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Research article

Business ethics in the era of COVID 19: How to protect jobs and employment rights through innovation

Chokri Kooli^{1,2*}, Melanie lock Son², Imene Beloufa³

ABSTRACT

The pandemic situation generated by the novel coronavirus virus (COVID-19) created several moral and economic dilemmas. While trying to save many local and world economies, entrepreneurs, leaders, and policymakers faced the challenges of managing the resultant economic and financial disruptions and risks coupled with the moral obligation to observe business ethics. This research is based on a documental collection, revision, and analysis of relevant and emerging literature to catch the best practices and experiences adopted by various governments and businesses, especially in western countries, to protect the jobs and employment rights of workers. Among other things, this study urges social policymakers to adopt innovative mechanisms and programs to not only protect the rights of employees but also help maintain jobs during pandemic situations and economic crises. The research suggests that adhering to business ethics will enhance the use of technology and boost the sense of innovation and creativity of both employees and their organizations. The importance of the collaboration between public Administrators, policymakers, entrepreneurs, and employees to maintain the fundamentals of business ethics and protect employees' rights is adjudged to be critical to a speedy recovery from the losses and disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Keywords: social policy, COVID-19, business ethics, employee rights, innovation, job protection

I. INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2019, the Chinese medical authorities revealed the emergence of a new unknown virus in the province of Wuhan [1]. The quick spread and transmission of the novel coronavirus virus (COVID-19) created a global health pandemic. Accordingly, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Coronavirus disease a global pandemic in March 2020 as it quickly spread worldwide.

To block the rapid progress of the virus and safeguard global health, most of the world's governmental authorities were under enormous pressure to make necessary, but tough, decisions. While some countries moved quickly to close their territories, stopped international flights, and ordered the general confinement of the population, some countries delayed halting economic activities, ostensibly "following scientific advice" of experts in their country. Quarantine measures employed to control the spread of the Coronavirus created a new economic crisis [2]. Several

¹ University of Quebec at Outaouais, Canada

² University of Ottawa, Canada

³ Community College, Qatar

* Email: ibm4chk@yahoo.fr

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companies have been forced to stop their activities. Some countries adopted measures that protected the rights of employees and employers. Some other governments did not do the same. They ignored the rights of employees and managed to protect investors rather than human capital. Some companies managed to preserve their human capital through their adoption of innovative solutions [3] for their daily operations in the face of a crisis.

In contrast, other companies opted for the most comfortable way by laying off their employees under the pretext of economic difficulties. Such a new economic conjuncture generated by COVID-19 created several moral [4] and economic dilemmas. It also reminded us of the importance of the main principles of business ethics, corporate culture, and values. While trying to save the local and world economy, entrepreneurs, leaders, and policymakers were confronted with the challenges of managing the most crucial resource of any organization - people.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD)/the UK, a global professional body for human resources management, opined that the health and well-being of human beings and strict ways to protect against the spread of the virus will still be at the same root of every company's answer. CIPD provided guides and asserted the need for employers to support employees returning to a safe and healthy workplace, getting the most from remote working, redundancy (where it becomes inevitable), and leave guides to employers. They also provided tools to help protect the business and livelihood of employees, such as their 'returning to workplace planner.' They also stress that employers have a constitutional obligation to protect people's health and well-being and create a safe and secure working environment. They also have a social commitment to ensuring workers feel comfortable and safe in their jobs. Hence, they concluded that companies should all be vigilant in protecting their employees and mitigating the likelihood of the transmission of the disease [5].

Without a doubt, with the ongoing pandemic, and the call to protect and preserve workers' rights, businesses need to save the cost of operation and secure their going concerns. Moreover, ethical and corporate social responsibility gives cause for concern. It leads to the need to explore further the dynamics of managing human resources during pandemic crises to review the ethical dilemmas and the best practices.

This paper is grouped into eight sections. Following this introduction, section two examines the impact of COVID-19 on public health; section three examines the ethics of crisis management, section four examines the effects of the economic crisis on businesses and investment, section five examines the impact of the financial crisis on workers, section six explores innovation and creativity in times of crisis, section seven presents creativity and Innovation mechanisms in a Recovering Economy, and the last section presents the paper conclusion.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The scoping review was executed through the PRISMA-SCR protocol. This research is based on a documental collection, revision, and analysis of relevant and emerging literature to catch the best practices and experiences adopted by various governments and businesses, especially in western countries, to protect jobs and employment rights of workers during pandemic situations and economic crisis. A systematic literature search was done in December 2020 through the Scopus database. Due to the rarity of research, we extended the search through the google search engine to catch specific economic and human capital analyses.

