Occupation Transition of Frontline Non-Teaching Personnel Amid the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has proved that the environment surrounding higher education institutions (HEI) is changing rapidly, prompting for implementation of new policies and processes to address fast-changing stakeholder needs. This study explored the transition to online front-line processes in HEI during the pandemic and the experiences of non-teaching personnel with new work arrangements. Findings revealed the implementation of online enrollment, admission, examination, hiring, payment, and request processes during the pandemic. Two key themes emerged from pandemic work experiences; (1) working in the pandemic era and (2) overcoming pandemic-related challenges. The study identifies the 5Rs of Pandemic Work Experience for personnel: Resiliency, Reinvention, Recalibration, Reformation, and Rationalization. Challenges included transition, limited online resources, stakeholder management, and compliance delays. The knowledge of these online processes and experiences can inform the development of responsive front-line processes, assisting organizations in sustaining relevance in this volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world.

Keywords: Occupational transition, covid-19 pandemic, frontline processes, non-teaching personnel, online processes, pandemic work experience

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Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented impacts to the economic activities of individuals and organizations worldwide. According to the United Nations (2020), 94 percent of the world's workers experienced workplace closure measures, preventing them from being physically present at work. An estimated 1.25 billion workers globally have been adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations, 2020). The pandemic triggered a worldwide transformation affecting employees in particular. One of the most affected sectors is education (Tria, 2020). Occupational transitions in HEIs included the shift to online processes for enrollment and freshman applications, conducting entrance examinations online, processing payments of financial obligations and availing various services online, submitting human resource management-related forms and documents online, taking comprehensive examinations online, and adopting flexible work set-ups and work-from-home arrangements, as well as handling daily time biometric processes and requests for DTR correction online, among others. HEIs were propelled to adopt strategic responses to protect the staff and assist faculty, students and other stakeholders (Cebu Normal University – Information Office, 2022).

The world was caught off guard by the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic (Vedder, 2020 as cited by Nuevo-Chow, 2021). The occupational transitions in workplaces from traditional to online environments posed a spectrum of challenges. Employees have had to face this reality and continue their duties, even though they were not prepared in such work arrangements and processes, as these were entirely new to them. Lack of resources to function effectively while working from home was evident. Employees were working within their homes, contending with various distractions from household chores and noise disturbances from the neighborhood, affecting their ability to focus at work. Employees have also experienced mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, affecting their efficiency and productivity as key implementers of these occupational transitions and shifts in processes. Research is needed to unfold the experiences of personnel to these occupational transitions amidst the pandemic to address these issues, which can be a springboard for an improved organization.

There is a need to explore the experiences of administrative employees to help them cope with the new normal. Examining the transition of front-line personnel from traditional workplace processes to online is significant, as it can provide information to leaders regarding the transition process and best practices. Identifying best practices, experiences, and challenges encountered by employees as firsthand

implementers can help leaders to better manage the crisis and beyond and make decisions that appear to have been successful. While much is known about teachers' perspective of the flexible teaching and learning delivery, little is known about experiences of administrative employees who have transitioned to an online workplace. This study may be used in the development of online programs in organizations to ensure that administrative personnel moving from on-ground workplaces to online workplaces address challenges they have faced.

Related Literatures

Occupational Transition

The COVID-19 pandemic has crippled the economic activities of global markets, leading significant changes in human activities and organizational operations (Buckley, 2020; Nuevo-Chow, 2021). In HEIs, the pandemic brought about challenges and opportunities, including transformations in management and leadership, as well as changes in research practices (Martin & Furiv, 2020). Colleges responded to the pandemic by reorganizing campus and business operations, including human resources, client services, teaching and learning delivery, and finance (Baer & Duin, 2020). For instance, Cebu Normal University (CNU) integrated online banking and payment methods for all transactions involving fees and charges, ensuring continued service delivery to clients. Rapid upskilling and training were necessary to ensure personnel effectively managed these occupational transitions (Cebu Normal University – Information Office, 2022). Community lockdowns and quarantines necessitated school staff and students to study and work from home, leading to the adoption of online platforms (Crawford et al., 2020; Tria, 2020). Jones et al. noted improved job satisfaction from remote work, attributed to flexibility, reduced work-related stress, and shorter commutes, while Lee et al. found that prolonged remote work can increase feelings of depression and loneliness, and concerns about the blurred boundaries between work and personal life.

