

Challenges and Coping Strategies of Frontline Customs Brokers in the Efficient Facilitation of Essential Goods During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered how individuals engage in work activities and navigate their daily lives. This includes customs brokers who served as frontline facilitators during the Covid-19 pandemic. They played a crucial role in ensuring the facilitation of essential goods during this challenging time. However, they encountered various challenges in their workplace, including safety protocols, prompting this study to explore how they coped up, specifically on the strategies undertaken. Hence, this study aimed to investigate if there were significant differences in the challenges faced by frontline customs brokers, as well as on their coping strategies in efficiently facilitating essential goods during the pandemic. Using online data gathering through Google Form, the study involved 30 frontline customs brokers, predominantly female, aged between 20-30 years, with the majority having four years or less of experience in the profession. Based on the results, the challenges encountered by the front-line customs brokers were difficulties in online transactions and transportation. Challenges related to customs clearance, online transactions, and transportation of essential goods were prevalent, with varying degrees of agreement among respondents. Safety-related challenges, such as unsanitary facilities, were also highlighted. On the other hand, coping strategies, like familiarizing with virtual meeting applications, utilizing shuttle services, and utilizing Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) IDs for easing transportation barriers were mostly applied. Future research could further explore the effectiveness of specific coping strategies and identify additional measures to support customs brokers in their vital role during times of crisis.

Keywords: challenges, coping strategies, front-line customs brokers, essential goods, Covid-19 pandemic



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INTRODUCTION

The processing of goods and services is essential for any country's normal functioning, especially during a global crisis like the current COVID-19 pandemic. In the customs industry, some customs brokers served as frontline workers but are not receiving the same visibility and recognition as doctors, nurses, truck drivers, or delivery personnel. Hence, they are often referred to as unsung frontline heroes during this pandemic. Martinez (2020) emphasized the role of customs brokers in ensuring the safety of fellow frontline workers in various industries across the country. In

compliance with Republic Act No. 11469, also known as the "Bayanihan to Heal as One Act," customs brokers continue to provide clearance services for essential goods such as PPEs and test kits at main ports of entry nationwide. They ensured that imported goods are disinfected with the use of sanitizing supplies to reduce the spread of viruses thus ensuring safety while timely distributing the goods among manufacturers, distributors, and franchises.

Despite their crucial role, and similar to other frontline workers, customs brokers face challenges related to their health, safety, and mobility. Recognizing their frontline role amidst the pandemic, their dedication to efficiently facilitate essential goods remains vital for the country. They encountered challenges but employed coping strategies to overcome crises and maintain the efficient flow of essential goods. Identifying imminent and prevailing challenges would entail the frontline customs brokers to apply strategic coping strategies. This would help them mitigate the pandemic's

impact by speeding up the flow of essential goods in the Philippines. Having the above rationale, the researchers aimed to identify these challenges and explore coping strategies to understand how customs brokers facilitate essential goods during these difficult times, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

LITERATURES

Customs Brokers as Frontliners During the Pandemic. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, customs brokers have emerged as essential frontliners in facilitating the entry of crucial goods into the country. Despite the risks on their health and safety, they remain dedicated to ensure the smooth flow of essential items. According to Almase (2020), these individuals face challenges such as the potential risk of infection and the strain on transportation systems. However, their commitment to their duty is unwavering as they prioritize the entry, transit, and departure of cargo containing vital supplies. Martinez (2020) highlights the vital role customs brokers play, emphasizing that they are among the unsung heroes ensuring the well-being of Filipinos. Despite the lack of recognition compared to other frontline professions, their contribution to safeguarding public health and supporting economic stability cannot be underestimated.

Overcoming Challenges in Pandemic Response. Customs brokers confront various challenges in their efforts to facilitate essential goods during the pandemic. The shortage of crucial items such as personal protective equipment (PPE) and medical supplies exacerbates the difficulties faced by frontliners. Leibovici and Santacreu (2020) discuss the scarcity of essential goods, leading to trade policy interventions to meet domestic demand. Despite these obstacles, customs brokers simplify procedures to expedite the clearance of essential goods, particularly medical supplies, and PPEs (WCO, 2020a). Their coordination with government agencies aims to ensure the integrity and efficiency of essential goods facilitation. Lagu, Werner, and Antenstein (2020) underscore the importance of PPE in protecting frontliners, noting the challenges posed by scarcity and panic buying. Despite these challenges, customs brokers persist in

their mission to ensure the continuous flow of essential goods into the country, mitigating the impact of the pandemic on public health and well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design. The study employed descriptive research of which survey was used as main method in gathering data. Descriptive-survey, according to Longe (2020), uses surveys to gather data about varying subjects. This data aims to know the extent to which different conditions can be obtained among these subjects. This background posited on the aim of the study in determining the challenges and coping strategies of customs brokers as frontline workers during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Population and Sampling. Using a simple random sampling procedure, the study employed 30 customs brokers stationed as frontline workers at the Port of Manila - South Harbor during the pandemic. They were considered to be the most qualified individuals to answer the research questions given the premises of the study. The random sampling approach ensured that the samples represented the broader population of customs brokers at the Port of Manila - South Harbor, allowing for generalization of findings on this specific group.

