

Effect of Occupational Stress on Individual Work Performance and Growth during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The Sri Lankan government announced a country lockdown in March 2020, due to the widespread of COVID-19 virus which was affecting every organization. Consequently, employees around the country were pushed into difficult settings due to significant changes in the work environment that created stressful situations. This study aimed to identify the effect of occupational stress on individual work performance and individual growth of employees in the agriculture sector government organizations in Kandy District during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study specifically explored how techno overload, work overload, job insecurity, loneliness, and individual factors influence employee job performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Individual work performance and individual growth under COVID-19 are the main two dependent variables considered. A structured questionnaire survey was administered to collect primary data from a randomly selected sample of middle-level workers covering seven organizations. Data were analyzed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) of Analysis of Moment Structure (AMOS) in SPSS. According to the standardized regression weights analysis, work overload, loneliness, and individual factor are the influential factors affecting employee individual work performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings are beneficial for those organizations to understand the causes of lowering employee performance during a shock situation such as COVID-19 to take possible recovery measures.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, Individual work performance, Growth, Occupational stress

Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak, which was first reported in China in 2019, was labeled as a novel virus by the global community. Since then, the global economy seemed like a flat line, with the worldwide spreading of this serious disaster. Sri Lankans also faced a struggle after detecting the first domestic case on 10th March 2020 regardless of territorial boundaries. Due to the danger of this pandemic, the country was locked down on March 11th, 2020.

Therefore, the local economy was also signed off big economic menace meeting this collapse. Consequently, all employees around the world including Sri Lankans were pushed into difficulty. These unexpected and significant changes in the work environment created stressful situations, influencing on individual job performance of employees.

Job performance is the way to perform job tasks according to the expected job descriptions (Saeed *et al.*, 2013; Wijesinghe, 2017). It plays an important role in deciding the success or failure of the organization (Alkadash and Alamarin, 2021).

Under COVID-19, organizations rapidly initialized their temporal tasks with novel working ways including flexible work, work from home (WFH), remote working, and digitalization. These radical changes raised difficulties due to home disturbances and a lack of techno know-how. Furthermore, employees felt isolated and experienced less interaction with colleagues, their co-workers, supervisors, and managers. Certainly, this new face led to stress on employees, hindering their performance at work (Saleem *et al.*, 2021).

Occupational stress is defined as a mismatch between an individual's aptitudes, capacities, and job demands (Joy and Kumar, 2018). It may influence positively or negatively the performance of employees. Nowadays, it has become more apparent and leads to the low morale of employees. Many factors can be identified as influencers on employee performance, but those were drastically changed under COVID-19. Therefore, it is valuable to research how occupational stress influences individual job performance and individual growth of employees under COVID-19.

The digital platform in the work environment makes, employees stressed with techno overload, which significantly impacts their job performance under COVID-19.

However, according to the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Fayad and Paper, 2015), when someone is continuously disposed toward technology with long-term interactions, it could improve individual job performance (Ingusci *et al.*, 2021). At first, it may seem anxious and stressful but after experiencing it feels like nothing. Research has mentioned that an excessive workload stresses employees which affect their work performance (Yunita and Saputra, 2019). Job insecurity is also negatively correlated with employee job performance (Alkadash and Alamarin, 2021).

Further, research has mentioned that unexpected social distance leads to lower individual work performance due to dissatisfaction in a boring work environment (Susilo, 2020; Kniffin *et al.*, 2021). As a matter of this fact, employees deteriorate to work-life imbalance, physical and mental stresses, and causing a loss of motivation for work (Çolak and Çetin, 2021).

As an agrarian country and a developing nation, Sri Lanka is seeking economic development by prioritizing the agriculture sector. It provides food security and employment for the people as the nation's lifeline. The agriculture sector also met with a longer sustained shock under COVID-19. Employee work performance in the agriculture sector is very important to the economic development of the country as one of the main key income sources of Sri Lanka though the pandemic condition is prevailing.

Even though some studies have been carried out in different countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are only a few studies that have been revealed in Sri Lanka in this area. Hence, the main objectives of this study were to examine how occupational stress factors i.e. techno overload, work overload, job insecurity, loneliness, and individual factor influence individual work performance and individual growth of employees in the agriculture sector government organizations in Kandy district of Sri Lanka under COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical Development

Occupational Stress

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis caused employees with high stress due to unexpected and inexperienced changes. These radical changes have raised some difficulties due to the unavailability of colleagues, disturbances in the home environment, lack of motivation, non-sharing of work, challenges of technology adaptation, communication difficulties, space problems, and unavailability of technical devices and internet connections. In addition, employees worked at an intense phase as the result of technology development, work-life transformation, and other changes. With those new ways of things, occupational stress was created influencing negatively individual work performance and individual growth in the COVID-19 struggle.

