Adapting to COVID-19 crisis in the UK infrastructure sector

Haddy Jallow, Dr Suresh Renukappa and Dr Subashini Suresh

Faculty of Science and Engineering
University of Wolverhampton
United Kingdom

Executive summary

- COVID-19 pandemic has not only claimed numerous lives but also caused severe limitations to daily private as well as business life. This is a written evidence that provides a deeper understanding of what the infrastructure sector has done in order to work around the UK lockdown rules. This evidence provides lessons learnt to policy makers and contributes knowledge on how the UK infrastructure sector have adapted in managing the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Five semi-structured interviews were conducted within the infrastructure sector and was then analysed to draw inferences.
- Policies were put in place in the form of: online induction; office staff "engineers that need to go on site"; operating at least 2 meters apart at all times; working from home; virtual support health and wellbeing; and general support for work activities. These policies were put in place to enable employees' safety during the COVID-19 outbreak while works are carried on in the infrastructure projects.

Introduction and reasons for submitting evidence

For infrastructure sector business leaders, the COVID-19 pandemic is proving to be one of the greatest leadership tests of their careers. This evidence from the University of Wolverhampton research team is being currently investigated to analyse the COVID-19 outbreak and how it is being managed within the infrastructure sector. Due to the current pandemic there is delay in works in most projects. This would have implications on the legal contractual obligations and have a negative impact on infrastructure business operations as most works' are conducted on site and require people to be present.

Written evidence

1. COVID-19 crisis has drastically changed the way in which the business world works and has brought massive changes to the infrastructure sector and the way in which they operate. Five professionals in the industry participated in the form of semi-structured interviews within three organisations ranging from various positions in the industry and include project directors, managers and sub-contractors to ensure that the various opinions from different points of views and working practices during COVID-19 pandemic were explored. The initial findings show that the COVID-19 crisis is bringing about a significant yet unintended cultural change and the crisis has led to a tentative digitalisation.

2. The sector has been known to be behind in adopting Industry 4.0 strategies, however with the COVID-19 outbreak, organisations are set to progress rapidly with the use of digital aids to carry on work on a daily basis. Communication is key within the sector as there are different organisations and parties that work together and collaborate to make important decisions concerning a project. Organisations have taken precautions to keep work flowing in an efficient and effective manner to ensure productivity.

3. The interviewees have shared how COVID-19 has impacted their day-to-day working practices. 60% of the interviewees have been strictly working from home since the lockdown was introduced while 20% are still on site and the remaining 20% have been furloughed. 100% of the interviewees have explained how the start of COVID-19 and lockdown rules had suppliers worried on going to site to provide materials which led to the shortage of materials and delay in project delivery. In addition to this, productivity on site has been affected as with the social distancing rules, only a certain number of site engineers are allowed to work at the site offices to ensure safe distance of 2m apart from each other. This has impacted the workforce as they have to take extra precaution to ensure they do not risk their health and that of their families when they go home at the end of the day.

4. To gain further insight on recruitment, members of the recruitment team were interviewed and one of the interviewees has specified how the recruitment process has changed drastically. 78% of new starters on projects feel like they find it difficult to adapt to the new working environment from their homes. This includes the difficulty in not knowing who to contact. There are also difficulties where a 100% of the interviewees have said that they find that they have virtual meetings all day which is leading to unproductivity during the working day which can potentially cause delays.

5. Though there have been furloughed staff members that were interviewed, organisations have been very attentive during this time. Employees have been

offered the opportunity to get desks and chairs sent to them to ensure that they are working in a comfortable environment and ensuring that the employees have the right equipment to be able to work from home. Two of the interviewees have stated that their organisation has introduced employee support during this time which is available for themselves and anyone within their family. This employee support programme is there for employees who are finding it difficult being stuck indoor whether it being lonely or just need someone to talk to. All interviewees have expanded on how supportive their organisations have been during this time, looking out for both their mental health and wellbeing.

