

Workplace Challenges during the Covid-19 Pandemic in a Private Institution of Higher Learning

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected both people and organizations. However, several studies on the pandemic's effects on the workplace in the educational sector have mainly focused on developed countries. This qualitative case study aimed to describe the challenges faced by the faculty of a private institution of higher learning in a developing country during the Covid-19 pandemic and how they coped with these challenges. Nine faculty members were purposively selected to participate in the study. Data analysis followed the thematic approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The findings highlighted challenges such as the country's economic condition; the level of preparedness of the organization, faculty, and students; technology; and the teaching faculty's health conditions. The faculty members met these challenges differently based on their personal skills and the institution's available resources. The participants thought that the institution's leaders needed to invest more resources to meet the future demands of the job. The major recommendation is that the administration prepares the faculty and puts mechanisms in place to help the organization thrive.

Keywords: Covid-19, higher education, technology, employee health, work structure, job demands-resources model.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected many countries in the world. Thousands of people were infected, and many countries enforced lockdowns and reduced social and economic activities to stop the spread of the virus (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). The educational sector was one of the sectors adversely affected by the pandemic. According to a United Nations report, by mid-April 2020, 94% of learners worldwide, ranging from pre-primary to postgraduate levels in 200 countries, had been affected by the pandemic outbreak in one way or another (United Nations Policy Brief, August 2020). In Africa, according to a study conducted by the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI), many schools and universities experienced a total shutdown (eLearning Africa & EdTech Hub, 2020). Other educational institutions turned to remote learning modes of delivery to continue operating. The

shift was a challenge for both management teams and educators. Most of the lecturers, including those from institutions of higher learning, had not been trained in online teaching (Osabwa, 2022). The problem was further exacerbated by a lack of infrastructure and appropriate learning materials such as Internet connectivity, electricity, computers, other devices, and textbooks (eLearning Africa & EdTech Hub, 2020). The institutions' response to the situation depended on their preparedness level and available resources, including their financial reserves. The pandemic required a significant upscale of technical and technological infrastructure (Barrot et al., 2021). The situation highlighted a disparity in the availability of such infrastructure across the organizations, among and within the countries across the globe (Beunoyer et al., 2020).

From an academic perspective, there was the issue of harmonizing academic calendars to suit the online mode of delivery (United Nations Policy Brief, August 2020). Within the workplace, the

administration and the faculty needed to adjust to new types of work distribution, work monitoring, and evaluation. With the pandemic coming so abruptly and disturbing how work was done, the work structure itself needed to be reevaluated and redesigned to suit the new normal.

The pandemic affected not only the technological aspects of the workplace but also the health of the personnel (Pal et al., 2022). There was the physical sickness brought by the pandemic itself, given its contagious nature. Then there were mental health considerations brought about by the social distancing requirements and the anxiety triggered by the uncertain nature of the pandemic (Sarfraz et al., 2022). Further, the shift in the way of working and the imposed quarantine triggered other work-related health complications, including mental problems (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020).

Given the importance of education for the future of developing countries and the role faculty members play in constructing the future of educational institutions, it is useful to understand the challenges that the faculty met during the pandemic and find out how they coped with those challenges.

The Job Demands-Resources Theory

Job demands-resources theory was used for the study because, during crises, organizations' job demands and job resources tend to change in an unpredictable manner (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). It is useful to find out how the employees (in this case, the faculty) managed the job demands and resources to bring constructive recommendations to the management team so that the organization can thrive despite the crisis. The theory explains how the workplace impacts employees' wellbeing and performance. The model's premise is that every occupation has its own risk factors, which can be grouped into job demands and resources. "Job demands refer to those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological (cognitive and emotional) effort or skills and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs" (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007, p. 312). Job resources are the aspects that help achieve work goals. These aspects can be of a functional nature (available logistics), or they can be those factors that contribute to reducing the physiological or

psychological costs of doing the job (support from co-workers and supervisors). Further, the resources can also provide personal growth and development for the employees (Tummers & Bakker, 2021).