Occupational stress is caused by various types of physiological and psychological pressures that are felt and handled by employees at the workplace. The level of stress depends on the workplace factors that the employees face (Shenje and Wushe, 2019). As a result of certain environmental factors, job stress is created which has become more apparent and lowers employees' morale due to technological changes, competitive lifestyles, and many other social factors (Vijayan, 2017). Research has mentioned that occupational stress can be generated by overwork, workload, salary issues, and lack of care by others (Melin *et al.*, 2014).

Some of the stressors are bad, and some will enhance the motivation as a catalyst and thus employees do their best to achieve their goals (Prasad and Vaidya, 2020). On the other hand, bad health conditions and certain work factors create stress which decreases the energy and performance of employees during the COVID-19 pandemic (Saleem *et al.*, 2021).

Researchers have mentioned that occupational stress is a silent killer (Prasad *et al.*, 2020). However, proper time management practices, work-life balance, work-from-home and flexible work hours, fair workload, open communication, and providing a conducive working environment support employees to minimize stress (Nyangahu and Bula, 2015).

Employee Job Performance

Occupational stress highly affects the job performance of employees and thus directly influences organizational performance. Performance is the accomplishment of a given task to achieve the expected goals and comply with predetermined standards (Prasad and Vaidya, 2020; Diamantidis and Chatzoglou, 2018).

The work performance of employees highly affects the level of the enterprise's success. Unsatisfied employees have low motivation to work thus leading to the lowering performance. Researchers have mentioned that a combination of employee skills, efforts, and abilities influences organizational productivity (Nayanathara and Karunarathne, 2021; Saeed *et al.*, 2013).

Moreover, in some uncertain situations such as COVID-19, organizations are facing difficulties in maintaining consistency in their usual operations so that employees' individual work performance can be lowered (Saleem *et al.*, 2021). Further, research has mentioned that occupational stress significantly influences the performance of employees (Vijayan, 2017). Most organizations have encouraged employees to work from home for the purpose of safety, and saving time and money during the COVID-19 pandemic but leaving many other issues in work-related aspects (Ingusci *et al.*, 2021).

Agriculture Sector in Sri Lanka

As the nation's lifeline, the agriculture sector is not limited only to providing food and raw materials for the industry; it also generates employment opportunities for Sri Lankans (Dissanayake, 2021). Further, the agriculture sector in Sri Lanka plays a major economic role in the national economy as it ensures food security, and poverty alleviation in rural communities.

Even though the agriculture sector is considered one of the main income sources of Sri Lanka, with the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, demand for agricultural exports has decreased including the exportation of tea and rubber products (Roshana *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, around 5% of globally trended food and agricultural products were affected as a result of lockdowns, export restrictions, and also quarantine under COVID-19 (Sachitra, 2021). In 2019, 7.4% of the GDP was contributed by the agriculture sector in Sri Lanka (Ministry of Agriculture – 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has had a higher impact on horticultural production in selling and harvesting than other agricultural products like dairy farming, floriculture, fisheries, and poultry farms (Sachitra and Padmini, 2021).

Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19)

Purposing mitigation of the worldwide spreading COVID-19 virus, the Union Government announced the first lockdown from 24 March till 17th March 2020 after reporting the first case in December 2019 in Wuhan, China (Prasad and Vaidya, 2020). Then, 4.54 million cases were recorded from 215 countries and territories in the mid of May 2020 with more than 303,707 deaths and 1.71 million recovered (Dissanayake, 2021). After finding the first case of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka on 10th March 2020, the situation was closely monitored continuing strict rules (Rusniya and Nufile, 2020). Furthermore, COVID-19 was expanded to 50 people and afterward, it reported over 935 cases with 9 deaths by the mid of May 2020 (Dissanayake, 2021). After that, all activities were subjected to conduct under different barriers by imposing a curfew on 20th March 2020 and with mobility restrictions which were started on 25th March (Sachitra, 2021).

