How Are Nonprofit Workers Doing? Exploring the Personal and Professional Impact of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has presented unprecedented challenges to the nonprofit sector, and while evidence is accruing about its impact on nonprofit finances and operations, less is known about how nonprofit workers are faring. With so many organizations in the increasingly professionalized nonprofit sector reliant upon their paid staff, this study assesses how COVID-19 has changed the way nonprofit workers think about their current and future work. We use a survey of nonprofit workers who have a nonprofit graduate degree to describe pandemic-related work changes and to explore the impact of these changes on their commitment to the sector. Our findings reveal that nonprofit workers are nuanced in how they approach their work and commitment to the sector. We distill our findings considerate of how future research should endeavor to unpack the degree to which workers' personal and professional circumstances affect how they think about their work in the sector.

RÉSUMÉ

La COVID-19 a présenté des défis sans précédent au secteur à but non lucratif. Les données s'accumulent sur l'impact de la pandémie sur les finances et les opérations des organismes sans but lucratif (OSBL), mais on en sait moins sur l'état des travailleurs dans ce milieu. Dans cet article, on reconnaît que, dans ce secteur qui se professionnalise de plus en plus, de nombreuses organisations dépendent de leur personnel rémunéré. C'est pourquoi cette étude évalue comment la COVID-19 a transformé la manière dont les travailleurs des OSBL perçoivent leur travail actuel et futur. On utilise un sondage sur les travailleurs des OSBL ayant un diplôme d'études supérieures pour décrire les changements au travail relatifs à la pandémie et pour explorer l'impact de ces changements sur l'engagement de ces travailleurs à l'égard du secteur. Nos résultats montrent que les travailleurs des OSBL sont nuancés dans la manière dont ils envisagent leur travail et leur engagement envers

le secteur. Nous examinons nos résultats en considérant comment des recherches futures pourraient tenir compte de l'impact des circonstances personnelles et professionnelles des travailleurs sur leur manière de percevoir leur travail dans le secteur.

Keywords / Mots clés : COVID-19, nonprofit finances, nonprofit operations, nonprofit workers / COVID-19, finances des OSBL, opérations des OSBL, travailleurs des OSBL

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic struck the nonprofit sector with a protracted need to manage two dueling priorities, "service and survival" (Moore cited in Kulish, 2020). Evidence is accruing that the pandemic has tested the "resilient sector" (Salamon, 2012) in unprecedented and unsettling ways, but much of what has been documented about COVID-19's effects has focused on the organizational level, with limited attention to the individualized impact on nonprofit workers (for example, see Kuenzi, Stewart, & Walk, 2021a; National Council of Nonprofits, 2021; Word & Gahre, 2020). Since many mission-related activities that nonprofits provide depend on workers (Mesch, 2010; Walk, Schinnenburg, & Handy, 2014), this descriptive study documents the pandemic's professional and personal impact on the sector's workers. Prior research indicates that how nonprofit workers think about their work and commitment to the sector is complex, affected by extenuating circumstances, and may change over time (see Walk, Stewart, & Kuenzi, 2021 for an overview of nonprofit sector commitment research). In light of this complex rationale for sector commitment, we are concerned that COVID-19 may prove to be a "critical incident" (Bright, Pryor, & Harpham, 2005) to how nonprofit workers view their work and commitment to the sector since the "pandemic is a highly disruptive and extraordinary event" (Akkermans, Richardson, & Kraimer, 2020, p. 1).

For this study, we draw upon a sample of graduate alumni with degrees in nonprofit management or philanthropic studies. Students choosing a nonprofit graduate degree are expressing a professional interest to work in the sector. Yet, alumni of these programs made that choice prior to the pandemic, making them an interesting source for understanding how the pandemic affected perspectives of nonprofit workers and careers. To explore their perspectives, we investigate two questions: 1) What are the changes that nonprofit workers have experienced during the pandemic? and 2) What is the impact of those changes on how nonprofit workers think about their work and commitment to the sector? We use a descriptive research approach to answer the first question by unpacking personal and professional changes encountered due to COVID-19. To answer the second research question, we explore the relationship between those changes and nonprofit sector commitment. This article proceeds with a brief overview of the literature that informs the study's approach, a description of the methods, reporting of the findings, and discussion of their implications for what we know about the pandemic's effects on nonprofit workers, as well as suggestions for future research from this study.