The Workplace

The simplest definition of a workplace is a building or place where people work (Combley, 2011). However, the literature also expanded the concept to include other dimensions: interrelationships between the personnel; the level of engagement of the employees (Fisher, 2010) and their sense of belonging; and the level of autonomy they possess within the organization (Endrissat et al., 2015). Fisher (2010) described that the emotions felt in the workplace (in the case of his study: happiness) help in job satisfaction.

Several aspects of the workplace in educational institutions have changed due to Covid-19. Three of the most salient are the technological aspects, work structure, and job-related health status of employees.

Using Technology for Teaching

Before Covid-19, the need for and use of information and communication technology was not emphasized in many institutions because the service was delivered face-to-face in most universities. During the pandemic, universities had to close their doors because of the lockdown. Then, when classes resumed, there was a need to quickly switch from face-to-face learning to online and distance learning. Many authors, like Nagel (2020), consider the Covid-19 pandemic as the accelerator of the transformation of the traditional mode of working to digital. In this regard, the pandemic influenced the rapid transition from face-to-face or traditional methods to remote ones or online learning as universities closed (Zancajo, 2022). Teachers had to continue teaching remotely during the pandemic as all countries recognized that education is primordial and has to be continued (eLearning Africa & EdTech Hub, 2020). To do so, universities had to adopt relevant technologies, prepare learning and staff resources, set systems and infrastructure, establish new teaching protocols, and adjust curricula (Barrot et al., 2021). The use of the Internet and instructional technology such as Moodle, Google Classroom, Google Meet,

Zoom, and social media increased exponentially as they facilitated online learning. Indeed, the use of information and communication technology was doubled, even tripled, compared to its normal use (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2021). These types of technology depended on the availability of the Internet connection, electricity, as well as the skills of the users (Gillett-Swan, 2017). Any constraints in one of these resources would slow the interaction between the teachers and the students and affect the teachers' effectiveness.

Globally, faculty members are compelled to acquire digital skills to perform their jobs, as online learning is going to be a trend in education. The International Labour Organization (2022) points out that these skills have become vital to the employees' future success. In that sense, Covid-19 has brought an advantage to the workers.

Work Structure

Work structure depends on the institution's size and activities. The work structure establishes formal networks that guide employees and motivate them to work together. The structure also gives employees more clarity of what is expected from them and helps them manage their tasks in a focused manner, thus becoming more productive (Kloefkorn, 2014). The employee's job description is the document that provides the necessary information concerning this expectation. Wayne (2013) defines it as the "written summary of task requirements for a particular job" (p. 690).

The created relationships can be vertical and horizontal, linking managers and employees (Nyathi & Bhebhe, 2019). Knowing the hierarchies within the workplace helps employees understand who supervises and evaluates who. Supervision is essential when it comes to work performance. In the case of universities, it is the responsibility of the head of the department or the dean of faculty to supervise his or her team members, which include teachers and supporting staff. It is also their responsibility to distribute tasks to their subordinates.

While performing his or her job, the teacher is subject to a performance evaluation to determine his or her strengths and weaknesses. The findings from the evaluation are significant and are used to enhance the quality of the teachers' teaching

(Yazdanparast et al., 2020). The process was done manually in the past, but nowadays it is online.

Health Issues in the Workplace and Covid-19

Due to Covid-19, many employees have lost their loved ones, seen their relatives lose their jobs, and become sick (Pal et al., 2022). As the economic situation worsened, many individuals' lives and work circumstances were changed. Employees brought these difficulties as baggage to the workplace. Actions were needed to help support employees as they recovered from adverse life events that rapidly depleted their resources or as they coped with health challenges (Mihalache & Mihalache, 2021).

For some employees, the lockdown compounded the health complications of their already sedentary behavior due to their deskbound work (Akulwar-Tajane et al., 2021). Studies indicate that excessive inactivity and movement have some repercussions on the physical health of individuals (Dunstan et al., 2012). Covid-19's lockdown isolated many workers from their colleagues, resulting in depression and some form of mental illness. For the employees, "the perception of being separated and the lack of opportunities for emotional and social interaction with the team and the supervisor can be considered a job demand" (Toscano & Zappalà, 2020, p. 2). Even after the crisis, people may still feel stressed and depressed as they try to regain a sense of normalcy. Many still fear losing family members, friends, or their own life. Others worry about losing their jobs. All these fears tend to affect their mental health, manifesting anxiety, depression, and stress (Sarfraz et al., 2022.).

