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Editorial

The Covid-19 crisis as a career shock: Implications for careers and vocational behavior



ABSTRACT

The covid-19 pandemic is a *career shock* for many people across the globe. In this article, we reflect on how insights from the literature on career shocks can help us understand the career consequences of the pandemic and offer suggestions for future research in this area. In particular, we offer three “key lessons”. The first lesson is that the implications of Covid-19 reflect the dynamic interplay between individual and contextual factors. Here, we argue that although the pandemic was difficult to predict and control, research shows that certain psychological resources – such as career competencies and resilience – could make this career shock more manageable. The second lesson is that the pandemic may have differential implications over time, as suggested by research that has shown the consequences of career shocks to differ between short-term vs. long-term time horizons, and across life- and career stages. The third lesson is that, even though the pandemic is clearly a negatively valenced shock for most people, further into the future it may allow for more positive outcomes. This lesson builds on research showing how negative career shocks have long-term positive consequences for some people. We hope that these insights will inspire both scholars and practitioners to study and understand the work and career implications of Covid-19 as a career shock, as well as to support people in dealing with its consequences.

As of early May 2020, the covid-19 pandemic has infected over 3.5 million people worldwide, with more than 250,000 dying as a consequence (JHU, 2020). While national governments are currently preoccupied with managing short-term implications such as lock-down policy and planning, longer term economic and societal implications are likely to be severe. As a corollary, it will also have direct impact on both short- and long-term individual career experiences, opportunities and trajectories. For example, healthcare and other frontline workers are working around the clock to provide relevant and dedicated support services, whereas other workers have been forced to work from home, requiring adaptation to on-line and virtual work arrangements. Others are facing immediate or imminent job loss as organizations cut back on service provisions and customer demand decreases. Employers are also facing significant challenges, including small business owners struggling to keep up with overhead costs. Unemployment rates have drastically increased since the start of the pandemic. Globally, initial estimates from the [International Labor Organization \(ILO\) \(2020\)](https://www.ilo.org/) indicate that roughly 7% of working hours will disappear in the second half of 2020, leaving up to 200 million people unemployed, particularly individuals and small business owners working in services, tourism, travel, and retail. There may also be significant increases in underemployment and reduced wages, resulting in an increase of 8.8 million in the number of ‘working poor’. These figures clearly indicate that Covid-19 will have a profound impact on people’s careers and, as a consequence, is a major *career shock* for many people. In this article, therefore, we reflect on how research related to career shocks could provide an important insight into the impact of Covid-19 on individual career opportunities and experiences, as well as provide suggestions for future research in this area.

1. Covid-19 as a career shock

A career shock can be defined as “a disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual’s control and that triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one’s career” (Akkermans, Seibert, & Mol, 2018, p. 4). In this regard it comprises two key elements: (1) an event, and (2) a process of initial sensemaking, which means that a disruptive and extraordinary event is not necessarily a career shock in itself. For example, unexpectedly losing a mentor or valued coworker can be interpreted as a major shock by one person, whereas another may continue with ‘business as usual’. Indeed, Akkermans et al. (2018) argue that career shocks can have different attributes, which potentially determine their impact on people’s careers, such as frequency, controllability, intensity, valence, and duration. For example, a single career shock may be low in intensity (e.g., a colleague leaves the organization), meaning it might not cause significant deliberate thought processing at first. However, if it happens multiple times (e.g., a number of colleagues leave), that is when frequency is high, the cumulative effect could

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be profound.

Applying this conceptualization to current events, it is clear that the Covid-19 pandemic is a highly disruptive and extraordinary event. While it is low in frequency, its low controllability makes it more likely to initiate a deliberate thought process (Akkermans et al., 2018). The degree of intensity, duration, and valence experienced also vary according to individual circumstances. For example, small business owners and people in retail or tourism are likely to experience a high level of intensity and duration, being at risk of losing their business and jobs. In terms of valence, the pandemic would generally be classified as negative, for example because of job insecurity, loss of income, emotional impact of social distancing, and increased general anxiety. Yet, as we will explain below, there may be positive consequences as well, such as spending more time with immediately family and not having to commute. Furthermore, although most occupations are negatively impacted, others are booming, such as software companies and home gym makers.