Resistance to change is a common issue in change programs, often due to feelings of inadequacy, fear of the unknown, or concern about the impact on job security (Kolzow, 2014; Society for Human Resource Management, 2007, as cited in Bauer & Erdogan, 2012). Disruption to normal routines, structures, and processes can lead to chaos within organizations (Nuevo-Chow, 2021; Bauer & Erdogan, 2012). Leaders may face challenges when employees perceive a decline in performance post-change, leading to reluctance to embrace necessary changes (Kolzow, 2014). Negative reactions and

pessimistic behaviors from employees must be carefully addressed by leaders, as they can lead to high turnover, low morale, disengagement, and lack of commitment (Peus et al., 2009).

New Normal Work Arrangement

The Civil Service Commission (CSC) issued several memorandum circulars (MC) to guide public agencies during the COVID-19. CSC MC No. 2, s. 2021 mandated all government offices for the create a Public Service Continuity Plan (PSCP). CSC MC No. 14, series of 2020 allowed the use of electronic signatures to expedite personnel hiring and employee renewals. To address challenges in hiring, the validity period for publishing vacant positions was extended to more than nine months and allowing other job search web engines and radio announcements, with submissions done via email. Agencies were also required to adopt internal guidelines for online recruitment and selection processes, including competency assessments and video interviews. CSC MC No. 3, s. 2021 provided guidelines for digital/online learning including webinars and other synchronous learning approaches, eLearning, and Microlearning Module, facilitating the transition from face-to-face to online learning. CSC MC No. 5, s. 2020. as amended, provided the interim guidelines for using leave credits for COVID-19 absences. MC No. 6, s. 2021 addressed the filing and submission of Statements of Assets, Liabilities and Net Worth. CSC MC No. 7, s. 2020, as amended, provided interim guidelines for alternative work arrangements during the pandemic, including work-from-home, skeletal workforce, four-day workweek, staggered hours, and shifting schedules. CNU implemented these work arrangements to ensure undisrupted services.

Colleges swiftly restructured their operations, adjusting human resources, client services, teaching and learning delivery, and finance (Baer & Duin, 2020). CNU took proactive steps by crafting the "Reframing the Teaching-Learning: University's Learning Continuity Plan." This aims to address the challenges posed by COVID-19 and prepare for a post-pandemic future based on feedback from students, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders. The university adopted several online systems, such as Online Enrollment, Online Testing Service, Online Payment, Online Submission of Grades, Online Grades Portal, and Online Request of Academic Records (Cebu Normal University – Information Office, 2022). They also enhanced the student portal for tasks like checking grades and enrollment status. Among the continuity plans of CNU include to sustain services like the student communication center, telecounseling services, PIO monitoring of concerns online, and eLearning Resource Center services through OERs, DDS, and Ask MINNIE. The Center for Innovative Flexible Learning (CIFL) and Information and Communication Technology Office (ICTO) have established a streamlined process to provide round-the-clock technical

assistance to faculty, staff and students. According to the CNU University COVID-19 Prevention protocol, faculty and staff adopted a 2-day work week on an alternate basis using the Cluster A and B system. The CNU also crafted the Administrative Protocol amid and Post Community Quarantine. This protocol aims to guide the internal and external stakeholders to ensure the safety and security of every person conducting business in the institution. The protocol mandates all personnel to immediately inform their respective unit of any difficulty they may have in physically reporting to CNU for immediate resolution. These difficulties may include COE procurement, issuance of quarantine passes, personal protective equipment such as masks, goggles, face shields, and transportation.

Challenges of Administrative Personnel in Covid-19 Pandemic

The recent outbreak of COVID-19 forced organizations to face surmounting challenges of unparalleled proportions that require them to change the way they manage their workforce and do activities (Carnevalea & Hatak, 2020). This new set-up requires them to address the corresponding anxiety and stress resulting from the lack of training and resources necessary for this transition (Buckley, 2020). Jennings and McDougald (2007) suggest that employees have profound physical, technical, and socio-psychological needs as they adjust to new work environments. An assessment conducted at CNU during the pandemic by Dayagbil et. al. (2021) revealed that challenges faced by human resource and welfare services. These include implementing work-from-home arrangements without clear guidelines and deliverables, ensuring the authenticity and validity of HRIS entries, ensuring the sustainability of safety and security measures, lack of technology and infrastructure, unstable or no internet connection for a majority of faculty, students and staff, absence of a functional LMS, limited ICT gadgets, and reliance on physical or over-the-counter transactions for providing services. Remote work poses various challenges, including unreliable internet connectivity, inadequate home office setups, difficulties in maintaining a healthy work-life balance, and challenges in collaborating with team members across different time zones. Communication issues with colleagues and supervisors have been noted, leading to burnout and reduced productivity (Tan et al., 2023), contributing to heightened anxiety, loneliness, and isolation among employees, thereby impacting their well-being (Kniffin et al, 2020).