The use of modern communication technology proved to be both a benefit to employees and a threat to their health (Chesley, 2014). For some employees in the service sector who interact with clients and customers, office hours are blurred as virtual communication allows people to interact at all times. Thus, there is an overlap between work and home spaces, which can create stress and strain for the employee (Chesley, 2014).

Methodology

Design

This study used a qualitative single-instrumental case study design. The design focuses on an issue or concern, and the case illustrates the issue or concern (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, the issue is about the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic brought to the workplace. The case study was chosen to help to describe the challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic within a bounded system, the institution of higher learning setting.

Sampling

A purposive sampling method was chosen for the study because it was necessary to find the right participants who matched the specific criteria and brought significant and relevant information to fulfill the purpose of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The single case chosen was an institution of higher learning. The following criteria were established for the choice a) it must be located in a developing country where resources are known to be scarce, especially in a crisis like the pandemic with its ensuring health and economic impact; b) it must be a private institution which depended on its financial resources to carry on the operations; c) it must have a target market that extends to many parts of the country where it is located; d) it must have a large proportion of self-sponsored students. Each criterion is significant as it establishes a basis to describe the extent of the challenges met by the faculty during the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the researchers identified the institution as having fulfilled all these criteria. Permission sought to carry out the research from the institution's administrators was granted.

The institution has six departments, and the total number of teachers (both regular and adjunct) was seventy-five. The research participants were purposefully selected based on the following criteria: a) they were all teaching faculty staff; b) they had been teaching before and during the pandemic; c) they were regular faculty members who lived on the campus of the institution. At least one teaching faculty who met the following criteria was chosen from each department. In total, 9 participants were invited to take part in the study.

Source of data

The study used a semi-structured interview where specific information was sought from all participants. However, the exact wording of the questions was not determined ahead of time. The format is flexible and allows new ideas to emerge through the discussion (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001; Merriam & Tisdell, 2014). The first part of the interview inquired about the demographic characteristics of each participant (number of years of teaching, number of subjects taught, number of students per class); Then the interview intended to collect information about the challenges the employees met in three areas: the work-related health status of the employees; the technology used in the workplace and the work structure. The interviews lasted for forty-five minutes each on average.

Trustworthiness: To establish the trustworthiness of the study, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed to facilitate data analysis, and validated by sending the transcribed data back to participants to confirm their accuracy. Two dimensions were used for trustworthiness: dependability, and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability is related to reliability. This ensures that the results would be identical if another study was conducted on the same topic, using the same methods, and with the same participants (Shenton, 2004). According to Merriam & Tisdell (2014), dependability can be ensured through peer examination and the audit trail. For this study, we asked a colleague who is an expert in qualitative research to read the work and check its authenticity and reliability.

Credibility answers the question: How congruent are the findings with reality? (Merriam, 1998). One approach used to measure credibility is reflexivity. It explains how the researcher influences the study (Probst & Berenson, 2014). The pandemic has affected us. The study setting is relatable as we are faculty members working at another institution of higher learning, although we did not have to face the same challenges. We believe that understanding the challenges that affect the workplace elsewhere can bring meaningful insights into coping mechanisms for fellow faculty members. Covid-19 may be abating, but it has left its mark on our workplace economically and professionally. One way to walk

through this experience is to gather best practices from others. By doing so, we can create shared meanings and come out stronger professionally and in a better position than before the pandemic to contribute to the success of the organizations.

Data Analysis

A thematic approach to data analysis was used for this study. The analysis was done using the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarize yourself with the data, (2) create initial codes, (3) find themes, (4) review the themes, (5) define and name the themes, (6) produce the report. For this study, step 1 was done when the transcripts were read thoroughly by both authors. In step 2, the initial codes were created. For steps 3, 4, and 5, themes were discovered, refined, and defined for the report writing, which is step 6.

