

IMPROVING BUSINESS ETHICS IN THE NEW NORMAL

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ABSTRACT

As societies emerge into a new normal world, there is an endeavour for businesses globally to establish stability. This comes amidst the catastrophe experienced socially, economically, and politically due to the emergence of the coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic. The covid-19 pandemic has highlighted numerous disparities and disruptions exposing business vulnerabilities highlighting work conditions, a lack of disaster preparedness, supply chain disruption and the inability to meet delivery deadlines. Many businesses have been forced to re-evaluate their business structures, values, and ethics so that stability can be reached, and revenue can be maintained or increased. This study aims to identify challenges that businesses have faced during the covid-19 pandemic affecting business ethics. There is an endeavour to improve business ethics in the new normal world. A review of literature is performed within this study using a systematic process of published and grey literature sources. Results discuss the following challenges that businesses have faced during the covid-19 pandemic affecting business ethics: Trust and behaviour, fostering relationships responsibility and reliability, morals, and decision-making. Recommendations have been made to facilitate the improvement of business ethics within businesses in the new normal world.

Keywords: Business, Covid-19, Employee, Ethics, Pandemic

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As societies emerge into a new normal world, there is an endeavour for businesses globally to establish stability. This comes amidst the catastrophe experienced socially, economically, and politically due to the emergence of coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic (Somani, Lockdown Impacts, 2021). The deadly nature of the communicable covid-19 spread across nations rapidly impacting human health. It has infected a record number of individuals, resulting in a vast number of deaths daily, hence the covid-19 pandemic was announced as a global health pandemic (WHO, 2020). "The virus impacted two-hundred and ten countries, territories, and two international conveyances" (Somani, Post Covid-19 Effects on the Future of Students in Higher, 2021). International governing bodies implemented lockdown legislations, social distancing measures and introduced the vital importance of excellent personal hygiene including hand sanitation and personal protective equipment (Somani, Lockdown Impacts, 2021). Although the legislations were devised to protect the health of societies, there has been a major impact on social, economic and political standings consequently resulting in a global upheaval (Somani, The Impact of COVID-19 on Human Psychology, 2020).

During these unpredictable circumstances, numerous businesses that were perceived as highly successful pre-pandemic have undergone vast challenges to ensure sustainability (Somani, Progressing Organisational Behaviour towards a New Normal, 2021). Social and economic impacts of the covid-19 pandemic have impacted global businesses in many ways (McGuire, Germain, & Reynolds, 2021). The physical closure of businesses has impacted business revenue substantially as footfall was ceased, hence altering business and consumer communication (Somani, EFFECT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON COMMUNICATION, 2020). Generating income and maintaining productivity levels are essential components for the success of any business, hence there has been a demand for businesses to find innovative methods to connect with their consumers. It is necessary to devise new and alternate methods because the dominant method through which the connection was established prior to the pandemic was with a physical presence. Employees were advised to 'work from home', hence numerous businesses utilised virtual platforms as a method through which business would continue and connections could be maintained with consumers, employees, employers, partners, and affiliated bodies (Somani, Progressing Organisational Behaviour towards a New Normal, 2021). This has created the need for practicing good business ethics more important than ever before.

The term business ethics pertains to every facet of business conduct, it examines ethical principles, problems that are of an ethical or moral nature and can be perceived as a form of applied or professional ethics. Business ethics can be "understood as the study of the ethical dimensions of the exchange of goods and services, and of the entities that offer goods and services for exchange. This includes related activities such as the production, distribution, marketing, sale, and consumption of goods and services" (Moriarty, 2021).

