

Proposal for COVID-19 AOM Rapid Research Plenary

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Coping with temporary job loss under COVID-19:
 A mixed-methods study of furloughed workers

Abstract

This research aims to understand how employees of different work orientations (job, career, calling) react differently to furlough under the impact of COVID-19. Through interviews and longitudinal surveys with furloughed workers, it will examine the differences across these three types of workers in terms of their psychological and behavioral responses and the roles of organizational communicating approaches. It will also study the post-pandemic impact on these employees' emotional well-being and occupational commitment. Altogether, this research hopes to build an understanding of how work meanings impact furloughed workers during and after the pandemic. It will offer insights to researchers, managers, and policymakers about navigating their furloughed employees through this pandemic and future uncertainties.

Project description

COVID-19 has heavily impacted the job market globally. In the U.S., 2.4 million workers filed unemployment in the week of May 11, and 38.6 million in the previous nine weeks (Romm, Stein, & Werner, 2020). The massive job losses have brought the country's unemployment rate to a historical high of 14.7% as of April¹. There is no official breakdown of different types of unemployment, but many companies are resorting to furlough as a first-stage approach to managing over-staffing (Townsend, 2020). This project aims to understand the short- and long-term impact of furloughs on the furloughed employee. The study pursues three objectives.

First, we propose to study the psychological impact of furlough on furloughed workers. We are particularly interested to learn how the sense of purpose that an individual derives from their work affects that individual's feelings towards furlough. According to the framework by Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, and Schwartz (1997: 21), people see their work as either a job ("focus on financial rewards"), a career ("focus on advancement"), or a calling ("focus on enjoyment of fulfilling, socially useful work"). The furlough could be a shock to all workers, but the emotional impact could be the largest for those with a calling because their work is who they are – they identify with the work, they are attached to their work, and they derive much of their life satisfaction from it (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Like a furloughed nurse said in a recent news report (Fade, Stone, Anderson, & Benincasa, 2020): "It's very devaluing, like a slap in the face ... Nursing is who you are ... I've never been unemployed my entire life."

Furthermore, we would like to learn how other social factors may affect one's psychological responses towards furlough. For example, organizations differ in how they handle furloughs. Some make it optional while others make it required. Some send out several warnings whereas some catch their employees off guard. How might these organizational approaches change the way workers see their furlough situation?

¹ <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000000>

Second, we would like to learn about the impact of a furlough on workers' behaviors, i.e., what they do during the furlough. Since the furlough happens amid the pandemic, the furloughed workers should have more discretionary time. How would people of different work orientations spend their time differently? For example, would the job-oriented people be more likely to find ways to earn money, or would the calling-oriented people strive to express their callings even at no pay?

Third, we would like to understand the long-term impact that the current furloughs have post-pandemic. How might it affect people's commitment to their occupation? This furlough could lead to disillusionment for some workers and make them rethink their work. Especially if the crisis extends to the extent that temporary unemployment becomes permanent, the influence could be stronger because of the larger financial and emotional stress involved. If the furloughed workers get their work back, it is likely that they would also relate to their work differently. Their views on job security and work importance might have changed permanently.

Sample and methodology

This will be a mixed-methods project containing a qualitative interview study (Study 1) and a longitudinal survey study (Study 2). In Study 1, we hope to interview 40 people who were furloughed under the impact of COVID-19. They will be recruited through online discussion groups and by soliciting recommendations for those who are furloughed. The goal is to get initial insights about 1) how furloughed employees feel about being furloughed; 2) how they spend their time after being furloughed; 3) if there are any systematic differences across individuals with a job, career, or a calling in their ways to cope with the temporary unemployment both psychologically and behaviorally; and 4) if they have indicated being impacted by other social factors. Using the grounded theory method, we would identify themes and patterns in the data. In Study 2, we will test emergent findings from Study 1 through a longitudinal survey study with 400 participants recruited from Prolific Academic. The website would help us identify the currently furloughed workers under COVID-19.

Initial findings from qualitative analysis

We have thus far conducted semi-structured interviews with 26 furloughed workers, ten of whom self-identified to see their work as a calling, four as a career, and twelve as a job. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Sutton, 1987). The method involved continuous comparison of data and a theoretical model with a focus on important themes and differences across people of different work orientations. Figure 1 depicts a model that arose from the analysis. We found uncertainty to be a central theme, which involves different types such as uncertainties associated with job security, finances, and health. Also arising from the qualitative analysis, the feelings of uncertainties could be affected by managerial communication practices, with thoughtful and compassionate communications relieving uncertainties whereas lack of communications exacerbating them. The uncertainties felt by furloughed workers impacted their emotional well-being by increasing anxiety, fear, and frustration, impacted their occupational commitment, and induced their coping behaviors such as finding distraction, seeking support, and taking control. More importantly, we found that work orientations, especially calling, could potentially influence the ways people react to uncertainties brought by the furlough. The “calling people” seem to be more resilient to uncertainties and feel less negative emotions; they tend to be more committed to their work and experience fewer doubts about their career choice; they are also more aware of others' needs in this time of uncertainties and offer help to bring certainties to others. The resiliency brought by calling contradicts our expectation that calling people may be more susceptible to emotional

impacts, indicating the lack of understanding by existing calling research and inviting our further investigations. Because of the limited space and the early stage of this project, this model is still coarse. Our next steps would be another round of systematic coding based on this model in order to get to a more clearly defined model and test it in study 2 with a field dataset. We would appreciate the chance to share our initial findings and get feedback from a knowledgeable audience at the Academy.

Theoretical contribution and social impact

The current research would contribute to the calling literature by understanding calling’s roles in coping with uncertainties after job loss. It also contributes to the larger body of research on unemployment by introducing uncertainties, which did not catch much attention by research in contexts of normal job markets but are widespread in the current job market under COVID-19. The project also aims to generate a broad social impact by studying the influences of the COVID-19 on the furloughed workers. These influences could be deep-level and long-lasting: the furloughed workers could change their identification to this occupation forever even after the pandemic is over. Our research will help organizations be more thoughtful in handling furloughs because even a small choice of their action could have a deep impact on their workers. It will also inform policymakers of the micro-level impact of government policies and help them better navigate the workforce management in this challenging situation.

Key references

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Figure 1. Emerging theoretical model from qualitative analysis

