

Managing COVID-19 in workplaces – a theoretical framework for integral employees' health

Sandra Gauer and Barbara Germann
Gauer Consulting, Bern, Switzerland

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to develop a framework on how to deal with stressors emerging from the COVID-19 outbreak. The theoretical framework aims to explain pandemic-related stressors and potential ways to prevent them, considering a wide range of interacting factors at individual, team and organizational levels to ensure their employees' health.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors drew on an integrative literature review to identify pandemic-related stressors influenceable by the organization and gathered solution approaches to counteract them. Popular psychological stress theories served as a theoretical base for the framework.

Findings – The authors based the framework on an integration of the transactional stress theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) and the job demands resources model (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004), focusing on their respective theoretical strengths. The final framework offers a solid orientation for scholars regarding the introduction of holistic and strategic measures in coping with pandemic-related stressors. A section describing possibilities for practitioners' use of the framework has been integrated.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first to offer a framework on how to handle COVID-19-related stressors in the workplace by implementing teamwide and companywide measures.

Keywords Framework, Covid-19, Employees' health, Organization development, Stress reduction, Change management

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

As of March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization characterizes the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic (WHO, World Health Organization, 2020). More than one year later, 178 million confirmed cases including over 3.8 million deaths are being reported (WHO, World Health Organization, 2021). COVID-19 is not only a public health crisis but also has become one of the global economic and financial scopes. Owing to the enormous impact COVID-19 has on workplaces, companies must continue to address respective issues to remain competitive in the working environment.

Since the pandemic started, many employees were forced to quickly adapt to new working practices. In addition, the pandemic triggered fears, anxieties and stress concerning the illness and current situation itself. In a survey issued by Thrive Global, 65% of respondents reported feelings of helplessness due to the virus and 80% indicated elevated stress (Robinson, 2020).

Stress over a short period is a helpful tool for mobilizing resources but long-lasting, chronic stress, can have drastic consequences on mental and physical wellbeing and may lead to harmful behavior and reduced performance (Kaluzka, 2018). It is therefore in the



interest of companies to counteract this to keep employees physically and mentally healthy. Nevertheless, there is often a lack of a theoretical basis for practitioners to follow.

Heretofore, there are no models that we know of dealing with stress generation in times of the pandemic in an organizational context. Reviews summarizing different aspects of COVID-19 and the workplace have emerged (Kniffin *et al.*, 2021; Giorgi *et al.*, 2020; Ogbah Agba *et al.*, 2020). To date, the focus of studies and reviews in the work context was on enumerating possible stressors resulting from the pandemic and listing approaches to address them. Even if respective pointers on how to act to prevent employees' stress during the pandemic can be helpful for organizations, there remains a need to adopt more holistic and thoughtful approaches considering many interacting aspects.

In the context of organization development (OD), the need to address two fundamental factors has been raised: rigor and relevance (Burnes and Cooke, 2012). The relevance of facing pandemic-related issues has been established, but beyond that organizational measures require a solid theoretical foundation. Without a strong basis, OD is likely to be insubstantial and flawed. According to Burnes and Cooke (2012), key to the attainment of rigor and relevance is closing the gap between scientists and practitioners, whereby scientists offer the behavioral-science knowledge, and practitioners test the developed basics. This paper aims to take the first step towards closing this gap by providing a theoretical basis concerning COVID-19 related stressors in the workplace.

In terms of the theoretical background, popular stress theories from psychology explain how and why certain stressors lead to certain outcomes, concretely being the Transactional stress theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), the Job demands resources model (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004) and the Challenge Hindrance framework (Cavanaugh *et al.*, 2000). The main issue in transferring these for organizational use, is that they primarily refer to individuals, their feelings, thoughts and behaviors relating to stress. A shift of focus to the adoption of teamwide and companywide measures is therefore needed. The aim of this paper is to develop a new theoretical framework to explain potential consequences of COVID-19 related stressors and possible ways to influence them in a strategic way.

This paper starts explaining the method. We continue by presenting a review on work-related and emotional stressors resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic as well as possible intervening points. We proceed to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the above-mentioned theories and integrate the findings of the literature research and discussion of theories into the framework. The final section of the paper presents a critical discussion, limitations and implications for future research.