The emergence of online and electronic services using online platforms and applications has introduced new obstacles, especially for administrative employees who are not technologically savvy and are unfamiliar with e-transactions (Meyen et al., 2002, as cited in Slovick, 2011). Crises can have various effects, including grief, emotional stress, physical injury, and disruption to the normal life of

individuals, which may disorient teamwork. Team members may distance themselves from the team due to emerging responsibilities to their families and the community, especially in facilitating recovery. McNierney (2004) stated that overcoming emotional resistance was a larger issue than the challenge of technology. Working efficiently with children playing at home is also considered an insurmountable obstacle by employees (Buckley, 2020). The dramatic alteration of how and where administrative employees carry out their duties will have implications for their experience, their encounters with the environment, cultures, values and work ethics (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011, as cited in Carnevalea & Hatak, 2020). A study by Kuranchie-Mensah and Kwesi (2016) highlighted job security as one of the issues faced by employees, while health insurance and retirement plans guarantee the retention of employees. The research of Wong et. Al. (2020) found that there was a deficiency in policies and inadequacy in the supply of protective equipment in workplaces during the pandemic, contributing to the increasing level of stress among employees. Institutions drastically affected by the societal crisis have implemented a freeze on personnel hiring and building projects, furloughs and lay-offs, and increased assignments of faculty and staff (Baer & Duin, 2020).

Management Paradigms in Responding and Recovering from Pandemic

Toquero (2020) recommends management strategies for HEIs, including strengthening environmental policies and hygiene practices, integrating online mental health and medical services, enhancing training for online processes, boosting research efforts, and implementing data monitoring and evidence-based practices. Lim and Garcia (2024) highlighted the importance of clear communication and streamlined workflows. The United Nations (2020) suggests strengthening systems for equitable and sustainable development, focusing on equity and inclusion, building capacities for risk management, ensuring strong leadership and coordination, and enhancing consultation and communication mechanisms. Efforts can be made to balance economic objectives by adopting flexible approaches in program registration, assessment, and certification processes. This can be achieved by utilizing information and communication technology (ICT) or online modes for applications, inspection, validation, and certification issuance. Additionally, competency standards should be developed to address emerging skills requirements, training regulations should be revisited to include preventive measures and occupational health and safety competencies relevant to the current situation.

Investing in development and training programs for employees is crucial for organizations. Such programs, as noted by Jehanzeb and Bashir (2013), enhance employees' abilities and skills, focusing orientation, operational skills, and management skills. Garcia and Santos stressed the need to enhance digital literacy among stakeholders. Employee development programs help employees adapt to modern technologies and nurture their abilities. Ensuring employee satisfaction and happiness directly impacts their performance and productivity (Nichols, 2020). Encouraging employee involvement in decision-making and teaching entrepreneurial characteristics like tolerance of uncertainty and proactive problem-solving can enhance employees' well-being and adjustment period (Wood & de Menezes, 2011, as cited in Nichols, 2020). Like entrepreneurs, employees also need to confront with the demanding and uncertain work environment, be flexible to new conditions, and recognize the relationship of family and work spheres (Jennings & McDougald, 2007). Interventions should also focus on workers' well-being and demonstrate support in work environments (Wong et al, 2020). The World Economic Forum [WEF] and Willis Towers Watson [WTW] (2020a) suggest creating a lifelong learning environment, engaging, stakeholders in decision-making, aligning employee well-being with organizational well-being, and focusing on long-term goals over short-term impacts.

Skilled labor, technology, education, and best practices are essential for organizational efficiency (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017). Employee well-being encompasses personal and work-related factors, contributing to employee stress (Buckley, 2020). Providing flexible work hours and support system can alleviate employee stress and enhance their wellbeing (Buckley, 2020). Efforts by organizations to ensure employee well-being and morale directly and indirectly impact their productivity and performance. The physical, social, financial, and emotional dimensions are crucial for a productive and engaged workforce (WEF & WTW, 2020a). In today's organization environment, management should focus on recognizing employees' capacities, the human aspect of workers, and the value and nature of teamwork (Tannenbaum, 1959, as cited in Nichols, 2020). Preparedness and early action are critical in crisis response (International Labour Organization, 2020). Managerial skills should encompass recognizing workplace diversity and understanding its evolving nature to address multicultural environments (Farnsworth et al, 2020).

