

Employment during the COVID-19 Pandemic by the Class of 2020 in Thailand

Rachaniphorn Ngotngamwong, Stamford International University, Thailand

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has created havoc throughout the world that is demonstrated clearly in the tremendous global impacts on economies, businesses, schools, employment, and the way of life. The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges the graduating class of 2020 had encountered in their job search and employment experiences in Thailand, and to gain an understanding as to why they had succeeded in gaining employment amidst the pandemic. Ten university graduates participated in a qualitative study involving in-depth interviews conducted through LINE application calls that lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. Half the participants found job hunting very challenging and stressful, and while some had no problems getting a job, the remainder found it much more difficult. Working remotely, on-site, or in hybrid mode during the pandemic, the majority experienced job security, while the amount of mentorship provided varied. The ability to obtain employment during the pandemic was attributed strongly to their fields of study, working in positions of high demand, and employment gained in low-risk/booming businesses. On top of that, being referred for a job opportunity opened doors for some participants, making it easier for them to get a job when compared with other candidates.

Keywords: *COVID-19, employment, 2020 graduating class, jobs, Thailand*

Introduction

Like every other country in the world, Thailand had been trying to come up with numerous measures to cope and battle with the ongoing COVID-19 nightmare. In order to contain the virus, Thailand, like the United States of America, implemented the shutdown of “schools, businesses, and public places across the country,” and every industry has been affected, either favorably, or more frequently, unfavorably (Williams, 2020 p. 13). The early signs of employment disruption in Thailand started at the beginning of the first quarter in 2020 (COVID-19 Employment, 2020) and unemployment became a big concern for Thailand as 8.4 million jobs were estimated to be at risk in the second and third quarters of 2020 (COVID-19 Impact, 2020). With approximately 300,000 Thai graduates who had graduated in 2020, combined with the 500,000 jobless graduates competing in a highly competitive job market during the pandemic outbreak, job opportunities were truly bleak, with few job openings and rampant layoffs. Some jobs had disappeared, new jobs emerged, while others were growing (Boonlert, 2020). The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges experienced by 2020 graduates in gaining employment, their employment experiences during the pandemic, and why they had managed to be among the few who succeeded in getting employed despite the pandemic crisis. This study will be a significant contribution to the scant literature available on the very new and recent COVID-19 pandemic, especially pertaining to the employment of 2020 university graduates in Thailand. This study will be beneficial to readers who are interested in this phenomenon and those in the academic domain as well.

Literature Review

COVID-19 Pandemic

Originating in 2019, the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) affected people throughout the world resulting in more than 179.6 million infections and more than 3.8 million deaths as of June 24, 2021 (John Hopkins University of Medicine, 2021). In the early months of 2020, world history was altered with the COVID-19 crisis leaving an everlasting impact on almost every sector of the global economy (Eaton & Heckscher, 2021; Kecojevic et al., 2020). The International Labor Organization reported that up to 94% of the countries in the world had experienced some kind of shutdown, and the countries

that were hit the hardest were developing countries (International Labor Organization, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a tremendous transformation in the lives and futures of people of all ages, as things will never be the same again. As people experience the new normal, it is expected that some elements of change will continue into everyday life after the pandemic has moderated (Ilie et al., 2020). According to the World Economic Forum, the pandemic has greatly affected “travel, trade, financial markets, workforce, medicine, and media” and “businesses that offer ‘non-essential services’ were disrupted most: fitness & health, restaurants, clothing & retail, hair & lifestyle, theatres, culture & entertainment venues” (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Thailand’s first stringent lockdown lasted from mid-March till June 2020 with closure of all shopping malls and the majority of businesses, with the exception of banks, supermarkets, and take-away food delivery restaurants (Boonlert, 2020). As one of the world’s few countries to have successfully contained the epidemic after the first lockdown, the high price tag that accompanied its victory against COVID-19 had created a tremendous negative impact on jobs and workers in the second quarter of 2020, leading to an economic recession (Boonlert, 2020; Hirunyatrakul, 2020; Signs Point to Higher Job Losses, 2021). In fact, the Tom Yum Kung financial crisis of 1997 paled in comparison to the economic strain caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Boonlert, 2020). Small businesses were earning 80% less and the pandemic situation worsened dramatically during the third wave at the beginning of April 2021, with the highest record of infection cases and deaths (COVID-19 Impact, 2020; Signs Point to Higher Job Losses, 2021).

