in the work environment?
4. What are the recommendations that can be suggested to mitigate negative factors?

Research Objectives

The key objective of this study was to emphasize how the change in the work environment impacts employee engagement through job satisfaction and motivation based on the current pandemic situation in the secondary education sector of Sri Lanka. To achieve this, the following specific objectives were formulated.

1. To identify the factors that affect the teacher's level of engagement in conventional methods of teaching.
2. To examine why teachers, prefer / reluctant to engage in online teaching.
3. To find the challenges they face due to the change in the work environment.
4. To explore the recommendations that can be suggested to mitigate negative factors.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Qualitative findings were taken into consideration in the study to gain in-depth information. It was found to be one of the best ways to gain insight into the targeted teachers as it can support a progressive flow and precisely determine which actions lead to outcomes and find beneficial reasons.

Sample

Twenty-five secondary school teachers were selected as the sample of the present study. The sample was chosen from ten non-government schools in Western Province for the convenience of managing as the interviewees were conveniently available to participate in the study. The Snowball sampling method was applied to reach further respondents while using the technique of random sampling. A reasonably open framework was provided, and impromptu questions and open-ended questions were also used in this study.

Table 1: Sample profile of teachers in non-government schools in Sri Lanka

Teacher Number	Age (Years)	Gender	Experience (Years)	Subject/s	Grade/s	Marital Status	Children (Below 18Y)
T1	32	F	8	English Sociology	9 to 11	Single	-
T2	35	F	15	Science Health	8 & 9	Married	2
T3	44	M	10	Divinity	11	Married	2
T4	58	M	35	Science Divinity	11	Married	-
T5	24	M	1	Mathematics Science	6 to 9	Single	-
T6	26	M	3	Mathematics Health Science	8 to 11	Single	-
T7	31	F	8	Health Science Science	6 to 8 / 10 to 11	Single	-
T8	27	F	3	Mathematics	9 to 10	Married	-

				Science			
T9	28	F	5	Sinhala Design & Tech	6 to 7	Married	-
T10	35	M	16	Mathematics English	6 to 11	Married	2
T11	30	F	4.5	Science	8 to 9	Married	Expecting
T12	35	F	10	Science	8	Married	2
T13	26	F	2	English Divinity History	6 to 8	Single	-
T14	44	F	20	Sinhala Media	10 to 11	Married	-
T15	65	M	40	Sinhala	9 to 11	Married	-
T16	35	F	11	English Divinity	6 to 9	Married	2
T17	33	M	9	Accounting	11	Married	2
T18	52	F	31	History Geography Buddhism Civics	6 to 11	Married	-
T19	38	F	17	ICT	7 to 9	Married	2
T20	32	F	3	Dancing	6 to 9	Married	-
T21	31	F	8	Music	7 to 11	Married	1
T22	41	F	11	Drama	6 to 11	Married	1
T23	28	F	6	History Civics Divinity	7 to 9	Married	-
T24	32	F	5	Sinhala	9 to 11	Single	-
T25	46	F	20	Divinity Practical Tech Civics	6 to 9	Single	-

Data Collection Methods

In-depth interviews were employed as the data collection method to get the selected respondents' input by giving them the freedom to voice their concerns. Nevertheless, the face-to-face interviews could not be carried out due to the current pandemic situation. Instead, they were conducted over the phone with a standard guideline while recording them with their permission.

Data Analysis

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed while reducing a large amount of accumulated raw data to represent reproduced and quality data to the reader. The data were coded corresponding to specific interview questions and arranged to mark the significance of the contributors' experiences. Coding persisted until all viable alternatives for themes had been derived, and the interviews appeared to have been studied. Then the data were analyzed thematically. As a result, six main themes were identified as areas of concern: relationships with others (the relationship between the teacher and the students), working conditions (in-class as opposed to working from home), personal life (the changes, both negative and positive became challenges while working from home), personal growth (new skills and techniques that were not needed in the classroom but were developed working from home), job interest (students not reaching full potential concerned the teachers causing a lack of interest), quality of supervision (dynamics of management changed from in-class to working from home) These themes were

derived from the teachers' views on satisfiers and dissatisfiers in the normal environment (conventional method) and in the new normal environment (working from home).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The current study discusses how the change from the normal (conventional) environment to the new-normal (online) environment impacts employee engagement through job satisfaction and motivation.