BACKGROUND

Nonprofit organizations step in and provide needed services during times of crisis (Simo & Bies, 2007). As COVID-19 spread globally starting in spring 2020, nonprofits assumed a multitude of

response roles, but the pandemic's extended duration and universal reach was unprecedented, prompting stress and uncertainty for nonprofits and their workers. For example, during the 2008 economic crisis, data from the Bureau of Labor statistics show that nonprofit employment increased (DePillis, 2016) while the current pandemic has not only caused nonprofits to make staffing changes but also programmatic and operational changes (such as social distancing, remote work, etc.) that were not required during previous external shocks (Akingbola, 2020; Akingbola, Brunt, Baluch, & Cunningham, 2021). Further, many state and local sectors have documented the pandemic's impact on nonprofit operations and services, and prior commentary has made the link between COVID-19, workforce changes, and the capacity of nonprofits to serve their missions. Yet the studies that investigate the impact of COVID-19 on nonprofit workers have limited their findings to human resource policy changes with scant attention to the perspectives of workers who are the target of these changes (Kuenzi et al., 2021a). An individual's experience and perception of their work environment may impact organizational level outcomes such as absenteeism (de Reuver, Van de Voorde, & Kilroy, 2021) or intentions to stay with the organization (Alfes, Shantz, Truss, & Soane, 2013). Pandemic-related organizational changes are made against the backdrop of prolonged personal turmoil due to the pandemic, and how workers perceive these changes could affect how they think about their careers, their work within their organizations, and more broadly, their commitment to the nonprofit sector. In the following, we draw on prior research to justify this need to inquire directly with nonprofit workers about COVID-19's impact and discuss what others are uncovering about COVID-19's personal and professional impacts that informs the focus of this study.

NONPROFIT WORK: CHOICE AND COMMITMENT

Weisbrod's (1988) theory of managerial sorting instructs that workers choose their sector of employment based on their motivations, preferences, and goals. We know some workers choose nonprofit work based on intrinsic motivations such as a mission-commitment or expression of values (Johnson & Ng, 2016; Tschirhart, Reed, Freeman, & Anker, 2008). Moreover, nonprofit career routes are documented (Stewart & Kuenzi, 2018; Norris-Tirrell, Rinella, & Pham, 2018; Suarez, 2010), and many of these workers start to work in the sector or confirm their career intentions by seeking the specialized training of a nonprofit education graduate degree (Kuenzi, Stewart, & Walk, 2020).

Whereas they are mostly aligned, sector choice and sector commitment are not the same (Kuenzi, Walk, & Stewart, 2021b). Prior research has found low compensation (AbouAssi, McGinnis Johnson, & Holt, 2021; Johnson & Ng, 2016; Walk et al., 2021), limited professional development opportunities (Linscott, 2011), and the financial burden of higher education (Berkshire, 2012; Kuenzi et al., 2021b) disrupt the initial choice to work in the nonprofit sector from being a sustained commitment. Moreover, Kuenzi, Walk, and Stewart (2021b) found that nonprofit sector commitment changes over time, indicating that commitments may change in the face of new circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Organizations are "managing challenging and unprecedented demands" (Worley & Jules, 2020, p. 279) due to COVID-19. For the nonprofit sector, finances and programmatic offerings have been affected by the pandemic, and the ripple effects of these changes extend to the nonprofit workforce. This list of changes is long and includes mandated working from home, altered work schedules,

new role expectations, programmatic changes, furloughs, and even layoffs. Pre-pandemic workforce vulnerabilities in the nonprofit sector, such as underinvestment in leadership development (Landles-Cobb, Kramer, & Milkway, 2015) and inadequate compensation of employees (Kim & Charbonneau, 2020; Ng & McGinnis Johnson, 2019), further complicates how nonprofit workers may perceive changes brought on by the pandemic and think about their future in the sector. Yet, nonprofit workers are essential to a thriving sector, and understanding what engenders, as well as detracts from, their commitment to the sector in the wake of COVID-19 is important to the sector's resiliency.

COVID-19 IMPACT: PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL

This workforce generation has not experienced organizational changes to the degree triggered by COVID-19 (Schwarz & Bouckenooghe, 2020), which has resulted in stress for these workers (Kniffin et al., 2021). Essentially, workers need support to navigate these changes. To effectively provide that support, those who fulfill human resource functions as well as those who seek to understand workforce dynamics need to consider the "vantage point of the living, breathing individuals" (Toffler, 1970 as cited in Schwarz & Stensaker, 2020, p. 262) who are experiencing these changes.