Essentially business ethics refers to what is deemed as morally right and wrong within business, including the need to be responsible, truthful, ensuring not manipulate or exploit employees, acting in a just and beneficent manner. Most individuals in society carry out business transactions nearly daily, hence business ethics are relevant and important. They create a foundation of contemporary life as many individuals are either preparing to participate in or are already participating in business activities. Individuals holding powers of authority within businesses such as business owners and managers, are continually making decisions involving ethical impacts. Business ethics facilitate understanding behaviours, decisions and values of the overall business and have been vital towards shaping business strategies and employee interaction during the covid-19 pandemic. Business credibility, the culture of empathy and competition whilst ensuring responsible profits are also necessary ethical components. The covid-19 pandemic has highlighted numerous disparities and disruptions exposing business vulnerabilities highlighting work conditions, a lack of disaster preparedness, supply chain disruption and the inability to meet delivery deadlines. Many businesses have been forced to re-evaluate their business structures, values and ethics so that stability can be reached, and revenue can be maintained or increased (Cotton, et al., 2020). Although businesses have attempted to survive, numerous businesses have lost hope and ceased operating resulting in permanent closures. Consequently, numerous employees have been made redundant or their working hours have been reduced impacting upon their financial statuses (Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2020). In contrast, during the covid-19 pandemic businesses have managed to continue operating, however, to ensure sustainability the practice of good business ethics remain a challenge.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This study aims to identify challenges that businesses have faced during the covid-19 pandemic affecting business ethics. There is an endeavour to improve business ethics in the new normal world.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

A review of literature is performed within this study using a systematic process of published and grey literature sources. Literature sources are searched, identified, extracted from, analysed, evaluated, and interpreted from existing published white and grey literature sources. Manual and electronic databases are searched including Google Scholar PubMed, JSTOR, Scopus, books, and magazines. The following keywords have been used within the initial search: 'Ethics' 'Businesses' Covid-19' 'Pandemic' 'Employees' 'Employers'. Numerous literature sources are identified therefore the following exclusion criteria is devised:

- Literature irrelevant to business ethics during covid-19 are excluded
- Literature focusing entirely on business challenges are not included
- Literature using languages other than English are ignore
- Literature with information duplicated in newer literature sources are not used
- Literature with insufficient technical information to their approach are excluded

A total of thirty-four papers are shortlisted to aid focus to this study. Upon closely examining the papers, two were duplicated therefore not used and after reading the abstracts and introductions one was eliminated. This has equated to thirty-one studies. Another literature source was eliminated due to implementation details. Thus, thirty literature sources have reached the overall criteria and have been included within this study.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During times of distress as experienced during the covid-19 pandemic, numerous businesses have reinforced the necessity of upholding the highest ethical standards which are at the core of business values. Due to the rapid transition of most businesses from physical to online platforms, numerous challenges have been experienced. Results have revealed the following challenges that businesses have faced during the covid-19 pandemic affecting business ethics: Trust and behaviour, fostering relationships responsibility and reliability, morals, and decision-making.

4.1 Trust and behaviour

Working from home requires a high element of trust between employees and employers to ensure the short-term and long-term goals that have been set, can be attained. The need for appropriate hardware, software, and internet connectivity for individuals to work efficiently from home is essential. Additionally, a conducive working environment is necessary to ensure limited interruptions that will help increase productivity. This can be difficult for individual's belonging to low socio-economic backgrounds who have limited space in their homes, particularly as family members may cause distractions. For employees with children,

governing body regulations resulted in education institutions undergoing temporary closures resulting in children being educated remotely, hence utilising additional space to study and participate in classes. The excess work, unpaid care and uncertainty or fear of the unknown can lead to negative mental health implications like stress and anxiety (Somani, The Impact of COVID-19 on Human Psychology, 2020).

Businesses during the pandemic are exposed to risks of fraud and financial misconduct that can occur within internal and external operations (EAFO, 2020). They are more susceptible to hacking and phishing scams (OECD, 2020). Although governments have funding available for businesses, abuse of the safety net funding have been reported, travel restrictions and data availability are restricted (Edie, 2020). For employees of businesses that have re-opened within their physical vicinities, there is trust that each individual will be kept safe through the implementation of appropriate health and safety regulations to minimise exposure to covid-19 (OECD, Supporting people and companies to deal with the COVID-19 virus Options for an immediate employment and social policy response, 2020). To maintain this relationship of trust between employers and employees simultaneously following governing body guidelines, sanitary measures have been enforced to include the appropriate use of personal protective equipment, regular hand sanitisation and social distancing in the workplace.