Question 1: What factors affect the teacher's level of engagement in conventional teaching methods?

Trying to determine the level of employee engagement in a normal environment, a sample of secondary teachers was asked about the factors that affect their level of attention and satisfaction when teaching in the classroom. These factors were divided into satisfiers and dissatisfiers following Herzberg's Theory. Corresponding to the results, most secondary teachers in Western Province found the work environment entirely satisfactory in the normal environment due to the strong affiliation with their students and as the domain is set up for working, with everything close at hand. According to the results, the significant themes derived from this study were a) relationship with others and b) working conditions.

a) Relationship with others

It was found that students' relationship with teachers was the most significant favourable influence on teachers' engagement and satisfaction. Teacher-student relationships are an essential part of teaching (Marzano, 2003). When the students are learning, the teachers have the most satisfaction. A study done in two regions of Tanzania revealed that job satisfaction among secondary school teachers is determined by their positive relationships with their students, parents, and co-workers and the respect for and the recognition of the contribution of teachers in providing quality education. They were pleased to see their students shine in their studies (Nyamubi, 2017).

b) Working conditions

Working conditions were the second most satisfying factor in the normal environment, including the necessary resources being on hand, ability to do group activities and conduct practical lessons, social interaction, etc. Even in other industries, the facilities and resources at the workplace and social interaction should satisfy employees. Teachers found that the working conditions in the normal environment situation help make their job more satisfying.

Question 2: Why teachers prefer /are reluctant to engage in online teaching?

2.1 Why teachers prefer online teaching?

The main objective of the teachers is to prepare their students to become future leaders in the country by providing them with a quality education. The researcher developed four significant themes through the data collected, such as a) working conditions, (b) relationship with others, (c) personal growth, and (d) personal life.

a) Working conditions

Based on the findings, it is shown that working conditions significantly impact the level of satisfaction and engagement of teachers interviewed. Included in the results was the advancement of technology, commuting and travel, and work-life balance.

b) Relationship with others

Some respondents found that there was a better interaction with students when teaching online. When a relationship is formed between teachers and students online, this shows that there is a commitment from both parties. In turn, this is also a satisfier to the teachers when students are motivated.

c) Personal life

The teachers' personal life was impacted by the factors that positively impacted their lives, leading them to satisfaction and engagement in their job. It was also found that working from home was a benefit to the teachers who were expecting a baby.

d) Personal Growth

It was revealed that senior teachers found more personal growth in themselves, particularly in the area of technology. However, it was not a significant consideration for the younger generation as they are comfortable using it.

2.2.1 Why are the teachers reluctant to do online teaching?

Throughout this research, most teachers found they were not generally happy with online teaching, as they cannot engage with the students as much as they want. Four main themes have emerged, which caused them to have less satisfaction. They are, a) working conditions, b) relationships with others, c) lack of job interest, and d) lack of quality of supervision.

a) Working conditions

The work environment has a positive influence on the performance of employees. Findings showed that most teachers' work situation significantly impacts the successful demonstration of their ability to do their job. The researcher concluded that a majority of teachers experienced unsatisfactory work conditions when working from home. These conditions include technical failures, physical issues, distractions, stress, and lack of resources. In general, teachers find that working from home is incompatible with providing students a quality education, indicating that hygiene factors may change when the work environment changes. There will be many challenges ahead if this is to be successful.

b) Relationship with others

The researcher found that many teachers are less satisfied as they could not maintain a strong relationship with their students as they used to do in the classroom due to the lack of participation and inability to identify if they have grasped the lesson's intent.

c) Lack of quality supervision

Substantial supervision encourages employees to be well-disciplined (Nasution, 2017). Guidance can be done by the management, as well as by a third party such as parents. When working from

home, the quality of supervision is diminished as it is provided by untrained parents who may or may not be available. Also, in the school, management is all around in the presence of principals and vice-principals. If a teacher in the school has any difficulty in teaching, she can talk to the vice-principals and get advice. When teaching from home, this much needed supervision is not readily available.

d) Lack of Job Interest

Herzberg (1959) stated that lack of job interest would lead to low satisfaction. When the hygiene factors are met, there is generally increased interest in the job, and it can motivate the employees, encouraging them to perform better. However, when teaching from home, teachers find that a lack of interest in doing their jobs grows, leading to less satisfaction which results in less motivation.

