

# The impact of Covid-19 on career

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This article explores the experience of careering during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on a wide range of recent research, it proposes a framework for understanding this experience which attends to its multi-scalar nature and to its temporality. The article provides an analysis which addresses the micro, meso and macro levels within which individuals' careers take place. An argument is made that periods of crisis reorder our temporal experiences creating a new periodisation based on:

- the immediate crisis period;
- the subsequent period when restrictions are lifted and we return to the increasingly contested idea of 'normal life'; and
- the long-term as these repeated crises reorder our thinking and our society.

The framework is discussed primarily in reference to the experience of the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, which highlights the cyclical and ongoing nature of such crises.



## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is not a short-term crisis with a clearly defined end, but an ongoing part of our world. Following the identification of the Omicron variant in December 2021, Jeremy Farrar of the Wellcome Trust pronounced 'that we remain closer to the start of the pandemic than the end' and argued that we need to see it as a long-term challenge which will require concerted global political action (Farrar, 2021).

After two years of COVID, it is a good time to take stock of what has happened and consider what it

means for our society and our careers. If COVID is going to be a long-term feature of our world we need to theorise its implications for careering and career guidance.

There was a time when public health was rarely discussed in relation to career. While there is important research that has made the connection between career and health, such research has been at the edges of the field and has typically explored how work and over-work can produce negative health consequences and the impact of health on performance (Grawitch et al., 2017, Smith et al., 2002). Work that explores the role of health as a more structural influence on people's careers has been less common and discussion of its implications for career guidance rarer still (Robertson, 2013, 2014).

The enormous public health crisis of COVID-19 has changed this. We are now in the habit of considering the public health implications of everything. Early in the pandemic, Ronald Sultana, Rie Thomsen and I explored what the pandemic might mean for careers and highlighted the way that it had made many of our assumptions about what our careers might hold increasingly fragile and highlighted their dependence on the wider context (Hooley et al., 2020). We also noted that the pandemic was driving right wing and centrist politicians into unfamiliar political territory in which the state was stepping in to underwrite people's careers and livelihoods. The question that we left unanswered was whether such a shift was just a short-term crisis response or whether these multi-level changes heralded more permanent change.

Since then, scholars of career have been writing about and researching COVID and considering what its implications are for the field. This has included special issues of the *Career Development Quarterly* (Osborn et al., 2021) and the *Journal of Vocational Behaviour* (Fouad,

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2020) as well as important articles being published in journals such as *Career Development International* (Autin et al., 2020). It has also included a wide range of research, writing and theorisation in related fields. The current issue of the *NICEC Journal* builds on and extends these concerns within the field.

This article will synthesise the emergent literature on COVID and careers to propose a new framework for thinking about the impact of the pandemic on our careers. My framework is multi-scalar and addresses the different levels on which career takes place (what I describe as micro, meso and macro) and recognises the temporal nature of the COVID crisis.

### Developing a framework for understanding career in the pandemic

The concept of 'total war' was developed as a way of understanding the experience of warfare in the late nineteenth and twentieth century (Black, 2010). War was no longer something fought by professional armies in remote locations, nor something that the civilian population could ignore. It was a totalising logic around which everything was organised. Total war impacted on small things (the micro level) including individuals' movements and their diets, on organisations and how they operated (the meso level), which in turn had implications for individuals' work and careers and on government policy and the economy (the macro level).

COVID-19 has seen the advent of 'total pandemic' in much the same way. By this I do not mean that COVID-19 is the worst imaginable pandemic or that it has changed every aspect of our lives, but rather that it has seen responsibility for public health move beyond the specialists and has reordered the behaviour of individuals, organisations and governments. Public health is no longer the preserve of doctors and health ministries but is now a part of all our lives and serves as an underpinning logic for all government policies. The presence of COVID has become the new normal and the longer the pandemic goes on the more difficult it is to identify *what is happening because of COVID* from just *what is happening*. Given this it is useful to break it impacts on career down and to think

about these impacts in terms of their *micro, meso* and *macro* level effects. The recognition that our careers are changing on multiple levels has also been observed by a range of other writers who highlight the way in which personal, organisational and national shifts are often intertwined (Cho, 2020; Kramer & Kramer, 2020).

