One size does NOT fit all: Understanding differences in perceived organizational support during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 crisis forced organizations to radically rethink how to lead their workforce. Facing an unprecedented drop in consumer demand, business leaders struggled to balance staying financially solvent with the responsibility of supporting their employees during the crisis. Early surveys found many employees did not perceive their organizations communicated a clear plan of action; others questioned whether their employers cared about workers’ health and safety. While researchers have examined perceived organizational support, studies are only now starting to examine workers’ perceived support during a pandemic. The study used a mixed method design to collect quantitative and qualitative data from 949 workers during the COVID-19 crisis. Results revealed employees working outside the home and furloughed workers perceived lower quality support than employees working remotely. While some employees recommended changes to create a safer work environment, others suggested more frequent communication and/or reassurance about job security/pay. The findings suggest leaders should recognize the nature of support workers need varies. Leaders should customize support to meet the needs of specific groups, especially essential...
employees working outside the home and furloughed workers. Beyond the pandemic, the results suggest organizational leaders should reexamine their approach to employee support to better prepare for future crises.

**KEYWORDS**
COVID-19, crisis management, employment status, perceived organizational support, work location

1 | INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated the world (Lovelace, 2020), radically changing economies, affecting individuals, businesses, and communities at an unprecedented level. Many businesses have reduced their workforce, changed business models, and shut their doors. Employees have made life-altering adjustments to their professional and personal lives, doing everything possible to keep themselves and family members safe from both physical and financial harm. Disruptive and revolutionizing events, like the COVID-19 pandemic, are described as black swans that “change the trajectory of governments, economies and businesses—altering the course of history” (Mudassir, 2020, para. 1). While all crises involve unexpected events and lack of knowledge about what action to take, black swan events, like COVID-19, pressure leaders to make swift, high stakes decisions (Grandori, 2020). COVID-19 resulted in well-known companies like Hertz, Neiman Marcus, and J.C. Penney filing for bankruptcy (Shen, 2020), as did many restaurants, construction and real estate companies, and retail establishments (Shen, 2020). Over 14 million U.S. workers lost jobs, and the civilian unemployment rate spiked at 14.8% in April 2020 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2020a).

As a result of the pandemic, many employees started working at home, while others were fired or furloughed. While essential workers, such as healthcare providers and grocery retailers, worked to near exhaustion, non-essential workers continued to struggle balancing work, family, homeschooling, and other responsibilities. Unlike limited duration crises (e.g., Hurricane Harvey, Exxon Valdez oil spill, etc.), the COVID-19 crisis persisted, with medical and business analysts suggesting the pandemic could have lingering health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020a) and economic effects (Santhanam, 2020).

Although some studies provide insight about how organizations respond in emergency situations, prior to COVID-19, few researchers examined workers’ perceptions during pandemic events (see Bostan et al., 2020; Damery et al., 2010; Garrett et al., 2009; Martin et al., 2013; Vawter et al., 2008). Early in the COVID-19 crisis, consulting firms like Mercer (2020a, 2020b, 2020c) and Perceptyx (2020) as well as polling organizations, such as Gallup (Harter, 2020a, 2020b), assessed organizational responses to the crisis. Mercer (2020c) found many businesses (66%) closed their offices and 77% developed a company-wide communication plan.

Soon thereafter, employees began experiencing a shortage of organizational support. One survey of 800 U.S. employees found more than 80% of respondents reported the pandemic significantly affected their daily work lives (Emmett et al., 2020). Over 70% of nonremote employees with little flexibility reported negative work effectiveness, with about 58% indicating they were struggling (Emmett et al., 2020). Greenhouse (2020) reported an increase in worker...
anger and strikes against their employers due to a lack of organizational support. While some fast-food employees conducted walkouts to protest a lack of personal protective equipment, farm workers conducted strikes to demand safer working conditions and increased hazard pay (Greenhouse, 2020). Expecting better organizational support from their employers during the pandemic, numerous workers filed lawsuits against their organizations related to issues such as Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) interference, wrongful termination, discrimination, and workplace safety (Spiggle, 2020).

Perceptyx (2020) found only 42% of employees strongly agreed leaders were effectively leading the organization through the crisis; however, the percentage increased to 71% when workers felt supported by their manager in making decisions about health and well-being. Similarly, while only 44% of those required to be onsite during the crisis strongly agreed the organization was committed to their health and safety, the percentage increased to 87% for those who believed leaders were listening to and cared about their concerns—a percentage comparable to the 89% of remote workers who agreed (Perceptyx, 2020). Such research provides preliminary evidence that employees' needs for organizational support during a pandemic vary (Emmett et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique opportunity to provide additional insight about crisis management and how effectively organizations support employee needs during a black swan event. In particular, Bundy et al. (2017) recommended additional research to study “organizational attempts to deliver multiple strategies to distinct audiences” (p. 1682). Such research would also provide insight about whether an organization's response is consistent with employees' perceptions (Bundy et al., 2017).

1.1 Perceived organizational support

In times of crisis, when circumstances are chaotic and business resources are strained, employees' perceptions of their organization's support are paramount (Chen & Eyoun, 2021; Forbes Business Council, 2020; Zheng, 2020). Fearful of the crisis, workers look to leaders for strategic direction as well as financial and emotional support (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020; Fallon, 2020; Rampton, 2020; Tu et al., 2021). Perceived organizational support (POS) is the degree to which employees believe they are valued for their contributions and know the organization cares about them and shows concern for their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Extensive research exists on the relationship between employees' POS and business outcomes (see Kurtessis et al., 2017; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). POS has been associated with higher levels of attendance, performance, job satisfaction, engagement, and affective organizational commitment (see Dejoy et al., 2010; Eisenberger et al., 1986, 1990; Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011; Guzzo & Noonan, 1994; Kim et al., 2016; Kurtessis et al., 2017; Marique et al., 2013; Simosi, 2012; Wayne et al., 1997). As comprehensive reviews of POS literature can be found elsewhere (e.g., Kurtessis et al., 2017), we focus on applying extant POS literature to the context of a global crisis.