Method

To develop a concise theoretical framework on a newly emerging topic, we conducted an integrative literature review (Torraco, 2005). The review covered the following topics: Individual stressors resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, their influence on the employee's health as well as key variables and actions that may counteract the respective stressors.

The research was conducted using the following search engines: PsycInfo, Business Source Ultimate, Google Scholar as well as the search engine of Emerald Insight. We searched for articles with the following keywords: "COVID-19" or "Coronavirus" coupled with "Work", "Workplace", "Office", "Health" or "Stress". Additionally, a backwards reference search was conducted.

We reviewed all articles covering consequences of COVID-19 for either the workplace and/or the individual as well as possible solutions to emerging problems. If described stressors were influenced by the current crisis, can impact an employee's stress level and

health, may at least to some extent be influenced by the organization (and not e.g. by politics) and can be classified in Richter and Hackers list of work strains (1998); they were included in the framework development. We further extracted diverse approaches to the identified stressors in the COVID-19 literature that can be taken in an organizational setting. For most stressors, a more extensive literature review in the above-named search engines as well as in organizational psychology books was conducted to identify a wide range of potential solutions. We complemented these findings with small case studies conducted during last year in our clients' offices and our day-to-day experience as new work change managers. The aforementioned work of [Richter and Hacker \(1998\)](#) served as a basis to structure the review:

- First, stressors are presented in accordance with their list of work strains.
- Second, suitable organizational resources to reduce the stressors are listed.
- Third, the theoretical base linking the stressors, resources and consequences is described.

For the theoretical underpinning a wide range of stress theories were critically reviewed. Through consulting critical reviews and multiple studies considering the strengths and weaknesses of the respective models and theories, three theories that best explain under which circumstances possible stressors lead to stress, were selected and integrated with the identified stressors and potential solutions in order to generate a framework that contains all the necessary information but still remains clear and simple.

Problem setting

COVID-19-related stressors

A vast number of individual consequences resulting from the crisis were extracted with using Richter and Hacker's list of work strains (1998). The list categorizes strains in six categories, two describing stressors resulting from the job (stressors from the work task or work role), three resulting from the work environment (material environment, behavior setting at work and social work environment) and one from the so-called human system. The last category contains work-life-conflicts as well as individual coping and emotions. In stress theory, one criticism refers to the incomplete consideration of stress-triggering conditions concerning person-related aspects such as emotions ([Greif, 1991](#); [Zapf and Semmer, 2004](#)). In response to this criticism, we decided to devote a separate category for pandemic-related emotions. We divided the remaining stressors in the categories "work-life-balance" and "work" (summarizing aspects from the job itself as well as the work environment categories). In the following, we present the stressors relevant to our model.

Work.

Remote working. Due to stay-at-home orders and social distancing measures many employers have switched to remote working, which poses new challenges. Firstly, not all employees have a suitable remote working setting with the necessary equipment at home (e.g. a proper workstation, stable internet connections, a printer) Moreover, certain programs needed for regular remote working, for example VPN-solutions, virtual meeting platforms or instant messaging tools might not have been set up at the time of the outbreak. Besides technical challenges, working from home requires strengthening certain skills for example self-management skills, high autonomy, time management and digital skills ([Franken, 2016](#)). Moreover, leading a team and teamwork in general becomes more complicated due to the lack of personal exchange ([Kniffin et al., 2021](#)). Working from home also makes it hard for

some employees to distance themselves from work and the permanent accessibility puts people on stand-by mode and leads to increased stress (Franken, 2016).

Workplace. As rules are slowly being lifted in many countries, employees return to the offices. Other employees who cannot work from home (e.g. blue-collar worker) have remained in the workplace throughout the pandemic. This as well entails challenges in terms of complying with hygiene measures to ensure a safe workplace. Distance rules often foster the need for more space and common facilities need to be regularly disinfected. Moreover, many employers are still working a substantial amount of time from home which can complicate cooperation. A qualitative study from Lautsch *et al.* (2009) has shown that the workload for employers in the workplace often increases since they must compensate for those working remotely, which causes tension and frustration.