It is also important to recognise the way that the pandemic impacts on our careers temporally. When the UK entered its first lockdown, its perennially optimistic Prime Minister Boris Johnson said that he believed the UK could 'turn the tide' on COVID and 'send it packing' within 12 weeks (Gallagher, 2020). While it is easy to use hindsight to ridicule the Prime Minister, his temporal perspective was widely shared. The question was not whether we would return to normal, but when. Two years later this seems naive. Akkermann et al. (2020) make the important observation that COVID's impact on our careers is likely to change over time, perhaps initially experienced negatively, but ultimately leading to positive change. In this article I will explore this through a new periodisation that the pandemic imposes on people's experience of career. Firstly, the *immediate* crisis period; secondly, the *subsequent* period when restrictions are lifted and we begin to return to the increasingly contested idea of 'normal life'; and finally, the *long-term* as these repeated crises reorder our thinking and our society.

These three temporal perspectives are not neatly defined by public policy decisions such as the beginning and end of periods of lockdown. Rather they are subjective and open to contestation. For a hospitality worker the *immediate* period might be defined as when their restaurant closes, the *subsequent* period when it reopens and the *long-term* when regulations no longer govern the operation of the business. On the other hand, health workers may find that the *immediate* period is associated with a rapid growth in hospital admissions, the *subsequent* period when the peak has been reached and overcome and the *long-term* as when COVID no longer dominates admissions. These two temporal perspectives are clearly intertwined, but they may not run to the same rhythm. Some people may be moving into a subsequent period, whilst others are still caught up in the immediacy of the crisis.

It is not just occupational or positional differences that may lead us to different judgements about whether we are in the middle of a crisis or coming out of it. There are also important political and analytical differences that shape people's perspective. For example, before Christmas 2021, the UK Government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) was lobbying for an increase in regulations and arguing that we were once more in a crisis, while backbench Conservative MPs organised through the COVID Recovery Group (CRG) argued against any regulations that might limit the freedom of individuals and businesses (Woodcock, 2021). This is not to argue that SAGE and SRG's perspectives are equivalent, nor to dismiss the epidemiological realities which the competing strategies needed to address, but merely to note that it is possible for different people and different groups of people to come to different conclusions about the extent, nature and even existence of a public health crisis at the same time.

We have also come to see that the temporal nature of the pandemic is far from linear. It is not a single shock with a steady return to normal, but rather a series of loops bringing us into and out of crises of different severity on a regular basis. The shift from immediate to subsequent and long-term is not a one-way street but rather a constantly shifting set of perspectives which can be applied at a variety of levels.

These scalar and temporal concerns offer us a framework (see Figure 1) that we can use to investigate how COVID is impacting on our careers more fully.

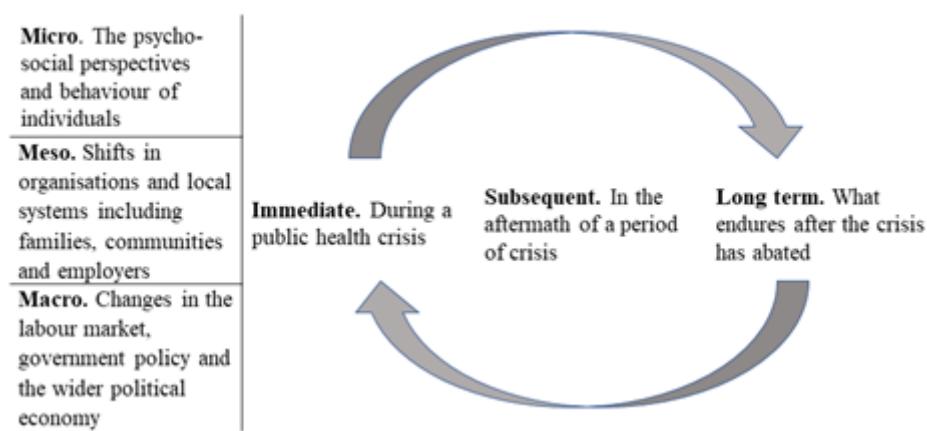
## Micro level

The pandemic has come as a surprise to most of us, it was not expected nor easily prepared for. It has heightened our sense of vulnerability, disrupted people's daily routines, including their work and study routines, and reorganised and often contracted their social networks (Blustein et al., 2020; Kovacs et al., 2021). These psycho-social changes have resulted in a measurable decrease in mental wellbeing for many people and an increase in stress, anxiety and depression (Saladino et al., 2020) as well as a range of negative behavioural changes including drug and alcohol abuse, suicide and domestic violence (Kumar & Nayar, 2021).