While prior studies provide general insight about POS, it is unclear whether these insights can be generalized to organizations coping with a black swan event like COVID-19. Government imposed business closures and stay-at-home orders forced many organizations to shift to a remote workforce. Before COVID-19, 78% of organizations had fewer than 25% of their workforce operating remotely (Mercer, 2020c). According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM, 2020), during the pandemic, as many as 7 in 10 employers reported
struggling to adapt to a remote workforce. A major gap in the POS literature relates to support during significant organizational change. Only one POS study intentionally collected data from a business undergoing major change. Research by Gigliotti et al. (2019) found POS to be correlated with change readiness. This finding suggests prior POS research may provide valuable guidance to organizations undergoing change. However, more research is needed to examine POS in organizations undergoing sudden and comprehensive change during a pandemic crisis.

1.2 | Workers’ pandemic concerns

While two-thirds of employers reported difficulties maintaining worker morale during the COVID-19 crisis (SHRM, 2020), few researchers have investigated employee attitudes about work during an actual pandemic (i.e., Balicer et al., 2006; Garrett et al., 2009; Torá-Rocamora et al., 2012). Prior to 2020, most organizational pandemic research focused on healthcare and public service workers (Garrett et al., 2009). Balicer et al. (2006) found nearly half of health department workers were unlikely to report for work during a pandemic, while von Gottberg et al. (2016) reported 20% of public service employees were unwilling to work during an influenza pandemic. Garrett et al. (2009) reported worker absences doubled during the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, compared to absenteeism in previous years’ flu season. Safety concerns were reported as the largest barrier for employees reporting to work, followed by childcare and transportation. Absenteeism during a pandemic has also been found to be influenced by employees’ willingness to accept the risk (real or perceived) of going to work (Garrett et al., 2009). However, employees’ attitudes toward attending work were mitigated when organizational support was offered, such as availability of antiviral medication or personal protection for employees.

Since the COVID-19 crisis began, a myriad of employee concerns related to the pandemic have emerged. One survey of 800 U.S. employees found more than 80% of respondents reported the pandemic significantly affected their daily work lives (Emmett et al., 2020). Over 70% of nonremote employees with little flexibility reported negative work effectiveness, with about 58% indicating they were struggling (Emmett et al., 2020). Research indicated frontline healthcare workers during the COVID-19 crisis had higher risks of mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, insomnia, alcohol/drug abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Preti et al., 2020; Stuijfzand et al., 2020). Restaurant and hospitality workers experienced significant job insecurity concerns as well as emotional exhaustion (Chen & Eyoun, 2021; Usly et al., 2020). General office workers, such as accountants and HR managers, similarly reported concerns about declining organizational and co-worker support during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bakarich et al., 2021; Gigauri, 2020).

These studies suggest that while some forms of organizational support remained constant after the pandemic, the nature of support shifted for a significant number of workers (see Table 1). For instance, while enjoying high job security support before the pandemic, many employees were abruptly laid off or furloughed during the COVID-19 crisis. The need for health support also changed dramatically. Before the crisis, the medical needs of most employees were met with basic health insurance. After COVID-19, however, essential workers frequently needed personal protective equipment, social distancing guidelines, sanitation protocols, telemedicine, and counseling visits. Other differences were also present in employees’ financial, social, technological, and family support needs during the pandemic (see Table 1).

In applying the extant POS literature to a broader population of workers, we suggest many employees, beyond healthcare staff and public servants researched in pre-COVID studies, had
significant concerns about their work environment due to the 2020 pandemic. One in three employers report experiencing an increase in requests for information about employee assistance programs (SHRM, 2020). Unlike the H1N1 flu pandemic, COVID-19 affected business sectors, organizations, and employees to a much greater extent. As a result, employees are likely to have different experiences based on their unique work situations (Emmett et al., 2020).

Aggregating all workers into a homogenous group with generic needs fails to recognize the complexity of the COVID-19 crisis. Fired and furloughed workers may require assistance with health insurance, unemployment claims, and/or assistance finding new work. Those working

| Organizational support | Before COVID-19 | After COVID-19 |
|------------------------|----------------|---------------|
| **Job security support** | High job security; near full employment (BLS, 2020b; Stebbins, 2019) | Low job security; record layoffs and furloughs (BLS, 2020a, 2020c; Stebbins, 2019) |
| **Financial support** | Regular work hours (SHRM, 2019) | Flex time, overtimes, reduced hours (Mayer, 2021) |
| | Paid vacation (SHRM, 2019) | Deferred vacation and sick days (Holtzman, 2021) |
| | Retirement benefits (SHRM, 2019) | Retirement benefits (IRS, 2020) |
| **Health support** | Basic health insurance benefits (SHRM, 2019) | Basic health insurance benefits (AHIP, 2021) |
| | Limited counseling/mental health services (SHRM, 2019) | Expanded counseling/mental health services (Sammer, 2020) |
| | Face-to-face visits (SHRM, 2019) | Telemedicine visits (Sammer, 2020) |
| | Paid sick leave (SHRM, 2019) | Extended paid sick leave when quarantined (Mayer, 2021) |
| | General OSHA guidelines (OSHA, n.d.) | OSHA, provision of personal protective equipment, social distancing guidelines, sanitation protocols, etc. (Nagele-Piazza, 2020) |
| **Social support** | Supervisor—Face-to-face (Caesens et al., 2020; Jolly et al., 2020) | Virtual, face-to-face, or blended (De Smet & Mysore, 2020; Maurer, 2020) |
| | Co-workers—Face-to-face (Caesens et al., 2020; Jolly et al., 2020) | Virtual, face-to-face, or blended (De Smet & Mysore, 2020; Maurer, 2020) |
| **Technological support** | In-office support (Semerad, 2017) | Limited virtual support (Hughes, 2021) |
| | Organization’s hardware, software, and internet connection (Semerad, 2017) | Personal hardware, software, and internet connection (Hughes, 2021) |
| **Family support** | Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) (Madell, 2021) | FMLA and Family First Corona Response Act (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.) |
| | Little to no child day care support (Miller, 2019) | Extended paid sick leave when caring for someone with COVID or a child not in school (Mayer, 2021) |
| | | More child day care support (Leonhardt, 2020; Modestino et al., 2021) |
from home may need support with technologies to stay connected and flexible as well as resources to care for children who attend school from home. Full-time and part-time essential employees who must report to work may need more personal protection equipment, training, and/or other resources to feel safe and productive.