Turning to the USA, many states issued stay-at-home orders, while non-essential establishments were shut down in order to reduce the spread of COVID-19 (Dey & Loewenstein, 2020). The six sectors that were directly affected by the shutdown orders included Restaurants and Bars, Travel and Transportation, Entertainment (e.g. casinos and amusement parks), Personal Services (e.g. dentists, daycare providers, barbers), sensitive Retail (e.g. department stores and car dealers), and sensitive Manufacturing (e.g. aircraft and car manufacturing) (Vavra, 2020). The majority of firms under shutdown orders were small ones, but a substantial number of affected employees worked in large firms. States that rely heavily on tourism were affected the most, and this produced a ripple effect on supplier sectors. The pandemic-caused recession created permanent business deaths that could be widespread, and possibly lead to unfavorable consequences on the US economy (Arshad, 2020; Crane et al., 2020). Most closures involved small firms belonging to industries that were the most sensitive to social distancing. Restaurants in particular were severely disrupted, with statistics indicating that up to 50% of restaurants had reported a permanent exit (Crane et al., 2020).

In a study that explored the positive changes experienced during the national lockdown, the majority of the sample “had more time to spend on activities they value” such as “more quality time with their partner,” “more time doing enjoyable things, spend more time in nature or the outdoors, and increase their physical activity,” “time to reflect,” and they were now “more appreciative of things usually taken for granted.” Some negatives of the health crisis included adverse mental health issues such as self-harm, abuse, and suicidal thoughts (Williams et al., 2021, p. 8).

Employment during the Pandemic

The employment sector was greatly affected by the pandemic with the closure of many offices, and with the majority of the workforce working remotely. New management tools were introduced to deal with employees working from home (WFH); a downside resulting from WFH arrangements was the emerging work-family conflicts experienced. Low tech companies found themselves pressured to embrace computer technology, while other firms used technology at an accelerating pace to facilitate and manage operations and accommodate WFH employees. There was also a large spurt in the use of collaborative tools to enable flexible teaming, meetings, and communication (Eaton & Heckscher, 2021). In a survey conducted in Thailand, almost every organization in Thailand (94%) had to implement multiple HR changes, with approximately 52% of staff working remotely. Such arrangements have had a negative impact on employees’ well-being and engagement. In fact, the quality of life was reported to have dropped substantially from a high 90% to 58% since the

pandemic started. Organizations were also facing difficulties that came along with remote work, such as technology usage problems and reduced teamwork effectiveness. Up to 36% of the survey participants had experienced “a reduction in staff remuneration,” including suspension of salary increases (21%) and bonus payments (18%), and reduced staff salaries (20%) (Maintaining Business Continuity, 2020).

Aside from prolonged unemployment and economic disparity for some (Inskeep et al., 2020), the pandemic had “extreme socio-psychological, physical, and technical consequences for employees as they want to change to [sic] their severely distorted work environments” (Ilie et al., 2020, p. 667). The mental well-being of those who had experienced job losses was significantly impaired, while some who were still employed during the pandemic did not escape depression. However, they experienced depressive thoughts to a much lower extent when compared to those who were laid off (Posel et al., 2021). Leading employee worries included: “job security, personal health, childcare and homeschooling, personal finances, remote work, visibility of their employer, stress and mental health, work-life balance, family health, productivity, social isolation, managing schedule” (Butler & Rivera, 2020). The professions largely impacted were lower-paying jobs that employed low-skilled workers. They were at a high risk of unemployment (Dey & Loewenstein, 2020; Eaton & Heckscher, 2021), while the wealthy were doing well because of the strong stock market (Eaton & Heckscher, 2021). These trends further increased the existing inequalities in society (Blundell et al., 2020; COVID-19 Impact, 2020), and the number of reported unemployed women was higher than men (International Labor Organization, 2020).