Work-life-balance. In terms of work-life-balance, working from home facilitates certain family matters (e.g. through time savings due to no commuting, flexibility in terms of scheduling). On the other hand, it can and will potentially result in blurring boundaries between work and private life. This is particularly challenging for families with children. Although work-life-conflicts have the potential to strain both parents, studies from different countries showed that women were disproportionately disadvantaged during this pandemic (Collins *et al.*, 2020; Del Boca *et al.*, 2020; Feng and Savani, 2020). Women, particularly academics, reported having less time for work due to care responsibilities significantly more often than men. Research done by Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya (2020) further points to the fact, that if men participate in home-duties, they mostly spent more time with children, therefore executing more satisfying family work than housework. The increased dual role can thus trigger additional stress, especially for academic women with young children.

COVID-19-related emotions. Besides triggering stress due to dual roles, the current situation also triggers fears and worries in many employees, whether in terms of fear of losing their job, fear for their own health or that of those close to them, or other fears. Studies have shown the negative impact of such fears: Trougakos *et al.* (2020) found that fears about having or contracting COVID-19 leads to impaired work, family engagement and had negative health outcomes. Bakker and van Wingerden (2020) demonstrated the connection between ruminating about COVID-19 and increased depressive symptoms and exhaustion.

Another problem hitting people living alone and those with few contacts is elevated isolation. Several studies show an increase in perceived loneliness in the population (Killgore *et al.*, 2020). Loneliness can have far-reaching effects such as depression (Erzen and Çikrikci, 2018).

Indeed, many studies ascertain elevated psychological distress and other mental problems during this pandemic (Bäuerle *et al.*, 2020; Qiu *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2020). Among these problems are psychological distress, anxiety, depression, insomnia, irritability and changes in concentration. Consequences include but are not limited to health problems, productivity losses and interpersonal conflicts (Bäuerle *et al.*, 2020; Vinkers *et al.*, 2020).

Organizational resources

Several possible solutions that can be offered in an organizational setting to counteract the above-mentioned stressors were extracted from the integrative literature review. The resources are further being categorized in the following levels:

- First, measures that can be taken by the organization (meso-level).
- second, solutions dependent on the leader (micro-level).
- third, changes undertaken in the category “technology and room”.

This category sets a special focus on technical, spatial and real estate solutions, representing the basics that enable efficient work in the first place. In addition to being a guidance for theoretical development, this section also has practical relevance. By listing various organizational solutions, we also provide practitioners with a possible list of actions concerning the current crisis and its influence on employees' health.

Technology and room.

Technology. A functional environment sets the cornerstone for successful task execution; therefore, it is a must to provide the technical tools to enable effective work. Every employee should have the necessary equipment for productive remote working. Depending on job descriptions, employees' needs include strong laptops, work-smartphones, VPN-solutions, task-related programs (e.g. SAP, Microsoft Office, SPSS) knowledge-related programs (e.g. Wikis, E-Books) as well as communication- and team-related programs (e.g. instant messaging, virtual meeting-platforms).

Technological and technical innovations can further be harnessed in the workplace to protect employees from the virus. Examples range from glass protections and partition walls to door-free accesses, automatic light switches, improved air ventilation and air conditioning technologies with specially designed filters, UV lamps for overnight disinfection of surfaces, occupancy indicators and NanoSeptic surfaces providing continuous self-cleaning (Parker, 2020).

Room. An organization and its employees might also take advantage of certain spatial changes. Employers might hand out tips for a functional remote working environment (e.g. ensure adequate lighting, take ergonomic considerations concerning body posture or safe eye-monitor distance into account etc.).

At the office, certain changes might be taken into consideration. Since working from home is probably going to be a trend outlasting the current pandemic (Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi, 2020), employers might consider flexible workspaces including desk sharing and open office spaces. Many companies are considering reducing office space by leasing it in order to save costs. We concretely see greater potential in multispace offices that can be adapted to current needs fast. Multispace offices consist of group offices, cellular offices, as well as various recreation areas and exchange and retreat possibilities. Through homely design elements, the multispace office contributes to a pleasant atmosphere, which is intended to promote employees' wellbeing. Besides positive influences on well-being because of a feel-good factor, the open and diverse structures are very flexible and adaptable to the fast-changing working environment. Furthermore, we monitored several multispace offices of our clients during the pandemic for research purposes. Different clients have stated that if employees decided to work at the office, they mostly sat down in open group structures and hardly ever used single offices. We explain this by the fact once employees come into the office, they want to benefit from social exchange and togetherness, the elements one lacks at home.