6. All interviewees have agreed that their organisations have been quite collaborative and for two of the interviewees who are in different organisations, their organisations have a weekly organisation wide live briefing from the CEO, as a way of updating the whole organisation on how to manage and what the next steps are during this time. The interviewees have specified that this has given them reassurance as they feel included on the decisions and are aware of what is going on at a higher level as working from home and being on joint venture projects with other organisations they might be unaware of bigger things happening within the organisation in terms of how the organisations are adapting practices during COVID-19 compared to their project organisations. Toolbox talks are organised for all organisations that took part in this study whereby the wider team can keep up to date on the latest topics within their project. The interviewees have specified that this is very useful to them as for the staff working from home, they can be up to date with the latest site topics.

7. Managers that have taken part in this study have expanded on how they are managing their team, 86% of interviewees have said that they have morning/end of work day meetings with their managers to catch up on tasks and how they are being managed. This is allowing the employees to have one to one's with their manager on tasks that they need aid with. This is also allowing the monitoring of productivity on day-to-day tasks within teams. Two out of the three organisations have adopted electronic timesheets for all employees which go into detail on day-to-day tasks and the time it takes, interviewees have stated that they find this useful personally as with working from home they seem to find that they think they are being unproductive, but having a platform to note down tasks that is shared with their managers allows them to feel productive on a working day while their manager also sees the their productiveness making them feel useful.

8. One of the interviewee who is a survey manager has found using the Building Information Model (BIM) on their job has helped immensely. A task was set on site however this was delayed by three weeks as the task involved a beam of a viaduct

being demolished, however this was not proving possible as there was something locking the beam into the viaduct. With the aid of the 3D model, the beam could be visualised as the survey manager was not able to go on site and survey the beam due to the lockdown rules. The interviewee has stated how much more efficient this process was compared to having men on site working at heights and the health and safety risk on a platform to conduct a survey of the beam.

9. Despite the lockdown, the offices for all organisations that took part in this study are open, however most of the interviewees have stated that their organisations have not mandated going back into the office and there is a certain criteria in order to go back into the office. One of the organisations have specified that if the employee has to take public transport to travel to their place of work then they should work from home, in addition employees who are at high risk or live with a high risk individual should keep working from home.

10. In conclusion, organisations within the infrastructure sector have put measures in place to counteract the challenges they are facing with the COVID-19 outbreak, however as COVID-19 is unpredictable, these measures are temporary and long term solutions are to be though in order to manage the situation.

11. The following recommendations are presented for the Government and the infrastructure sector in order to ensure that adapting to this change in the way we work and live post COVID-19 can allow for future outbreaks like the pandemic we are currently in.

- **Wellbeing:** Organisations must ensure that their employees are ok to work from home as 54% of interviewees have explained that they either have to work from couches on their home which is not good for their posture up until their organisations offered to send the desks and chairs in order to work comfortably. Despite the slow start at the start of lockdown, organisations have picked up providing work equipment for their employees, however with the uncertainty, this was delayed and only began to happen 2 months into the lockdown period.

- **Technology:** as we are in the fourth industrial revolution, organisations should look into fully adopting and implementing these technological advances. Prior to the outbreak, the technological aid was available for most of the interviewees however not being used frequently. Upon the lockdown, employees found it hard to get around to using these technologies and software's as there was either a lack of understanding of how to gain benefits from them to assist with work or they were unaware that they existed. If these technologies were implemented within the organisations and training was provided for the

adoption, this change would have been an easy and fast process for the employees.

- **Mental health:** there has been an increase in mental health issues since the lockdown period widely amongst all sectors. As the interviewees have mentioned, most organisations are doing a lot to combat this as interviewees have stated that they have weekly chats with their line managers about their wellbeing and mental health. Having social platforms within the teams are also a good way to ensure that staff members have colleagues to confide in and share their thoughts as working within this sector can be stressful at times and those that live alone will not have someone to confide in when stressed. Some organisations from the interviewees have introduced having an hour break during the day and play an online game together where it is a social aspect like if staff members were in the offices having lunch together to gain some form of normality.

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