The COVID-19 threat requires organizations to be adaptable and responsive in managing their workforce for vitality and survival (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). Garcia and Smith posit that organizations will continue to offer remote or hybrid work arrangements, thereby changing the nature of work in the

future. The pandemic has shown that some services must operate outside traditional organizational rules (World Economic Forum, 2020b). In a related study, Garcia and Santos found that many individuals prefer hybrid work arrangements for the balanced flexibility of remote work and the social interaction inherent in office-based work.

Research Questions

1. What are the responsive frontline processes at CNU in the new normal?
2. What are the pandemic work experiences of non-teaching frontline personnel at CNU?

Scope of the Study

This research study focused on the front-line processes implemented in the Finance Management Office (FMO), Office of the University Registrar, Human Resource Management Office (HRMO), and Office of Student Affairs (OSA) at CNU during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Method

Research Design

This research employed a descriptive case study design, aiming to describe, explore, or explain social phenomena. Qualitative research allows researchers to emphasize explanations and make sense of what they believe is critical (Stake, 2003 as cited by Slovick, 2011). Qualitative case study researchers seek to understand topics from participants' perspective. The case study approach was suitable for this study as the researcher wanted to learn about a population's experiences over time and how these experiences influenced their work. Sandelowski (2000) argued that a descriptive case study design is effective in studies in which investigators seek to understand participants' experiences in their own words. This design was suitable for this study because this research explores how individuals view their environment based on their experiences within it (Creswell, 2013).

Research Locale

This study was conducted in CNU, a state-funded HEI in Region VII. CNU was chosen as the research locale because of the occupational transitions occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which

affected front line administrative personnel. The researcher was a casual administrative staff employee of the university who have been in service for more than four years, experiencing and being with CNU from the start until the present situation of the pandemic.

Key Informant

The key informants for this study were administrative personnel from the four front-line offices in CNU. At least two administrative personnel from each office shared their experiences during the crisis. Respondents were selected using purposive and convenience sampling methods, based on criteria set by the researcher. Setting specific criteria for participants before the study encourages maximum variation of sampling, increasing the likelihood of gathering diverse perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Respondents included regular and casual administrative employees in CNU holding 1st and 2nd level positions who met the following criteria:

- Currently connected at CNU;

- Employed at CNU for at least six months before the Covid-19 pandemic;

- Full-time administrative employees; and

- Direct experience with new processes implemented during the pandemic.

Scholars have noted that there is no minimum number of participants required in qualitative research. Investigators can determine the ideal sample size for a qualitative study by evaluating the quality of the information collected (Slovick, 2011; Creswell, 2013).

Research Instrument

This study used a researcher-made interview guide based on the research questions. The questionnaire was translated into vernacular, validated and pilot-tested before the actual field interviews. The guide focused on how the transition processes were presented, their experience managing the new processes, challenges faced, and recommendations for improvement.

Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to the conduct of the actual data gathering for this research, a pilot test was done to validate the research instrument. Following the interviews, it was determined that the previously reviewed semi-structured interview guide would provide the necessary depth to explore the pandemic work experiences. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and key informant interviews (KII)

with participants. Given the limitation on face-to-face interactions due to the global crisis, the study employed online communication platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet and Facebook Messenger.

Participants were provided with comprehensive information to enable them to give informed consent or withdraw from the study before each interview. Throughout the interviews, the researcher sought to identify any participant discomfort. All transcripts were kept confidential and secured, accessible only to the researcher.

Analysis of Data

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze data from the in-depth interviews. Following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis involved: (1) familiarizing the data, (2) assigning preliminary codes and categories to describe the content, (3) identifying patterns or themes and sub-themes, (4) reviewing themes and sub-themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. In addition to thematic analysis, the interview documents underwent content analysis using NVivo focused on interpretational, structural, and reflective analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). NVivo was used to perform this content analysis, determining related words and their association to form themes.

Ethical Consideration

Participants were informed about the risks and benefits of participation, including the option to withhold information if they felt uncomfortable. Privacy protection measures were implemented to ensure confidentiality, such as coding participants' names and securely storing interview data. All participants provided informed consent, indicating their voluntary agreement to participate and their right to withdraw at any time without repercussions on their employment status.

Results

Frontline Processes of Cebu Normal University

The CNU implemented several responsive frontline processes. These included online admission and application procedures, online enrollment processes, online hiring procedures, online payment methods, and an online request system.