Ethical considerations

First, we requested and received written permission from the institution to conduct the study. The interviewees were informed of the purpose of the study, and confidentiality was assured. The interviewee had the right to refuse to participate at any time during the process. Each interviewee was given a number (R1, R2,...) to ensure anonymity.

Results and Findings

This qualitative case study aimed to describe the challenges faced by the faculty of a private institution of higher learning in a developing country during the Covid-19 pandemic and how they coped with these challenges.

The setting

The case context is an institution found in a developing country in sub-Saharan Africa with a GDP per capita of less than 1,000 USD. The level of infrastructural and technological development varies across the country. The urban areas are well developed, but the rural areas have infrastructure and technological development challenges. The institution offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in six departments. The institution has had a steady level of enrolment over the years. The tenured teaching faculty reside on campus with their families, and there is also a team of adjunct faculty hired on a contractual and

temporary basis. The students come from all over the country and reside in the campus dormitory or nearby communities. Most of the students are self-sponsored.

Emerging Themes

The analysis of the data, aligned with the purpose of the study, led to three themes: (1) challenges the faculty encountered during the pandemic, (2) coping mechanisms of the faculty to deal with the situation, and (3) expectations of the faculty for the post-Covid-19 workplace.

Challenges encountered during the pandemic: The economic condition

When Covid-19 happened, the government launched a complete lockdown, followed by limited confinement. There was a sharp drop in production and sales levels. For the institution, the lockdown meant that the institution needed to close; hence, there was no income during that time. Some teaching faculty employees were concerned about losing their jobs.

R1: I was worried. I have a family, and I wondered if I would lose my job because of the school's closure. In addition, I often wondered if the school could sustain its operations and for how long.

When classes resumed, the virtual delivery mode of instruction was adopted. However, many students could not enroll because of economic hardships. As many of them are self-sponsored. When the pandemic happened, many private businesses were closed, affecting household revenues. As the families were earning less, priorities was given to basic needs such as food and shelter at the expense of pursuing a degree. The situation worsened as time passed, and the students decided not to enroll for the subsequent semesters.

R2: The economic situation worsened, and the students or their parents could not afford to invest in their schooling. Even those who registered could not continue studying because they could not afford to pay tuition and fees.

This finding agrees with those of other authors who stated that, as with many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, the pandemic hit the country mainly in terms of the economy (Gondwe, 2020).

Challenges encountered during the pandemic: The technology

Before the pandemic, the faculty had limited connectivity on campus, except for their private use, either personal or professional endeavors such as research. There were plans to install more ICT infrastructure, but the plans stalled. For businesses to install the necessary infrastructure for a good Internet connection, it was necessary to find reliable firms specializing in such products and services. In the area where the institution is located, such providers are few, and it took a very long to get everything installed correctly.

R5. The main issue was definitely the Internet connection. It took so long to install a new cable (fiber optic) to have Internet finally.

When the pandemic came, the administration did what they could with the resources available to provide better Internet connections for the faculty. Yet, even if the institution had everything in place to deliver the courses online, the students did not have Internet access.

R9. We could manage to teach online, but the students were not able to access the Internet.

Before Covid-19, educational technology was not fully advanced, and digital learning was not very popular or even valued in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Kotua et al., 2015; Ayega, 2020). There was limited access to a broadband high-speed Internet connection, and it was a costly investment.

Challenges encountered during the pandemic:

The unpreparedness of the institution and the students

One of the main challenges was that the institution was unprepared for the pandemic. The faculty was trained to teach face-to-face, with little use of online educational technology. After the initial complete shutdown of the institution, the administration decided to offer classes virtually. The faculty realized that they had to redesign their courses and restructure how they teach, and they were not prepared for that, either psychologically or pedagogically. For some courses, the faculty found it challenging to teach

online because they were not trained to teach the course's practical aspects.

R6. We abruptly had to make some changes. The school was unprepared for such a major change in infrastructure or training.

R3: We had not planned for the situation. We had to learn through this as we went. In my department, we were used to teaching hands-on with the students watching and practicing in the classroom. We had to change that way of teaching and did not plan for this.

Another challenge was the lack of policies and procedures on how to carry on with the distribution of responsibilities, task evaluation, and monitoring of the teaching. There was no formal policy for the faculty to follow while working from home.