There have also been some positives to the pandemic with people having the opportunity to change their daily routines, spend more time with family and take stock of their lives (Kyoo-Mann, 2021). Although in many cases the challenges of this renegotiation of work and family life have been experienced more keenly by women (Woodbridge et al., 2021). Despite the mental, physical, social and economic challenges posed by COVID, the population has proved to be remarkably



**Figure 1. A framework for understanding the impact of COVID on career**



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resilient with people demonstrating that they are able to manage rapid and unforeseen change. However, the dividing line between those who have experienced the pandemic positively and negatively depends on both pre-existing psychological (Paredes et al., 2021) and social resources (Caballero-Domínguez et al., 2021) as well as the socio-economic position of the individual (Wright et al., 2021).

We have also seen the emergence of contradictory pressures on our social relations. On one hand, COVID has interpolated itself between people, breaking us apart and requiring a physical distancing that is easily transformed into a social distancing. On the other hand, it has also fostered an increased awareness of the nature of social connection, a recognition that people are connected and that our individual wellbeing is based on the air that we breath, on the capacity of our shared health systems, supply chains and other social and economic systems.

De Luca Picione et al. (2021) explore the way in which people have responded to these profound psycho-social disruptions. They identify four different clusters of responses consisting of: firstly, people who put their faith in the state to manage the pandemic; secondly those who are concerned and disorientated by it; thirdly those who focus on looking after themselves; and fourthly those who emphasise responsible behaviour and social solidarity. Despite these differences, all groups agreed that collective action was needed and anticipated a temporary, necessary, but ultimately undesirable reduction in their autonomy because of the measures that would need to be taken. De Luca Picione's work demonstrates the way in which the pandemic has synchronised individuals' psycho-social wellbeing in relation to a global event as well as highlighting the patterning that has emerged in how different people respond to this synchronisation.

The pandemic has compelled governments to play, and be seen to play, a larger role in people's lives and this has shaped people's understanding of what is possible and reasonable to expect from their government. For example, in the UK policies like furlough, increases in Universal Credit, and changes to statutory sick pay successfully protected many people's employment and incomes (Brewer & Tasseva, 2021). Such policies have heightened the entanglement between the personal and

the political and individuals' careers and government policy.

During periods of intense crisis many of these psycho-social issues play out in immediate career concerns. For those losing work, particularly those with limited personal resources, the pandemic led to mental health issues and a need to find new forms of support as they adjust and seek work (Wright et al., 2021). Faced with a lockdown and the rapid contraction of employment opportunities (ONS, 2022) some people were anxious to hang on to existing work and safeguard their personal, financial and employment situations. But, as we have moved past the immediate points of crisis there has been interest in whether people have become more active and purposeful in their careers, with some citing the 'great resignation' as evidence of this shift (Brignall, 2021). However, further analysis suggests that most people's job moves in this subsequent period do not represent a fundamental rethinking of their life and career. Rather people are identifying that their power in the labour market has increased and seizing on this moment to increase their security and improve their rewards and conditions of employment after a long period of wage stagnation and relatively low levels of employee leverage (Swindells, 2021).

So, at a micro level people have struggled with pandemic, experiencing both physical and psychological harm from COVID-19 and from social isolation. Simultaneous with these psycho-social challenges, was an immediate and rapid reduction in the number of job opportunities available as employers backed away from hiring during a period of uncertainty (OECD, 2021). But as we have moved into the subsequent period people have started to look for opportunities to progress the careers and lives that have been stalled by COVID. In general, this has not resulted in radical rethinking or starting again, but rather in careful and purposeful careering designed to increase security and quality of life.

Over the long term the very real trauma of the pandemic may have enduring impacts on people's psycho-social worlds. The experience of mental and physical illness, the depletion of social networks, the loss of friends and loved one and ongoing mental health issues or long COVID symptoms may have an impact

on how people engage with life and career. In addition, it is too early to dismiss the idea that the experience of pandemic may serve as a critical disruption, prompting deep career thinking from at least some people. While people seem to be making small career moves following the crisis rather than big ones (Swindells, 2021) it is possible that the repeated cycle of pandemic boom and bust may ultimately foster more fundamental forms of careers thinking and enactment. On the other hand, the pandemic may serve to heighten people's sense of risk and insecurity, ultimately incentivising risk averse career behaviours.