2. Career shocks: Lessons to learn from the potential impact of Covid-19 on careers

Below we identify three ‘Lessons’ that recent studies on career shocks teach us about the implications of the Covid-19 crisis for individual careers. They also signal other avenues for further research on the topic.

2.1. Lesson 1: The implications of career shock are directly impacted by the interplay between contextual and individual factors

Recent empirical studies have provided support for this lesson. Seibert, Kraimer, Holtom, and Pierotti (2013), for example, showed that career self-management (i.e., individual agency) and career shocks (i.e., external events) both served as antecedents of career decisions. Furthermore, Blokker, Akkermans, Tims, Jansen, and Khapova (2019) showed that career competencies were indirectly related to perceived employability via subjective career success (i.e., an “individual agency process”), yet that negative career shocks weakened this relationship, whereas positive shocks strengthened it. Though not explicitly framed in terms of career shocks, Baruch, Wordsworth, Mills, and Wright (2016) argued that a major earthquake (i.e., an external event) explained the lack of a relationship between turnover intentions and actual turnover in their study. Furthermore, Baruch and Lavi-Steiner (2015) showed that career events moderated the effect of a protean career orientation on career outcomes, and Hirschi and Valero (2017) showed that there are dynamic patterns in how people's career decidedness relates to the impact of career events.

Event Systems Theory (Morgeson, Mitchell, & Liu, 2015) supports the notion of contextual and individual interactions. It argues that events are external, and that they are at the intersection of an action with its context (Rousseau & Fried, 2001). The theory also states that stronger events – characterized by novelty, criticality, and disruption – are more likely to initiate change. In other words, the features of the context (i.e., the career event) and the individual (i.e., decision making) together determine the outcomes of a career shock. Another helpful theory is Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011). According to this theory, *practice* (here: career behaviors) are the result of a dynamic interplay between people's dispositions (*habitus*), competencies (*capital*), and circumstances (*field*) (cf. Schneidhofer, Hofbauer, & Tatli, 2019; Townley, 2014). Bourdieu's theory argues that the *habitus* is embodied and highly stable, yet constantly reinforced or modified by experiences and events. This can lead to a situation of *hysteresis*, when a sudden crisis – resembling the notion of a career shock – can lead to adjustment problems because of a mismatch between individual and context. The ability of the individual to realign their *habitus* and *capital* with their *field* is a critical determinant of how successfully they can manage to deal with a career shock.

Although a career shock is typically difficult to predict and prevent, the individual component of dealing with career shocks is often quite malleable, meaning that there is a lot to do in terms of preparing for- and effectively dealing with career shocks. One such thing is developing career competencies. To illustrate, Blokker et al. (2019) show that individuals who develop reflective, communicative, and behavioral career competencies are better able to capitalize on positive career shocks, such as unexpected promotions. Indeed, career competencies can help people to become more employable and engaged, and also more resilient in the face of setbacks (Akkermans, Brenninkmeijer, Schaufeli, & Blonk, 2015). Similarly, Seibert, Kraimer, and Heslin (2016) presented a broad range of psychological and behavioral strategies that individuals can use to become resilient when facing shocks. Psychological strategies include dealing with distracting emotions and nurturing a growth mindset, and examples of behavioral strategies are developing social relationships and participating in training activities. In all, the literature on career shocks shows that career resources and behaviors are important factors that can influence how well people cope with negative career shocks and capitalize on positive ones.

Our advice to scholars studying the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic is to take into account the dynamic interplay between contextual and individual factors as critical determinants of how this particular career shock may have differential implications for different people. Prior empirical findings may help focus future studies in the selection of concepts to examine, and particularly Event Systems Theory and Bourdieu's Theory of Practice may be helpful frameworks for understanding the interplay between contextual and individual elements (though others may also be helpful, see Akkermans et al., 2018 for a brief overview).