Prior POS research indicates employees need support, yet it is not clear how types of support are perceived by different work groups during a crisis. Because a vaccine and other therapeutics were not available to alleviate employees’ concerns early in the pandemic, businesses had a social responsibility to adjust their support to better meet workforce needs. In response, the purpose of the mixed method convergent design study was to examine the quality of support organizational leaders provided to address worker needs during the COVID-19 crisis.

1.2.1 Employment status

Few studies have examined the relationship between employment status and POS. While Gakovic and Tetrick (2003) detected some significant POS differences, they concluded the social exchange process of part-time and full-time employees tended to be similar. Conway and Briner (2002) also found part-time and full-time workers tended to respond the same way when psychological contracts with their employers changed. However, both these studies were conducted nearly two decades ago, sampled employees in a limited context (e.g., university, bank, and supermarket), and exclusively focused on part-time and full-time workers.

Disruption caused by the 2020 pandemic resulted in dramatic changes in employment status for a significant number of American workers. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States experienced the lowest unemployment in 50 years (Council of Economic Advisers, 2019). Between February 2020 and April 2020, our nation went from 670,000 more job vacancies than unemployed (Cox, 2020) to 23.1 million being unemployed (BLS, 2020c), mostly due to layoffs. Employees frequently perceived being laid off as a violation of a psychological contract (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003), often perceiving their own layoff as more of a breach of contract than when someone else is fired (Rust & McKinley, 2005). Some organizations fired thousands of people at the same time during mass video conference calls (Peck, 2020; Schnitzer, 2020; Snider, 2020). Described as an unethical and cruel layoff tool, one fired employee described her experience: “Employees logged on [to Zoom] and listened to a manager read from a script. Their voices were muted so they could not ask questions. They were told not to talk about it with anyone” (Peck, 2020, para. 5). After the call, the former employees were immediately shut out of the company website and email.

In addition to part-time and full-time employees, many workers were fired or furloughed. During the COVID-19 crisis, Chen and Eyoun (2021) found restaurant workers were particularly fearful of being laid off or furloughed. Even traditionally safe jobs, such as state and local government, healthcare, and technical positions, were subject to significant layoffs and furloughs (Guina, 2020). Prior research suggests how organizations interact with laid-off and fired employees can have long-term consequences. Webster (2019) reported 38% of laid-off employees posted negative reviews online about their former employers. In contrast, 70% of job seekers said receiving outplacement services resulted in more positive opinions about former employers. Unlike fired employees, furloughed workers remain on the company payroll for an unpaid temporary leave of absence (Verrall, 2020). While they have more job security than fired workers, furloughed employees experience anxiety about lost income and when they will return.
to work (Wellington, 2020). Potentially feeling forgotten, furloughed workers, who lack daily
interaction with supervisors and co-workers, may need different types of support during a crisis
than full-time and part-time employees who are still actively working. Sucher and Gupta (2020)
emphasized the importance of humane furloughs, which provide workers with frequent and
transparent communication to boost employee morale.

The needs of full-time and part-time workers may also differ during a pandemic. While still
earning some income during the COVID-19 crisis, about 57 million part-time and self-employed
workers struggled from reduced hours (Murphy, 2020). Unlike fired and furloughed workers,
part-time employees may need greater communication about scheduling, hours, and other
opportunities for increased pay. In contrast, full-time employees, especially essential workers,
may feel exhausted from long hours and/or concerned about enforcement of safety precautions.
Based on the unique needs of full-time, part-time, furloughed, and fired workers, the current
study tested two hypotheses related to quality of organizational support and worker employ-
ment status.

**Hypothesis 1.** Fired and furloughed workers perceive significantly less organiza-
tional support than part-time and full-time employees.

**Hypothesis 2.** Fired and furloughed workers perceive the frequency of suggested
organizational support to be significantly less than part-time and full-time
employees.

1.2.2 | Work location

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many companies shifted the location of most members of
their workforce. Organizations that previously operated in a traditional face-to-face setting
(e.g., schools, professional services, and customer service centers) sent non-essential employees
home to work remotely. While some of these new at-home workers felt higher POS (due to
greater physical protection from the virus), others perceived less support because they disliked
being forced to work remotely, instead preferring an in-person environment (Bloom, 2020;
Liu, 2020). Working parents encountered significant challenges as they attempted to balance
work responsibilities and deadlines with the needs of their families (Baert et al., 2020;
Lobell, 2020). One in five employees who teleworked also reported more conflicts with house-
mates (Baert et al., 2020). While those working from a home office often felt socially and profes-
sionally disconnected from co-workers (Arkesteijn et al., 2021; Chong et al., 2020; Kurniawan
et al., 2021; Zito et al., 2021) and/or experienced other issues (e.g., no childcare, difficulties
using new technologies, etc.), employees working outside the home, who engaged directly with
the public, worried about risk of infection.