## Meso level

The meso level describes the spaces where career happens, including employers, education providers, local and professional communities, and families. In our society such institutions are typically founded on physical proximity and social connectedness. While there are clearly countervailing forces including globalisation, the internet and the growth of the app mediated gig economy, the concepts of place and social connectedness have remained central to most people's experience of reality. For example, in 2019 only around 5% of the UK workforce described themselves as working wholly or mainly at home (ONS, 2020a).

COVID represented a major shock to organisations and networks which relied on proximity to produce goods (factories), organise their operations (offices), sell their products (shops) or create opportunities for the exchange of knowledge and connections (conferences and meetings). During the April 2020 lockdown in the UK and then again in the February 2021 lockdown around 47% were working at home for some of the time, and many of those who were not had to deal with changes and restrictions to the way in which their place of work operated (Partington, 2021). Furthermore, the profile of those working from home was unevenly distributed by sector, occupation and socio-economic status, with older and higher status people far more likely to work at home (ONS, 2020b). This meant that the experience of working in the pandemic differed between organisations (often on a sectoral basis), but also within organisations (often on an occupational basis which intersected with socio-economic status).

During the immediacy of the lockdowns many organisations and networks rapidly re-engineered the way they operated. From community groups delivering 'Zoom Zumba' (Groundwork UK, 2020) to organisations shifting recruitment, induction and learning and development functions online (ISE & AGCAS, 2020), many responses were substantially defined by the rapid adoption of new technologies.

These substantial changes to working life were experienced by workers as neither wholly positive nor negative (ONS, 2021). Many reported improved work-life balance, fewer distractions, an increased ability to focus on and complete work and generally improved wellbeing. But these positives were balanced by concern about it being harder to think of new ideas, there being less opportunities for career advancement and it being harder to work with others.

As the lockdown regulations abated many organisations reflected on the pros and cons of the enforced remote working experiments. Some saw benefits including improved staff wellbeing, reduced overheads, and increased productivity (ONS, 2021). But this change also prompted a number of challenges including some employers investigating how to surveil their remote workforce (Baska, 2020). Others raised concerns about the induction of new, and particularly young workers, the loss of peer-to-peer and happenstance learning and concerns about whether the gains in wellbeing from homeworking would be eroded by loneliness and the loss of workplace support networks (Thomas, 2021).

Employers and other organisations have therefore been wrestling with the definition of a new paradigm. If COVID prompted a period of rapid experimentation, the subsequent period has been defined by questions about how far and how fast to return to the pre-pandemic normal or shift to something else. Some organisations are shedding office space, but it is not clear whether this represents a permanent retreat from the centrality of physical workplaces or what new physical spaces should look like (Mearian, 2021). As we have been cycling in and out of crisis since March 2020, with repeated changes in regulation and the public health situation, many organisations have struggled to establish a new paradigm. The costs of frequent switching from remote to proximate practices is considerable and so it may be difficult for a new

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paradigm to emerge until there is a greater sense of permanency to the situation.

In the long run it seems very likely that new paradigms for working, studying, community organising and even social networking with family and friends will emerge. These are likely to intensify the use of digital technologies but may seek to balance these online connections with face-to-face contact. But such speculation remains idle in a period in which public health crises are regular but remain difficult to predict. What is clear is that COVID has resulted in considerable changes in the way in which the sites and institutions of career operate.

### Macro level

The careers of individuals and the development of organisations take place within a social, cultural, political and economic context. This context has a myriad of local variations which exist within a global frame which up until 2008 could be described as neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism developed as an ideology and political project from the 1920s and began to influence policy in advanced capitalist countries, starting with Chile, from the 1970s (Srnicek & Williams, 2016). It was defined by a reification of the market and the belief that the power of the state should be mobilised to introduce market logics into all aspects of life. It was designed to advantage capital over labour and implemented through the reduction of labour regulations and the welfare state as well as the deregulation of financial markets.

In many ways the pandemic has showcased the logic of the neoliberal system. While governments and central banks have done everything in their powers to backstop corporate profits and financial markets (Blakely, 2020), the brunt of the impact of the pandemic has been borne by those whose labour drives global profits. Poverty and other forms of inequality are strongly associated with death and other COVID-related risks, with poorer workers both more vulnerable and exposed to infection (Blundell et al., 2020). And it is the very deregulation of labour markets and loosening of workers' rights, including health and safety regulations, that has often been to blame for these differential outcomes (Hendry & Ewing, 2020).