Employers, on the other hand, had difficult decisions to make regarding their operations: How many workers would be needed, and how many employees could work remotely to prevent further spreading of the virus. Many companies had to comply with state and local mandates, meaning they were completely closed during the shutdown, and they experienced mounting COVID-19 related costs with the continued spread of the virus (Schriefer & Born, 2020). The pandemic also resulted in lower demands for apparel, resulting in canceled orders that caused many employees in developing countries in the global apparel supply chain to be temporarily suspended or permanently terminated. This caused diminished income, and for those who experienced the loss of their jobs, it also resulted in widespread hunger (Kyritsis & LeBaron, 2021). The two developments arising from this crisis in the area of employment were a dramatic increase in reliance on virtual work in almost every field, and new job opportunities abroad that did not require relocation, as many jobs in the world can be done remotely (JobsDB, 2021).

Impacts of the Pandemic on University Students

The class of 2020 would never forget their final year which was filled with many disruptions in their lives, from the sudden switch to online learning, long-awaited but less joyful graduation ceremonies, and unpredictable and unpromising employment opportunities (Stahl, 2021). To prevent the transmission of the COVID-19 virus on campuses, universities were locked down and students had to switch to a completely new online learning experience. The pandemic created extremely high levels of psychological distress for students, and they were affected physically, academically, financially, and psychologically (Gewin, 2020). US students were reported to have lost their study focus (73.5%) and experienced e-learning difficulties (58.6%), with some students not having access to computers or the Internet at home. Other problems included getting medications and hygiene supplies (59.3%), food (22%), unemployment/reduced wages/work hours (56.8%), and COVID-19 anxieties (66.7%) (Kecojevic et al., 2020). Students were also suffering from “depression, anxiety, somatization, and perceived stress” (Kecojevic et al., 2020, p. 21). Many US students were severely impacted as they lost their means of self-support with the prolonged closures of retail or service industries in which they were employed. It was reported that one out of every four students lost their jobs during the pandemic. These job losses created financial difficulties for four out of five college students, leading to problems in paying loans and feeding themselves. To temporarily resolve

this, they had to take additional loans and were amassing more credit card debt, with Black and Hispanic students experiencing more financial problems than others (Student Loan Hero, 2020).

In Thailand, too, educational institutions had to make the sudden switch to online learning in March 2020. A male Thai student described the online learning experience as “uncharted territory for students and teachers alike because there were many technical problems with applications and distractions. To be honest, I didn’t understand the lessons and did not do well in an online exam” (Boonlert, 2020, p. 2). As for regular students in the US, e-learning proved to be less favorable as it was harder to understand the lessons taught, and this was particularly so for courses that were visual or required hands-on learning facilitated by one-on-one learning with a professor. In the US, businesses and communities were again disappointed in the summer as the pandemic continued. This had severe impacts on students, who had problems getting internships and employment, and had concerns regarding their careers and future education (Gay, 2020). About 49% of 2020 US graduates predicted that they would have problems getting jobs due to the pandemic (Student Hero, 2020).