Effects of Techno Overload on Employee Job Performance

As a result of the worldwide spreading of COVID-19, remote working and work-from-home concepts were viral all over the world with the help of some communication tools such as team viewer, splash-top, Microsoft remote desktop, zoom, Microsoft teams, etc. (Prasad and Vaidya, 2020). However, handling all the skills and knowledge related to the new updates in information technology are caused to employees with insecure, incapable, and techno-stress. This situation leads to a huge amount of information handling, provoking fatigue, memory difficulties, and loss of control for the workers due to longer and faster work contribution requirements than normal (Ingusci *et al.*, 2021). When employees are facing such issues at home, it creates difficulties in handling via online communication systems thus employee performance will go down (Chen, 2021).

Effects of Work Overload on Employee Job Performance

Work overload influences employees' productivity badly. Work overload can occur due to time pressure, shortage of adequate and timely help, inadequate resources, inefficient co-workers, role conflict etc. (Vijayan, 2017). Such difficulties mostly occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic (Yunita and Saputra, 2019; Joy and Kumar, 2018).

Effects of Job Insecurity on Employee Job Performance

Job security ensures that the job is not threatened and is unlikely to be dismissed (Abolade, 2018). Job insecurity generates work stress thus leading to poor performance. Under COVID-19, job security was threatened due to many factors such as loss of sales, lack of raw materials, and travel restrictions (Nemteanu, Dinu and Dabija, 2021). Further, Alkadash and Alamarin (2021) have mentioned that job insecurity shows a negative relationship with employee performance in organizations.

Effect of Loneliness on Employee Job Performance

Flexi-time work has generated some adverse effects including isolation of workers, more organizational distances, fewer rewards, low face-to-face interactions, less managerial guidance, lack of information sharing, lack of teamwork, greater stress, and burnout (Nayanathara and Karunarathne, 2021). Employees experience loneliness due to the unavailability of; colleagues, routing interactions, fun, chats, and group activities. Also, employees feel stress with the loss of one-to-one communication thus creating feelings of loneliness (Prasad and Vaidya, 2020). Furthermore, problem-solving through online communication systems leads to psychological stress and anxiety that extremely affecting to the mental health of the employee (Chen, 2021). However, the most favorable and comfortable work environments optimize the performance of employees (Susilo, 2020).

Effect of Individual Factor on Employee Job Performance

Employee abilities and skills are inherent to performing a better job that will result in better performance (Prasad and Vaidya, 2020). A balanced life of an employee is considerably linked with individual performance.

Creating a healthy work environment and performing domains with the help of properly arranged and scheduled work structures are important to enhance employee performance (Nizath and Karunaratne, 2021).

Hence, based on this literature review, the theoretical model was developed for the current research.

Methodology

Theoretical Framework

The proposed conceptual framework for the research is depicted below (Figure 1).

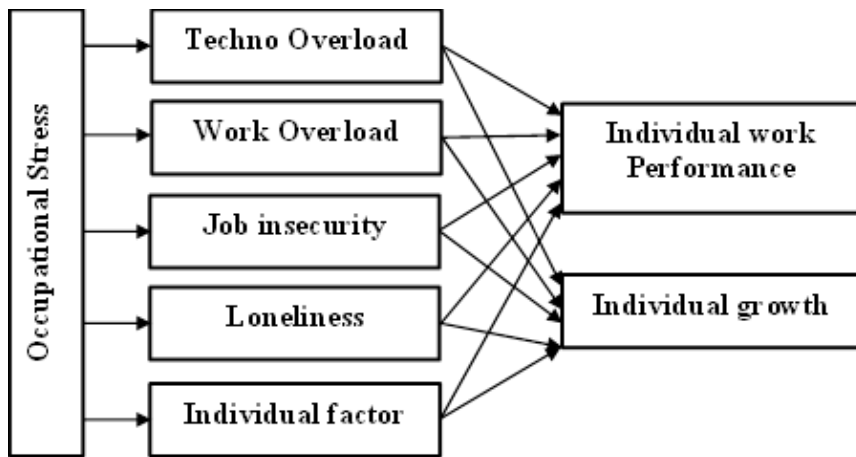


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Methodology

The survey was conducted through a structured questionnaire to gather primary data from the study population. Data were collected from randomly selected 317 respondents from seven government organizations of the agriculture sector in Kandy district. Completed 300 questionnaires were subjected to data analysis. The questionnaire consisted of two sections that are demographic measures and occupational stress-related measures. Occupational stress-related measures consisted of seven factors i.e. techno overload, work overload, job insecurity, loneliness, individual factor, individual work performance, and individual growth under the COVID-19 pandemic. Individual work performance and individual growth were the testing variables for the study.