Moreover, the precautions related to COVID-19 have drastically altered personal and professional environments, and with shifts to working from home, a worker's organizational and professional identities coincided, if not collided or conflicted, with their personal identity (Ashforth, 2020). Shifts from the workplace to work-from-home may change how people think about their work (Hoff, 2021), and organizational changes may affect how workers identify with their organization or their occupation (Ashforth, 2020; Hennekam, Ladge, & Powell, 2021; Ranganathan, 2021). Work routines that were a settled matter pre-pandemic have since been altered, and how workers relate to their work has drastically been disrupted as work modalities and even the nature of work has changed. The prolonged nature of the pandemic has also potentially impacted workers' ability to sense-make, as fatigue has set in from the constant adaptations and foreboding uncertainty (Stephens et al., 2020). Sense-making refers to "a socially constructed process in which individuals interact with their environment and with others to create meaning and enable action" (Christianson & Barton, 2020, p. 1). Sense-making is about making sense of what is right in front of you in the here and now, but also how people engage with planning about their future. Given how the pandemic has changed these "interactions" of work and personal, we pose that it is not a matter of *if*, but *how* the pandemic is altering the ways in which nonprofit workers reflect on their current and future work in the sector.

Evidence is compiling that the pandemic's impact is disparate among populations (Kniffin et al., 2021; Muzio & Doh, 2021). For example, women have reported experiencing disproportionate parenting-related stress due to disruptions in childcare and school arrangements (Calarco, Anderson, Meanwell, & Knopf, 2020; Munir, 2020; Muzio & Doh, 2021; Viswanath & Mullins, 2020). Women and minorities are also more likely to be frontline workers (Munir, 2020; Muzio & Doh, 2021; Viswanath & Mullins, 2020) and experience more trouble connecting and speaking up in a virtual environment (Milliken et al., 2020). Women accounted for 80 percent of the people who exited the workforce during the pandemic (Ellinggrud & Segel, 2021), with the ratio of women working falling below 57 percent for the first time since 1988 (Gogoi, 2020). Younger generations of the workforce

also have fewer years of accrued experience to draw upon in navigating their pandemic experience (Kniffin et al., 2021). Though this is an exploratory study, these findings from outside the nonprofit sector lead us to expect that the experience of nonprofit workers and their reflections on how COVID-19 impacts how they think about their work and commitment to the nonprofit sector may vary according to their personal and professional profile.

METHOD

This study uses survey data from nonprofit workers to explore two related questions: 1) What are the changes those nonprofit workers have experienced during the pandemic? and 2) What is the impact of those changes on how nonprofit U.S. workers think about their work and commitment to the sector?

The sample was drawn from alumni of nonprofit graduate degree programs (i.e., nonprofit management and philanthropic studies). Through the choice of their graduate degree, these alumni have demonstrated selection into and initial commitment to the nonprofit sector (Kuenzi et al., 2020). Those graduates are not only committed to serving in the sector but, as a result of this training, qualified with the competencies and skills needed for management roles (Mesch, 2010; Tierney, 2006).

The sample was drawn through seven universities offering nonprofit graduate degrees across different locations (Midwest [3], Southwest [2], Northwest [1], Mid-Atlantic [1]) and with different affiliations (NACC [2], NASPAA [1], both [4]). In total, 1,567 alumni were invited to participate via email; 234 of those emails were bounce backs (mostly university-affiliated email addresses that no longer worked) and 420 responses were returned (32% response rate).[1] Two universities provided us with lists of alumni and we fielded the survey to their email addresses directly. Five universities sent out the link to the survey through their internal alumni lists. To further increase the response rate, we provided individuals with a $5 incentive gift card to Starbucks; all invited alumni received two follow-up emails after the initial invitation to participate. Data collection took place during October 2020.

As our research questions pertain to those working in the nonprofit sector, we excluded those respondents who worked in public and for-profit organizations (i.e., all respondents who were not working in the nonprofit sector on March 1, 2020) resulting in a sample of 243 used in this article. We selected March 1, 2020, as the start date of the pandemic providing a good indication for the employment status before pandemic-related changes were implemented. Shortly after this date, states announced stay-at-home-orders (Curley & Federman, 2020).

Sampling from nonprofit education alumni is advantageous for a few reasons: 1) sampling directly through nonprofits would likely yield biased responses (e.g., those organizations with radical changes to their workforce might not share the survey request with employees) and thus unlikely to reach employees beyond the executive listed on the 990 form; 2) this approach reaches individuals who were laid off or are furloughed; 3) creates spread of respondents geographically as well as across a variety of nonprofit mission areas; and 4) since education is held constant and alumni have committed to nonprofit work by their education choice, this inquiry can evaluate if other factors manifest or disrupt professional intentions. We acknowledge that nonprofit graduate alumni are not a representative sample of the nonprofit workforce, but given this generation of nonprofit workers is growing in

size (Mirabella, Hoffman, Teo, & McDonald, 2019) and is appreciated for their professional skills (Mesch, 2010), the sampling approach is appropriate for the research study's intent.

