MANAGEMENT OF MEDICAL PERSONNEL IN THE SITUATION OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE SENSE OF THE MEANING OF WORK

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Abstract: The healthcare sector is an interesting research area for various fields of science, including organization and management. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic caused additional issues and new challenges for organizations' managers. It is worth noting that when employees feel that what they are doing makes sense, their commitment to work clearly increases.
Purpose: The aim of this article is to present the healthcare personnel's opinions in terms of how COVID-19 pandemic affected the organization of their work and the sense of meaning of performing assigned duties.
Design/methodology/approach: In order to identify the opinion of healthcare personnel on functioning in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic, a study was conducted in December 2020 on a representative sample of employees of this organization. The CATI technique with a Likert scale-based questionnaire was used for the research. **Findings:** The research results show the relationship between the management of personnel in healthcare units in Poland and the sense of the meaning of their work during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Research limitations: The COVID-19 pandemic situation, affecting organizations and society, is unprecedented due to its increase, resources or solutions involved, and the lack of existing literature.
Practical implications: The presented research results highlighted not only the image of the work environment of Polish healthcare workers, but also show the way how it can be improved.

Key words: COVID-19 pandemic, management in healthcare units, the sense of the meaning of work

Introduction

The health sector is a very important economic area in each country and thus an interesting research area for various fields of science, including management in particular. Unfortunately, Polish health care facilities are underfunded, often show a low level of efficiency in the management of their resources and inefficient organization of work, which leads to numerous problems in their management. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused additional difficulties and new challenges for managers of these organizations (see Iyengar et al. 2020, pp. 943-946; Restubog et al. 2020). The pandemic forced the introduction of extraordinary organizational arrangements and the involvement of a variety of resources, as well as the associated risks, made it necessary to support employees in maintaining a sense of security and sense of work. This theme is part of the broad problem of loss reduction, since the untapped potential of healthcare staff is a clear loss that can be analysed in organizational and social terms.

The aim of this article is to present the views of medical staff on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their work organization and the sense of carrying out their duties. The presented results of the study not only present a picture of the working environment of Polish health professionals, but also indicate how the management of medical workers can be improved using the experience of the crisis caused by the pandemic.

Research Background

The management process in organizations, regardless of their type, the industry in which they operate, whether they perform tasks and objectives, can be characterized by identifying four basic activities (functions): planning, organizing, conducting, and controlling. Management is a process undertaken by one or more people (managers) to coordinate the activities of others (employees) in such a way to achieve results that are not achievable for a person acting alone (Scully-Russ, Torraco 2019, pp. 66-93). Organizations use four types of resources in the management process: human, material, financial and information. And while all resources are essential to their operation, people are absolutely the most important resource. Human resources are all members of an organization, i.e., employees with their potential, knowledge, experience, skills, or talents. Today's managers can't only be administrators of the resources entrusted to them to achieve their goals, but they must also meet the role of team leader. They should therefore have the competence to motivate, solve problems and prevent conflicts and influence employees by giving meaning to their work (Czarnecka, Słocińska 2015, pp. 92-104).

Meaningful work is one that is perceived as "valuable in itself" and at the same time "worth doing" (Rosso, Dekas, Wrzesniewski 2010, pp. 91-127). Such work, on the one hand, helps to satisfy the expectations of the employee related to, for example, development, building relationships. On the other hand, it allows us to create value for important social groups or society as a whole. Feeling the meaning of work requires the employee to look reflexively at the actions taken and assess whether the resulting experience and results are in line with their values and goals (Brach 2020, pp. 294-295).

The issue of the meaning of the work was dealt with by many researchers (see (Baker, Jacobs, Tickle-Degnen 2003, pp. 57-66; Ardichvili, Kuchinke 2009, pp. 155-167; Schnell, Hoge, Pollet 2013, pp. 543-554). According to the model of the characteristics of the work of J. R. Hackman and G. R. Oldham (1980), describing the determinants of the sense of meaning of work, the assessment of the meaning of work is individual. According to them, the employee, when assessing the content of the work performed in terms of diversity, identity and importance of tasks - concludes about the meaning of the work performed. Criticizing this approach, representatives of the Theory of Social Information Processing argued that an individual never gives meaning to the activities carried out. They pointed out that, in a situation of constant uncertainty about the objectives and the need to coordinate activities in the organization, how the employee perceives his work depends on how others perceive it. The theory of Social Information Processing indicates that in

studies of the sense of meaning in work, it is necessary to take into account the variables that include the opinions of people entering into relationships with the employee, in addition to individual and organizational variables (see Weick, Sutcliffe, Obstfeld 2009, pp. 131-151; Brach 2020, p. 295).

