Responding to COVID-19 Through Surveys of Public Servants

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Evidence for Practice

- COVID-19 has changed where and how public servants conduct their work, the demands their job places on them and the demands they face outside their jobs

- These changes are likely to put significant strain on public servants, with adverse consequences for burnout, sick leave and performance, if they remain unaddressed

- Employee surveys are an essential tool for managers to identify challenges public servants face, support them appropriately and enable them to operate effectively during the pandemic

- The COVID-19 Survey of Public Servants presented in this Viewpoint provides an open access template for governments to survey public servants during the pandemic

- The Global Survey of Public Servants Consortium can assist, through the World Bank's Bureaucracy Lab, national governments free-of-charge in implementing the survey

Abstract: Responding to COVID-19 presents unprecedented challenges for public sector practitioners and addressing those challenges requires knowledge about the problems public sector workers face. This Viewpoint essay argues that timely, up-to-date surveys of public sector workers are an essential tool for identifying problems, resolving bottlenecks and enabling public sector workers to operate effectively during and in response to the challenges posed by the global pandemic. This article presents the COVID-19 Survey of Public Servants, which is currently rolled out in several countries by the Global Survey of Public Servants Consortium to assist governments in strategically compiling evidence to operate effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the greatest challenges to face society in generations. As the public sector takes the lead in responding to, mitigating, and helping resolve the crisis, we are reminded of the fundamental importance of an effective state. States are not only expected to craft and deliver high-quality public health systems during this pandemic, but must also address the strains on ordinarily routine processes of governance. In economically developed states, for instance, welfare administrators are processing unprecedented numbers of requests for social support and officials are crafting policies to minimize economic damage (Cohen 2020). In the developing world, government agencies are coordinating the delivery of essential items to the poor such as food and medicine as social safety net systems collapse (Kazmin et al. 2020). An effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic thus requires effective administration. Effective administration in turn crucially depends on the effort and capacity of the millions of public sector workers from the frontline to central administration. However, for many public sector workers, COVID-19 has fundamentally changed where and how they work, the demands their job places on them and the demands they face outside their jobs.

In this Viewpoint, we first draw on prior literature to illustrate the strain that these changes put on public sector workers, the particular challenges public sector workers face and the consequences these will have for, among others, burnout, sick leave and performance if they remain unaddressed. Subsequently, we argue that timely surveys of public servants are a crucial diagnostic for governments to understand and address these challenges in government

organizations. At the same time, existing surveys and measurement scales do not address well the particular context of and management needs during COVID-19. In response, we introduce the COVID-19 Survey of Public Servants to address this limitation and an offer to governments to implement the survey and provide management reports free-of-charge. Finally, we conclude with implications of a COVID-19 Survey of Public Servants for our understanding of why some governments respond more effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic than others.

The impact of COVID-19 on public servants' work

For many public sector workers, COVID-19 has changed the location of their work, their work tasks, the demands at work and the demands they face beyond work. Prior research suggests that these changes create both unique challenges and significant strain on public sector workers, risking burnout, sick leave, demotivation and lower performance.

First and most obviously, many public sector workers now telework - not because they choose to do so, but because they are obliged to due to social distancing during the pandemic. Surveys of teleworking show that teleworking is associated with significantly less happiness at work and intention to remain in the organization, where employees are obliged to - rather than choose to - work remotely (Tinypulse 2016). Moreover, public sector workers now frequently have to telework throughout the week. Surveys, however, show that teleworking is most associated with greater engagement where employees work remotely some of the time, but still have an opportunity for face-to-face interactions with managers and coworkers during other times (Gallup 2017). In other words, while there are benefits to remote working - such as a greater

sense of autonomy about one's work schedule and planning (Gajendran & Harrison 2007) - the particular COVID-19 context is likely to emphasize and exacerbate the costs of remote working.

Remote working five days a week during the pandemic, for instance, heavily constrains social interactions between employees (Baker, Moon, & Ward 2006; Golden et al. 2008), risking professional and social isolation of employees (de Vries et al. 2018; Buffer 2020). As the shift towards COVID-19 occurred suddenly, many of the preparatory steps good practice guides recommend for effective remote working - such as ensuring appropriate and safe remote workplaces, providing technical equipment or training in virtual collaborative environments (McKinsey 2020) - could not be completed. Public servants are thus likely facing a series of unmet needs when it comes to their remote workplace and resources to work effectively. This holds all the more in developing countries, with limited internet connectivity and electricity supply.