R3. During the pandemic, the online teaching evaluation did not work. There were no specific systems to monitor our work.

R7. I was not aware of any evaluation done during the Covid-19 period. It was I who informally asked the students how my teaching was.

Furthermore, the students were not prepared to study online. Before the pandemic, the students would travel from their hometowns, be oriented on campus when they arrived, and start their academic journey. During the pandemic, virtual orientation was not as effective as it should be. Without a proper orientation, students were at a disadvantage from the starting point of how to study virtually. Some students did not know how to access the virtual classroom and interact with the faculty. The majority lacked some degree of self-efficacy to study online.

R7. The institution did everything possible to turn things around as quickly as possible, but the students were not trained nor prepared to receive instruction online. Some did not even know the basics of connecting and uploading the materials! So they contacted us and explained their challenge.

R8. The problem was not the LMS used or the way the course was delivered, but the problem was with the students. They could not study independently, even if everything were uploaded

on the platform. They needed some interaction, like when we used Zoom, for example.

This finding confirms a study by Van de Werfhorst et al. (2022), who found that students' computer skills also contribute to the digital divide across schools.

Challenges encountered during the pandemic: Health considerations

Before the pandemic, faculty members did not think much about occupational health. Health issues were not a priority, except for some individuals with chronic illnesses. When Covid-19 appeared, there was concern about catching the virus. Then there were the extra hours to redesign the courses, deliver the courses virtually, and evaluate the students' progress. On their side, the students called, asked for help and explanation, and submitted their assignments at all times, day and night. For many of the faculty members, the workload doubled or even tripled. Because of the number of hours spent on the screen, some developed headaches and other complications. They became more aware of their health than before the pandemic.

R4. I was worried because I was not feeling well even before the pandemic and feared getting worse because of the workload.

R6. Even if the government has removed the restrictions, there will always be a risk. I cannot wait for the school. I take my own precautions.

Their experience confirms Matli's finding (2020) that the pandemic brought teachers a work overload. The job demands were increased, as far as teaching was concerned.

Coping measures taken during the pandemic

After the government removed the complete lockdown restriction, the institution's administration quickly set training sessions in place for faculty to be trained on how to teach online. It was an intensive course, and the faculty was trained to use different Learning Management Systems. Even before Covid-19, the administration already had plans to install better connectivity on campus. The economic situation heightened the motivation to offer classes virtually. The institution had no income for the two previous semesters, and the administration realized that students would be reluctant to come

to campus. Thus the administration decided that the best option was to go online. Internet connectivity was provided on campus.

R4.R8. We were given training on how to use Moodle and Google Classroom.

R5. Administration made the decision to install the Internet connection on campus. Before we had only limited connection that we used for class preparation and personal use.

After the administration decided to offer courses online, at least using Google Classroom and Moodle, some faculty members learned how to use them and started teaching immediately. They realized that it was necessary to keep the school open.

R1. I learned as much as I could on how to teach using Facebook as an e-Learning platform. I was able to deliver the classes somehow. I created videos and posted them on Facebook; students could upload them and learn independently. I had a forum for discussion, and students could download their assignments.

Other faculty members realized that Moodle was not working for their classes, either because they had not acquired enough expertise in using Moodle, or because of the situation of their students. So they used social media. Still, others used regular email to ensure that the students could continue their classes, even though they were aware of the severe limitations of such tools and the effect on the effectiveness of the job.

R8. We were given training on how to use Moodle, Google Classroom, and Facebook Education, in that order. It was the least recommended platform. But realistically, we had no choice, and we had to use Facebook because that is what some students had access to.

R7. I did not use Moodle. I did not master it enough to teach effectively. I used social media and Facebook. Also, the students were not able to access Moodle. They could only buy air time, so I had to use social media.

Thus, within the same institution, there was variance in how teaching was conducted. The situation reflects what was happening in other countries, where some groups could cope with the changes, but others fell behind (Beaunoyer et al., 2020).

Although the participants were anxious about the disease, they maintained social support, allowing them to live through the situation without experiencing severe levels of stress and depression. There was a sense of solidarity, and they devised ways to keep in touch even though they could not socialize as before.