The survey predominantly contained questions targeted to collect information about the workers and their experience during the pandemic. We focused on questions capturing employment infor-mation (e.g., employment status), workplace-related changes (furloughs, lay-offs, employer changes, changes in pay/benefits, changes in programming), changes in work responsibilities (im-pact on work hours, number of tasks, work impact), and the impact of the pandemic on childcare (for those caring for children). We also assessed the change in nonprofit sector commitment using the item "Have the experiences of COVID-19 changed the way you think about work in the nonprofit sector?" with response options ranging from 1 = definitely not to 5 = definitely yes. Demographic information consisted of age (in years), gender (male, female, another gender identity, prefer not to answer), number of children, marital status (single, married/domestic partner, divorced/separated, widowed, other, prefer not to answer), and race/ethnicity (American Indiana/Alaska Native, Asian, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander, White, other, prefer not to answer).

Data analysis includes univariate and bivariate analyses and a multivariate regression analysis pre-dicting change in nonprofit sector commitment.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive characteristics. Our sample predominantly consists of white (79%), fe-male (79%), married (65%) nonprofit workers without children (71%). Of those having children (29%), the number of children ranged from 1 to 4. Those numbers compare well with other studies (Faulk, Kim, Derrick-Mills, Boris, Tomasko, Hakizimana, Chen, Kim, & Nath, 2021; Independent Sector, 2022), where findings indicate that women (66–68%) and white individuals (78%) tend to be overrepresented.

Table 1: Descriptive characteristics

Gender	Marital Status
78.75% were female 20% were male 1.25% were other	28.99% were single 64.71% were married 6.30% were other
Age 36 years old on average (23-72) **Race/Ethnicity** 78.66% were white 7.11% were Black or African American 6.69% were Hispanic or Latino 7.53% were other	**Children** 70.66% had no children 13.64% had 1 child 10.33% had 2 children 4.96% had 3 children 0.41% had 4 children

Notes: N = 243. Numbers are rounded to the nearest decimal point resulting in some categories not totaling 100%.

Most of the alumni were employed full-time (86.31%) as of March 1, 2020. Of those employed, 88.64 percent started to work from home more once the pandemic started. Generally, a larger share

of workers had their pay (13.55%) or benefits (13.02%) cut due to COVID-19-related employment changes, but some had been laid off (4.61%) or furloughed (5.14%).

We conducted bivariate analysis exploring the relationship between COVID-19-related employment changes and demographics. No difference was found between COVID-19-related employment changes and marital status, gender, race/ethnicity, and age ($p > .05$), but there were statistically significant differences between those with children and those without on two aspects: 1) benefits were cut for fewer workers with children ($\chi^2 = 3.94$, $p = .047$), and 2) more workers with children were furloughed ($\chi^2 = 5.78$, $p = .016$) as compared to those without children.

We also explored the cumulative impact of those employment-related changes. We find that a majority (69.64%) had experienced one change, followed by 15.62 percent who experienced two changes, 5.8 percent experiencing three changes, and .98 percent experiencing four changes. Eight percent have not experienced any of those changes. No relationship was found between the number of changes and demographic characteristics.

The survey also inquired about other organizational changes due to COVID-19. Most of the organizations changed how volunteers are engaged (81.81%), while a majority left jobs vacancies unfilled (64.77%). Other frequently identified changes were hiring freezes (48.88%), reduced work hours (46.74%), and laying off employees (40.22%). Please note, the overall sample size for this question is smaller as this was an additional, optional question ($N = 187$).

The survey also inquired about changes in work responsibility due to the pandemic (see Figure 1). Generally, workers note that their flexibility in work scheduling (69.42%), the number of tasks in their jobs (63.22%), and the impact of work on others (50.83%) has decreased. For most their weekly work hours (54.17%) and the quality of information about their job has stayed the same (60.33%).