Thirty-five indicators were used to assess these seven factors except demographic factors. The 5-point Likert scale was used to assess all these seven factors, ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 denoted “strongly disagree” and 5 denoted “strongly agree”.

Data Analysis

Structural Equation Modeling via SPSS was used to analyze the data. The demographic factors of the respondents were analyzed by using descriptive statistics.

The reliability values of the factors were measured by using Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficient. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was done by using an Analysis of Moment Structure (AMOS) in SPSS 23 version. Finally, factor loading values and p values were investigated to explore the significant levels and causal relationships between independent and dependent variables.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

According to the analysis, the majority of the respondents were female (75%), and 25% were male in the study population (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic factors of the sample

Factors	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	75
	Male	25
Age	18 - 30	14
	31 - 40	44
	41 - 50	29
	Above 50	13
Monthly income	10000 to 20,000	5
	20,001 to 30,000	6
	30,001 to 40,000	47
	Above 40,000	42
Marital status	Married	85
	Unmarried	15
Work experience	Less than 5 years	16
	5 to 10 years	36
	10 to 15 years	17
	above 15 years	31
Educational level	Secondary education of O/L and A/L	8
	Diploma degree	37
	Bachelor degree	44
	Other	11

In the study population, forty-four percent (44%) of respondents belonged to the 31-40 years age category, and 13% were above 50 years. In the population, 47% of respondents are included in the category of LKR 30,001 to 40,000 monthly income. Among the respondents, eighty-five percent (85%) were married, and 15% percent were unmarried. It shows that 36% of respondents had 5 to 10 years of work experience as highly experienced people. Eight percent of respondents had been educated up to secondary education, and 44% had achieved bachelor's degrees.

Reliability Statistics

Commonly, Cronbach's alpha is used to test the reliability values of the instrument. Table 2 shows the observed Cronbach's alpha of each factor used to measure the internal consistency of the Likert scale items.

Table 2: Cronbach's alpha of each factor

Factor	Cronbach's alpha
TOL (Techno Overload)	0.833
WOL (Work Overload)	0.812
JOI (Job Insecurity)	0.864
LON (Loneliness)	0.809
INF (Individual Factor)	0.792
INW (Individual Work Performance)	0.860
ING (Individual Growth)	0.793

Cronbach's alpha is acceptable when its value is greater than 0.7 (Hair *et al.*, 1998).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

The proposed model was validated by using CFA. It determines the overall quality of the measurement model. The measurement model was estimated by using the maximum likelihood method. Multiple Fit Indices were used to assess the model fit (Table 3).

Table 3: Measurement model fit indices

Indices	Measurement Model Estimates
Chi-square (χ^2)	603.82
df	327
Probability Level	0
CFI	0.932
GFI	0.873
AGFI	0.842
RMSEA	0.053

The chi-square value (603.82) for the model was statistically significant, $\chi^2/df = 1.85$; a root mean of squared error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.053; goodness-of-fit (GFI) = 0.873; adjusted goodness-of-fit (AGFI) = 0.842; and comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.932.

The thirty-five (35) statements were used as indicators to measure the variables at the beginning of the analysis. The results of the model fit showed that the model fit was inadequate to proceed with the same set of indicators. Therefore, seven indicators (TOL1, WOL4, JOI1, LON1, INF4, INW2, and ING2) with low factor loadings (below 0.05) and insignificant (at $p=0.05$) were pruned and re-assessed the model. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Confirmatory Factor Analysis results