As my colleagues and I have argued previously, the neoliberal project shapes people's careers, for example by reducing the availability of public education, welfare and employment support (including all forms of publicly funded career guidance) and subjecting what is available to a range of quasi-market logics (Hooley et al., 2018). It is also important because neoliberalism is not just an external force which shapes the possibilities available to individuals, it is also an ideology which colonises our thinking, shapes what we consider as 'common sense' within the realm of personal and political possibility.

However, the neoliberal political economy has been experiencing a period of crisis since at least the 2008 banking crisis (Tooze, 2019). The need for regular state intervention to prop up a struggling global financial system accompanied by wage stagnation in many countries has seen the shine come off the neoliberal hegemony. As a result, there has been the growth of new political formations from both the left and the right that have questioned the orthodoxies of neoliberalism and explored the possibilities of reintroducing tariffs and rolling back various elements of globalisation.

COVID provided a new shock to this already crisis ridden global political economy. In the short term this pushed governments into utilising the power of the state to underpin people's jobs and livelihoods (Blakely, 2020; Fitzroy & Spencer, 2020). Levels of public spending and public borrowing that had previously been dismissed as impossible proved surprisingly easy to implement at speed when it was necessary to do so to keep the population from starvation.

As the world emerged from the initial phase of COVID-19, many celebrated a strong economic recovery. But the speed of the recovery has slowed, bedevilled by the emergence of new variants as well as longer-term structural issues (IMF, 2021). What recovery we have seen has also been characterised by an increase in inequality and poverty (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2021). According to the IMF's Gita Gopinath (2020) we are facing 'a long, uneven and uncertain ascent' which 'will likely leave scars well into the medium term as labour markets take time to heal, investment is held back by uncertainty and balance sheet problems, and lost schooling impairs human capital.'

Whether the trajectory of this long ascent is going to take the world back to pre-2008 conditions is uncertain. For some this assertive deployment of the power of the state points the way towards a new, more progressive political and economic settlement (OECD, 2020), but as Blakely (2020) points out the crisis has seen many corporations and oligarchs enriching themselves in close collaboration with governments who have increased the power of the state and used it to sure up vested interests. Gerbaudo describes this as 'a shift from neoliberalism to neostatism' and suggests that we are 'moving toward a model of capitalism that is far more interventionist than it was during the golden age of neoliberal globalisation' (Venizelos, p.59).

Yet we should be sceptical of any predicted future. One thing that the pandemic has demonstrated is that assumptions about the direction of travel of society or the economy can quickly be rewritten. The pedagogic moment posed by the pandemic for individuals is paralleled with a similar possibility for politics to be transformed in a variety of directions. While in Britain the 2008 crash and the pandemic have resulted in an extended period of right-wing government, which under Boris Johnson has become neostatist in nature, in Latin America there have been decisive swings to the left in Honduras, Peru and perhaps most importantly Chile (Blackburn, 2021). After winning the 2021 Chilean election, Gabriel Boric, pronounced 'if Chile was the cradle of neoliberalism, it will also be its grave' (The Guardian, 2021). In contrast to the neostatism on offer in the UK, Boric offers another possible version of the post-pandemic future characterised by improved public welfare systems, the forgiveness of student debt, improved wages and living standards and a revitalised democracy.

## Conclusions

This article offers a framework for the analysis of the pandemic on career. It reminds us that the pandemic could serve as a pedagogic moment for individuals and for the career development field as a whole, asking us to reflect on what has changed and what has stayed the same, and to scrutinise whether our theories and practices remain sufficient.

I have argued that the pandemic has highlighted the multi-scalar nature of careers. Lockdowns and

furlough, simultaneous with organisations divesting of their head offices and the widespread challenges for mental health has shown that our careers take place on multiple levels. Effective theory and interventions must recognise this complexity and address career on all these levels simultaneously.

The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of social temporality. Career is not just lived to our own biological timeline, nor can it be made to run to a pre-determined plan. The pandemic shows that personal, organisational, and social events and their consequences exert an enormous influence on our careers and that the ability to recognise, analyse and respond to such events is critical in understanding and managing careers.

A period of crisis illuminates truths that exist in the shadows during normal times. Public health is intertwined with our careers and further crises and changes to public health should be expected. These crises unfold over time and are experienced on multiple levels. Career theory needs to recognise the relationship between public health and the opportunity structure and attend to the dialectical interplay between individual careering and social reality. The framework set out in this article provides an approach that can be used to capture these interactions and consider their implications for careering in and after the pandemic.



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