The Job Market in Thailand during the Pandemic

The first lockdown in Thailand caused a tremendous impact on jobs and workers in the second quarter of 2020 (Boonlert, 2020; Hirunyatrakul, 2020), with employees falling into the following categories: Working reduced hours, remote work, hybrid arrangements to combat the virus, or terminated (COVID-19 Impact, 2020). According to a job market survey that was conducted in February 2021 by JobsDB, Thai employment opportunities were reported to have increased after the second wave by 24.65%. Positions that were considered essential to the Thai economy included e-commerce, technology, and e-learning (Signs Point to Higher Job Losses, 2021). The jobs that topped the job search list on job search platforms and other channels in the first quarter of 2021 included: Sales, Customer Service, and Business Development (16%); IT (14.7%); and Engineering (9.8%) (JobsDB, 2021). A total of 758,000 were unemployed in the first quarter of 2021, and this number was expected to increase with the continual shutdown of businesses. Employers had been adopting various hiring techniques to cope with the situation, such as hiring more freelancers, not hiring full-time employees, and relying more on digital technology. Thailand’s pandemic situation worsened dramatically during the third wave, which resulted in a record high in deaths and daily infection cases and threatened further unemployment (Signs Point to Higher Job Losses, 2021). A Suan Dusit poll conducted in the first quarter of 2021 showed that the sharp rise in unemployment had caused financial problems, stress, increased crime (robbery and theft), and family problems (COVID-19 Takes a Heavy Toll, 2021). The tourism industry, which generates a substantial amount of income, was hit the hardest. The pandemic is expected to cost more than six million lost jobs, and the prolonged tourism slump is predicted to take until mid-2022 to recover (Signs Point to Higher Job Losses, 2021). The impacts on other industries were at different levels, with restaurants suffering from unpredictable and sudden lockdowns that lasted for different periods (COVID-19 Impact, 2020). In a report released by the National Statistics Office, the reasons for unemployment were due to business closures (35%), resignations (24.6%), terminations (16%), expired labor contracts (6%), expired employment contracts (1.6%), and others (0.5%) (Signs Point to Higher Job Losses, 2021).

Aviation graduates were highly affected as “the coronavirus outbreak has devastated a once-secure airline business” and “the aviation industry has been hit hard as air travel restrictions were imposed to curb the spread of the disease” (Boonlert, 2020, p. 1). This caused aviation graduates to pursue completely new career opportunities and goals. Tourism graduates, too, faced a similar situation, knowing that they would not be hired in the hospitality business with a drop of 16 million tourists (60%). New medical graduates, on the other hand, were in high demand as they were mobilized—together with soldiers and health officials—to help provide much-needed healthcare for increasing COVID-19 cases in Bangkok and its vicinity (Health Personnel from Provinces, 2021). Lockdown policies deprived graduates of job offers through job cancelations and indefinite postponements. This also included graduates who had opportunities to work abroad, but due to

immigration and travel restrictions between countries, everything had to be canceled (Mongkol, 2020). This pandemic lessened opportunities for graduates to apply to companies of their choice. However, skilled candidates with excellent performance still had a chance of landing good jobs in companies that were seeking capable employees to help drive their organizations (Signs Point to Higher Job Losses, 2021).

Objectives and Research Questions

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about not only chaos, but also a huge transformation to this world. Amongst those greatly affected by the crisis was the graduating class of 2020, as they had to compete for the scarce jobs available in the midst of business closures and lockdowns. The main objectives of this study were to explore the challenges that the graduates encountered in their job searches for employment during the pandemic and to gain an understanding as to why they were able to gain employment amidst the pandemic. The research questions that guided this study included:

1. What were the challenges involved in looking for a job during the pandemic period?
2. What portals were used in job searches, and how difficult was the hiring process?
3. Did the participants experience fear of being laid off?
4. Did the participants start working online or at the office, and how much mentoring did they receive?

Methodology

A qualitative research method using in-depth interviews was selected for this study. The data received were then clustered into themes according to the commonality of the participants' experiences. As with most qualitative research studies, purposive sampling was used to align with the intent of the research study, which was to study the employment challenges experienced by Thai university graduates during the COVID-19 pandemic. The selection criteria included two main items: A university student who had *graduated* during the pandemic period, and was *employed* during the pandemic. An e-survey of eight questions was sent to each interested participant to collect demographic and basic employment data prior to the interview. A total of 11 structured open-ended questions were used in in-depth interviews conducted from March 13 to April 28, 2021 through LINE application calls that lasted for approximately 30 to 45 minutes per participant. The interview protocol included a total of four parts (11 questions):

Part 1: Job Application (three questions);

Part 2: The Challenges, Stress, & Difficulties in Job Hunting (three questions);

Part 3: The Hiring Process (two questions); and

Part 4: Experiences during Employment (three questions).

The targeted subjects were university students who had graduated in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic and were employed in 2020–2021. A total of ten university graduates who participated in this study had graduated at different times in 2020, with nine participants representing universities in Thailand and one from the USA.