Figure 1: Change in work responsibilities
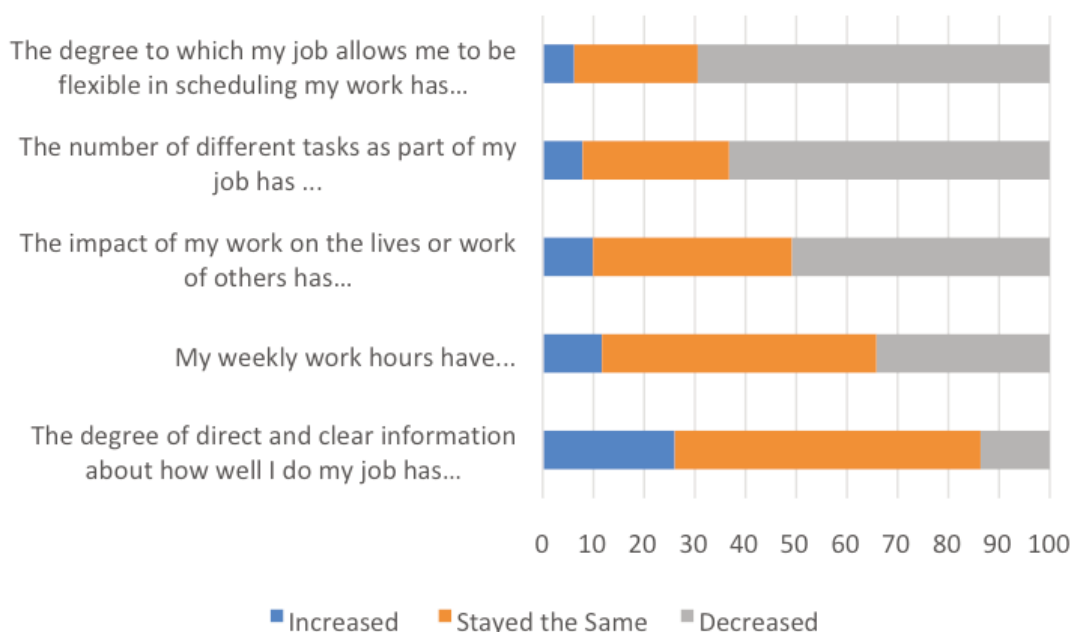
Bivariate analysis of the individual work responsibility changes and demographic characteristics indicates no differences with regards to children, gender, and race/ethnicity. Some differences with regards to age and marital status emerged. Older workers reported an increase in weekly work hours ($M = 40.25$), number of different tasks ($M = 44.95$), and the impact of the work on others ($M = 41.91$, see Table 2). Married workers reported a larger share (74.51%) of decreased flexibility in scheduling as compared to single alumni (65.22%, $\chi^2 = 15.19$, p = .004).

Table 2: Differences between work-related responsibilities and age

Variable	Increased	Stayed same	Decreased	Test statistic
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
Impact of work on others	41.91 (15.52)	35.48 (9.52)	35.63 (8.44)	$F(236) = 4.27, p = .015$
Number of tasks	44.95 (15.65)	34.76 (8.75)	35.67 (8.86)	$F(236) = 9.02, p = .0002$
Weekly hours	40.25 (14.91)	35.14 (9.02)	36.37 (8.70)	$F(234) = 3.14, p = .045$

Changes to work can be disruptive; we therefore explored the cumulative changes (both increases and decreases in work responsibilities) and compared them to those who reported no changes. Findings show that only 12 percent reported no changes to their work responsibilities, indicating that 88 percent of nonprofit workers experienced changes to their work (see Figure 2). Whereas only 4 percent experienced changes in all five areas, 10 percent experienced changes in four, 20 percent changes in three, and 30 percent changes in two areas.

Figure 2: Number of changes in work responsibilities (both decreases and increases, in percent)
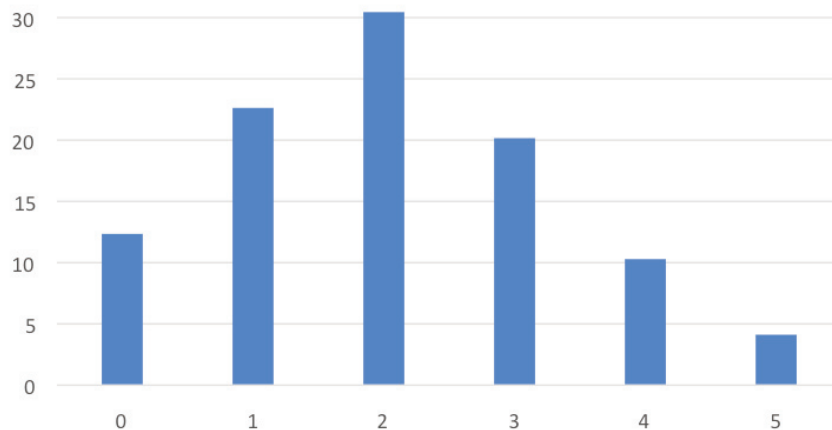
Respondents were asked if the experiences of COVID-19 changed the way they think about work in the nonprofit sector. A large share indicated this was definitely not (33.5%) and probably not (31%) the case, 19.8 percent were neutral, 13.6 percent answered probably yes, and 2.1 percent definitely yes. Although self-reported, a combined 15 percent of our sample reported an impact of the pandemic on their sector commitment. This number is notable considering research indicating that lack of sector commitment is related to leaving the sector (Walk et al., 2021).