The main focus was on business ethics during COVID-19. So, we used multiple keywords including words like Business ethics, COVID-19, job protection, employment rights, and innovation. A librarian from the University of Ottawa, Canada helped us with the search strategy.

The search strategy included studies that analyzed positive and negative ethical behaviors of businesses and workers during the COVID-19 era. The research was extended globally and did not focus on a single country or region. We excluded studies that are not related to the COVID-19 context. The main retained studies were qualitative and quantitative, published in peer-reviewed journals in 2020 and written in English. The discussion was solidified by the most recent analysis published in 2021 and 2022.

The first search screened 44 studies in the database. The abstract analysis helped to maintain 21 relevant and eligible studies.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Impact of Coronavirus on Public Health

The world has witnessed and is still battling devastating health, economic and social crisis occasioning COVID-19. Acclaimed to have originated in China, the virus has spread its devastating effect all over the world; its impact and severity differ from country to country. Its casualty and fatality in countries depend on both the quality and quantity of public health infrastructure and, most importantly, the political and public policy proactiveness and reaction(s). Thorlby et al., [6] identified five dimensions, which mostly reveal the unprecedented impact of the Coronavirus on public health (although with a focus on England). These dimensions manifest the overall effect of the virus on the number of deaths and severe diseases [7]. They also reflect the indirect impact on persons with medical conditions not linked to COVID-19. The third level of damage may affect people with severe illnesses or those who require less immediate treatment, which may have been disrupted. The standard practitioner does a great deal of work in handling patients with chronic conditions. The fourth factor should be the medium and long-term effects on the well-being of regulatory changes to regulate the progression of COVID-19. The impact primarily affected by the blockade could have been significant, resulting in bankruptcy, joblessness, increased domestic violence, abuse, and adversity. The fifth dimension is the longer-term impact on service capacity and adaptability.

The United Kingdom National Health Service (NHS) managed to enter the disease outbreak with either a reduced level of beds and per capita employees, or a large part of the government response to the disease outbreak has predicated on trying to slow the disease to allow time for the NHS to raise intensive care capability in health care facilities.

In separate research, Phiri et al., [8] attempted to understand the impact of the virus on “black, Asian and minority ethnic” (BAME groups) and concluded that there is a correlation between allegiance to certain ethnicities and the probability of positive testing and surviving to COVID-19. Genetic factors would not be included in the framework of the study. This study reported that the optimum age-standardized diagnosis rates of COVID-19 per 100,000 population were among Black cultural minorities (486 females and 649 males) and the lowest among Caucasians (220 females and 224 males).

3.2 Ethics of Crises Management

During crisis and post-crisis periods, the core values, integrity, and moral and ethical compass of the leadership and decision-makers governing institutions, organizations, and critical stakeholders are exposed, tested, and appraised by those who bear the brunt of their actions or inactions [9]. These appraisals are mainly based on the same characteristics that make up the crisis. They are also based on the urgency and degree of uncertainty occasioning the crisis and public perception of transparency, accountability, and information management (pre, during, and post-crisis). Lina Svedin [10] argued “that public perception of how crisis managers deal with value conflicts and whether or not they perceive the process by which decision-makers make hard and controversial decisions as legitimate and fair are key to the overall public assessment of whether the crisis was managed well or not”. The study further opined that ethics could be a reflective study of moral choices and behaviors underpinning arguments that serve as the criteria that drive decision-making during crises.

Briefly stated, crisis management immediately affects the lives, livelihoods, and well-being of citizens. When an emerging crisis is quickly identified, responders are aware of what is happening, the appropriate people consider crucial decisions, responders’ actions are coordinated, government/management interacts with its communities’ members, and the repercussions of a crisis are characterized by appropriate accountable procedures and a willingness to learn from the downturn as a whole. It is said that a crisis has been effectively managed.