Even if some individuals intuitively think open structures and desk sharing might promote the spread of the virus due to air circulations in open spaces and commonly used surfaces, the suspected downsides can be counteracted by sticking to distance rules, good air ventilation systems and regular disinfection of surfaces thus outweighing the disadvantages. It should be noted however, that big technological, as well as structural changes always entail changes in work processes and collaboration which in turn translate in higher-level changes concerning the organizational structure, processes and culture (Wörwag and Cloots, 2020). Therefore, a change consultant should be involved in larger organizational changes.

Organization. Interventions at the organizational level have a lot of potential to reduce employees' stress. In regard to remote working, for example, introducing companywide rules might concern among other agreements on when to be online and when to switch off work devices to protect employees from being on permanent standby-mode and the division of labor between employees in and outside of the office to prevent tensions resulting from unfair work distribution (Franken, 2016). Furthermore, the possible double burden of working parents needs to be taken into consideration. Relief can be fostered by internal childcare centers or by offering courses on how to deal with work-life-matters. A skill that has proved to be very useful in handling work-life-tensions is effective communication (Shumate and Fulk, 2004). It should clearly be defined and communicated to all parties when a person is in the "home-role" and when in the "office-role". This way, others know in advance exactly at which times what will be expected from them and what they can expect from the remote working employee respectively family member in return. A diverse range of courses can also benefit other issues. In the following, we will present our readers with a list of possible actions in the context of pandemic-related stressors:

- Handling technology: These courses should deal with the effective handling of digital means and address questions like "How do I effectively communicate online?" or "How to work on the internal wiki?"
- Working remotely at home: Businesses might offer tips and information on how to effectively work from home e.g. concerning time management, shaping the home-workstation, ergonomic issues.
- Train new work skills: Remote working, enhanced digitalization and flexible workspaces require strengthening certain much needed skills. Research has highlighted the need for autonomy, flexibility, time management, self-organization and self-management (Chen and Bonanno, 2020; Shin, 2004; Franken, 2016). Remote working in teams further requires an increased willingness to trust (Breuer *et al.*, 2020). Strengthening these skills is therefore recommended.
- Stress management training: To tackle the problem at source, stress management trainings are a good solution. They typically involve relaxation training (e.g. progressive muscle relaxation), mental training (e.g. counteract stress-increasing attitudes and anchor supportive ones), problem-solving training and indulgence training (e.g. how to properly recover) (Kaluza, 2018).
- Provide health-promoting infrastructure: Physical activity is a crucial way to protect the organism from the damaging effects of chronic stress and should therefore be supported by employers. Concretely, employers may offer discounts on sports subscriptions, organize in-house sports activities or provide healthy canteen food. Companies should also include these thoughts in building planning processes (e.g. facilities to shower at the office).
- Train managers: Leadership in times of COVID-19 is particularly challenging. Therefore, leaders should be trained concerning those challenges. This broad topic will be discussed in the next section "Leadership".

In addition to concrete offers, employers also play an important role in providing general feelings of safety in these uncertain times. Clear communication concerning where the business is heading, what happens in case of production losses and which measures are planned during and after this time, helps to reduce the great unpredictability in the context of the crisis. Furthermore, socially responsible human resource management during the

crisis has shown to negatively influence employee fears concerning the pandemic (He *et al.*, 2020).