We therefore conducted an ordinary least square regression analysis exploring the relationship between demographic characteristics, COVID-19-related employment changes, and changes in work-related responsibilities on the impact of the pandemic on alumni nonprofit sector commitment (see Table 3). Model 1 contains demographic characteristic, Model 2 adds COVID-19-related employment changes, and Model 3 adds changes in work-related responsibilities.

Table 3: Impact of pandemic on nonprofit sector commitment

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Demographic characteristics			
Age	0.016*	0.020*	0.017*
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)
Children (1 = yes)	0.211	0.140	0.233
	(0.175)	(0.186)	(0.188)
Marital status (single is reference category)			
Married	-0.673****	-0.571**	-0.559**
	(0.185)	(0.193)	(0.193)
Other	-0.503	-0.486	-0.403
	(0.342)	(0.381)	(0.383)
Gender (male is reference category)			
Female	-0.108	-0.278	-0.328*
	(0.177)	(0.183)	(0.184)
Other	0.892	0.850	0.863
	(0.649)	(0.630)	(0.640)
Race/Ethnicity (white is reference category)			
Black/African American	-0.229	-0.354	-0.377
	(0.282)	(0.282)	(0.281)
Hispanic/Latino	-0.310	-0.372	-0.369
	(0.298)	(0.323)	(0.329)
Other	-0.144	-0.363	-0.290
	(0.278)	(0.290)	(0.294)
COVID-19-related employment changes			
Laid off		0.247	-0.004
		(0.466)	(0.478)
Furloughed		0.063	0.016
		(0.376)	(0.375)
Pay cut		-0.541*	-0.658**
		(0.247)	(0.253)
Benefit cut		-0.171	-0.162
		(0.243)	(0.242)
Work from home more		-0.053	-0.027
		(0.245)	(0.260)

Kuenzi, Walk, & Stewart (2022)

Table 3 (continued)

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Changes in work responsibilities			
Weekly work hours			0.054
			(0.142)
Number of tasks			0.094
			(0.133)
Impact of work on others			0.276*
			(0.125)
Flexible scheduling			0.138
			(0.143)
Clear information			-0.021
			(0.121)
Constant	2.126****	2.166****	1.488*
	(0.313)	(0.395)	(0.584)
Observations	236	206	205
R^2	0.071	0.123	0.160

*Notes:* Standard errors in parentheses. **** $p < 0.001$, ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, * $p < 0.05$

A one-year increase in age is related to a .016 ($p=.037$; Model 2: .02, $p=.015$ and Model 3: .017. $p=.044$) increased likelihood of stating the pandemic impacted nonprofit sector commitment. This coefficient is consistently statistically significant across models. Those married have a decreased likelihood of reporting their sector commitment has changed when compared to single workers across models (Model 1: -.67, $p<.0001$; Model 2: -.57, $p=.003$; Model 3: .56, $p=.004$). When adding the COVID-19-related employment changes, findings indicate that workers who reported their pay being cut during the pandemic had a reduced likelihood to report that their sector commitment has changed (Model 2: -.54, $p=.03$, Model 3: -.66, $p=.01$). Put differently, and a notable finding, employees who saw their pay cut are less likely than those whose pay stayed the same to report a change in sector commitment. We discuss this finding below. In Model 3, we added the changes in work responsibilities (see Figure 1). One of the five variables was significant. Workers who felt their work had a decreased impact on others were more likely to report changes in sector commitment (.28, $p=.028$).

Of the respondents who had children ($N=71$, 29.34%), 82.86 percent reported disruptions in childcare between March 2020 and October 2020. Parents of older children (high-school and beyond) were less likely to report disruptions to childcare than parents of younger children ($\chi^2=8.75$, $p=.003$). Figure 3 provides more nuanced information about the kinds of disruptions parents experienced. Most of the children were home from school (96.49%), workers juggled childcare with a partner (82.46%), and many workers asked their employers for flexibility in work scheduling (61.11%) because of disruptions. A smaller number homeschooled their children (25.49%) or asked their employer to reduce work hours (10.91%). The smaller share of employees who asked their employer to reduce work hours can be further contextualized by a question about the impact of

Kuenzi, Walk, & Stewart (2022)

childcare disruptions on work hours (e.g., "Since the start of the pandemic [mid-March], how have any changes to your childcare arrangement impacted your working hours?"), with 49.12 percent indicating working similar hours with myself or household member providing in-home childcare, 17.54 percent indicated working similar hours with a different day care provider, 12.28 percent worked reduced hours, and 1.75 percent no longer worked due to disruptions in childcare. About a fifth (19.3%) indicated they were impacted in other ways with an open response option, which suggested participants experienced different impacts on childcare earlier in the pandemic vs. later (e.g., childcare facilities/schools closed initially, virtual attendance, transition back to in-person later, reduced work hours initially, transitioned back to full-time later).