Results

As participants were from different universities with different academic calendars, they completed their studies at different times in 2020. Therefore, their job searches started at various months in 2020, with six participants beginning their job searches prior to completion of their studies, while the other four started upon completion of their studies. The demographics and current employment of the participants are highlighted in Table 1. Nine of the participants graduated with degrees in Business Administration, but were from different majors, and one graduated with an Engineering degree.

Table 1 Demographics and Employment

Participant	Gender	Age Range	Nationality	Major	Current Employment
Participant 1	Female	21–25	Thai	International Business Management	Case team assistant
Participant 2	Female	21–25	Thai	Finance	Credit analyst
Participant 3	Female	21–25	Thai	Finance	Business consultant
Participant 4	Female	21–25	Thai	International Business Management	Coach recruiter
Participant 5	Male	21–25	South African	International Relations	English second language instructor
Participant 6	Male	Below 21	Thai	International Relations	Freelance
Participant 7	Male	26–30	Thai	Entrepreneurship International Business Management	Client solution professional
Participant 8	Female	21–25	Thai	International Business Management	Associate
Participant 9	Female	21–25	Thai	Electrical Engineering	IT consultant
Participant 10	Male	21–25	Thai	Marketing	Digital marketer

Four themes emerged from the interviews conducted: –(a) Theme 1: Challenges and Stresses Experienced in the Job Hunt; (b) Theme 2: Job Applications and the Hiring Process; (c) Theme 3: Fears/Threats of Being Laid Off; and (d) Theme 4: Working Remotely/Onsite and Mentorship.

Theme 1: Challenges and Stresses Experienced in the Job Hunt

Half of the participants experienced high levels of stress and challenges in their job searches due to various reasons. Participant 1 shared that “the recruiters got a lot of applications and they might not have even gone through mine.” Aside from competing domestically for jobs during the pandemic, there was also increased competition with graduates who were coming back from abroad. This group not only had “better degrees,” but also had internships abroad, making them more marketable with better job opportunities compared to local graduates. As for Participant 10, he said that:

It was very challenging as there were a lot of graduates when I graduated, and many were looking for jobs. Most companies were looking for applicants with one or two years of working experience and so, it was very hard for new graduates to get a job.

Participant 3 was stressed out because “most students in finance started looking for a job pretty quickly and received job offers in auditing at the beginning of the fourth year in the university.” Many job applicants experienced similar treatment, getting no response from employers. A very disappointed Participant 6 stated that he had sent out 100 resumes and only received one response. Participant 1, who was applying for a job towards the end of the term, mentioned that:

I was feeling very stressed with the initial job search as the professors were piling work on us towards the end of the term, and everyone was looking for a job at that time. Moreover, those with good connections would have higher job opportunities.

Although concerned, Participant 4 did not feel particularly stressed out because “I understood about the pandemic and that companies were not accepting a lot of applications and not many positions were open.” Participant 8 was very positive and did not feel too stressed out because it was a known fact that jobs were hard to come by these days. In fact, it took her only a month to get a job compared to her prior expectation of three months. Participant 5, who had graduated from Thailand and was looking for job opportunities in his field of International Relations, encountered many employment barriers as non-governmental organizations (NGO) prefer local hires (Thais), and COVID-19 created limited options as they had to downsize. So he shared that “I was not feeling stressed but there was just a lack of options. But I have the benefit of a few years of teaching

experience behind me, and so, it was simple to get a stable teaching job.” Another very positive participant (Participant 7), who was an Entrepreneurship major, applied for an IT job as he had been working in the field of IT for two years prior to undergraduate studies. Since an IT position is one of the most sought-after jobs, particularly during the pandemic, the participant did not feel that it would be difficult to get a job and, therefore, did not experience any stress. A US Electrical Engineering graduate (Participant 9) stated that job hunting was normal and “not difficult because of the high demand for IT personnel, but then, there’s a high supply too. I had six months of working experience as an IT specialist, so it was a comparative advantage I had.”