2.2. Lesson 2: A career shock can have a different impact in the short-term vs. the long-term and for different career stages

In their study of early career employees' decisions to pursue graduate education, Seibert et al. (2013) found that a positive career shock (receiving a quick raise or promotion) *positively* related to the employee's intentions to pursue graduate education (measured cross-sectionally), but *negatively* related to that employee's likelihood of applying to graduate school 16 months later. And, two negative career shocks – having a mentor depart the organization and a significant organizational change – did not impact the

employee's immediate intentions to attend graduate school, however, did impact the likelihood that the employee subsequently applied to graduate school 16 months later. As these findings demonstrate, the actual impact of a career shock on one's career outcomes may not be immediate, but rather only manifest over time.

Research has also found that specific career shocks may impact one's career outcomes in different ways based on one's career or family stage. For example, in a sample of academics, [Kraimer, Greco, Seibert, and Sargent \(2019\)](#) found that the positive career shock of publishing a paper in a top-tier journal positively related to work engagement among late-career academics, but positively related to salary among mid-career academics. And, the shock of not receiving an administrative position negatively related to career satisfaction for early- and late-career academics, but not those in mid-career. Related research has also found that a significant national shock impacts individual's stress levels based on their family status. In particular, [Ragins, Lyness, Williams, and Winkel \(2014\)](#) examined the impact of the 2008 financial and housing market crisis (which they termed a "national shock") and found that fear of housing foreclosure was more strongly (positively) related indirectly to physical symptoms of stress, through negative home-to-work spillover, among individuals with family responsibilities, compared to those without dependents.

The above research has two important implications for scholars studying the career consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. First, studies should be designed to capture both short-term and long-term consequences. Although research is likely to find that this specific career shock has mostly negative career and psychological consequences in the short-term (e.g., job loss, reduced salary, lower career and work satisfaction), over time some individuals (see [Lesson one](#)) may move into more satisfying careers or job roles through their own proactive career behaviors. Indeed, research has demonstrated that employees who experience a novel and critical negative workplace event were more likely to engage in improvisation behaviors such as taking advantage of opportunities and "thinking outside the box" ([Chen, Liu, Tang, & Hogan, in press](#)). Conversely, other individuals may be in occupations that have been able to adapt to the pandemic requirements of social and physical distancing (e.g., education, journalism, and government), thus, the effects of the pandemic shock on respective career outcomes may be neutral or even positive in the short term. But the long-term economic consequences of social distancing and closure of non-essential businesses to industries dependent on government support may lead to severe budget cuts, and thus, job insecurity in the future. How long is "long-term" is not clear at this point, but many economists predict the consequences of this pandemic will continue well into 2021.

Second, it is imperative that studies either consider the focal individuals' life or career stage in developing any theoretical models explaining how the pandemic shock impacts career and work outcomes, or explicitly examine career or life stage as a construct within the model. For younger or early-career adults the Covid-19 pandemic may be their first experience through a significant global crisis, thus it may have long-term psychological effects on them. Moreover, from the accumulative advantage perspective ([Miller, Glick, & Cardinal, 2005](#)), a disruption to an early career path, caused by the pandemic, may have significant career consequences for several years. At the same time, very early career adults may be less likely to currently have children or a mortgage loan, giving them one less "worry" during the pandemic. Mid-career individuals may be more established in their careers, but for those who did lose their jobs, finding a new job may take more time. Mid-life also means one is more likely to have the added stress of work-family conflict and financial debt ([Ragins et al., 2014](#)). For later-career adults and retirees, the pandemic may be especially stressful given the higher rates of death among the elderly and economic implications for pensions and investments. Some may take this opportunity to start retirement planning, others, especially in non-profit and health care sectors, are coming out of retirement to help their former colleagues cope with the high demand of their services. Resource-based theories, such as Job Demands-Resources theory ([Bakker & Demerouti, 2017](#)) and Conservation of Resources theory ([Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018](#)), and work-life spillover theories ([Edwards & Rothbard, 2000](#)) provide useful lenses to help identify how and why various work and family experiences associated with the pandemic crisis impact individual's career, work, and psychological outcomes across various life and career stages.