Figure 3: Disruptions to childcare
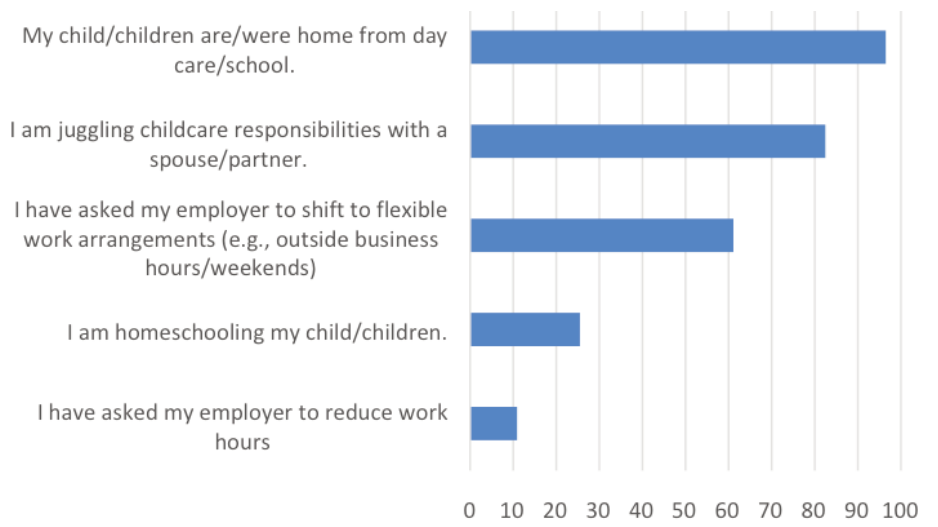
DISCUSSION

This article documents worker perspectives on changes to nonprofit work due to COVID-19. Survey responses provide insights about how COVID-19 has altered nonprofit work, revealing differences according to the worker's personal and professional profiles. Responses provide insights about the enduring nature of nonprofit sector commitment, but the burden of the pandemic has not been felt evenly across all workers. In the following, we discuss our findings and draw upon them to propose suggestions for future research.

First, many workers report tangible changes in how and when they do their jobs due to the pandemic, but nearly two-thirds reported no changes in their commitment to the nonprofit sector. Although prior research has documented that nonprofit sector commitment can change due to extenuating factors and in light of expectations that COVID-19 would shift commitment, we question if factors of nonprofit work revealed by the pandemic such as community needs and general inequalities helped sustain rather than disrupt sector commitment. Yet 15 percent of the respondents say their commitment to the nonprofit sector has changed—that is one in seven respondents—and we know that the pandemic did prompt commitment disruptions for some.[2] Given blurring sector boundaries and the protracted impact of the pandemic, we suggest future research revisit the pandemic's effect on commitment to understand what predicts changes in sector commitment for some workers, but not others.

Next, responses reveal unexpected relationships with the worker's personal and professional profile. Contrary to other findings and commentary about COVID-19's impact, we found no relationship according to gender and race/ethnicity demographics and sector commitment. Our findings offer cautious hope that the inequalities found elsewhere might not be perpetuated in the nonprofit workplace. Perhaps the sector's values create a vigilance or motivations might play a safeguard that buffer worker experiences in facing changes. We caution though that this finding perhaps reflects our study's limitations and sample, which we discuss below. Regardless, we suggest future research stay alert for the possible relationship of disparities that are perpetuated in nonprofit workplaces and among nonprofit workers due to pandemic-related organizational changes.

We did find though that age, marital status as well as contextual factors related to the pandemic impacted alumni sector commitment. Contrary to what we expected about accrued experience giving more reference for sensemaking, this finding gives consideration that workers with more career experience may have been more rooted in a pre-pandemic "normal" and disruptions to that normal put them more ill-at-ease than workers with fewer years in terms of age and work experience. Age might also be correlated with level of work experience so these older workers might also have been behind the scenes, contributing to or responsible for change decisions. Thus, their different vantage points might make them more vulnerable to shifting thinking about their career in the nonprofit sector. With millennials constituting most of the workforce (Fry, 2018), future research should stay attentive to generational differences among nonprofit workers, particularly to disentangle COVID-19's impact on career plans and transition intentions. The finding that married workers report a lower likelihood of the pandemic impacting how they view nonprofit work compared to single workers is interesting. The mechanism here, however, remains unclear. One potential explanation that future research should further investigate is that married individuals may have an additional safety net, be it through additional income or health care benefits, which would indicate that employment-related changes can be buffered more easily. Our findings on pay and commitment align with earlier work indicating that the relationship between pay and commitment is complex and not clear cut (Kuenzi et al., 2021b). Nonprofit workers have long been found to be motivated by doing good and having an impact (Tschirhart et al., 2008). Our findings indicate that once this aspect of their work is altered, there may be consequences for how they see their work in the sector.