1. Admission and Entrance Examination Process

During the Covid-19 pandemic, nearly all aspects of the admission and entrance examination process were conducted online. The transition enabled freshman applicants to pursue their career at CNU from their own localities. Students submitted their documents through a Google Form, which was then evaluated by university administrative personnel. Any discrepancies were communicated to applicants via email, and they were able to address them through the same means. The entrance examination was conducted online through a university-approved third-party service provider, a practice also adopted by the University of San Carlos (USC) and Siquijor State College (SSC). Other universities, like CTU, suspended the entrance examination due to the pandemic. To prevent cheating, the university, in collaboration with the CIFL and Testing Center, developed a policy. Subsequently, examination results were posted on the university's social media platforms, ensuring accessibility to all students in the region.

2. Enrollment Process

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the university's enrollment process was conducted face-to-face requiring students to visit the university to complete their semestral clearance in various offices, fill out and submit different forms, have their grades assessed, make over-the-counter payments for enrollment fees, and wait in long lines to be successfully enrolled and receive their study loads. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the process transitioned to online platforms, utilizing the university's social media platforms, website, Google Form and Google Mail to facilitate student enrollment before the start of classes. The shift was implemented across private and public HEIs in Region VII, such as USC, USJR, UP-Cebu, SSC, LLCC, and NORSU. This transition was necessary due to restrictions on face-to-face transactions, preventing students from physically visiting the university.

3. Payment Process

Due to the pandemic, the over-the-counter payments were suspended to prevent clients from visiting the campus. Consequently, the payment process was transitioned to better serve those living at a distance and to comply with the restrictions and limitations by authorities. Payment assessments were sent via email, and clients were able to make payments using available online options or through university's partner government banks. Proofs of payment were uploaded via a Google Form, allowing the Cashiering Department to verify and confirm payments. Confirmation was also provided through

email. With the new process, clients were only required to visit the campus once their documents were available for claiming.

4. Hiring and Interview Process

With the transition of the hiring process and posting of vacancies to online platforms, there has been an observed increase in the number of applicants, as document submissions are now exclusively done via email. Administrative personnel evaluate these documents online. Any lacking documents or discrepancies are communicated to applicants through email. Additionally, character references are more easily obtained using social media platforms. Since interviews are conducted online, members of the selection board committee can participate from their respective offices, allowing them to attend to their primary tasks simultaneously. For applicants, various online tools are available, especially useful teaching demonstrations, enabling them to make presentations more creative and effective through integration of technology and ICT.

5. Process in Requesting for Scholastic Records

Clients can now process their requests online, including making payments. A Google Form was devised for clients to fill out when requesting specific documents from the university. Clients are only required to visit the campus in person according to the designated claiming schedule, particularly if they require hard copies of the documents. The claiming schedule was designed to prevent overcrowding at the university and to ensure compliance with minimum health protocols. In the University of the Philippines-Cebu, some bureaucratic procedures, such as on requisition of scholastic records, were also suspended to simplify the process during the pandemic.

Pandemic Work Experiences of Frontline Non-Teaching Administrative Personnel

This study revealed two main themes; (1) working in the pandemic era, (2) overcoming pandemic-related challenges.

Working in the Pandemic Era

This study identified five sub-themes: Learning to be Resilient (Resiliency); Improving Task Completion (Reinvention); Acquiring New Work Skill (Recalibration); Humanizing the Workplace (Reformation); Enhancing Cost-Efficiency (Rationalization). These sub-themes were systematically termed as the "5Rs of Pandemic Work Experience" for Administrative Personnel.

RESILIENCY: Learning to be Resilient

The occupational transitions tested the capacity of frontline personnel to adapt, recover and thrive in the ever-changing and complex work environment. The transitions required frontline personnel to quickly adjust to contribute keeping the organization afloat during a crisis. During the transition process, frontline personnel sought ways and tasks that they could work on from the comfort of their homes.

"We first addressed our internal processes. Despite the challenging situation, we found other tasks that we could work on while at home" – SR301

Front-line personnel successfully navigated the challenges, stress and difficulties by evaluating processes and adopting new methods to accomplish their tasks.

"Initially, the transition to an online setup was challenging due to lack of experience, leading to initial struggles. However, as I became familiar with it, I understood its benefits. Managing people became easier, as it was more convenient".
- SR101

Although the transition to online work was difficult at first, they eventually embraced it with optimism and open-mindedness, recognizing the necessity of the change.

REINVENTION: Improving Task Completion

The quality objectives of most organization encourage for revisiting processes to make them timelier and up-to-date in attaining organizational targets without compromising core values and thrusts.