3.3 Impact of Economic Crises on Businesses and Investment

The global economic crisis has changed the outlook of today’s business markets across the globe leading to a drastic decline in productivity and, eventually, profits [11]. The competitive position of several organizations was severely affected by the economic crisis of 2008 which led to dwindling investments and upheaval in the economy as a result of business debts. For instance, the Gorynia et al., [11] study considers the effect of the economic recession on the Polish business sector. Their findings reveal that companies open to foreign cooperation or exchange were more prone to economic disturbances relative to domestically focused companies. Similarly, Maniak and Zelek [12] claim that economic turbulence rendered foreign activities ineffective, especially with the fluctuations in the

foreign exchange market and discrepancies in foreign policies arising from the need to protect each other's interests.

Furthermore, Matysiak and Bausch [13] discuss the link between a company's performance and the degree of internationalization. Their study suggests that such a link is not always justified due to performance being a result of the company's capabilities and ability to gain leverage on international markets. Nachum [14] suggests the need to explore the role of the external environment in the relationship between a company's performance and internationalized activities has given the effect of the global economic crisis on organization competitiveness. The position of competitors in the foreign market remains a key measure of the ability of an organization to sustain its current level of competitiveness. Hence, changes in the competitive position of foreign competitors tend to affect the decision-making outcomes of an organization to internationalize.

In addition, countries also depend on foreign direct investment (FDI), which is adversely affected by the loss of demand during the economic crisis leading to disinvestment. Although, the propensity of such occurrences of disinvestment is on the scale of influence exercised by the parent company over its foreign affiliates. During an economic crisis, the ability to sustain foreign economic activities is dependent on the cooperation between foreign and local partners. Hence, countries tend to foster international collaboration and treaties that promote international trade and eliminate barriers to free or fair trade among cooperative countries.

Finally, Figueira de Lemos and Hadjikhani [15] contend that the effect of economic crisis and disruption on international trade and investment depends on (a) the location of internationalization, that is where is the base of value-added and production, (b) the strategic position of the foreign ventures pre-crisis that serves as a determinant of their competitive position during and post-crisis, (c) the importance of the sector of activity of the internationalizing company and exports supporting FDI and investments [16], and structure, or profile of internationalization such as the possibility and tendency to adjust production locations to cost levels and diversifying their international risks. Thus, because of the new economic crises, it becomes necessary to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic crises on workers as economic agents.

3.4 Impact of Economic Crisis on Workers

The complexity and dynamism of today's workplace and the need for it to be effectively communicated, coupled with struggling to maintain and sustain social and corporate culture invested in by both employers and employees, will be utterly daunting in the face of increased teleworking as a result of social distancing. Furthermore, is it of great importance for the organization to develop new opportunities to integrate workers and make knowledge sharing possible after being affected during the economic crisis because of a decline in productivity and employee participation. Employers must therefore offer recorded or live formal training on organization policies and procedures and a platform and atmosphere that encourage social circles to gather for less official socializing opportunities using technology, in order to ensure that the organization's objectives are met.

The COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered the vital role played by both paid and unpaid employees in the organization and the economy at large. They are maintaining the health and well-being of employees and societies by ensuring resilience in the face of future crises. With the closure of childcare facilities, employees are at the epicenter of the response to the crisis. Some innovative measures have been put in place by some counties to allow citizens to perform care services and essential workers to keep working to economic sustainability. Indeed, the COVID-19 crisis has laid bare the disparities in social and labor protections, which result from workers' contractual status. Employees with part-time jobs or contracts, alongside the self-employed individual, do not enjoy the same paid sick leave or unemployment insurance as employees with permanent and full-time jobs/contracts. Also, they do not benefit from the same protection level against work hazards. As nations emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, it is of great necessity to revisit the existing work regulatory structures for ensuring employees equal treatment regardless of their employment status.

Another problem is the decline in the collaboration between countries of origin and destination for expatriates facilitates the extension of protection to migrant workers across national borders through information exchange in ensuring the smooth repatriation and reintegration of expatriates or through the provision of medicines and other forms of support to both nationals and expatriates. Additionally, labor unions are embarking on cross borders collaboration in order to facilitate food distribution to migrant workers. Hence the effect of the COVID-19 crisis is strong on workers and the economy at large, which requires a continuous effort of individuals, employers, and government intervention through palliative and policy review.