Due to a rise in consumer demand for example within sectors like health care, food production and security many employees have been required to work overtime and possibly under conditions that are deemed unsafe. This can not only have an impact upon their health and wellbeing but concurrently affect their personal life with reduced time with their families (OH&S, 2020). Female employees within businesses and families consisting of school children, have been required to ensure sufficient support and childcare to continue working particularly with children undergoing remote education or a blended teaching method (Somani, PAVING A PATHWAY TO A 'NEW NORMAL' THROUGH EDUCATION, 2021). It has been suggested that businesses that offer their employees a good healthcare package and access to benefits, cultivates trust and increases employee morale. In addition, it increases employee retention rate which create a positive foundation for support during recovery and progression towards a new normal (Lee & Chen, 2018). Simultaneously, these packages are deemed attractive to unemployed individuals and investors that are seeking employment of partnership associations.

The behaviours of employees in the workplace are based upon communications and interactions with their employers. With little or no contact, employees become unsure of their expectations and employment insecurities, resulting in potential erratic behaviours. Through good communication between businesses and their employees and suppliers there is a good understanding of what is expected, a common goal is set, and behaviours are focused upon goal attainment (Somani, Progressing Organisational Behaviour towards a New Normal, 2021). Some businesses create false hope and make promises without discussing necessary information with consumers pertaining to accessing products in attempt to attain financial benefit. This affects business integrity and constitutes towards breaking trust that has been built over a time frame. In addition, business credibility is affected as the miscommunication can result in friction and a breakdown in communication. During the pandemic consumers were more focused on purchasing products that they deemed essential, with a decline in all

other products. Therefore, businesses resulted in advertising their products and services to appeal to consumers. Some advertising that took place consisted of over-promising and cultivating false hope within consumers. This behaviour affects the integrity of the business and the inability to maintain relationships with consumers over a long duration.

4.2 Fostering Relationships

Integrity is vital towards ensuring maintenance of a strengthened relationship between employers, their employees, and consumers. Essentially it consolidates the trust that has already been built over a time frame. The most successful relationships within businesses are those that have open and honest communication channels, and action is taken on agreed tasks (Somani, EFFECT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON COMMUNICATION, 2020). During the pandemic most businesses have experienced financial challenges and consumers who are deemed as friends of business owners are also enduring difficult circumstances during the economic recession. These personal friendships can have a financial impact upon businesses, as additional pressures can be applied to implement fee reductions, accept late payments, subsidise loans or wave fines all of which affect compliance, thus threatening sustainability with fewer resources (Lee & Chen, 2018). This can become problematic as reduced professional help can lead to sensitive elements of documentation being discussed with service users later than necessary, due to staff shortage. Hence, exerting additional pressure on employees to attain productivity, instead some processes are avoided, highlights inefficiencies and deviates from deadlines.

Employees and employers have experienced heightened stress levels within relationships due to uncertainties and financial implications. Therefore, some businesses have started to educate their staff on how to cope with work-related pressures and utilise interactive video-conferencing technology to stay connected. Through this medium, employers can offer the emotional support required by the employees to carry out their work productively (Somani, Progressing Organisational Behaviour towards a New Normal, 2021). Businesses are reliant upon consumers for their financial growth in productivity, therefore employers can be perceived to hold little power within this connection. This can be exacerbated when smaller businesses that are independent in nature form a larger company, particularly as smaller businesses have been affected more financially making them more vulnerable. However, ethical behaviour needs to be illustrated by every individual within the business including employers present in the hierarchy system of the business model and their associated partners and service providers. This will ensure that not one element of the business is abandoned during the distress of the covid-19 pandemic or in the new normal. When integrity and respect are cultivated through honesty in trying to achieve business objectives, social responsibilities towards a sustainable future business within the new normal are achieved. An increased demand of services offered in other businesses have resulted in some business owners encountering feelings of desperation and harmful ideas of exploitation or illegal practices to make a rapid financial profit, for example fraud. This ethical dilemma must be avoided as it is immoral, and it can take advantage of the vulnerable in society and break-up good working relationships.