Similarly, public managers face novel challenges. They cannot supervise whether staff are working physically. Particularly in developing country contexts where risks of staff moonlighting and corruption might have already been elevated pre-COVID (see e.g., Meyer-Sahling, Schuster and Mikkelsen 2018), this presents significant monitoring and supervision challenges. Moreover, managers need to communicate, lead and motivate remotely, and ensure that team and organizational cultures stay intact during remote working. This is no trivial feat. Surveys of teleworking suggests that a significant minority of employees find 'staying motivated' challenging when teleworking, and almost half are in contact less than once a day with their superior when teleworking (Buffer 2020; Tinypulse 2016).

In addition, work tasks and demands often change with remote working. Citizen-facing roles of public sector workers, for instance, now require online and remote interactions. An employee of a national statistics agency collecting household survey data, for instance, might now (learn to) conduct computer-assisted telephone interviews rather than in-person household surveys. A physical therapist now needs to provide remote diagnosis and treatment via video, rather than in-person. Learning these new work tasks comes at a time when workloads in many employment-heavy public sector institutions - health and social security - have been amplified due to COVID-19. Moreover, changing work tasks coupled with less direct contact with superiors can challenge the clarity which employees have about their tasks, objectives and goals and the expectations that superiors have of them when working remotely.

It is also worth recognizing that demands outside the workplace have changed. With nursery and school closures, public sector workers may need to combine work and child care duties during working hours. Moreover, increased sick leave due to employees or their dependants contracting COVID-19 and due to mental health issues and anxiety from the pandemic concentrates public sector workloads in fewer available staff members.

Perhaps most importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to not just alter the way that work tasks are executed, but in many cases may shift the broad objectives of ministries and agencies entirely. These shifts are likely to be accompanied by structural changes to bureaucracies as patterns of oversight, hiring, promotion, and funding are likely to be reconfigured. States are likely to take different paths in seeking to strengthen their capacities (Fukuyama 2013; Bersch

and Fukuyama 2019), but leveraging the expertise, views, and insights of public sector workers will be crucial for successful problem-solving based reform (Bersch 2019).

Looking at these changes cumulatively through the lens of job demands-resources theory (Bakker and Demerouti 2014), predictions are dire. Job demands have increased in many public sector organizations, while job resources (e.g. in terms of support from supervisors, colleagues, or technical equipment to operate effectively) and personal resources (e.g. optimism) will have suffered. If the predictions from the job demands-resources model are true we may expect lower work engagement (e.g. Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli 2006), greater burnout (e.g., Bakker et al. 2005), greater sickness-related absenteeism (e.g., Clausen et al. 2012) and lower job performance to follow (e.g., Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke 2004).

Greater public service motivation (PSM) of public sector workers might shelter public sectors to some extent from these adverse effects (Perry and Wise 1990). If ever self-sacrifice mattered as a motivator of strong work effort, it is now during a pandemic (cf. Esteve and Schuster 2019). There are important limits to this, however. Not all public sector workers have high PSM. Moreover, where societal impact potential is high - as, arguably, is currently the case - higher PSM is associated with burnout: public sector workers sacrificing themselves "too much" for society (van Loon et al. 2015).

This puts a premium on public sector organizations effectively and systematically addressing the new challenges faced by public sector workers to avoid their otherwise predictable burnout, demotivation and other adverse consequences. Responding to these fast-moving changes in

public sector organizations characterized by often codified work procedures is no easy feat. In the next section, we argue that surveys of public servants are one important building block in government responses to COVID-19, to identify problems, resolve bottlenecks and put the right procedures and support for public servants in place during the pandemic.

How Surveys of Public Servants Can Help Governments Support Staff and Make More Informed Management Decisions - Particularly During COVID-19

Surveys of public servants can provide a crucial management diagnostic to governments to improve staff management (see e.g., Meyer-Sahling, Schuster and Mikkelsen 2018; World Bank 2019; US Office of Personnel Management 2020; UK Cabinet Office 2019). For instance, findings from surveys conducted with over 80,000 public servants in 20 countries by members of the Global Survey of Public Servants Consortium - a Consortium which was founded by, among others, several authors of this article[2] - have led government institutions to make evidence-based changes to numerous personnel management practices, from recruitment to onboarding, training and performance management, to name a few (see, among many, El Mercurio 2020)

Why do well-designed surveys of public servants provide impactful management diagnostics? Surveys are powerful as they provide granular, empirical information about existing capabilities and constraints across government institutions and within government institutions across units and groups of public servants. They are, in particular, good at capturing and benchmarking public servants' experiences and perceptions of management practices, as well as their work-related attitudes and behaviors.