Leadership. Leading a virtual team is difficult: Exchange and communication is restricted, non-verbal signals eliminated and building trust is difficult. Therefore, we want to provide our readers with an overview of the most important aspects that need to be considered to ease employees' stress:

- Keeping in touch with individual employees is a key to successfully leading an online team. In doing so, it is important to use communication for information exchange purposes and not to control employees (Lautsch *et al.*, 2009). Communication and exchange should be facilitated not only for business purposes but also as an informal tool. Through virtual coffee breaks, lunches or happy hours, social connectedness is promoted and loneliness is prevented.
- Autonomy, flexibility and self-management skills will most likely gain importance in the new work environment and during the current crisis (Wörwag and Cloots, 2020). Therefore, a corresponding environment for employees to improve these skills should be provided. Instead of a controlling environment, leaders need to offer sufficient scope for action, freedom of choice and versatility. Interestingly, effects of are not limited to better learning of the above-mentioned skills but have also been shown to be negatively related to loneliness during the pandemic (Wang *et al.*, 2021).
- Create common sense: With lower physical connectedness a psychological connectedness should be created. Shared team values and norms should be launched and sustained, and a team should create common meaning to be successful in a virtual setting (Einola and Alvesson, 2019).
- Coordinate well: Because of remote working practices, leaders must set clear rules, define responsibilities and organize work processes between employees working at home and those in the office. Task-oriented behavior with guidance and a clear direction have been the most effective during the crisis (Bartsch *et al.*, 2020).
- Exemplifying: Leaders need to set an example concerning among others digital work (e.g. use programs accordingly), rules (e.g. regarding work-life-boundaries) or healthy behavior (e.g. promote self-care, advise regular breaks, avoid intense media exposure).
- Show comprehension: Leaders should show understanding for individual situations in these difficult times and try to find innovative and personal solutions. Social support is a key resource leaders can offer employees (Bakker and van Wingerden, 2020; Bartsch *et al.*, 2020).

Theoretical background

Based on Richter and Hacker (1998) we subdivided the information extracted from the literature review in stressors and resources. Now we proceed to explain, how these two interact and under which circumstances negative outcomes can be expected. Various theories can be drawn upon to answer this question.

Job demands resources model. Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) simply explain employees' health as a balance between job resources and demands. A negative balance, marked by high demands and poor resources, results in burnout and consequently negative outcomes (health problems), whereas a positive balance can enhance engagement following in positive outcomes (performance). In a study by Vaziri *et al.* (2020), for example, where the impact of

the pandemic on employees' work-family-interfaces was investigated, different results were found depending on the resources and demands of employees. Employees with higher demands (e.g. technological overload) and fewer resources (e.g. leaders with less family supportive behaviors) showed more family-work-conflicts and less mutual enrichment than those with fewer demands and higher resources.

Despite widespread use, the theory has some weak points (Schaufeli and Taris, 2014). The main concern of the model is the black box between the demands respectively resources and their outcomes: The mental process that determines the emergence of stress or engagement is not explained. Another problem concerns the fact, that certain demands (e.g. responsibility) were shown to have motivating effects. In response to this problem, the Challenge Hindrance framework (Cavanaugh *et al.*, 2000) emerged. The framework further distinguishes demands as either challenge or hindrance, depending on whether a person evaluates the demand as positive or negative. Nonetheless, no specific statements are made about how exactly the evaluation process functions, which still leaves us with the black box problem.

Transactional stress theory. The idea that an external condition does not directly cause a stress reaction, but rather the evaluation of the situation determines the outcomes is the essence of the of Transactional stress theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). The theory also explains the underlying mental processes that lead to either a negative or positive outcome. According to the Transactional Stress Theory, potentially stressful events can either be classified as a harm/loss (some damage to the person has already happened), as a threat (losses are anticipated) or as a challenge. A challenge also calls for the mobilization of resources but focuses on the growth potential.

After this first appraisal, the manageability of the situation is assessed. In this secondary appraisal, individuals evaluate which strategies respectively resources are available to deal with the situation. In case a stressor is seen as dangerous and a lack of resources is assumed, the stressor causes stress. The theory further focuses on personal coping strategies, some of which are more favorable than others. When returning to the study of Vaziri *et al.* (2020), employees with a negative transition regarding their work-family interface showed a non-adaptive unfavorable coping strategy, with a strong focus on their emotions.