4.3 Responsibility and reliability

Every business globally endeavours to progress successfully, with that desire comes a responsibility to ensure employees are protected for virus exposure limiting the spread. Employers have a duty of care towards their employees to ensure social distancing is maintained, appropriate personal protective equipment is worn, and sanitisation procedures are followed. These measures are imperative to ensure employee and consumer safety and a responsibility placed on the business. In addition, employment targets need to be met and continue essential services. Business responsibility is a key component constituting towards success and a requirement within the implementation of business strategies (Kunas, 2020). It is the responsibility of a business to ensure they relay their intentions with transparency, they respect their colleagues and employees alike, simultaneously displaying ethical behaviours and a role model within the business. Hence, taking responsibility within a business can be perceived as a general social responsibility, determined by customer-based problem-solving and adhering to the needs of employees and stakeholders (Kunas, 2020).

As the world undergoes an economic recession, by identifying the ecological and economic challenges current and future generations will benefit. Business responsibility can encourage sustainable development and promote the initiation of good values within the marketplace allowing healthy competition between businesses (Somani, Progressing Organisational Behaviour towards a New Normal, 2021). It has the potential to improve relationships between business owners, their suppliers and customers and evolve into acceptance within a social setting sharing interests and values. Success and competition can be determined through actions taken by businesses and analysing the cost benefits invested within the products or the service offered by the business, environmental and societal effects. Through the identification of strengths and weaknesses, businesses can devise an ethical business strategy that can result in a competitive edge over competitors. The covid-19 transition to online platforms has resulted in employees feeling worried, isolated, facing potential unemployment and fear of their health (Somani, The Impact of COVID-19 on Human Psychology, 2020). Many businesses have been brought together within this globalised world during the pandemic to establish connections. It is an opportunity for businesses to work together responsibly and devise strategies through which economic sustainability can be attained.

Businesses comprising of health and safety management practices that are robust can rapidly respond to short-termed threatening situations, particularly pertaining to sanitation, hygiene, and safe chemical use (Kunas, 2020). Simultaneously, ensuring elimination of fake news that creates fear and panic within societies. This should be replaced with reliable communication mediums and trusted information sources through which employees can attain reliable information (Somani & Saraswathy, Sort Stress & Stop Suicide, 2021). Businesses have a duty of care towards their employees, correspondence should be reliable and trusted through which individuals shape their behaviours in accordance with business guidelines. Another ethical challenge businesses encounter is within their accounting practices, particularly through the misrepresentations of their expenditure and wages pertaining to tax deductions. Some employees resort to financial reporting manipulation which contributes towards employees being perceived as more successful. Hence numerous business owners' resort to the personal review of accurate record keeping even if accounting software is used for finance tracking purposes. Some businesses themselves have also attempted to inflate their reporting to be perceived as more successful within a pandemic situation despite the risky

repercussions in pursuit of sustainability. During periods of crisis consumers are more inclined to favour businesses that have a good reputation and brand strength (Melo & Galan, 2011). They are deemed more reliable and approachable during periods of uncertainty appealing to consumer purchasing goods from them. Learning from previous mistakes can facilitate businesses to grow and the utilisation of direct communication channels between employees and employers in management positions.

4.4 Morals

The covid-19 pandemic has created disparities within businesses pertaining to remote working due to social distancing regulations. Employers were directed towards ensuring their staff worked from home where appropriate. However, for this to be feasible employers were required to ensure adequate training was imparted to their employees. This included ensuring software navigation and the appropriate use of tools (Somani, Progressing Organisational Behaviour towards a New Normal, 2021). Employers envisages that through demonstrating good morals their employees would follow by suit and use their personal morals and ethical values to understand and distinguish between what is deemed right and wrong. Through expressing the ethic of trust, a good working relationship can be cultivated. Nevertheless, employers find it beneficial to apply balancing controls and privacy settings on business property like temporary or permanent laptops to ensure that employers can track the amount of work being done by employees from remote locations. This will establish if individuals are completing the work that they should be completing, they are sitting idle or getting distracted on the internet. It is essential that employees consent to monitoring and all employees receive fair treatment. As the lockdown restrictions have eased, some businesses continue operating from remote locations, however unequal opportunities have been highlighted between employees physically present in the workplace to progress although productivity is unaffected (Enterprise, 2021). All employees should be provided with the same opportunities to progress within their careers despite if they work onsite, remotely or hybrid. Similarly, the same key skills and training should be delivered to the employees despite their location and employees must ensure they work honestly during working hours. Upon encountering difficulties employees must have the trust and confidence to approach and consult their employers with clear communication between individuals. This will also ensure minimisation of conflicts and provide safe communication channels through which employees can raise immediate concerns.