For instance, survey data can help identify those public sector organizations - and units within them - with the most overworked or idle personnel, thus helping allocate workloads better across and within public sector organizations. Surveys allow for measurement of staff experiences with management practices - from recruitment to leadership to rigidity of procedures, to name a few - enabling government organizations and units within them to benchmark themselves against each other, and learn from and emulate best practice organizations (see e.g. Schuster et al. 2020). And they enable organizations to assess a range of staff attitudes, from their work motivation to their intent to remain in the organization, thus also serving as early warning signs of future retention or absenteeism problems, for instance. Aggregating survey data also provides managers with rich insights into the more general diverging capabilities and constraints of public sector organizations within a country (see Fukuyama 2013). These insights are equally relevant to scholars, who have hitherto often focused on cross-country rather than within-country differences in state capabilities, despite research underscoring that the latter is often larger than the former (Gingerich 2017).

Surveys of public servants can thus both deepen our scholarly understanding of the state and provide crucial evidence for staff management in public sector organizations. This motivates the work of the Global Survey of Public Servants Consortium - which, as noted, has introduced surveys of public servants as management instruments in 20 countries of, principally, the global south - and the proliferation of regular government-wide surveys of public servants in OECD countries (OECD 2016).

Surveying public servants about their experiences, perceptions, attitudes and behaviors is arguably more important during the COVID-19 epidemic than ever. As noted above, public servants' work tasks, location, processes and demands have all changed with the pandemic. Giving public servants voice through a survey to systematically understand their needs, obstacles to getting their work done and good practices to be disseminated in this changing environment is crucial to enable organizations to support public sector workers and enable them to operate effectively.

Existing measurement instruments of governments and in the literature are only suited for this purpose to a very limited extent. Government employee surveys - which occur once every year or once every two years in most OECD countries (OECD 2016) - are insufficiently timely. Moreover, their batteries are not tailored to understanding the unique needs and constraints of public sector workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Do their superiors communicate effectively in virtual environments? Are remote workspaces adequate, for instance in terms of internet connectivity or IT support provided by the organization? Are co-workers engaging informally with each other virtually, or do employees have a sense of social isolation? Other measurement instruments - such as teleworking surveys - come closer, but are equally not adapted to the current context. Such surveys, for instance, are often predicated on contexts in which public sector workers voluntarily opt into teleworking, and only start teleworking after the "basics" - such as checks of safe and adequate remote workspaces - are in place (cf. Telework.Gov 2020). Moreover, such measurement instruments are often too long: answering such surveys should not be onerous for public sector workers who are already overburdened. Our COVID-19 Survey of Public Servants addresses these limitations.

The COVID-19 Survey of Public Servants

Challenges across public sector organizations vary in response to COVID-19. With this caveat about one-size-fits-all in mind, we propose below several separate survey questionnaires. These questions are released as open access for government organizations to use, edit, or discard as they wish. In light of the analysis in this Viewpoint, what is crucial for public sector organizations is to survey staff in a timely and concise fashion to identify key constraints to the effective working of the public administration and solicit the views of public officials within this quickly changing environment - irrespective of the precise question wording.

With this said, we recommend a short, targeted survey aimed at officials on the front lines as well as a longer survey for officials carrying out their core mandates in a new COVID context.

The Short Survey. Because public servants are busier than usual, they may not have time to respond to more than a few questions. Governments may, for example, choose to implement a brief phone survey of all officials on a bi-weekly basis. The survey might ask the questions like the following to provide managers a continuous diagnostic of the challenges faced by their staff:

1. What are the greatest challenges you face in implementing your team's response to coronavirus?

2. What are the greatest challenges you currently face in implementing your team's typical core tasks?

3. What activity has been most successful in dealing with the challenges your team faces during the coronavirus crisis?

4. What has been most difficult about interacting with your colleagues during the coronavirus crisis?

5. Do you feel you have sufficient support for your mental health and general well-being during the coronavirus crisis?

Where an even briefer open-ended survey is needed, two short questions can shed light on problems that might otherwise escape notice: what is the biggest obstacle to effectively implementing your current tasks; and, how can this be resolved?