When individuals perceive their health is in danger, they often take action to reduce risk,
but the direction of the association between risk perception and behavior varies (Brewer
et al., 2004, 2007). Moreover, prior POS research indicates workers interpret organizational sup-
port as a commitment to them (Eisenberger et al., 1986, 2020; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002),
but the strength of the relationships differs (see Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) and may be a
more significant factor for employees working in stressful environments (Viswesvaran
et al., 1999). Based on these differences, the current study tested two hypotheses based on work
location.
Hypothesis 3. Employees working outside the home perceive significantly less quality of organizational support than employees working remotely.

Hypothesis 4. Employees working outside the home perceive the frequency of organizational support to be significantly less than remote workers.

2 | METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using a mixed method convergent design, where quantitative closed-ended and qualitative open-ended data were gathered simultaneously using a survey hosted on the SurveyMonkey platform. Data were collected over 1 month, from mid-April to mid-May 2020. Gathering different, yet complementary, data allowed for a more complete understanding of the quality of support organizations and leaders were providing to address worker needs during the COVID-19 crisis. The mixed method design also allowed for comparing and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data and insights from the same participants.

2.1 | Population, sample, and procedure

The population was individuals currently working and those who had been furloughed or lost their job as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Upon receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval, participants were recruited by posting participation requests on each researcher’s LinkedIn homepage and Facebook. Participants were also sought using Facebook ads and snowball sampling, where those known to the researchers were asked to share the participation requests with others who met the population criteria. Individuals interested in participating in the study were asked to click on a link taking them to the informed consent form. To verify eligibility, those who provided consent to participate were then asked to respond to a question about their current employment status. Individuals who did not meet the study population criteria (were self-employed, retired, or not working) were exited from the survey and thanked for their time. Eligible individuals then answered demographic questions, followed by 16 Likert-type questions and 2 open-ended questions.

While 949 individuals completed the survey, not all respondents answered all questions due to skip patterns. Representing 22 industries, 86% were employed in service industries. Most participants were currently working full-time (74.1%), outside the home as essential or non-essential workers (51.7%), and were individual contributors (61.8%) (see Table 2).

2.2 | Quantitative instrumentation

Data were collected using a survey to measure the quality of support organizations/leaders were potentially providing at the beginning of the pandemic to address the needs of employees. The survey was developed based on pulse survey research Perceptyx (2020)—thought leaders in employee surveys and analytics—conducted during the first few weeks of the pandemic. Based on their research findings and experience, Perceptyx (2020) suggested organizations and leaders can have the most impact during the crisis by taking 15 actions to meet five specific employee needs:
Believing health and well-being are seen as a top priority of the organization
Feeling comfortable expressing concerns about the COVID-19 outbreak
Feeling leaders are listening and care about their concerns
Feeling supported in making decisions about their health and well-being
Feeling satisfied with communications and the organization’s response to COVID-19

Leveraging Perceptyx (2020) findings, a 15-item Likert-type survey was created. The 15 items were the support actions Perceptyx recommended organizations and leaders take to have the most impact during the crisis. These actions were grouped within the survey based on the five specific employee needs Perceptyx identified. The final data collection instrument (survey) asked participants to rate the quality of the 15 support actions their organization/managers were potentially taking to lead employees through the pandemic. Quality of support was rated using a 5-point scale (very poor, poor, fair, good, and excellent), with a don’t know option.

Best practice steps were taken to enhance the quality of the data collected by the survey. First, to enhance the content validity of the survey, the first step when developing the survey involved creating a survey plan (Miller & Lovler, 2020). In addition to the survey objective and demographic information to be collected, the survey plan included operational definitions of the five employee needs Perceptyx (2020) identified. Additionally, the organization/leadership actions to be assessed were more clearly articulated and linked to the appropriate employee

| Work characteristics | n   | %   |
|----------------------|-----|-----|
| Employment status    |     |     |
| Full-time            | 703 | 74.1%|
| Part-time            | 90  | 9.5% |
| Furloughed           | 97  | 10.2%|
| Fired during pandemic| 59  | 6.2% |
| Work location        |     |     |
| Working outside the home |   |     |
| Essential            | 341 | 44.3%|
| Not essential        | 57  | 7.4% |
| Working remotely     |     |     |
| Due to the pandemic  | 290 | 37.7%|
| Not due to the pandemic | 62 | 8.1% |
| Working outside the home and remotely | 19 | 2.5% |
| Job level            |     |     |
| Owner, executive, C-level leader | 29 | 3.4% |
| Senior manager       | 72  | 8.5% |
| Mid-level manager    | 65  | 7.7% |
| Manager/supervisor   | 155 | 18.3%|
| Individual contributor| 523| 61.8%|
| Other                | 2   | 0.2% |
need (see Table 3). Once the instrument was designed, it was checked for face validity and then beta tested (piloted) to ensure the directions and questions were clear and to ensure the skip patterns functioned properly.

Instrument reliability was assessed upon completing data collection by first calculating split-half reliability for the 15 leadership action scores using Spearman’s Rho as data were collected using a Likert-type scale, which is an ordinal level of measurement (Miller & Lovler, 2020). There was a significant, positive correlation between scores of odd and even numbered items ($r = 0.959$, $p = 0.01$), indicating excellent overall reliability (Miller & Lovler, 2020). Internal consistency was then calculated using Cronbach’s alpha. Need-level participant scores were created by summing individual responses to the survey items within each need. Cronbach’s alpha was calculated for each need on a sample of 737 to 785 workers (valid cases). All alphas for each need were greater than 0.9 (see Table 4), indicating excellent internal consistency (George & Mallery, 2003).