Challenges pertaining to confidentiality and productivity have been questioned as individuals work from remote locations, questioning their morality. Therefore, professional behaviour and morality should always be demonstrated. Professional conduct will endure that confidentiality is maintained pertaining to sensitive data following compliance laws. Fair assessments must be carried out to evaluate employees based on their performance. There have been increased fraud levels within businesses during the covid-19 pandemic, thus cybersecurity concerns have been raised (Kemp, Buil-Gil, Moneva, Miró-Llinares, & Díaz-Castaño, 2021). There have been cases of identity theft, illegitimate goods being sold online, hackers exposing viruses and holding information ransom or selling information found on corporate networks and insurance fraud cases. Hence, safeguarding is of utmost importance, particularly as processes and policies may not involve unprecedented events. Therefore, through fraud risk-assessments being carried out periodically, the strategies to overcome

challenges can be re-assessed and implemented accordingly. The covid-19 pandemic has provided individuals with the opportunity to apply for and receive optimum benefits and as a result employees are opting for this option. However, some employees are taking advantage of the situation by committing fraud as they cheat the government taking financial benefits from their employers through payroll taxes, simultaneously working for another business or the same business and receiving cash in hand (OECD, Supporting people and companies to deal with the COVID-19 virus Options for an immediate employment and social policy response, 2020). This needs to cease as it is a large ethical concern.

4.5 Decision-making

The decision-making process is essential within every business, despite of the role an individual is employed in, there is an expectation to make decisions at different levels. “A business decision is defined as a judgment to achieve organizational objectives efficiently and effectively” (Kozioł-Nadolna & Beyer, 2021). During the covid-19 pandemic, a multitude of change has been faced resulting in the need for businesses to respond rapidly. This constituted towards individuals in positions of power within businesses to make rapid decisions without understanding the consequences of their decisions due to pressure constraints (Bahrololoumi, Rokooei, & Jafari, 2021). Many rapid decisions with negative repercussions were made without sufficient information and were primarily taken by individuals that have had little experience or training to make life changing decisions. For example, during the covid- 19 pandemic taking the decision to make staff redundant due to cost cuts during the pandemic. This decision requires experience, capability with good communication skills, and the capacity to harbour empathy. If the situation was handled incorrectly, negative impacts would be exaggerated, impinging upon the employees and the business reputation.

Within the United Kingdom the number of business closures were fifty percent higher in July to September 2021 in comparison to quarter three of 2020 (Williams, 2021). An ethical approach is required as businesses decide to downsize to ensure sustainability in the new normal world. The decision to make employees redundant is very difficult and requires integrity to ensure correct decisions are being made. One in four employed people were put on furlough during the pandemic within the UK (Davies, De Silva, Vassilev, Santiago, & Probert, 2021). In this instance integrity is required to ensure that employees do not commence working for another business to improve their finances as this would be immoral and fraudulent, therefore integrity is vital.

When large scale disruptions occur, businesses are required to evaluate governance structures and identify a leader in accordance with risks being taken. When necessary, individuals will assume various roles to ensure challenges are overcome with integrity. With global connectivity, successful practices can be shared between common businesses helping each other through issues arising from the pandemic. This will facilitate key decision-makers to find solutions towards a sustainable recovery for their business. It is important that businesses take the appropriate measures to minimise negative impacts of the pandemic. This can be linked to hasty decision-making in cancelling orders from suppliers or postponing contracts which can lead to legal challenges (Bronstad, 2020). Other rapid decisions made by businesses that could be deemed as compromising their duty of care entailed insufficient

health and safety measures or neglecting associated components, the inability to shield employees and consumers from virus contamination, thus putting their health and safety at risk (Austin, 2020).