Over the years several weak points have emerged, one of which is Lazarus' implementation of his ideas in experimental designs and psychometric procedures: The complexity of the model makes it hard to operationalize its component and prove its effects as a whole, so empirical testing of individual model sections or testing adapted versions of the model is therefore widespread as a compensation solution (Franke *et al.*, 2007). Another criticism concerns the individual-centered view regarding stress-triggering events. The model strongly focuses on subjective evaluation mechanisms, not giving enough weight on external influences (Greif, 1991; Brief and George, 1995).

Theoretical framework for integral employees' health

From our literature research, possible stressors in the COVID-19 context emerge, as well as concrete organizational resources. While the Transactional stress theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), the Job demands resources model (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004) and the Challenge Hindrance framework (Cavanaugh *et al.*, 2000) explain stress from an individual's perspective, they do not explain the interrelationships of the respective factors on an organizational level. Therefore, we developed a framework integrating parts of the discussed theories with the stressors, organizational resources and consequences.

When developing the framework, we have drawn on the idea of the Job demands resources model that consequences result from the balance between demands and resources.

In our framework (Figure 1), the demands are called “potential stressors” and are defined as stimuli that, without sufficient support or strategies, will most certainly cause stress and therefore call for the mobilization of resources. We classified the potential stressors in the previously mentioned categories work, work–life-balance and COVID-19-related emotions.

Resources in general can result from different aspects such as objective points (e.g. financial stability, a home etc.), social support, personal characteristics (e.g. stress resistance) or wellbeing. However, since our framework deals with ways in which organizations can influence their employees’ health, the resources in our framework are limited to those that are influenceable by the employers.

Furthermore, we integrated the evaluative aspects of Transactional stress theory in our framework. As part of the first appraisal, a potential stressor is either evaluated as potentially harmful and therefore, in our framework, classifies as a definite stressor characterized by negative emotions or the stressor is classified as a challenge, which also calls for the mobilization of resources but focuses on the growth potential and is marked by positive emotions. As in the of Transactional stress theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) and according to the Challenge Hindrance framework (Cavanaugh *et al.*, 2000), we hypothesize that both assessments can occur simultaneously, but the aim of our framework is to facilitate a shift towards a challenge-assessment, rather than a stressor-assessment. In that respect, many and qualitatively high organizational resources are favoring a classification as challenge. The points of action are particularly effective when they are appropriate to the stressor, so if, for example, childcare due to school absences is a stressor, making childcare facilities available in companies will lead to the stressor being accepted as less disabling.

The second organizational point of action emerges during the process that we call coping assessment. Thereby, an employee evaluates if he or she has enough resources to cope with the respective demands (challenges and/or stressors). We hypothesize that the organizational resources lead to a more favorable demands-resources balance and therefore increases the chance of successful dealing with the situation. After an individual has dealt with a stressor successfully, he or she experiences growth. This positive learning experience also makes us more resistant in dealing with future stressors. Over time, successful coping leads to increased methods of dealing with stress, which makes us more resilient and healthier in the long term. If an organization takes responsibility and succeeds to foster such

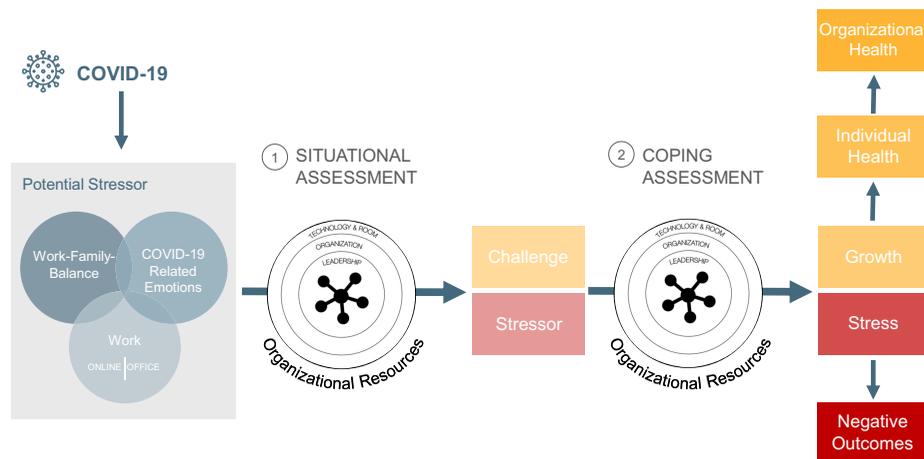


Figure 1.
Theoretical
framework for
integral employees’
health

positive learning processes within large parts of its employees, it can be seen as a healthy organization in its entirety. However, if the organizational points of action remain unsuccessful, many individuals might experience stress which may lead to negative consequences some of which are depression, burnout, somatic symptoms, substance abuse, conflicts, fluctuations in performance, mishandling and absenteeism (Greif, 1991).