3.5 Innovation and Creativity in Times of Crises

Creativity explains the generation and identification of a new idea in solving a particular societal or individual problem. In comparison, innovation explains the transformation of the generated idea into a valuable product or service. Today and the future workplace undoubtedly is an increasing product of employee health and safety concerns that ensure efficiency, effectiveness, and cost-reduction as a result of the COVID-19 crisis [17]. However, the present-day degree of openness of an organization to innovation (to adapt to the COVID-19 reality), determines its absorptive capacity and level of responsiveness to exogenous shocks and challenges.

Technology strides as a response to COVID-19 such as developments in artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning as well as other edge-cutting tech touches to an organization's workplace will have a crucial function to play in laying the blueprint of the employment prospects [18]. Moreover, the increased recognition of technology as a vessel for creativity and innovation in the workplace will likely accelerate organizations' awareness, development, acquisition, and adoption of technological innovation into workplace policies [18].

Under circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, that are recognized as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, the dynamic capabilities of an organization give it the capacity to adjust its internal and external capabilities to face disruptions. Those new mechanisms set in place allow companies to furlough traditional operating mechanisms for more adapted and innovative ones that allow them to protect the business and its stakeholders in the long term. For example, on one hand, the immersion of technologies in the workplace will popularize the case for technology compliance, knowledge management, and security issues. On the other hand, creativity, and innovation through technology such as AI, backed preliminary interview screening for informed hiring decisions, and electronic software to gather data analytics related to employee performance. These tools have enhanced the remote workforce and have increased the long-term efficiency of organizations. **Table 1** summarizes the creative and innovative business solutions that have been leveraged to face challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1. Summary of creative and innovative solutions to employer-employees' challenges during COVID-19.

Human resource management during COVID-19	Solutions through creativity and innovation
Recruitment/hiring	Internet-based recruitment and virtual interviews Recruitment software for informed hiring decisions
Measuring employee performance	Electronic software to gather data analytics on employee performance
Social distancing at work/closed offices	Remote or home working, teleworking using ICTs
Employee training	Monitored online training courses
Teamwork and staff meetings	Online meetings using Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, etc.
Great resignation: high churn rate	Stay interview to determine areas of improvement

In terms of facilitating remote work, moving it away from the physical workplace due to the COVID-19 crisis is crucial to saving employees' life. However, for organizations to ensure continuous operation and going concerns, employees must be able to perform allocated tasks effectively and efficiently through effective communication during distanced remote work. Hence, it had become essential for organizations to be effective, successful, environmentally sensitive, and technologically adaptive for survival. Organizations frequently depended on the use of information and communication technologies along with teamwork applications. Working remotely has become a viable solution inside some organizations thanks to these technologies. As a result of COVID-19 accelerating crises and effects, technological advancement through creativity and innovation will continue to thrive and ensure enhanced organizational performance [19].

Furthermore, artificial intelligence in human resource functions has been deemed critically beneficial. Online interviews and web hiring processes constitute the new norm; however, it has gained more attention through the COVID-19 crisis. Technological advancements through artificial intelligence evolve constantly in directions that enhance the organization’s recruitment process [19]. The labor upheaval caused by COVID-19 has heightened the strategic challenges facing HR experts. Tactical issues within the organization that address common worker inquiries concerning worker’s compensation and other matters relating to human resources are currently addressed in a more automated way [19]. Such as online resources and personal chatbots, warning staff only if no response can be obtained as well as offering “learning” continuously.

However, with confidential information transmission increased from remote locations, cybersecurity must be considered by employers and employees to avoid unauthorized access by third parties during video conferencing, telecommuting, and social media information sharing. Voice command technologies’ expanding use and remote working arrangements are substantially influenced by the degree of trust that employers have in their employees to secure the organization’s classified information and other sensitive data of the organization. Furthermore, creativity and innovation through the advancement in old technology and the introduction of technological advances bring queries about workers’ rights and future responsibilities. Hence, maintaining privacy and confidentiality is crucial to the employer and employee [20].