Factors and indicators	Estimate	P value
Techno Overload (TOL)		
TOL2 (Techno impossibility)	0.500	***
TOL3 (Techno stress)	0.590	***
TOL4 (Risk of techno overload)	0.981	***
TOL5 (Technological burden)	0.801	
Work Overload (WOL)		
WOL1 (Shorter work weeks)	0.823	***
WOL2 (Limited physical attendance)	0.693	***
WOL3 (Non- sharing of work)	0.582	***
WOL5 (Limited office days)	0.784	
Job Insecurity (JOI)		
JOI2 (Salary reduction)	0.799	***
JOI3(Cuts of bonuses and allowances)	0.898	***
JOI4 (Reduction of additional benefit)	0.800	***
JOI5 (Job threat)	0.595	
Loneliness (LON)		
LON2 (Loss of face-to-face interactions)	0.526	***
LON3 (Staying away from friends)	0.946	***
LON4 (Loss of interpersonal communication)	0.888	***
LON5 (Unavailability of guidance and motivation)	0.515	
Individual Factor (INF)		***
INF1 (Work-life imbalance)	0.843	
INF2 (Skill inflexibility)	0.750	***
INF3 (Self-incapability)	0.613	***
INF5 (Poor mentality)	0.591	
Individual Work Performance (INW)		
INW1 (Quantity of worker fulfillment)	0.614	
INW3 (On time task fulfillment)	0.847	***
INW4 (Fulfillment of all responsibilities)	0.816	***
INW5 (Quality of worker fulfillment)	0.773	***
Individual Growth (IING)		
ING1 (Self-improvement)	0.555	
ING3 (Confidence of higher-ups)	0.705	***
ING4 (Promotion/ salary hike)	0.716	***
ING5 (Performance appraisal)	0.743	***

Levels of statistical significance ***P<0.001, **P<0.01

According to the CFA results listed in the Table 4, standardized estimates are statistically significant except for TOL5, WOL5, JOI5, LON5, INF5, INW1, and ING1 indicator variables. TOL4 indicator shows the highest factor loading (0.981) towards the techno overload which indicates that the risk of techno overload highly reflects (by 98.1%) the factor of techno overload. The indicator shorter work weeks (WOL1) highly reflects the factor of work overload by 82.3%. Cuts of bonuses and allowances (JOI3) show the highest estimate (0.898) towards job insecurity. Results show that the indicator of staying away from friends (LON3) highly reflects the factor of loneliness by 94.6%. The indicator work-life imbalance (INF1) shows the highest factor loading (0.843) towards the individual factor. Based on these findings, the research concludes that the risk of techno overload, shorter work weeks, cuts of bonuses and allowances, staying away from friends, and imbalance of work-life create employees with high stress which badly influences employee performance in individual work performance and individual growth under COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the standardized regression weights analysis (Table 5), it shows that work overload, loneliness, and individual factor are the significant and negatively influencing factors on individual work performance under COVID-19. Work overload, job insecurity, loneliness, and individual factor are the significant and negatively influencing factors on individual growth under COVID-19 (Table 5).

Table 5. Standardized regression weights

Factors	Estimate	P
INW < TOL	0.092	0.094
INW < WOL	-0.425	***
INW < JOI	-0.055	0.340
INW < LON	-0.146	0.013*
INW < INF	-0.363	***
ING < TOL	-0.045	0.452
ING < WOL	-0.241	***
ING < JOI	-0.286	***
ING < LON	-0.189	0.004**
ING < INF	-0.322	***

Levels of statistical significance ***P<0.001, **P<0.

Under the work overload, four statements were asked i.e. the effect of the shorter work weeks, limited physical attendance, non-sharing of work, and limited office days on performance. Salary reduction, cuts of allowances, reduction of additional benefits, and job threats related statements were included in the factor of job insecurity.

The factor of loneliness was measured by the indicators i.e. loss of face-to-face interactions, staying away from friends, loss of interpersonal communication, and unavailable of guidance and motivation. Work-life imbalance, skill inflexibility, self-doubt, and poor mentality were included to measure the individual factor.

According to the results, work overload highly influenced individual work performance (SRW -0.425, $p < 0.001$) and the individual factor highly influenced individual growth (SRW -0.322, $p < 0.001$) under COVID-19. Techno overload did not significantly influence both individual work performance and individual growth under COVID-19 (Table 5). It is due to the quick adaptation to the technological applications by employees in these organizations.

Figure 2 illustrates the structural relationships between selected factors and two categories of employee job performance i.e. individual work performance and individual growth under the COVID-19 pandemic.