Implementation of the framework

To meet the proposal of Burnes and Cooke (2012), suggesting that behavioral-science knowledge should further be tested by practitioners, we decided to include a short guidance on how an implementation of the framework can be addressed in the workplace.

As for the sequence of actions, the organization should proceed from the outer circle (room and technology) to the inner (organization followed by leadership). The reason for this is, firstly, that big structural changes of the outer two circles should have an impact on most employees and not just on some, therefore being more effective. Secondly, changes in the outer circles offer more stability: If an online knowledge management system is implemented, or a childcare facility is opened, these changes would probably remain for long. Thirdly, the inner circles are directly dependent on the outer circles. If employees do not have the necessary equipment to execute their work, the organization cannot function. Additionally, if the management of the organization does not prioritize the integral health approach, a team leader might not even know what he or she can do to counteract pandemic-related stressors or might not have the financial, time or psychological resources needed. Simply put, it is like building a house: One cannot start installing windows when the scaffolding is not constructed.

Concretely, we therefore propose to start the process with a need analysis concerning the structural and technical aspects. Are all the spatial, technical and technological means available to carry out the work efficiently? What other improvements would contribute significantly to improved performance? The next step is to identify what organizational support would be most beneficial in terms of employee health. There is no “one size fits all” solution, which is why a staff survey can be useful in identifying which organizational points of action are most appropriate to the employees’ stressors. Organizations can have the employees choose from a selection of measures that are within the organizational financial and organizational scope.

In view of the current situation, the use of online elements is strongly recommended. Online courses and support have the advantage that they can be self-directed, independent of time and place and are usually extremely cost-effective (Kauffeld, 2016).

Due to the immense influence that leaders have on the health of employees (Franke *et al.*, 2015), training managers concerning employees’ health in the current pandemic is recommended, even if only a short training is done.

Discussion

Burnes and Cooke (2012), key to the attainment of rigor and relevance is closing the gap between scientists and practitioners, whereby scientists offer the behavioral-science knowledge, and practitioners test the developed basics. This paper aims to take the first step towards closing this gap by providing a theoretical basis concerning COVID-19 related stressors in the workplace.

The paper aims at integrating relevant behavioral-science knowledge to explain how COVID-19 triggered stressors can lead to stress and resulting negative consequences for the employees. For the development of the framework, an integrative literature review was conducted covering COVID-19 and its consequences and resources to counteract the

negative effects. We integrated the findings drawn from our literature review with the Transactional stress theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), the Job demands resources model (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004) and the Challenge Hindrance framework (Cavanaugh *et al.*, 2000) to explain how COVID-19 related stressors lead to negative or positive outcomes. Concerning the integrative literature review, we would like to point out that we make no claim to completeness of studies but used a representative excerpt as a source reference in each case.

The framework states, that diverse stressors resulting from the pandemic, assigned to the categories work, work–life-balance and COVID-19-related emotions, may either lead to favorable or unfavorable outcomes depending on the evaluation of a situation as well as the means of coping with it. Concretely, an employee first assesses if a situation can be seen as potentially harmful, therefore categorizing it as a stressor, or if it can be interpreted as a challenge. Through a second appraisal it is determined, if enough resources to deal with the situation are available. If yes, a situation has the potential for personal growth and in the long run individual and organizational health. If not, an event will most likely cause stress and lead to negative outcomes such as poor performance and health. Measures taken by the organization, including spatial, technological and structural changes, the introduction of courses, as well as leadership actions, can lead both evaluations in a favorable direction by generating valuable resources for the employees.