While resulting Cronbach’s alphas established the items within each of the five employee needs were closely related (Miller & Lovler, 2020), the results do not inform us about dimensionality. While Perceptyx (2020) linked each of the 15 recommended support actions to one of five specific employee needs, there is no indication that the intent was to create unidimensional scales and develop a survey instrument for ongoing use. Rather, the objective was to quickly capture employee perceptions during the pandemic so that organizational leaders could gather quick insights on how to manage their workforce and keep employees safe and engaged while ensuring the business could still function.

However, when dimensions, constructs, or scales are created and used for analysis purposes, and no previous research exist to demonstrate evidence of validity, conducting factor analysis to gather evidence the dimensions, constructs, or scales are unidimensional is critical (Knekta et al., 2019). Therefore, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted after the data were collected for the current study to see if any existing evidence existed to verify the factor structure of the five employee needs. The results indicated all 15 items fit onto one single theoretical construct. Although CFA found one dimension, the five employee needs are important because Perceptyx (global leader in employees surveys) recommended these five specific needs as practical actions leaders needed to take to stabilize the work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 2.3 Qualitative instrumentation

The survey also included an open-ended question where participants were asked to describe what their organization and/or manager could do better or have done better to make them feel more supported. Responses were coded into themes, based on types of suggested support. Because no literature previously examined suggested types of support during a pandemic, no assumptions were made about pre-existing themes. A reading of all responses to gain a general understanding of suggestions resulted in the identification of 10 themes (see Table 5). Two doctoral-trained researchers dummy coded ($0 = $did not make a comment related to the theme; $1 = $made a comment related to the theme) a random sample of 40% ($n = 220$) of the open-ended responses. To verify reliability of the qualitative data transformation, each coder’s theme frequencies were tallied and an inter-rater reliability was calculated (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Daniels et al., 2016; Rouse, 2009; Rouse & Al-Maqbali, 2014). Because the inter-rater reliability ($\alpha = 0.85$) reflected strong agreement, one coder transformed the remaining responses.
| Employee needs               | Description                                                                 | Survey items                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Health and well-being       | Leaders taking actions that demonstrate their workforce's health, well-being, and safety are a top priority for the organization | 1. Ensuring that health and safety policies, precautions, and other measures are adopted throughout the organization  
2. Communicating to employees the reasons for health and safety policies, precautions, and other measures  
3. Providing employees with information about health and wellness programs or benefits that are available to them |
| Comfortable expressing concerns | Leaders taking actions to make their workforce feel comfortable expressing concerns about the outbreak | 4. Encouraging employees to opening and honestly express their concerns by maintaining an open-door policy  
5. Listening, asking clarifying questions, and addressing concerns as appropriate  
6. Demonstrating empathy in regard to concerns (showing they truly understand what employees are feeling) |
| Listening and care about concerns | Leaders taking actions to demonstrate they are really listening to their workforce and care about employee concerns | 7. Encouraging employees to openly and honestly share ideas, thoughts, and concerns  
8. Following up on employees' ideas, thoughts, and concerns, even if direct action cannot be taken  
9. Helping employees understand the connection between their ideas, thoughts, and concerns and the actions taken |
| Support for employees' decisions | Leaders taking action to demonstrate they support the decisions their workforce makes regarding personal health and well-being | 10. Encouraging ongoing communication between managers and employees  
11. Equipping managers with the information and resources needed to have discussions with employees  
12. Ensuring that managers are practicing empathy and demonstrating care and concern for employees |
| Communicating the organization's response | Leaders ensuring their workforce receives clear and regular communications about how the organization is responding to the COVID-19 crisis | 13. Communicating clearly and regularly to the organization  
14. Ensuring that the methods and forums for communication remain effective for employees in a new or adjusted work environment  
15. Developing relevant information that employees can access online |
3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Perceived quality of support descriptive results

As shown in Table 6, respondents reported organizational leaders are doing the highest quality job demonstrating their workforce’s health and well-being are a top priority for the organization \( (N = 793, M = 11.69, Mdn = 13, SD = 3.73) \) and demonstrating they support the decisions their workforce makes regarding personal health and well-being \( (N = 815, M = 11.25, Mdn = 12, \)
More specifically, 70% and 66% of participants, respectively, indicated organizational leaders are doing a *good* or *excellent* job prioritizing health and well-being and demonstrating support for decisions.

The top two actions respondents reported leaders taking to support workers were (a) ensuring that health and safety policies, precautions, and other measures are adopted throughout the organization and (b) communicating to employees the reasons for health and safety policies, precautions, and other measures. Employees indicated leaders are doing the least quality job listening to and caring about employee concerns ($N = 733$, $M = 9.90$, $Mdn = 11$, $SD = 4.15$).

**TABLE 6** Overall descriptive statistics for the five employee needs for perceived quality of support

| Perceived quality of support                                      | $N$  | Minimum | Maximum | $M$  | Mdn | $SD$ |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|------|---------|---------|------|-----|------|
| Demonstrating health and well-being are a top priority            | 793  | 2       | 15      | 11.69| 13  | 3.73 |
| Demonstrating support for employees’ decisions                    | 815  | 1       | 15      | 11.25| 12  | 3.76 |
| Communicating the organization’s response                         | 774  | 1       | 15      | 11.24| 12  | 3.77 |
| Making employees comfortable expressing concerns                  | 755  | 2       | 15      | 10.80| 12  | 4.01 |
| Demonstrating they are listening and care                         | 733  | 1       | 15      | 9.90 | 11  | 4.15 |

**FIGURE 1** Frequency of 10 types of suggested support
3.2 | Types of suggested support descriptive results

Analysis of 548 recommendations about what organizations and/or managers could do better to make workers feel more supported resulted in identifying 10 types of suggested support. As shown in Figure 1, the greatest number of comments focused on increasing the frequency of communication \( (n = 118, 22\%) \) and expressing caring and empathy \( (n = 83, 15\%) \). The fewest comments related to supervisor support \( (n = 35, 6\%) \) and openness \( (n = 14, 3\%) \). Combined, communication-related suggestions (communication frequency, caring and empathy, openness, and listening) accounted for almost half \( (n = 254; 46\%) \) of the recommendations.