3.6 Creativity and Innovation in a Recovering Economy

The pandemic has challenged institutions and continues to disrupt their operations as the world recovers from the pandemic or dives into subsequent waves of infection. As exemplified by Cromwell and Kotelly [21], in the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions have innovated by exploring solutions while remaining aligned to their mission and objectives, or by anchoring their operations on resolving a particular problem or defining a specific solution. Both types of innovations have engaged companies in a culture of exploration and creation that can help them better adapt to the unprecedented ways of the evolving global economy. Companies that have thrived during the COVID-19 pandemic have all converged towards similar operating traits exemplified by **Table 2**.

Table 2. Strategies followed by companies to thrive during the COVID-19.

Engaged workforce and management	Clearly articulated and prioritized organizational objectives	Cross-functional collaboration	Agile workflow	Experimentation and learning
Management and employees were invested in solving pressing issues. There was adequate information flowing from top to bottom and vice versa	Organizations clearly articulated their current objectives and targets to fight the pandemic. Decisions and timelines were clearly communicated especially in a virtual setting.	Teams were either reshuffled or were forced to collaborate on projects to face unprecedented changes.	When facing the unknown several companies had to try possible solutions in an iterative manner.	Organizations opened opportunities for their employees to learn and experiment with new tools and methodologies.

In a post-pandemic world, the shifting dynamics in terms of regulations and capital allocation imply that the predictable growth model will no longer be viable in the next few years. A McKinsey study analyzing the performance of top innovative companies in the world during the 2008 economic downturn showcased that those that focused on innovation throughout the crisis had successfully outperformed the market by about 10% during the crisis and by about 30% post-crisis [22]. Consequently, today there is a case for a dynamic approach to innovation, especially during crises and post-recovery phases of crises.

Illustratively, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way businesses conduct their operations. Many believed that the government's restrictive measures were temporary. However, in 2021, around the globe, countries are still going in and out of lockdown measures. With almost permanent altered operations, organizations have faced what was first coined as the "Great Resignation" [22]. The Great Resignation has resulted in not only adaptability issues for small or big organizations, but also landed them in the fight to retain and acquire talent. As such organizations have leveraged more creative ways such as having "stay interviews." Ergo, we can note that during crises an innovative approach to problem-solving and forward planning is necessary to manage the unpredictable.

4. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 crisis has imposed certain changes on the organization and the economy at large. In order to stop the rapid progress of the virus and protect public health, most of the world's governmental authorities were under enormous pressure to make necessary but difficult decisions.

While some countries moved quickly to close their territories, stopped international flights, and ordered the general confinement of the population. The crisis has sharply changed the traditional work practice into a greater remote and flexible setting. Employees' health and safety should be management's top priority as they are the key factor in building and sustaining performance in the organization. This work showed that through the appreciation of the advent of technology, organizations must adopt innovative platforms for collaboration, socialization, and learning to fit the current economic situation. Adaptability in terms of job design, health and safety, and employee well-being will be a key attribute of the post COVID-19 work setting.

Adoption of innovative mechanisms and programs will not only protect the rights of employees but also help to maintain jobs during pandemic situations and economic crises. Adhering to business ethics will enhance the use of technology and boost the sense of innovation/creativity of both employees and their organizations. The importance of the collaboration between public administrators, policymakers, entrepreneurs, and employees to maintain the fundamentals of business ethics and protect employees' rights is adjudged to be critical to a speedy recovery from the losses and disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Organizations that have just adopted teleworking as a COVID-19 response strategy may consider adopting them as working policies and practices. Therefore, gained experience during the COVID-19 crisis may fit into developing a teleworking policy and procedures within the organization or revising existing ones to ensure employees' safety and enhanced organizational performance.

Few studies focused on studying the unethical behaviors of businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study treated the issue differently and could be considered the first research that linked ethical values, human rights, and employees' rights. This research studied the impact of a global public health issue, and its generated unethical business practices. It concluded by providing practical innovating solutions. This research could have several positive implications for the community of researchers and policymakers. Its impact goes beyond the COVID-19 crisis and its recommendations have daily practicability for businesses, especially in times of crisis.

This research has some limitations like the non-conclusion of a meta-analysis or a risk-of-bias assessment because the current study is a scoping review. Since we only considered peer-reviewed, published research that was written in English, this review may also be influenced by publication bias. The review was conducted during the first months of the pandemic, which could have affected the quality of the collected data. This research needs more in-depth data extraction and intervention or follow-up studies. It also needs to be updated and enriched with interviews that collect the testimonial of employees or consumers who have been impacted by the case.