Theme 2: Job Applications and the Hiring Process

Multiple job portals were utilized by participants in their job searches such as www.JobsDB.com, LinkedIn, www.jobthai.com, www.jobtopgun.com, Facebook groups, Company Websites, Ajarn.com, and UN websites. Aside from digital applications, a few participants applied through University or Government job fairs, and interestingly enough, five job offers were made through referrals. It was interesting to note that none of the companies that the participants had interned with offered them a job, but one participant (Participant 8) received a job offer through a referral from a previous internship. She shared that “I was lucky. I had interned at Bosch and joined HR at Lazada. I kept in touch with my supervisor, and when she needed an assistant for a project contract, she contacted me, and since I didn’t have a job then, I took that job.” Another example of a referral was by Participant 4, who was referred by a friend at the university. Participant 7, on the other hand, said that “I did a lot of research to find out about start-ups and applied to them through JobsDB, company websites, LinkedIn.” In the meantime, Participant 5 who was seeking a UN job, stated that, “I searched for UN postings through their own platform, applied through LinkedIn, and some websites for teaching such as Ajarn.com.

The hiring process for each participant ranged from one week to four months, with the interviews ranging from one to three rounds. Half of them were not required to take any selection tests while the others took the following tests: Case Study, Assessments in Math, Case Studies, and Business Process, Teaching demo via Video, Mathematical and Logic Test, and an Online Business Assessment Test. Participant 3 stated that the tests she had taken were not really stressful and that “I was involved in one whole day of assessments. They included a Math assessment (multiple choice), an essay question in the form of a case study, and I had to draw a business process.” Participant 2 had a different experience, as she was given some test questions during her third interview. She stated that “there were three interviewers from three different functions who asked me a lot of different questions. Some were finance, accounting, and less technical, compared to the first company that I had interviewed at.”

Theme 3: Fears/Threats of Being Laid Off

The majority did not experience any fears or threats of being laid off during the pandemic for multiple reasons. A couple of them were working for large firms that were unaffected and were—in fact—doing better during the pandemic, such as IT and online businesses. Other companies were well backed up financially and money was not a problem. One participant (Participant 2) said that being an entry-level employee has its benefits, as the ones in danger of getting laid off were those in senior positions. Another participant (Participant 3) shared that “I was not scared because the company did a restructure and needed more people in the business consultant department,” while Participant 8 said that “with the online business booming, there is no fear in job loss. I was needed and even had to frequently work extra hours at night.” Other answers were, “I had no fears as the boss really liked me and I knew the first week, I was set to stay” (Participant 6), “there are no threats as the company is doing great” (Participant 4), and “I didn’t feel threatened about losing a job because my family would support me if I lost my job. The focus was more on learning as much as possible” (Participant 10).

Theme 4: Working Remotely/Onsite and Mentorship

Depending on when each participant started working and the pandemic's seriousness, participants were either working completely remotely, on-site, or in hybrid mode. When the pandemic was not serious with few COVID-19 cases, the majority worked at the office, but when the second and third waves started, they had to work remotely. Working remotely was attractive for one participant during the first month because she could wake up late and not have to travel, but then in the second month, remote work became boring and unproductive. In certain cases, the participants started out working at the office, and then remotely or hybrid; the reverse also happened, with work starting remotely, and then back to the office when things got better or went hybrid. A few participants had no choice but to work completely at the office owing to the nature of the business. A participant who had been given the option of either working from home or on site said that "I prefer to work at the office because it was easier to communicate with other departments due to the nature of the job" (Participant 4).

The amount of mentorship provided varied from one participant to another. Three of the ten participants who needed to be onsite received good mentorship, and they were very happy. The ones who were hit the hardest were those who started working remotely with no mentorship and had to figure things out by themselves. One participant was given past work examples to go by and it was difficult. But then working at the office did not guarantee mentorship. Participant 8 who was working on a team did not receive any help from team members, but instead received guidance from members of another team. According to a participant who was a contract worker (Participant 4), "there was hardly any mentorship for contractual workers, but full-time employees would benefit from proper training." Working in a small start-up company has its advantages. According to Participant 6, "my boss gave me guidance and arranged for external training to equip me with the skills necessary for the job." Things were completely different for Participant 7, who did not receive any training because the company did not have any such funds. He said that:

I had to figure things out, observe, and ask a lot of questions. I treated it as a challenge and felt the pressure to pass probation. As I am a fast learner, I grasped all the concepts well and was fully immersed in one to two months.