3.3 | Hypothesis testing results

3.3.1 | Employment status

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to test the hypothesis that perceived quality of support, as measured by five employee needs, differs significantly by a worker’s employment status \( (H1) \). Perceived quality of support was significantly dependent on employment status, \( F(10, 1442) = 7.46, p < 0.0005 \). As shown in Table 7, with a Bonferroni alpha correction \( (\alpha_{\text{altered}} = 0.05/5 = 0.01) \), follow-up univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) showed statistically significant differences between employment status and all perceived quality of support for employee needs except for making employees comfortable expressing concerns \( (F[2, 725] = 3.05; p = 0.048, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.008) \).

Four post hoc pair-wise comparisons using Tukey’s honestly significant difference (HSD) with Bonferroni correction revealed statistically significant differences based on employment status (see Table 8). For demonstrating support for employees’ decisions \( (p = 0.000) \), demonstrating health and well-being are a top priority \( (p = 0.007) \), communicating the organization’s response \( (p = 0.000) \), and demonstrating they are listening and care \( (p = 0.002) \), quality of support ratings were significantly lower for furloughed workers than full-time workers. For demonstrating support for employees’ decisions \( (p = 0.000) \), communicating the organization’s response

| Perceived quality of support                                      | Type III sum of squares | df | Mean square | F    | p    | Partial \( \eta^2 \) |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|----|-------------|------|------|----------------------|
| Demonstrating support for employees’ decisions                   | 379.01                  | 2  | 189.51      | 14.09| 0.000| 0.037                |
| Communicating the organization’s response                        | 353.03                  | 2  | 176.51      | 13.07| 0.000| 0.035                |
| Demonstrating they are listening and care                        | 213.65                  | 2  | 106.83      | 6.35 | 0.002| 0.017                |
| Demonstrating health and well-being are a top priority           | 150.20                  | 2  | 75.10       | 5.59 | 0.004| 0.015                |
| Making employees comfortable expressing concerns                 | 96.57                   | 2  | 48.29       | 3.05 | 0.048| 0.008                |
(p = 0.011), and demonstrating they are listening and care (p = 0.009), quality of support ratings were significantly lower for furloughed workers than part-time workers.

Fisher’s exact test of independence was used to test the hypothesis that frequency of suggested support, as measured by 10 different types of recommendations, differs significantly by employment status (H2). Results revealed the frequency of recommendations related to job security/pay (p = 0.00), communication frequency (p = 0.00), safe work environment (p = 0.05), and openness (p = 0.05) were dependent on employment status. Suggested support related to workforce management (p = 0.25), planning/leadership (p = 0.39), supervisor support (p = 0.37), caring/empathy (p = 0.72), listening (p = 0.38), or other support (p = 0.11) were independent of employment status. Post hoc analyses using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of 0.00625 per test (0.05/8) were used to identify specific differences. As indicated in Table 9, observed job security/pay suggestions were significantly more prevalent than expected for workers fired during the COVID-19 crisis and for workers employed full-time (p = 0.000). Observed recommendations for communication frequency were more prevalent than expected for furloughed workers during the pandemic and for workers employed full-time (p = 0.000).

### 3.3.2 Work location

MANOVA was used to test the hypothesis that perceived quality of support, as measured by five employee needs, differs significantly by an employee’s work location (H3). Perceived quality of support was significantly dependent on work location, $F(20, 2166.72) = 5.92, p < 0.0005$. As shown in Table 10, with a Bonferroni alpha correction ($[\alpha_{altered} = 0.05/5] = 0.01$), follow-up univariate ANOVAs showed statistically significant differences between work location and all perceived quality of support for employee needs.

Post hoc pair-wise comparisons using Tukey’s HSD with Bonferroni correction revealed statistically significant differences based on work location for all perceived quality of support for employee needs (see Table 11). For all five employee needs, quality of support ratings were significantly lower for essential and non-essential employees working outside the home than those working remotely due to COVID-19 and those working remotely not due to COVID-19 (p = 0.000). For demonstrating health and well-being are a top priority (p = 0.018), quality of support ratings were significantly lower for non-essential employees working outside the home.
| Type of support          | Full-time |          |        |          |          |        |      |          |          |          |        |      |
|-------------------------|-----------|----------|--------|----------|----------|--------|------|----------|----------|----------|--------|------|
|                         | $n$       | $\%^a$  | $p$    |          | $n$      | $\%^a$ | $p$  |          | $n$      | $\%^a$  | $p$    |      |
| Job security/pay        | 19        | 2.7%     | 0.000$^b$ |          | 4        | 4.4%   | 0.713 |          | 9        | 9.3%    | 0.062  |      |
| Communication frequency | 67        | 9.5%     | 0.000$^b$ |          | 9        | 10.0%  | 0.462 |          | 30       | 30.9%   | 0.000$^b$ | 12   | 20.3%| 0.057 |
| Safe work environment   | 60        | 8.5%     | 0.100  |          | 9        | 10.0%  | 0.388 |          | 2        | 2.1%    | 0.028  |      |
| Openness                | 7         | 1.0%     | 0.038  |          | 2        | 2.2%   | 0.537 |          | 2        | 2.1%    | 0.613  |      |

$^a$Percentage of respondents commenting about a type of support.