By developing a framework as theoretical orientation, we take the first step towards closing the gap between scholars and practitioners the second step being the testing of the framework and its subcomponents in practice. To further facilitate this step, a short guidance on how the framework can best be implemented was given in the section “implementation of the framework”. In addition, the organizational resources identified in the literature review can function as a possible to-do list of organizational measures that could be implemented. When testing the framework, the means of choice is longitudinal analysis to determine causality. However, it is questionable whether testing the model as a whole is even possible, as this has already proven difficult with similarly complex models such as the transactional stress model (Schwarzer, 2000). As in the transactional stress model, testing sub-aspects of the framework will likely prove useful (Franke *et al.*, 2007).

A variety of relevant questions can be derived from the framework and its subcomponents. For example, it could be investigated which situations are perceived as particularly stressful. It is also relevant to investigate which resources are best suited to improve which stressors. Are there certain subgroups (age, gender, field of operation, size of operation, etc.) in which certain interventions prove to be particularly helpful? Questioning and improving the model itself should also be on the future research agenda. One priority in this regard is the confirmation of the factorial structure of the stressors to ensure the classification in the three above-described categories, since the classification was not sufficiently derived from a solid theoretical foundation. Furthermore, the classification of the organizational resources should also be reviewed since it was mostly based on professional experience. Conceptually, a more standardized approach for developing the framework would have been preferable.

Theoretically, we have taken up the criticism of the respective theories and integrated its strengths in our framework. By incorporating organizational and leadership factors, greater emphasis is placed on external influences, thus addressing the criticisms of the Transactional stress theory (Greif, 1991; Brief and George, 1995). On the other hand, including the Transactional stress theory in the framework explains underlying psychological processes, and thus takes up the criticism voiced concerning the Job demands resources model and other models based on it (Schaufeli and Taris, 2014).

Nevertheless, the fact that we abstracted the theories to the organizational level leads to a new theoretical difficulty: The evaluations, which explain how and why potential stressors become definite stressors, are very strongly dependent on individual personality traits, coping mechanisms and personal as well as external resources (e.g. social support, unique situation of the respective organization etc.). However, since we abstracted the theories to a higher level, more precise statements regarding concrete cases are no longer possible. Therefore, the model suffers from its predictable simplicity. Organizational measures do not always lead to organizational health and organizational health does not always result from organizational measures but, individual and contextual factors often determine the outcomes. Nevertheless, we take this into account, since the model is primarily intended to help practitioners in organizations that have to decide on overarching aspects and cannot consider each case separately. This is also what makes the framework special and distinguishes it from other concepts, which in psychology, focus on individuals. The model's uniqueness is thus at the same time its greatest weakness.

Despite these difficulties, we offer a practical framework integrating COVID-19 related stressors, psychological processes as well as organizational spheres, reaching from technical points over to organization structure, cultures, leaders and the employees themselves. We are the first to offer a COVID-19 related framework within the workplace that tackles issues from an organizational point of view with consideration of the complexity of the many interrelating aspects but still with a clarity that makes it well usable in OD, therefore bridging the gap between theory and practice.

With a holistic and strategic introduction of specific measure during the pandemic, the organization can act in a planned and dynamic manner. To look at it from a financial perspective, an investment is needed to build the organizational resources. However, in times of the pandemic, many companies face financial problems, thus complicating an initial investment. We urge these companies not to put intervening off until later, but instead to seek creative solutions that can be cost-effective yet helpful. For example, a platform could be established encouraging employees to exercise together. Alternatively, online offers are a good option, as they are usually cost-efficient. As a practitioner, it is important to be aware that a systematic introduction of health-promoting measures leads to returns on investment in the range of 1:2 to 1:10 through savings in illness costs and cost reductions due to reduced absences (Kreis and Bödeker, 2003).

Tackling individual stressors as an organization in a strategic and well thought-through manner, does not only influence the employees' health in a narrow sense. It automatically leads to changes in behavior, performance, teamwork and ultimately results in a higher performance of the organization itself. Therefore, a healthy organization is a successful company, which makes best possible use of its most important asset – the employee.

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Corresponding author

Barbara Germann can be contacted at: info@gauer-consulting.com

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