When given the choice to either work remotely or on site, Participant 7 specifically stated that "my preference was to go to the office as it was easier to learn." An IT employee (Participant 9) shared that "I had to work at the office, and I received mentorship from the person who was leaving, and then from another person who came in at the same time but was more experienced."

Discussion

Theme 1: Challenges/Stresses Experienced in the Job Hunt and Theme 3: Fears/Threats of Being Laid Off

It is normal for graduates to feel some sense of anxiety about getting a job offer, and while some managed to obtain employment prior to graduation, others eventually got one after a couple of months. The pandemic crisis resulted in shutdowns and layoffs in a majority of industries, unemployment was experienced at increasing levels, and few job opportunities were available. Being a new graduate, particularly one with little or no prior working experience, made it even more difficult to compete for the much prized and scarce positions. Therefore, it was normal for graduates to experience challenges and stress associated with job hunting during the pandemic. Competing for a job with domestic students was already a challenge by itself, and having overseas graduates and those with prior working experience made getting a job a whole lot more difficult.

However, it was interesting to learn that only half of the participants felt highly stressed out and challenged in looking for a job during the pandemic, while the others felt otherwise. Those who understood the pandemic situation knew and accepted the fact that it would be difficult to get a job, and others who had a job waiting for them prior to graduation had no reason to panic. Participants who landed a job soon after graduation did not find it stressful or challenging, but those who applied to numerous companies and had to wait for a couple of months felt otherwise. A few participants

who felt that their current job was an imperfect fit were successful in obtaining job offers elsewhere during the pandemic crisis. This is an indication that, despite the pandemic, participants were still capable of getting jobs. The ability to obtain employment during the pandemic was partially attributed to their fields of study, nine of which were in Business, and one in Engineering. They were able to seek employment in businesses that were essential to the Thai economy in booming industries such as e-commerce, technology, e-learning, and business development. Moreover, they were applying for positions where their skills were in demand and would drive organizations (Signs Point to Higher Job Losses, 2021; JobsDB, 2021). On top of that, being referred for a job opportunity opened doors for some participants, making it easier for them to get a job compared to others who did not have a networking advantage.

Work experience counted and was well demonstrated in three instances. An International Relations graduate realized the impossibility of landing a desired NGO job, but was successful in getting a teaching job based on his three years of English teaching experience. A male Entrepreneurship graduate with two years of IT experience prior to undergraduate studies decided to fall back on his past experience to apply in a hot IT job market, and was successful. The half-year working experience for the US Engineering graduate also proved to be advantageous when she was successful in obtaining a job offer.

Different organizations had varying lay-off policies during the crisis; some laid off older employees who were more expensive to maintain and kept the newer employees who were much cheaper. One participant indicated that this was her experience; consequently, job security also came with her organization's policy. However, that did not apply across the board, as some companies actually laid off the newest employees while retaining the older ones. Working for large firms also provided more job security, and being in an Asian country with a collectivist culture like Thailand, families were usually there to support their children when in trouble or going through a difficult time (Luthans & Doh, 2021). One participant belonged to that category, as he mentioned that his family would be there for him if he was terminated. All these reasons contributed to the fact that the participants experienced little fear of being threatened by potentially being laid off.

