by Elingah Magada (NSSA)

Managing the COVID-19 Infodemic at the Workplace

The COVID-19 pandemic has not just created a health and socio-economic crisis but an information crisis as well. Since the onset of the pandemic there has been an overabundance of both factual and non-factual information on all aspects of the virus, that is, information pertaining to its origins, causes, transmission, prevention and treatment. Additionally, much of the information is also often contradictory and confusing that it makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish between facts and fiction. Consequently, this creates an information crisis that has a detrimental effect on people's decisions and behaviours regarding their safety and health which further propagates the pandemic. This phenomenon is known as an information pandemic or an infodemic.

What is an infodemic?

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines an infodemic as, "an overabundance of information- some accurate and some not- that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it," (https://iris.paho.org). This phenomenon usually occurs whenever there is a pandemic. It is a resultant effect of frequent changes and gaps in information, particularly during the early stages of a pandemic, when very little will be known about it. These information gaps and changes give way to myths, misconceptions and conspiracy theories which lead to misinformation and disinformation about the pandemic. Misinformation is the unintentional spread of inaccurate information while disinformation involves its deliberate creation and propagation which puts people's lives at risk (Sell *et al*; 2021).

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, technology has been a significant driver of misinformation and disinformation- internet and social media platforms have made it easier and faster to circulate information globally. Furthermore, the social isolation due to the pandemic has led to an increase in internet and social media use which means daily billions of people are being bombarded by inaccurate information about the pandemic.

Impact of the infodemic on the COVID-19 response in workplaces

The infodemic poses a significant impediment to the effective management of the COVID-19 crisis. This puts the safety and health of workers at risk as it:

- Affects management's decision making and response to the crisis. An infodemic makes it difficult for management to identify reliable and trustworthy information for guidance which may lead to delays and/or errors in decision making and crisis response.

- Reduces workers' confidence in public health interventions e.g. most organizations' efforts to promote COVID-19 vaccination as part of their return to work strategy have been countered by anti- vaccine conspiracy theories. These conspiracy theories have contributed to vaccine hesitancy/resistance among workers.

- Alters health seeking behaviours - it leads to delayed health seeking behaviours among workers as they resort to unproven, fake or even harmful COVID-19 remedies before seeking professional medical help.

- Increases at-risk behaviours - certain myths and misconceptions about prevention and treatment of COVID-19 may trigger false

confidence exposing workers to at risk behaviours e.g. increased use of alcohol and/or cannabis to prevent or treat COVID-19.

- Triggers panic and anxiety leading to mental health issues - some of the conspiracy theories create a sense of doom and hopelessness which may lead to stress and depression among workers.

- Promotes stigma and discrimination – e.g. conspiracy theories on the origins fuelled social stigma against workers' of Asian descent.

Infodemic Management - workplace interventions

In light of the impact of the infodemic at the workplace, it is crucial for organisations to recognise it as a serious threat to their COVID-19 response. While it may not be possible to prevent or eliminate it entirely but organisations can put in place interventions to minimise its impact on their COVID-19 response. These interventions include but are not limited to;

*Identifying and using **trusted and authoritative** sources of information in health and risk communication and management.* Sources can be persons such as health experts who are well knowledgeable on COVID-19 or health authority bodies/organizations (domestic and/or international e.g. WHO, Ministry of Health etc), websites, literature etc.

Intensifying risk communication - provide frequent, real time and factual information from trusted or authoritative sources. It is important to **repeat and reinforce** this information to promote understanding of the pandemic. Risk communication should persist even during periods of lockdowns and alternative working arrangements. Avoid entirely leaving workers to look for information on their own as this makes them susceptible to misleading or inaccurate information.

Direct workers to factual and authoritative sources of information. Organisations may need to educate and provide workers with a list of authoritative sources on the pandemic.

Build workers' resilience to misinformation and disinformation. This can be done by enhancing health and digital literacy. It empowers workers with the knowledge and skills to distinguish between facts and fiction and authoritative and non-authoritative sources of information. It also empowers them to act on and propagate factual information and, conversely, to resist acting on and propagating misinformation or disinformation.

Finally, it is also important to *promote and maintain worker engagement* to strengthen joint efforts in curbing the infodemic at the workplace - remember workers should not be considered as passive recipients but active partners in infodemic management.

References

- Sell, T.K, Hosangadi, D., Smith, E., et al.(2021). National Priorities to Combat Misinformation and Disinformation for COVID-19 and Future Public Health Threats: A Call for a National Strategy. Baltimore. John Hopkins Centre for Health Security.

- Managing the COVID-19 infodemic: Promoting healthy behaviors and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation. Accessed August 2, 2020. https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemics#tab=tab_1.

- Understanding the infodemic and misinformation in the fight against COVID-19. Accessed August 8, 2021. https://iris.paho.org.