"The pandemic has not only brought suffering and sadness but has also prompted us to upgrade our processes for greater convenience. Without the pandemic, we might not have realized the possibility of online banking. It has pushed us to upgrade our processes and services, making CNU more technology-oriented. We discovered that payments can be made online, eliminating over-the-counter transactions and enabling payments to be processed even from distant locations." – SR202

Processes were transitioned to online platforms and modern technology tools to support frontline personnel and allow stakeholders to conduct business with the university, resulting in unhindered services and operations. Frontline personnel realized the feasibility of upgrading work methods to be more efficient and convenient.

"Once we became accustomed to it, we understood and realized its benefits, especially in managing people. We can easily see and track everything; when looking for something, we simply scroll through the internet and view our clients' attendance, unlike before when we had to sift through piles of papers. Although the transition to online work was very difficult at the beginning, we eventually found its benefits, making some of our work and processes much easier. Regarding administrative work, I believe it is better since we can minimize errors and ensure that files will not be misplaced, as everything is stored on the computer." - SR101

Frontline personnel reported that they can manage and communicate with people more effectively with the new processes. Accessibility also improved, particularly in terms of data and document filing in the office. Through online platforms, they can search and track everything instantly and without hassle, unlike when dealing with hard copies of documents. They have found a more efficient way to complete their tasks, reducing errors and workload. Administrative personnel discovered more efficient methods to fulfil their jobs, especially in dealing with clients, which are more sustainable.

RECALIBRATION: Acquiring New Work Skill

The occupational transitions have led to the development of new online processes, providing frontline personnel with the opportunity to acquire new work and life skills. These skills include proficiency in technology, understanding how to use online applications and software, communicating effectively online (e.g. via email, Messenger, Zoom etc.), enhancing creativity, and embracing digitization and modernization.

"In today's technology-based world, communication has become much more convenient. For example, I have learned to send letters electronically, allowing us to send and receive signed letters within minutes. I prefer this method of communication, especially for urgent matters" - SR402

"We discovered that payments at CNU can be made online, eliminating the need for over-the-counter transactions" - SR202

The transition to online processes and digitization of processes have given administrative personnel the opportunity to become familiar with and proficient in using technology. This includes desktop computers, laptops, and various software that have been shown to improve the accuracy, convenience and creativity of their output and reports.

"The process helped me improve my critical thinking ability because it requires not just physical presence in the office, but also mental presence and technical acumen" - SR202

This has also enhanced critical thinking ability and attention to detail of administrative personnel, particularly in preparing reports and evaluating documents. While the task was initially challenging, administrative personnel eventually recognized its benefits, particularly in terms of accessibility and learning.

REFORMATION: Humanizing the Workplace

Organizations have come to realize the importance of the health and wellness of employees, recognizing that they are human and vulnerable to threats such as disasters and crises. This has served as a reminder of the human aspect of the workforce. The pandemic has emphasized the need for work-life balance, as employees cannot effectively work when faced with life-threatening situations.

"As I continue to work from home, I have come to realize how much I have missed spending time with my family. Working from home has allowed me to work more efficiently, as I have access to my personal laptop. My physical and health status has improved during this period, as I have had the opportunity to bond with my family and enjoy fresh air. I have experienced less stress, as I have limited contact with sources of stress" - SR402

Administrative personnel were able to spend more time at home with their family members. This additional time allowed them to take better care of themselves, improving their welfare and quality of life.

RATIONALIZATION: Enhancing Cost-Efficiency

The occupational transitions have led to the digitization and modernization of processes in almost all organizations, resulting in reduction of paperwork. The university has implemented mechanisms for communicating with clients and stakeholders through email. Reports and requests are now facilitated online and submitted via email. The online exchange of communication has replaced the traditional method of sending and forwarding documents and reports, not only within the university but also to partner agencies.

"The process reduces the amount of paper used in the office, as well as the use of expensive ink" - SR203

The processes introduced new methods that have led to resource-saving and cost efficiency. These changes have long-term effects on the environment and address concerns regarding supply procurement and wastage.

Pandemic-Related Challenges

Adopting and working with the new processes presents struggles and issues that everyone must deal with to remain functional during uncertain times.

Figure 1. World Cloud of Pandemic-Related Challenges

1. Transition Issues

The lack of orientation and clear guidelines resulted in confusion and misalignment of instruction. Administrative employees had no choice but to self-train to adapt to the new setup. They were forced to adjust to the transitions and work with them, even though several transition mechanisms were not yet in place.