R1. We managed to keep in touch despite the restrictions, which allowed us to encourage each other.

R4. Together, we joined hands to face the situation. It made us stronger.

Expectations for the post-Covid-19 workplace

The faculty are excited that the institution can now teach online and face-to-face. According to them, the transition will create a competitive advantage for the institution and it can expand its market share. Most participants felt that Covid-19 had a positive impact on the institution. The teachers have more access to Internet connection than before. The students have been briefly exposed to the possibility of learning virtually.

R9. I found this confinement as an opportunity because the department had to move to new teaching technologies compared to before the pandemic.

R2. If Covid-19 did not happen, we would not have started teaching online. Also, we have better Internet connectivity than before, so the pandemic brought a good thing.

R5. Overall, the pandemic was more positive because it did not bring severe consequences (death, strong disease) on the campus but forced the university to quickly switch to modern instructional technologies.

The pandemic has opened other venues for doing business. Students have discovered that studying online presents several advantages. But, there must be a structured system to take advantage of the progress Covid-19 brought. According to the participants, several resources are needed to help them face the job's demands. During the pandemic, the faculty was forced to adapt to keep teaching despite the situation. They did what they had to do on their own. Each faculty did what he/she could to suit his or her classes' needs and depended on his or her capabilities. But the way forward is to have a centralized system where everyone can access the same

opportunities and facilities to reach the desired standard. More human resources and expertise are needed to help prepare for the future. Hence more functional resources are required to operate effectively.

R2. We need to seriously assess how much progress we have made and continue making improvements for the institution's good.

R3. I believe there is an interest in investing in modern technology, which will provide a competitive advantage for the institution.

R4. We need to have a system that allows everyone to effectively teach online. During Covid-19, each of us was finding the best way to teach based on our individual skills and abilities.

Another aspect that needs to be considered is the collaborative culture that provides the team to share best practices and learn as they face the future together (Pal et al., 2022). Management can encourage collaboration by providing the necessary support to the workforce to buffer the effects of pressure on job demands.

R6. The school needs to invest in training, providing a technical team, and the infrastructure. Although I am not a technical expert, I am willing to learn how to effectively teach the class.

R9. We need more organization coming from the administration in my department.

Conclusion

This study sought to identify faculty challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. The sources of the obstacles came from external forces as well as internal factors.

First, the pandemic has affected the economic conditions of the country. Due to the mandatory lockdown, the institution was closed, so there were no revenues. When the lockdown stopped and the institution was allowed to re-open, the economy had still not recovered, unemployment was high, and students could not register.

The level of technological development in the country is minimal in many areas, notably in terms of educational technology. The need for advanced technological infrastructure was acute during the pandemic, but it was costly. The administration did what it could to provide Internet connectivity and the needed ICT infrastructure on campus. It helped a lot, but another problem surfaced: the

students could not access the technology to study online.

The delivery of online courses requires a certain level of preparation for the organization, faculty, and students. But neither the organization nor the faculty was prepared for the pandemic. Apart from technological preparedness, there were no online course delivery and evaluation policies. The faculty was not ready to design and teach online. The level of unpreparedness was mostly on the students' side. They were not mentally, intellectually, or financially ready to study online.

The pandemic also brought some job-related health challenges to the faculty because of the work overload the staff had to face. However, they did not feel stressed and isolated as they found ways to encourage one another.

The administration decided to open the institution and set up virtual classes to cope with the situation. Intensive training courses for the faculty on how to teach online were also provided, together with better Internet connectivity, and the faculty designed and prepared their courses.

According to the job demands-resources theory, every occupation has two dimensions: demands and resources. The pandemic brought new job demands, such as new skills to be acquired, new considerations in health, and new systems to enable the smooth operation of things. But the pandemic also opened up possibilities to be exploited. These opportunities can help reinforce the resources required to offset the increased demands. In particular, the faculty expressed the need for more investment in ICT infrastructure and instructional technology. They also expect to see more experts being hired to assist the teaching faculty in delivering online classes.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that top management of educational institutions become more conscious of new developments in the sector and proactively set up mechanisms to meet the job demands of the new normal.

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