Our findings report on a nonprofit sector operating with a changed work environment and worker experience due to the pandemic. Nearly 70 percent of workers experienced at least one COVID-19-related employment change, and 53.5 percent reported three or more changes, while 88 percent of workers reported at least one change in work responsibilities. Even if workers were not experiencing much of a personal impact due to COVID-19, witnessing, even being impacted by such professional changes likely contributed to personal anxiety and uncertainty, especially given the shifts to work from home. Moreover, these changes in work responsibilities indicate that the nature of work has changed and with so many in the sector seeing their work as a calling (Walk et al., 2020), how they continue to assess and reflect on their work might impact their commitment to the sector. The quantitative nature of our data prevents us from fully understanding the underlying mechanism and individual sensemaking of nonprofit workers impacted by changes in their work. Future qualitative research could help explicate how nonprofit workers experience and make sense of multiple changes to their work.

Our findings also emphasize the burden nonprofit workers were juggling with child and work responsibilities. The findings describe that for many their nonprofit workplace was a steady anchor with limited changes to benefits, which might engender loyalty to workplaces in the long-run. We also wonder if for those with children in their care who were furloughed, these dual disruptions could be particularly unsettling. Again, we see an opportunity to engage these workers to understand how the professional and personal tolls of COVID-19 intersect, understanding how these role transitions and even conflicts contribute to their career outlook, particularly as this tension become a memory rather than a day-in-day-out struggle.

With so many nonprofits aspiring to be professionalized but without inhouse human resource management functions (Guo, Brown, Ashcraft, Yoshioka, & Dong, 2011), we question where these nonprofit workplaces and workers go from here as the pandemic's impact wanes and organizations consider how to shift to post-pandemic operations. The sector has been critiqued for "indiscriminately adopting" (Rojas, 2000, p. 101) practices from the for-profit sector implying that nonprofit organizational practices and change may be undertaken in a careless manner. We pose the need to continue to monitor these COVID-19-related changes, questioning whether it is not so much these changes that disrupt commitment to particular organizations and the broader sector, but rather that their undoing will challenge worker commitment. We also know prior literature has considered organizational resilience following natural disasters in terms of organizational performance and finances (for an example, see Lin & Wang, 2016), and we see this as opportunity to also understand nonprofit resilience from a human resource perspective.

LIMITATION AND CONCLUSIONS

As descriptive research, the findings reported herein are valuable for the directions of future research they point us to investigate, rather than for their conclusive merit. With the fluid and constant changing nature of the pandemic, the questions posed in this research are worth asking of both a broader sample and at a later point in time as workers and organizations experience new means of navigating and coping with the effects of COVID-19. We also acknowledge that our sample of nonprofit graduate alumni presents some limitations, but for the aforementioned reasons, we see them as an appropriate group for first insights into worker experiences and COVID-19 impacts given their expressed commitment to the sector by choice of their degree. We encourage research that follows to sample workers using other criteria. With the data sourced from one point in time, future research should endeavor to triangulate information to overcome common source bias. As exploratory research, findings yielded unexpected relationships between work responsibilities and sector commitment changes, and we encourage future research to probe if sector commitment is more stable than expected or changes in commitment are not easy to capture when personal and professional circumstances are intersected as is the case with COVID-19. For example, interviews with nonprofit workers might be insightful about the nature of the changes brought on by the pandemic, and how workers reflect on their current and future work in the sector.

Our research adds a worker's perspective to the evidence already compiled that nonprofits were heavily burdened by the pandemic, and the findings describe workers as professionally and personally burdened. This research demonstrates the merit and necessity in inquiring directly to nonprofit workers to understand more fully how COVID-19 has impacted nonprofit work, workplaces, and

workers. Future research must be sensitive to this impact and its implications for the nonprofit work-force. We see an urgent need to add to what we know about nonprofit work and sector commitment considering COVID-19 and offer suggestions for future research so that our understanding of nonprofit workforce dynamics and worker commitment can be updated to account for the pandemic.

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NOTES

- Response rates across schools (excluding bounce backs) varied from 24–59 percent.
- A comparison of sector commitment from respondents in the public and for-profit was conducted post-hoc with no significant differences found.

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