Giving meaning is the ability to perceive meaning, have a unique view and define deeper meaning. It is the ability to think in a way that has not been codified so far, so still activities of this type can't be taken over by computer programs. (Ławicka, Sitko-Lutek 2020, pp. 91-101)

Giving meaning to work, as one of the key competences of a modern manager, is based on a set of skills. One of them are cognitive skills that condition the management of an employee in a way that helps them work effectively and at the same time develop and achieve life satisfaction. The way to effectively fulfil the functions assigned to an employee is dialogue, which should resemble coaching rather than a simple exchange of opinions. If the employee understands what is expected of him, he will find the right way to perform the tasks so as to achieve the goal set for him by his superior. However, the employee should not only understand the manager's expectations towards him, but should also see the sense in taking up the assigned tasks.

The ability to give meaning is also associated not only with proper knowledge of employees, but above all with proper knowledge of oneself. Conversations with employees related to giving meaning to their work are associated with openness in sharing one's own experiences and own understanding of the work done for the benefit of the organization. It is also an indicator of having a distance to oneself, which is a component of a mature personality, manifested in the ability to objectify one's own and other people's behaviour. The effectiveness of management, in addition to substantive competences, i.e., professional knowledge and experience, also depends on the implementation of "soft" areas, i.e., having communication skills, emotional intelligence or openness (Czarnecka, Albrychiewicz-Słocińska 2018, pp. 35-43). Only such a manager is convincing in the role of a mentor who gives work meaning to others.

The above aspects of a manager's work are particularly important in those organizations that go through change processes, which is exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic situation. These situations are accompanied by quick and often chaotic actions that are not followed by explanatory messages. In the absence of detailed information on how to proceed in new, atypical for the organization and employees, situations, it is he or she who is responsible for explaining the meaning of the activities performed. Employees will follow the supervisor they trust, who is their professional authority, is open-minded and explains to them the organizational reality, even if their actions are burdened with the risk of failure or uncertainty as to the future results of current actions. Moreover, such a management style means that the supervisor does not have to interfere in all aspects of the work, and employees who have greater autonomy in the way of carrying out tasks can be expected to be engaged and non-standard initiatives.

Nowadays, managerial activities related to human resource management are changing, including the management model, evolving towards building employee

relations and supporting employees (Słocińska, Czarnecka 2015, pp. 105-119; Czarnecka, Albrychiewicz-Słocińska, Illes 2018, pp. 122-130). Thus, managerial activities become more aware, responsible, reflective and empathetic. This model fits perfectly into giving meaning as one of the basic managerial competences. Employees who understand the sense of undertaken actions become more independent and effective in them. One can't ignore the fact that doing work that you understand and accept has an impact on your well-being and job satisfaction. This, on the one hand, brings measurable benefits to the employee who changes his own attitudes and behaviours, becoming a more motivated and coping with stress better (compare Isaksen 2000, pp. 84-107; Messias et al. 2021, pp. 139-143). On the other hand, for an organization - an employer, such a situation translates into an increase in business indicators, the level of commitment, safety, retention or innovation, and reduces turnover and absenteeism (Clausen, Borg 2011, pp. 665-681; Rodrigues, Barrichello, Morin 2016, pp. 192-208).

Methodology

The presented research results constitute a part of a state-wide quantitative research concerning medical workers carried out in terms of the "Research on the opinion of medical workers concerning their functioning in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic in their place of work". The study was carried out in December 2020 with the participation of a specialist external company DRB Polonia. The main research problem of the project was formulated as follows: How medical workers perceive their professional functioning in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic in the following areas:
- job safety;
- work organisation;
- employee relations;
- satisfaction and sense of work.

The survey was performed using quantitative research methods using the CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interview) technique. The research population consisted of medical employees as classified by CSO (Central Statistical Office). The study included a randomly selected representative sample of medical workers N = 384, determined on the basis of the Central Statistical Office data for 2018. The research sample was selected taking into account the representativeness of the research population in terms of the division into professional groups - doctors, dentists, pharmacists, nurses, midwives, physiotherapists, laboratory diagnosticians, paramedics.

A standardized questionnaire consisting of closed questions and statements was used for the research. A Likert scale was used for the responses, which makes it possible to determine the relative intensity of the different responses. The questionnaire is original and was created by the members of the research team - employees of the Department of Psychology, Sociology and Communication in Management at the Faculty of Management of the Częstochowa University of Technology.

The group of respondents, i.e., 384 medical workers, included: 86 doctors, 12 dentists, 28 pharmacists, 185 nurses, 22 midwives, 26 physiotherapists, 11 laboratory diagnosticians and 14 paramedics. It should not be surprising that such a numerous representatives of the professional group of nurses, which is the most numerous professional group among medical workers.

Most of the respondents (86.20%) indicated their employment status as some form of employment, including 82.03% of persons employed under an employment contract, 3.13% of persons with an employment relationship agreement, and 1.04% of persons on the basis of an appointment. The remaining respondents (13.80%) were employed on the base of a different legal form including: contract (2.08%) people, contract of mandate (8.33%) people, affiliation agreement or an agreement with a different service provider (3.39%). There were 80.73% of women and 19.27% of men among the respondents. The respondents also varied in terms of age, total length of service, as well as length of service in the health service.