2.3. Lesson 3: Negative career shocks can incur positive career outcomes

While the negative impacts of Covid-19 are likely to be far-reaching, in some instances they may also incur positive career outcomes. In this respect we observe how a career shock that is initially negatively valenced may, over time, result in positively valenced career experiences, opportunities and outcomes ([Seibert et al., 2013](#)). [Zikic and Richardson \(2007\)](#), for example, argued that whereas unanticipated job loss might initially be viewed negatively, overtime it may give rise to opportunities for career exploration and change. Indeed, many of the managers in their study indicated that what had initially seemed like a negative experience, had ultimately allowed them to make positive career changes increasing their job-satisfaction and opportunities for life balance. Similarly, [Rummel, Akkermans, Blokker, and Van Gelderen \(2019\)](#) showed that for some young entrepreneurs, being forced to leave a corporate career was initially a negative experience but ultimately led them into becoming a successful entrepreneur.

In the case of Covid-19, it may be that sudden changes in employment (including unemployment) coupled with the broader societal changes are interpreted by some people as epiphanies causing them to re-evaluate either their career trajectories or broader life aspirations. For example, in their study of retirement decisions, [Vough, Bataille, Noh, and Lee \(2015\)](#) reported that negative life events, such as death or sickness in the family, can create a re-evaluation of career aspirations leading to more positive life decisions. In a study among former professional athletes, [Richardson and McKenna \(2020\)](#) also provide a further example of how a negative career event, e.g. on-field career ending injury, provided an opportunity for former players to change their career direction. This provides an example of what [Akkermans et al. \(2018\)](#) refer to as triggering a deliberate thinking process. For some, the negative career shock brought about by Covid-19 might also bring about opportunities for changing work arrangements, career development and skill upgrades.

Indeed, there have been widespread reports about how some companies who might have been reluctant to allow employees to

work from home are now discovering the added advantages including adoption of new forms of technology to cater to more flexible work arrangements (The Economist, 2020). This trend may also challenge the reported ‘flexibility stigma’ attached to those who take advantage of telecommuting (Golden & Eddleston, 2020; Kaplan, Engelsted, Lei, & Lockwood, 2018) which may, in turn, reduce both employee and employer willingness to use/offer it. Another potentially positive outcome of Covid-19 relates to the necessity to upgrade skills and competencies – particularly with respect to the use of technology. For example, whereas the move to online learning technologies can be unsettling for some academics who are more accustomed to and comfortable with the non-online classroom (Kilgour, Reynaud, Northcote, McLoughlin, & Gosselin, 2019), there have been growing reports about how academics have been upgrading their technological skills with the sudden demand to switch from in-class to online delivery and often in a matter of days if not weeks’ notice (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Similarly, other workers whose organizations have moved to provide much-needed medical supplies are also developing new skill sets and finding new meaning in their work. The ‘silver lining’ of these trends may, therefore, be that some individuals who may have otherwise been reluctant to engage in proactive skill development and career behaviors have augmented both their short- and long-term career sustainability by effectively dealing with the current changes in work demands (De Vos, Van der Heijden, & Akkermans, 2020).

3. Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that the Covid-19 pandemic can be considered a career shock that will have a major impact on people's work and careers. We set out to achieve two goals: (1) to offer ways of understanding this impact through recent insights from the career shocks literature, and (2) to help guide future research based on these insights. Specifically, we argued that the impact will be the consequence of a dynamic interplay between contextual and individual factors, which will differ for people across career and life stages. Also, we argued that there may be differences between short-term and long-term consequences, for example that even though the pandemic is a negative career shock, it may have longer term positive implications for some. We hope that these insights will inspire scholars and practitioners alike to study and understand the work and career implications of Covid-19 as a career shock, as well as to support people in dealing with this shock.

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Jos Akkermans^{a,*}, Julia Richardson^b, Maria L. Kraimer^c

^a School of Business and Economics, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands

^b School of Management, Curtin University, Perth, Australia

^c School of Management and Labor Relations, Rutgers University, NJ, USA

E-mail address: j.akkermans@vu.nl (J. Akkermans).

* Corresponding author.