$^b$Significant with Bonferroni correction.
than those working in a blended environment (working both outside the home and remotely). For demonstrating health and well-being are a top priority \( (p = 0.013) \), quality of support ratings were significantly higher for essential employees working outside the home than non-essential employees working outside the home.

Fisher’s exact test of independence was used to test the hypothesis that frequency of suggested support, as measured by 10 different types of recommendations, differs significantly by work location (H4). Results revealed the frequency of recommendations related to safe work environment \( (p = 0.00) \) and caring/empathy \( (p = 0.00) \) were dependent on work location. Suggested support related to job security/pay \( (p = 0.09) \), workforce management \( (p = 0.57) \), planning/leadership \( (p = 0.71) \), supervisor support \( (p = 0.20) \), communication frequency \( (p = 0.53) \), openness \( (p = 0.12) \), listening \( (p = 0.87) \), or other support \( (p = 0.09) \) were independent of work location. Post hoc analyses using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of 0.005 per test \( (0.05/10) \) were used to identify specific differences. As shown in Table 12, observed safe work environment suggestions were significantly more prevalent than expected for essential employees working outside the home \( (p = 0.000) \) and respondents working remotely due to COVID-19 \( (p = 0.001) \).

4 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

To survive and thrive during and after a crisis, businesses must not only achieve desired organizational outcomes; they must also act responsibly to retain a capable workforce. Achieving important people-related business outcomes—such as job performance, employee engagement, and organizational commitment—can be affected by employees’ perceptions of organizational support (see Dejoy et al., 2010; Eisenberger et al., 1986, 1990; Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011; Kim et al., 2016; Kurtessis et al., 2017; Marique et al., 2013; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Because employees’ unique perceptions of organizational support are influenced by the behaviors of leaders (see Eisenberger et al., 1986, 2010, 2014; Kurtessis et al., 2017; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), understanding employee perceptions of the quality of support leaders provide is critical during as well as after the COVID-19 crisis.

Consistent with findings in early polls (Harter, 2020a), our research indicates 70% of workers reported organizational leaders were doing a good or excellent job demonstrating their
workforce’s health, well-being, and safety are a top priority. Employees working from home in the current study gave their organizations significantly higher ratings than those working outside the home. Workers also indicated high levels of perceived quality of support related to prioritizing health/well-being, communicating the organization’s response, and supporting employees’ decisions. However, consistent with prior COVID-19 research (see Harter, 2020a;
### Table 12: Bonferroni corrected alphas for work location by types of suggested support

| Type of support                     | Working outside the home | Working remotely |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
|                                    | Essential | Non-essential | Essential | Non-essential | Essential | Non-essential | Essential | Non-essential | Essential | Non-essential | Essential | Non-essential |
|                                    | N         | %            | p          | N         | %            | p          | N         | %            | p          | N         | %            | p          |
| Safe work environment              | 44        | 12.9%        | 0.000      | 9         | 15.8%        | 0.039      | 12        | 4.1%         | 0.001      | 0         | 0.0%         | 0.013      |
| Caring and empathy                 | 31        | 9.1%         | 0.653      | 8         | 14.0%        | 0.127      | 16        | 5.5%         | 0.018      | 7         | 11.3%        | 0.427      |

*aWorking outside the home and remotely.

bPercentage of respondents commenting about a type of support.

Significant with Bonferroni correction.
Perceptyx, 2020), workers in our study gave the lowest ratings of perceived support to leaders’ listening and caring about employee concerns. This may be problematic because employees, fearful about their health and safety, want leaders to comfort them in a pandemic (Bennis, 2006).

Just as COVID-19 is a black swan event that has reframed how organizations operate (Chambers, 2020; Mudassir, 2020), the pandemic may similarly transform how leaders approach POS. The vast majority of prior POS studies (see Kurtessis et al., 2017; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) examine support of employees working under normal conditions at traditional on-site locations. In contrast, the government's rapid shutdown during the COVID-19 crisis required many organizations to provide unique types of support due to workforce changes. In response to the pandemic, new employer obligations emerged, including COVID-19 safety policies, personal protective equipment, and deep cleaning requirements (Santeusanio et al., 2020). Assistance for remote-working parents with children at home (see Caligiuri et al., 2020; Gigauri, 2020) and significant growth of telehealth services (Koonin et al., 2020) and mental health counseling (Kling, 2020; Moreno et al., 2020) also became the norm during the pandemic. In about 2 months, the pandemic created “armies of teleworkers” and transformed “once vibrant urban centers into virtual ghost towns” (Chambers, 2020, para. 4). Catching human resource departments off guard (Huang, 2020; Mayer, 2020; Meister, 2020; O'Connell, 2020), the virus created the need for unique types of support based on workers’ employment status and location.

Our findings indicate the perceived quality of organizational support differed by employment status and work location (see Figure 2). After detecting significant POS differences by employment status, post hoc analysis found furloughed workers had significantly lower support ratings than full-time and part-time employees across four employee needs. Furloughed workers reported their health/well-being and decisions were less supported than their full-time counterparts. Lower communication and listening/caring support ratings were also reported more frequently by furloughed workers. This result suggests furloughed employees may have a significantly higher need for more frequent communication than full-time and part-time workers. Consistent with this result, 30.9% of furloughed workers suggested more frequent communication, compared to 9.5% of full-time employees. “There’s a big lack of communication about the prospects of returning to work,” one respondent wrote. Furloughed workers encouraged their leaders to “call, text, email, or [share] any communication at all.” Fired workers also expressed different needs; 30.5% of fired workers made suggestions related to job security/pay, compared to 2.7% of full-time employees. One worker explained companies should offer a letter of reference or encourage fired employees to reapply in a few months.