In this study, teachers were less than satisfied with working from home. Meanwhile, in England, more teachers were satisfied in teaching online as the number of working hours have been reduced during the lockdown. Shareena and Mahammad (2020) also revealed in their study that more teachers were willing to work from home during the lockdown.

Question 3: What are the challenges they have faced due to the change in the work environment?

The researcher found that teachers view challenges in positive and negative ways. One of the significant challenges they faced was learning new technology and systems and positively applying them. Mainly this was a more substantial challenge for senior teachers comparing to the junior. Monitoring their children while teaching students, teaching with distractions, and changing the teaching method and sharing devices among households were also other challenges.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

It was shown that when the work environment changes adversely, the major hygiene factors may also be altered undesirably. In the natural environment, there was adequate satisfaction in the hygiene factors. When the condition changed negatively, the major hygiene factors changed causing much dissatisfaction, resulting in lack of motivation. This finding was also in line with the two-factor theory. It was established that the positive factors outweigh the negative in the normal environment while the opposite was found to be accurate in the new-normal environment. Therefore, it is expedient for the relevant authorities to take the necessary actions to mitigate these negatives. In any industry, circumstances beyond our control may require employees to work in an adverse environment; it may be forced lockdowns, company policy changes, working with a problematic client, etc. To achieve the company's aims, it is in the best interest of all the respective parties to work together.

However, digitalized teaching was available in Sri Lanka for the last decade, and many have not benefited. Therefore, it is recommended to promote all the available online resources among the nation. Better technology will not solve the problem alone if they lack the knowledge and skills to operate it and do not have enough resources. Therefore, if working from home is to succeed, better providers with better transmission are crucial. Training also needs to be provided to all the parties to adapt to alien technology and situations. Required resources such as laptops, dongles, allowances, etc. need to be provided to those who need them. This investment in educating Sri Lanka's students will pay dividends by delivering a better trained and better-educated workforce.

Similarly, as the employee is the heart of any industry, mitigating the above-mentioned negative factors will help to increase the employees' engagement and increased satisfaction and motivation. When the employee is satisfied and motivated, he may not be fully engaged, but meeting satisfiers and motivators play a significant role in getting engaged. Again, this will be directed towards the organization's effectiveness through increased productivity and higher profits.

REFERENCES

Marzano, R. J. and Marzano, J.S. (2003). Building Classroom Relationships. *Educational Leadership*. 61:1, 6-13. Available at http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept03/vol61/num01/The-Key-to-Classroom-Management.aspx.

Muhammad, G., Rehman, S. and Ahmed, N. (2015). Impact of Work Environment on Teachers' Job Satisfaction A Case Study of Private Business Universities of Pakistan. *European Journal of Business and Management*, 7(13).

Mulcahy, A (2013). *Chairman, CEO – Xerox*. Motivation. [online] Retrieved from https://storyofmulcahy.wordpress.com/.

Mustafa, N. (2020). Impact of the 2019-20 Coronavirus Pandemic on education. *International Journal of Health Preferences Research*. doi: 10.13140/RG.2.2.27946.98245.

Nasution, M. I. (2017). The Influence of Supervision and Work Discipline On Performance Of State Civil Apparatus. *In Proceeding 3rd Sriwijaya Economics, Accounting, and Business Conference 2017,* Palembang, Indonesia.

Nyamubi, G. J. (2017). Determinants of Secondary School Teachers' Job Satisfaction in Tanzania. *Education Research International,* 2017, *Article 7282614.*

Reynolds, J. (2016). The Difference Between Employee Engagement and Employee Satisfaction. Retrieved from tiny pulse website: https://www.tinypulse.com/blog/employee-engagement-employee-satisfaction-difference.

Shareena, P. and Mahammad, S. (2020). Work from home during COVID-19: Employees' perception and experiences, *Global Journal For Research Analysis (GJRA)*, 9(5).

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2020). Retrieved from https://en.unesco.org.