"There are no measures in place to monitor the authenticity and reliability of the online logs of employees. This is because employees can log in online even when they are not yet working or performing their official duties" - SR402

Due to the sudden implementation of the new processes and systems in the university, a monitoring scheme was not in place. The adjustment was done swiftly to respond to the situation's needs, but concerns arose regarding the integrity and authenticity of the performance reports and work accomplishments, especially when working from home.

"There was coordination challenge with the administration, as new processes were implemented without clear and proper information. Information was only communicated through word of mouth, making compliance difficult" - SR101

Due to the limited time, the transition was not presented to the personnel before its implementation. This resulted in unclear and misguided implementation guidelines for the processes, leading to miscommunication and redundancy.

2. Problem with Resources

The agency did not provide the necessary resources for digitization to every administrative personnel to support remote work setup.

"I faced challenges during the pandemic because I did not have laptop to use. Additionally, my cellphone at that time could not support Zoom" - SR402

"Initially, I had to look for a personal computer, and I even bought a prepaid WIFI modem" - SR102

Not all administrative personnel have sufficient resources to work with the new processes implemented during the pandemic. The remote online setup requires modern gadgets and technologies (e.g., laptop, computer, smartphone) and a strong internet connection, which may not be readily available in their homes.

"Sometimes, I cannot receive emails when I am at home. I have to go uphill, which is 2 kilometers away, to get better signal. If my laptop runs out of battery there, I cannot do anything" - SR202

Since some of the administrative personnel live in mountainous areas across the province, internet connection was a significant challenge for them, especially since it was a requirement for online processes.

3. Challenges in dealing with Stakeholders
"Some people send emails as late as ten or twelve in the evening, especially during weekends and holidays. This results in a bulk of emails waiting for us, causing clients to wait longer for answers to their queries" - SR102

Administrative personnel cannot control clients from sending emails and requests online, even after office hours and holidays. The accessibility of online communication has led influx of emails and transactions that are impossible for administrative personnel to handle all at once in a day.

"It was challenging for us at times. Some clients had difficulty understanding instructions sent through online" - SR102

Miscommunication and misunderstanding were prevalent in the online set-up, as working at a distance from each other was new for everyone. Administrative personnel were challenged in relaying information and instructions more clearly, especially since the only channel of communication was online.

4. Issues on Delay and Compliance

"It was a bit struggle when there were missing documents in the request, as it took time for the end users to respond. Similarly, if the document lacked a signature, it also took time for them to return it to our office" - SR203

In some cases, it took time for the end users and clients to submit the required documents that were lacking, which delayed processing. Some submissions had discrepancies that could not be processed by the administrative personnel, as complete supporting documents were needed. This compliance issue was likely to result in processing delays, which were experienced in the new processes.

"There are additional phases in the process. This has stretched the waiting time before we can release the documents, extending the number of processing days" - SR301

The process has also increased the waiting time that administrative personnel and clients need to consider before proceeding with processing of requests, such as waiting for the payment to be validated.

Discussion

The transition to online processes was imperative for HEIs, as it allowed them to continue their operations efficiently, ensuring targets were met despite the crisis. Transitions are crucial, as organizations that limit their focus to existing processes may find it challenging to respond to changes effectively (Hill & Birkinshaw, 2012, as cited in Osborne, 2017). HEIs have undergone major occupational transitions and organizational changes in response to the pandemic (Vedder, 2020; Nuevo-Chow, 2021). CNU restructuring included implementing new processes for enrollment, admission, entrance examinations, payment, and hiring, which shifted from traditional face-to-face methods to predominantly online procedures. These changes not only improved the efficiency of processes but also aligned with the government's push for digitization, streamlining bureaucratic procedures in line with the ease of doing business act. These processes work well, especially for students residing on neighboring island or in distant municipalities and mountainous regions. They also benefit employees who can utilize online platforms, even when not on campus, to cater to stakeholders. Despite the urgency and lack of concrete guidelines, CNU successfully implemented changes by informing people of their necessity. Lewin's Change Model suggests starting with unfreezing, making people and systems receptive to change by fostering trust and security. Establishing a sense of urgency helps convey the necessity of change and gain acceptance (Kotter's Change Model). Organizations must communicate that current processes are inadequate and clearly present the reasons for change. A clear and concise vision motivates everyone to unite and implement the change.