Theme 2: Job Applications and the Hiring Process

The subjects of the study applied for jobs through normal job portals where organizations were recruiting online (e-recruitment) (Mondy & Martocchio, 2016). Digital applications have served job applicants well, particularly during the pandemic, as it removed any necessary human contact. Moreover, technology played an enormous role in facilitating virtual interviews when the pandemic was too severe to conduct them face-to-face. Some participants were unsuccessful in getting a job at companies where they had originally interned. This demonstrated the severity of the pandemic situation, as some interns would usually be capable of getting at jobs where they had had internships. It came as a big surprise to learn that the number of job opportunities received through referrals amounted to approximately 50% of all jobs received. This demonstrated the power of networking, particularly in Thailand. The hiring process was normal with the number of interview rounds being between two to three, and the selection period ranged from between a few weeks to a few months. Only half of the applicants were required to undergo selection tests, and that was solely dependent on each company's selection policy. Organizations currently utilize online selection assessments that are easy to take, process, and use to evaluate an applicant's technical abilities (Mondy & Martocchio, 2016); they were truly ideal during this pandemic.

Theme 4: Work Remotely/Onsite and Mentorship

Working remotely, hybrid, on site, or in shifts, depending on the pandemic situation, aligned with the current trends observed throughout the world (Eaton & Hecksher, 2021; Maintaining Business Continuity, 2020). Providing mentorship to new employees, particularly those new to the workplace, was significant in not only boosting productivity, but also in improving employee morale. It was truly a disappointment to find that not all organizations have embraced the importance of

much-needed mentorship. Not receiving any mentorship was hard enough for those who worked at offices. However, they could at least observe others while working, or get assistance when they needed it on the spot. It was more difficult for those who started working remotely and had to figure things out for themselves. The more fortunate ones were able to work at the office and receive much-needed mentorship.

Conclusions

This study provided insights from ten 2020 graduates who had to go through most challenging times in seeking jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Aside from the normal challenges of seeking employment while competing with other graduates and active job seekers, they had the additional stress of business closures that resulted in fewer available positions, many of which required prior work experience. One thing that University lecturers could do to help students in their job searches would be to lessen their workloads in the final year at university, as students would be busy job hunting then. It is truly commendable that these participants had been successful in obtaining job offers while their peers might not have been as fortunate. The pandemic brought about many sudden transformations in demand for employees in different industries, some of which vanished overnight such as tourism and aviation. Worldwide lockdowns had also left many without work, signaling no guaranteed employment. The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on employment for new graduates with little or no work experience, particularly in negatively affected industries, would make an excellent case study. Students could discuss how they would cope if they were the victims to help them prepare for an unforeseeable future that might include unemployment. Fortunately for the participants in this study, they were in the right industries and were needed, which played a significant role in obtaining employment. Referrals also played an essential role in half of the hires, thus demonstrating the importance that networking in Thailand plays in helping candidates obtain job offers.

A tremendous jump in technology utilization took place in almost every industry. The changes occurred at amazing speed in order to enable quick adaptation and allow productivity to be maintained. Although virtual interviews existed prior to the pandemic, most interviews had to be conducted online when the outbreak was deemed too dangerous for candidates to appear in person for face-to-face interviews. Despite the pandemic's negatives, employees had a new experience of working remotely, which would not have previously happened in Thailand. This was an opportunity that does not come easily in a developing country like Thailand, but as remote working is currently experienced worldwide, it has brought Thailand's workforce in line with the rest of the world. The high levels of job security and the successful attempts in not only securing a job during an economic crisis but also moving on to another job when needed demonstrated the capabilities of this study's participants. Millennials are infamous for switching jobs (Ngotngamwong, 2019), and this trend of changing jobs by Gen Zers suggests that job hopping will continue to occur despite the pandemic and a period of scarce job opportunities.

The new normal has transformed the world of work for both organizations and employees. Things will never be the same again, even once the pandemic is over. With this in mind, educators might need to adjust their curricula in order to be better aligned with the new ways in which organizations function, and to prepare their students for the new workplace.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Study

Two main limitations of this study were identified. The first limitation was the difficulty in getting more subjects to participate in the study, as it was challenging to get subjects who met the two main criteria: a 2020 graduate who was employed. The second limitation was the scarce amount of literature available in Thailand, as COVID-19 is still a very recent event, and the researcher had to rely on Thai online news reports. Recommendations for further study include a study of how 2020 graduates in similar fields of study from other countries would compare with the results of this

study. Another interesting study would be an investigative study of the types of jobs to which hospitality and aviation graduates (who were most affected by the pandemic) have moved.

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