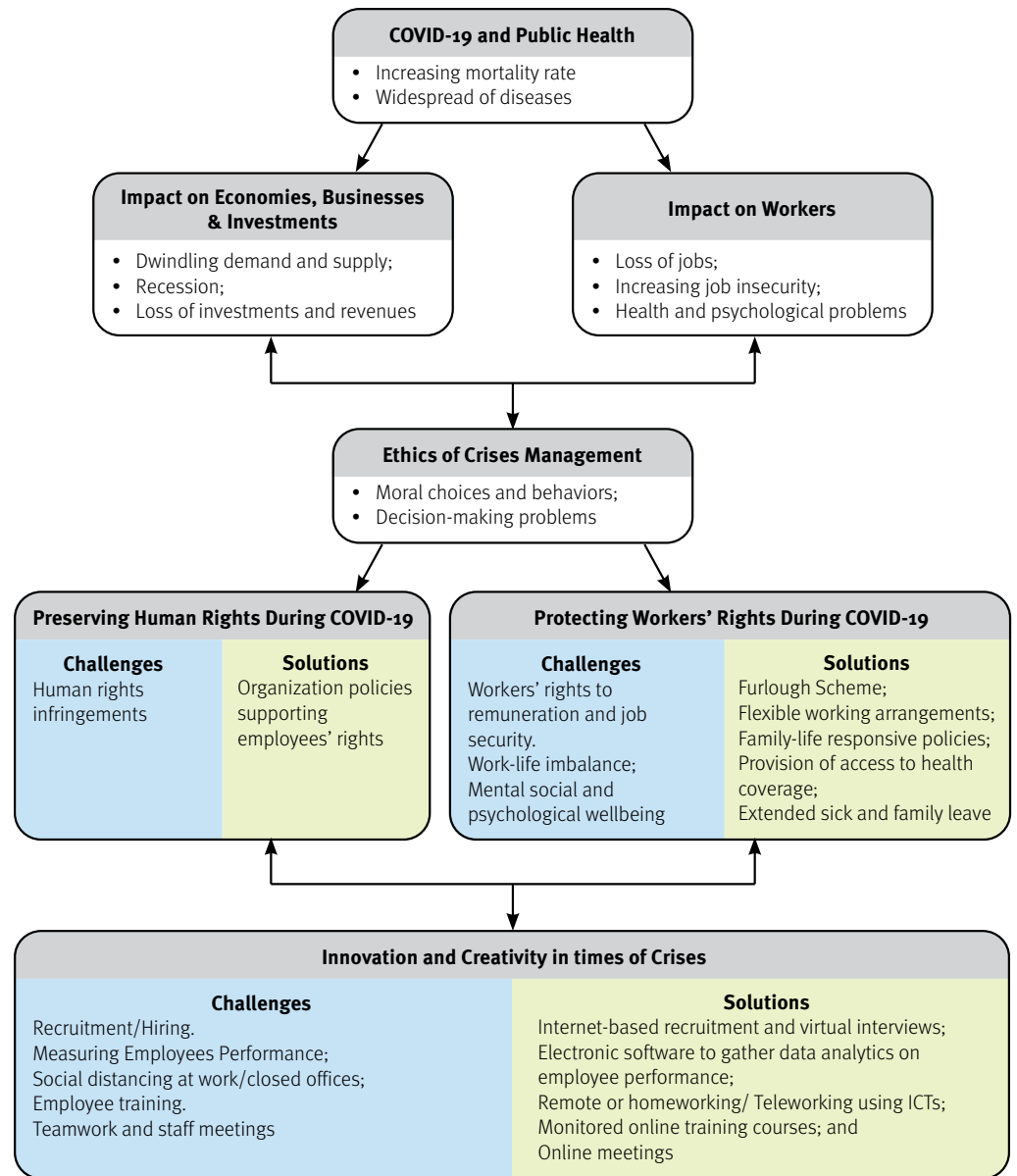


Figure 1. Business ethics in the era of COVID 19: How to protect jobs and employment rights.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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