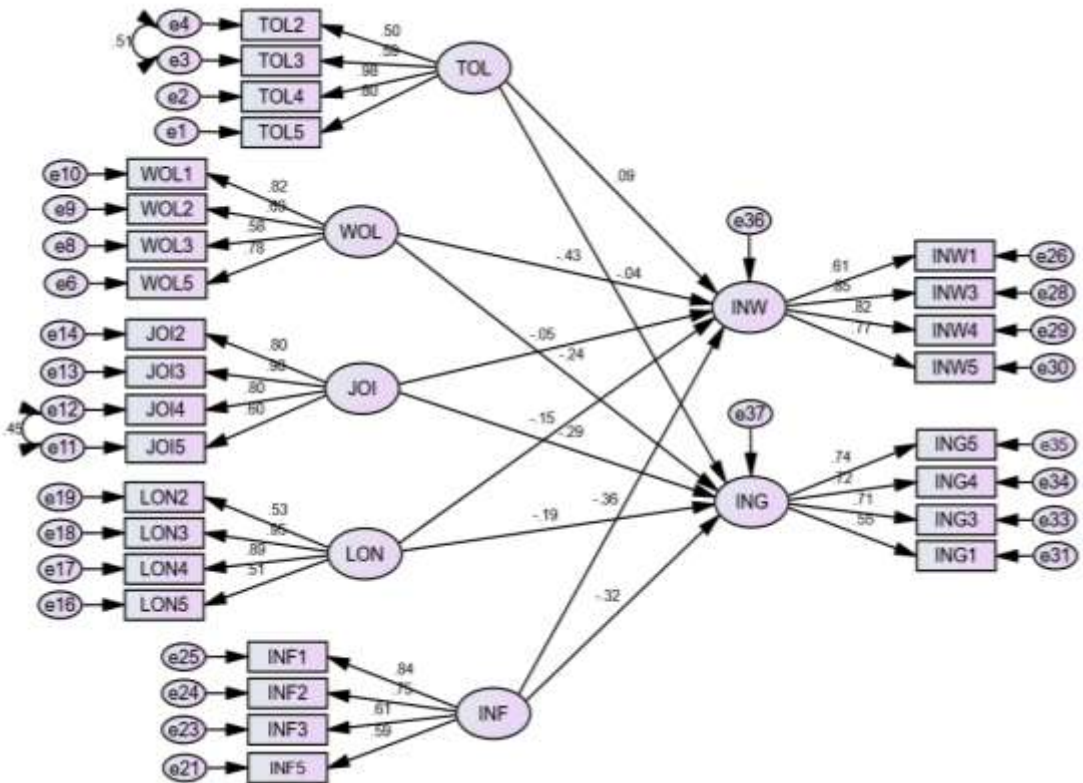


Figure 2: Structural model of selected factors and individual work performance

Conclusion

The results of this study reveal that work overload, loneliness, and individual factor are the influential factors on employee individual work performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. It means that work overload, loneliness, and individual factor negatively affect individual work performance during COVID-19.

Further, results reveal that work overload, job insecurity, loneliness, and individual factor are significant and negatively influential factors on the individual growth of employees during COVID 19 pandemic.

Indicators that were used to measure the work overload are the shorter work weeks for employees to work on, limited physical attendance to the workplace, non-sharing of work due to distance working, and limited office days. Other than the limited office days, the other indicators were significant on work overload. Therefore, managers of these organizations should implement proper work schedules such as divided-up work structures among employees, implementing frequent interaction systems with peer groups and management, maintaining effective interpersonal communications, giving the proper guidance, and monitoring the work thus supporting enhance individual work performance.

Indicators that were used to measure loneliness are loss of face-to-face interactions among workers, staying away from friends, loss of interpersonal communications, and unavailability of proper guidance. Other than the unavailability of proper guidance, all other indicators were significant in the factor of loneliness. In order to overcome these issues of loneliness due to social distance managers should implement strategic management interventions to enhance the affection needs of employees through proper communication channels and possible interactions.

Indicators that were used to measure the individual factor are work-life imbalance due to home environment disturbances, inflexibility of managing office work at home, self-doubt in job activities at home, and poor mentality due to the pandemic fear. Other than the poor mentality indicator, all other indicators were significant on the individual factor. Therefore organizations must conduct supportive programs and employee well-being practices for those employees under such a pandemic to improve their individual factor through the support for work-life balance, enhancing the skill of flexibility, self-confidence enhancement, and mental stability enhancement.

Indicators that were used to measure job insecurity are salary reduction, cuts of allowances, reduction of additional benefits, and existing job threats due to COVID-19. Other than existing job threats all other indicators were significant for job insecurity. Job insecurity negatively impacts the individual growth of employees. In order to overcome the negative impact of the feeling of job unsafe, managers have a huge responsibility to create trust in workers' jobs and also take proper strategic implementations to ensure the sustainability of the jobs and organization's practices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

These research findings will be beneficial to all levels of managers to maintain and enhance the employee's individual work performance and individual growth under such a pandemic. Further research is required to identify the effect of COVID-19 on individual work performance and individual growth in sectors other than the agriculture sector in Sri Lanka.

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