Similar differences were detected in workers’ need for support based on their work location. Across all five employee needs for POS (supporting decisions, prioritizing health/well-being, communicating, listening/caring, and making employees feel comfortable), post hoc analysis found essential employees working outside the home rated their organizations significantly lower than individuals who worked remotely. Understandably, essential employees expressed different needs than their remote counterparts. More than three times as many essential employees working outside the home (12.9%) made recommendations related to safety, compared to 4.1% of remote workers (see Figure 2). In their open-ended comments, several employees who worked outside the home urged more safety support, such as providing hand sanitizer, masks, and other personal protective equipment. One employee noted, “Disinfection measures are only occurring on surfaces customers contact, not on equipment and tools employees must use. Good luck finding sanitizer to wipe down a ladder or lift equipment; the
locker and breakroom are filthy.” Other workers expressed concern about the enforcement of safety guidelines. Consistent with anecdotal media reports (Rocheleau, 2020; Shoemaker, 2020; Smith, 2020; Wilson, 2020), employees working outside the home suggested enforcing social distancing rules, requiring masks, and regulating the number of customers allowed in stores. Not exposed to the same risks, employees working remotely described the need for support related to technology (Hickman & Robison, 2020; Office of Human Resources, 2020), childcare (DeFelice, 2020; Ferrante, 2020), as well as opportunities to maintain social connections and mental well-being (Center for Workplace Mental Health, 2020; Staglin, 2020).

As economies reopen, leaders should recognize a new set of challenges lie ahead. Chafetz et al. (2009) warn leaders, “if you do not take action to prevent a drop in employee job satisfaction and rising turnover intentions, then many of your employees will walk out the door as the economy recovers” (para. 14). This suggests retention of engaged employees may be particularly important in crisis situations. Willingly exerting discretionary effort for their employers, engaged workers positively affect critical organizational outcomes such as retention, productivity, safety, and customer service (Maylett & Warner, 2014). In urgent situations, engaged workers tend to learn, adapt, and innovate more quickly than disengaged employees (Maylett & Warner, 2014). One way to keep employees engaged, especially in a crisis, is to actively involve them in decision-making. Research suggests employees feel more engaged when they have a voice in what happens (Ruck et al., 2017), especially in situations related to their health and safety (Farr et al., 2019). Instead of infrequent, top-down communication described by many respondents in our study, leaders may consider developing a culture of listening so employees perceive their thoughts are understood and valued. This conclusion is consistent with work by Grandori (2020), who suggested businesses “pay attention to precursor voices” (p. 2), especially weak ones. Rather than depending on centralized and hierarchical leadership approaches
during a crisis, businesses can embrace democratic decision-making generated from a diverse and geographically distributed workforce. Doing so may help business leaders to “bounce forward” (Grandori, 2020, p. 1) when crises occur.

The study's results suggest sensitivity is important to meet the needs of “vulnerable” employees (furloughed workers and employees working outside the home) who perceived lower quality support. In the current study, these employees tended to want leaders to provide frequent communication, listen empathetically, and take action to protect their safety and financial well-being.

In the last two decades, the world faced severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), swine flu, avian flu, Ebola, and now COVID-19 (Ries, 2020). While the time and location of the next pandemic cannot be predicted, researchers agree future pandemics will occur (CDC, 2020b; Sutcliffe, 2020; Walsh, 2017). As a result, it is imperative for organizations to develop a pandemic plan (CDC, n.d.; Watkins et al., 2007). A majority of respondents in the current study (73%) indicated their organizations should be doing more during the crisis. Yet, as of early June 2020, 43% of surveyed companies indicated they were not planning to provide workers any additional support as they return to the workplace (Mercer, 2020b).

5 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Limitations should be considered when interpreting the study’s results. The findings are based on self-reported perceptions gathered online, primarily through social media. Perceptions of social media users and those with access to the Internet may differ from individuals without an online connection or presence on social media. Further, self-reported data may be biased due to selective memory (recalling some leadership actions but not others), forward telescoping (reporting leadership actions that occurred prior to the crisis), and exaggeration (embellishing events). Therefore, perceptions may be biased and not generalizable. Finally, data were collected between mid-April and mid-May 2020. While a few states were gradually reopening their economies toward the end of this period, most responses were collected when stay-at-home orders were in place and only essential businesses were operating. As more employees return to the workforce, the findings may not be generalizable.

While the current study provides organizational leaders with insight about how to manage their workforce and keep employees engaged, the survey was designed to measure 15 leadership actions Perceptyx (2020) believed organizations should take to address five employee needs during the early days of the COVID crisis. The intent of the survey was not to create unidimensional scales or dimensions to be used in ongoing research. Should a researcher desire to do so, additional steps should be taken to enhance the psychometric properties of the five employee needs to ensure unidimensionality.

More robust insights might come from longitudinal studies to evaluate/track changes in perceived quality of support as the crisis evolves. Since pandemic-related restrictions vary at the state and county level, researchers should consider gathering geographic and industry-specific information from workers so quality of support can be contextualized by location and industry.

Researchers should also consider collecting data to independently verify self-reported information that may be biased due to selective memory, telescoping, and exaggeration. For
example, researchers could conduct case studies of specific organizations where worker self-reported perceptions of support actions are triangulated with other types of organizational data sources, such as observations of leadership behaviors and organizational records.

6 | CONCLUSION

During the COVID-19 crisis, some businesses closed their doors with little to no support for workers, while other organizations introduced new processes and resources. To evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives, the current study asked workers about the quality of their organizations’ support. Qualitative and quantitative data indicated workers’ needs during a black swan crisis differed significantly by employment status and work location. The current study suggests leaders should avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to worker support. Instead, they should understand the unique concerns of workers and then develop appropriate interventions.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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