The transitions to online processes brought several benefits, such as increased convenience for clients, reduced bureaucratic processes, and improved efficiency in resource utilization, particularly in printing and paperwork. The pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital services, leading to a more inclusive digital ecosystem in government agencies. This move recognizes the crucial role of information and communication technology in nation-building. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the advantages of using digital services in various sectors, as they enable fast, convenient, secure, and transparent delivery of government services and business transactions.

Front-line personnel have shown remarkable resilience and adaptability finding positive aspects in the occupational transitions and benefiting from the new online processes. The pandemic has fundamentally changed the way work is done, emphasizing the importance of adaptability and resilience

in navigating future challenges. The pandemic has highlighted the need for organizations to embrace flexible working arrangements and online platforms, emphasizing the importance of managing people and work in online settings. The transition has provided new work and life skills to front-line personnel, paving the way for a more digitized and efficient work environment in HEIs and other organizations. The transition to online processes has brought convenience, particularly in the submission, compliance, and conduct of interviews, with platforms like Zoom being instrumental. The transition has led to improved efficiency in completing tasks, reduced errors, and decreased workloads. Front-line personnel have been assigned new tasks, helping them acquire new skills that enhance their job performance. There has been evidence of adaptation as people settle into long-term remote work, with the pandemic decreasing the challenge of achieving work-life balance (Teevan et al., 2021). Remote work has enabled greater focus on personal life, thereby reducing stress and burnout among administrative employees. This finding aligns with Jones et al.'s research, which demonstrated improved job satisfaction as a result.

Challenges remain including limited resources for online work, difficulties in remote stakeholder management, and adjustments to compliance and document submission methods. Administrative personnel have struggled with the transition to online processes and work setups, particularly due to limited resources and the unfamiliarity of the arrangement. One reason change can fail is the lack of involvement of those affected, even during the planning phase (Kolzow, 2014). Slow internet connections, lack of resources for online setup, problems with the new payment processes, and challenges in dealing with clients have been common issues. These challenges are supported by the studies of Reyes and Cruz, which highlight challenges in remote work such as unreliable internet connectivity, inadequate home office setups, difficulties in maintaining a healthy work-life balance, and challenges in collaborating with team members due to time zone differences. While online work is seen as more accessible, hybrid designs present new challenges for ensuring inclusive interaction (Teevan et al., 2021). Effective conflict management and continuous monitoring are essential to help employees adapt to the new work arrangement and address related challenges.

Despite these challenges, there are notable positive aspects to the new processes. Organizations have seen improvements in employee welfare, productivity, and performance, aligning with their goals. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of acquiring online materials and equipment, as well as the need for ongoing training to equip employees with the necessary skills to adapt to new processes

and overcome challenges. HEIs must provide necessary training to enhance performance in this new setup, including online application usage, language proficiency, and writing skills.

These occupational transitions during the pandemic paved the way for a new work reality, including long-term hybrid practices, online payments, remote document processing, and work-from-home arrangements. These occupational transitions should be ingrained in organizational culture for long-term impact, following Kotter's eight-step change framework. Similarly, Lewin's refreezing stage ensures that new procedures, habits, and rules become the organizational norm. This study suggests that hybrid processes are recommended for the future of work.

Conclusion

The occupational transition to frontline processes implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic has enabled Frontline Non-Teaching Personnel at CNU to not only survive but also thrive in the new normal. The shift to online processes allowed administrative personnel to continue working and meet their deliverable despite facing prohibitions, limitations and uncertainties brought by the pandemic. This transition has not only improved their resiliency but also focused on their welfare and equipped them with new skills necessary to navigate the increasingly competitive nature of work in the modernized, globalized and Industry 4.0 era. The implemented processes have provided administrative personnel with both soft and hard skills, enhancing their capacity to face work-related challenges and effectively utilize information and communication technology. Furthermore, the transition has accelerated the development of their change and crisis management abilities, thereby cultivating a 21st-century workforce capable of working independently amidst challenges and new arrangements. Despite encountering work-related struggles, frontline administrative personnel have demonstrated remarkable innovation and excellence in achieving targets and deliverables during the pandemic.

By learning from experiences of the pandemic, organizations can better prepare for the future, embracing digital transformation and improving work practices for a more sustainable and efficient workforce. The organization should consider its impact on personnel and operations, addressing current problems while envisioning technology-driven processes for a responsive frontline. Capacity building for manpower in technology and ICT is crucial, given the opportunities exposed by the pandemic. Clear

guidelines, timely consultation, and continuous quality improvement are necessary for all stakeholders to improve efficiency in the new normal.

Conflict of Interest

The author has declared that there are no conflicts of interest.

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