While rich information is to be gained through open-ended responses, governments may also wish to implement questions with categorical responses, not least to be able to quantitatively benchmark how government institutions and units within them are faring in response to COVID-19. In such cases, they may choose to implement multiple-choice questions such as the below:

On a scale of 1-7, where 1 is "Strongly Disagree" and 7 is "Strongly Agree," please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

1. The demands facing my team have significantly shifted as a result of the coronavirus crisis.

2. My team has been able to develop an effective strategy for coronavirus-related work during the crisis.

3. My team has been able to develop an effective strategy for completing core tasks during the coronavirus crisis.

4. Resource constraints impede my team's ability to undertake its core tasks during the coronavirus crisis.

5. Resource constraints impede my team's ability to respond effectively to the coronavirus crisis.

The right questions for a particular institution may differ from what is here. Fundamentally, as noted, the most helpful survey questions are those that identify the challenges and obstacles public servants are currently facing and the solutions they are using to overcome them.

Longer Menu of Survey Questions. A longer survey can collect a broader range of data about the current functioning of a particular administration. Longer surveys take more time for individual officers to fill in, but provide a more detailed diagnostic of the impact of the coronavirus crisis on the administration. It may be advisable to target a more detailed survey to particular members of the administration, such as managers or HR personnel. The Global Survey of Public Servants Consortium has developed a range of modules on topics related to public administration in the COVID-19 crisis. Such modules aim to measure how public service practices are shifting during this crisis; the availability of data to assess changes in administrative activities and productivity; and the extent to which organizations are implementing home-based work and the challenges of doing so, to name a few.

The survey questions described in this article have been programmed by the Global Survey of Public Servants Consortium in survey software. The Consortium can generate unique links for public sector organizations wishing to undertake the survey. The survey can be undertaken via email, phone, SMS, or WhatsApp and in a range of languages. Our team of experts has worked on surveys of public servants in more than twenty countries, and we are keen to support governments during this crisis. We are thus offering governments to run the COVID-19 survey of public servants and generate management reports for governments based on it free-of charge.

Several governments have already taken up this offer, and are currently implementing the survey. If you are interested in implementing the survey in your government, please contact Patricia Paskov at the World Bank Bureaucracy Lab (ppaskov@worldbank.org) for further details on the survey and implementation support.

However the survey is implemented, we strongly encourage surveyors to continue to prioritize anonymity of respondents and confidentiality of their responses. Even in a crisis environment such as that wrought by COVID, surveys of public servants should strive to meet the highest ethical standards.

Conclusion

Now more than ever, countries need strong, agile, and well-linked public administrations to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic while continuing to provide routine and necessary state services amidst rapidly shifting conditions.

To enable governments to meet this challenge, we argued in this Viewpoint that governments need rapid-response survey data to assess where they are struggling; foster best practices in responding to COVID-19; and give public servants a voice at an uncertain time, when they are facing both the impact of the disease itself and the necessary measures of social distancing. The need to build data systems that monitor the impacts of the pandemic is obvious; at the same time, we must build systems to monitor and support the strength of public services. The faster we can identify and resolve the challenges confronting public sector workers, the faster they can get on with their jobs at this critical time. The Global Survey of Public Servants Consortium draws on

prior expertise from implementing surveys of public servants in twenty countries to help governments address this challenge through the COVID-19 Survey of Public Servants, a measurement diagnostic tailored to helping governments overcome immediate challenges in staff management arising from COVID-19.

Apart from benefiting the public interest, surveys such as these should also inform and strengthen public administration scholarship. Despite the growing recognition that state strength affects development, scholars know remarkably little about why some states are better positioned to respond to a crisis than others. This is to say nothing of our scholarly understanding of within-state variation—namely, why some institutions within the same state cope more effectively with crises than others. Identifying the sources of this variation will improve our scholarly understanding of the state plus inform policymakers who seek to strengthen institutions over the long term.

Notes

[1]The ordering of these author names is certified random (https://www.aeaweb.org/journals/policies/random-author-order/search?RandomAuthorsSearch%5Bsearch%5D=JtX4w5tSUkFm).

[2] The Global Survey of Public Servants Consortium is the product of an unprecedented collaboration among leading researchers at, among others, the World Bank Bureaucracy Lab, Stanford University, Nottingham University and University College London. We have been collaborating for several years on developing and improving a Global Survey of Public Servants to help governments pursue evidence-based civil service reforms, while generating more robust

data to understand how bureaucracies work around the world. Our teams have collaborated with governments to survey over 80,000 government officials in twenty countries, including notoriously hard-to-access countries like China and Tanzania. Some of our early cross-country findings are published in Meyer-Sahling, Schuster and Mikkelsen (2018) and World Bank (2019).

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