The STATISTICA program was used to develop the research results, while non-parametric tests were used to assess the significance of differences in the analysed variables: the Mann-Whitney U test (UMW) and the Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA test (AKW). Numerous statistical hypotheses were adopted in the study: H0 - hypotheses assuming no statistically significant differences in the respondents' statements in relation to the defined independent variables, and H1 - alternative hypotheses about the occurrence of these differences. The strength of the correlations between the variables was determined using the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. As part of the study, the following problem was raised: how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the sense of the meaning of work among medical workers in Poland. The meaning of work in the case of the work of medical workers has been defined mainly as helping people.

Results and discussion

As part of the survey, employees were asked a question about their feelings about the meaning of their work. The answers provided indicate that the majority (as many as 42.19% of respondents) believe that their work definitely makes sense. 31.77% declare that their work rather makes sense, and only 9.37% express the lack of a sense of work. 16.66% of the respondents could not define their feelings in the examined aspect. It should be emphasized that the perceived meaning of work is not differentiated by variables such as: professional group, sex, age, length of service, form of employment, family situation, type of employing unit, its size, location, or the fact that the unit is a public or non-public unit. Such results should be interpreted as the basic feature of the medical worker profession, a specific mission of helping people, especially in a pandemic, regardless of external circumstances.

On the other hand, when analysing the Spearman's rank correlation indicators in relation to the sense of the meaning of the work performed, it should be noted that they correlate with the majority of indicators defined in the research tool. The perceived meaning of work is therefore related to:

- employer's assessment of coping with pandemic conditions in relation to work organization (r_s= 0.4131, for p <.0001), ensuring safety in the workplace (r_s= 0.4244, for p. 0001), maintaining good employee relations (r_s= 0.3408, for p. 0001) and the flow of information necessary for proper functioning in pandemic conditions (r_s= 0.3205, for p, 0001),
- assessment of the sense of security in terms of: availability of disinfectants (r_s= 0.4533, for p <.0001), availability of personal protective equipment (r_s= 0.4249, for p. 0001), organization of the work space (locks, places of isolation, etc.) (r_s= 0.3264, for p. 0001), access to knowledge and information on the COVID-19 pandemic (r_s= 0.4191, for p. 0001), access to knowledge and information on the legal regulations in force at the moment (r_s= 0.3691, for p. 0001), patient management procedures (r_s= 0.3788, for p. 0001), procedures of conduct in other situations at the workplace (r_s= 0.4102 for p, 0001);
- assessment of the organization of work, the method of managing the unit in a crisis in terms of: adapting procedures to the current situation (r_s= 0.4094, for p <.0001), comfort of work (r_s= 0.3645, for p. 0001), quality of work performance (r_s= 0.4241, for p. 0001), efficiency of work performance (r_s= 0.3811, for p. 0001), availability of knowledge and information on the current situation (organization of meetings, briefings, issuing orders, etc.) (r_s= 0.3902, for p. 0001), participation in the development of procedures (r_s= 0.3438, for p. 0001), decision-making by superiors (r_s= 0.3874 for p, 0001);
- assessment of relations in the workplace in terms of: support of the employee in the performance of professional duties (r_s= 0.4527, for p <.0001), supervisor's trust in employees (r_s= 0.4553, for p. 0001), the relationship with colleagues (r_s= 0.4673, for p. 0001), employees' trust in colleagues (r_s= 0.4573, for p. 0001), employees' trust in the supervisor (r_s= 0.4670, for p, 0001).

The presented results show that the independent variables describing the characteristics of the organization, in the case of medical workers, do not have a significant impact on the perceived meaning of work. However, the method of managing the unit, with particular emphasis on elements related to personnel management, determines such feelings. Of course, it should be noted here that a group of medical workers is a group of professions based on a certain mission related to helping the patient even at the expense of their own comfort and safety (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, Debebe 2003, pp. 93-135). In this type of work, it is easier to make sense of your actions and responsibilities in the workplace. D. Lepisto and M. G. Pratt (Pratt, Ashforth 2003, pp. 309-327) argue that although employees associate a sense of meaning with a specific experience of work (place, tasks, people), they draw the arguments that justify its meaningfulness from opinions formulated in the public sphere. In the era of a pandemic, medical professionals, especially in the first period, were given special recognition and attention by the public. Although this image worsened with the passage of time and the disclosure of numerous errors and inadequacies in the functioning of the Polish health service in

the public space, during the second wave of cases, employees of these professions still enjoyed support and social recognition.

Conclusion

The conclusions from the conducted research concern a relatively good image of employers hiring medical workers and the positive impact of elements related to the management of organizations and personnel on the sense of work perceived by employees. It should be noted, however, that when we feel the sense of work, the bond with the company that employs us strengthens so much that we start to treat it as a joint venture, and thus we are inclined to express better opinions about it (Brach, Mazerant, pp. 1-12).

The conducted study, due to the limitations related to its survey character, does not provide clear knowledge of the direction and strength of shaping the aforementioned relations between management and the meaning of work in the surveyed units. However, it should be emphasized that research on the sense of the meaning of work and, consequently, a stronger sense of the general meaning of life play an important role in relation to the functioning of medical workers in the workplace and should be continued and expanded.

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