There have been numerous disparities highlighted during the pandemic like gender and racial inequality leading businesses to make decisions to safeguard their employees. However, although numerous businesses have ignored these issues in the past, it is necessary to ensure equality is being attained. Although race and gender legislations were introduced as a means through which discrimination could be minimised, there was a noted reduction in the number of inequalities present. The number of inequalities have since accelerated through the pandemic requiring prompt attention. As working from home became the dominant way through which businesses were sustained prior to physical workplace re-opening, employers were able to focus on initiatives to eradicate race and gender biases to corporate within their policies (Nieweler, 2020).

5.0 CONCLUSION

Numerous challenges have been highlighted during the covid-19 pandemic. Hence, businesses have a responsibility in societies to act in an ethical and responsible manner. Transparency is imperative within periods of crisis and uncertain situations. Nevertheless, this period of covid-19 can be utilised as an opportunity to progress towards a sustainable economy through ethical strategies. Responsibilities must be assumed by businesses to ensure a balance is maintained between ethical, social, and economic responsibilities. The covid-19 pandemic may disrupt the mindset of individuals within businesses due to a decrease in financial income, affecting the quality of life of individuals globally. Therefore, subjecting individuals towards compromising their ethical behaviours. Although ultimately every individual is responsible for their own ethics and values, individuals in positions of power are role models who contribute towards shaping behaviours of their employees. By portraying ethical behaviours towards their employees while overcoming challenges during the covid-19 pandemic, employees are likely to reciprocate. Thus, being authentic in ethics and values and demonstrating transparency is imperative for a successful business.

In the new normal world, many businesses will continue to work from remote locations while others will be hybrid workers or completely within the workplace. Challenges will be encountered until the covid-19 is eradicated or it ceases to mutate, therefore employers and employees of businesses need to ensure they create a healthy work-life balance, they have access to appropriate technologies and security protocols, access to appropriate supply chains, meeting adequate time frames and following health and safety measures to ensure business sustainability in the new normal world.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been made to facilitate the improvement of business ethics within businesses in the new normal world.

- For businesses to attain stability within the new normal world, they should act in accordance with ethics of respect, integrity, fairness, and transparency. Unfortunately, during periods of instability and challenges ethical principles are

reduced and in contrast there is heightened fear and discrimination highlighting disparities.

- To reduce pressure on businesses and associates, short- and long-term solutions should be devised incorporating employee payments and cost cuts so that contingency plans can be implemented comprising of new ideas for start-up operations.
- Understand the cost implications of making employees redundant or training new employees to ensure productivity. An employee can take up to two years to reach expected productivity (Sucher & Gupta, 2017).
- Work quality produced during the covid-19 pandemic may have reduced due to encountering disruptions and changes. Nevertheless, these unusual circumstances have started to become 'the normal' resulting in continuous change. Many businesses have altered processes to accommodate the health, economic and social disruption, however both employees and employers need to ensure that work is completed to the best quality as it was prior to the pandemic, thereby raising their standards again. A decision must be made to challenge applied changes resulting from the pandemic. This is before it constitutes towards a reduction in profit affecting the business. Hence, employers must take the onus to re-skill and up-skill their employees to ensure a re—focus on their attainment goals ensuring skill competence.
- Employees experiencing inequalities pertaining to gender and race are required to cultivate the confidence to highlight their concerns within a safe environment without having the fear of facing retaliation from others. With the progressive utilisation of technology, businesses can create a secure anonymised platform through which individuals can share their concerns and feel safe and supported. Simultaneously, the culture of integrity is being promoted by employers and the ethical issues can be addressed. By cultivating a compliant working environment, employee performance can be improved, employee moral can be strengthened, new talent can be attracted bringing novel ideologies to benefit the business all of which promote business success in the new normal.

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