Instrumentation. The researchers designed a 23-item survey questionnaire for the study. The first part of the instrument initially gathers relevant information regarding the demographic profile of the respondents (which was reflected as additional discussions in presenting the background of the population). The succeeding questions posited on eliciting the essential data to answer the main aims of study: 1) identify potential challenges experienced by the respondents during the pandemic; and, 2) explore how they overcame (cope-up) these challenges. The questions, in general, is framed on the efficient facilitation of essential goods during the Covid-19 pandemic. Utilizing a 5-point Likert Scale, the response indicators ranged from Strongly Agree (scored 5) to Strongly Disagree (scored 1) to gauge the respondents' level of agreement. Please see below the scale range and interpretation:

Table 1
Likert Scale used in assessing the B2C e-commerce impact to the general performance of LSPs.

Rating	Scale Range	Interpretation
5	4.51 - 5.00	Strongly Agree
4	3.51 - 4.50	Agree
3	2.51 - 3.50	Neutral
2	1.51 - 2.50	Disagree
1	1.00 - 1.50	Strongly Disagree

Data Gathering. First, a letter addressed to the District Collector of the Collection District II, Port of Manila, PNR Building South Harbor, Manila was drafted. The letter indicated a request to conduct a survey to the customs brokers who are currently assigned as frontliners in the facilitation of essential goods during the pandemic. The letter was forwarded to the Head of the Customs Administration Department for review and approval. Upon approval, the questionnaires were scheduled for administration. As the pandemic protocol is still enforced, the distribution of the survey questionnaires (converted into an online survey form via Google Form) were done online via Facebook messenger. Though the pandemic curtailed the normal data gathering procedure, this method facilitated the efficient collection of data while adhering to safety protocols during the pandemic. Ethical standards in gathering were still observed through informed consent and a statement on the confidentiality of data gathered. Subsequently, the researchers collected the gathered data for tallying in preparation for statistical treatment.

Data Analysis. To derive the data of the study, a Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS v.20) was utilized. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize and interpret the findings. Measures such as frequency count and weighted mean were employed to provide a clear overview of the challenges encountered and the coping strategies undertaken by the customs brokers.

RESULTS

Occupational Challenges Encountered by Customs Brokers During the Covid-19 Pandemic. Table 1 illustrates the challenges faced by customs brokers toward their occupation-related duties. In terms of customs

clearance, two indicator statements, namely "Customs clearance procedure using online processes is not effective to facilitate essential goods" and "It has been difficult to use and be familiar with using virtual meeting applications," received weighted means of 3.64 and 3.69, respectively, and both interpreted as "agree." Overall, challenges related to customs clearance garnered an average weighted mean of 3.47 (agree). Conversely, in the area of transportation, the weighted mean is 2.58, and interpreted as "disagree." In general, occupation-related challenges received an overall average weighted mean of 3.03 (neutral), suggesting that respondents did not concur with the stated challenges.

Table 1
Mean Distribution of Occupation-related Challenges Encountered by Customs Brokers, (N=30)

OCCUPATION-RELATED	Weighted Mean	Descriptive Interpretation
Customs Clearance		
1. The no-contact policy implemented by the BOC became difficult and did not help to facilitate the proper importation of essential goods into our country during the Pandemic.	3.08	Neutral
2. Customs clearance procedure using online processes is not effective to facilitate essential goods.	3.64	Agree
3. It has been difficult to use and be familiar with using virtual meeting applications.	3.69	Agree
Average Weighted Mean	3.47	Agree
Transportation of Goods		
4. The transportation of essential goods has not been easy due to the protocols like military road checkpoints implemented by the government due to the Pandemic.	2.58	Disagree
Average Weighted Mean	2.58	Disagree
Overall Average Weighted Mean	3.03	Neutral

On the other hand, the statement "It has been difficult to use and be familiar with using virtual meeting applications." garnered the highest weighted mean of 3.69. The majority of respondents expressed difficulty in using and becoming familiar with virtual applications. This challenge may stem from feelings of disconnection from clients and colleagues, hindering quick and immediate interactions. Additionally, challenges may arise from a lack of clarity, direction, and misunderstandings due to poor communication and incompatible communication preferences. To maintain connectivity, individuals may need to navigate multiple communication apps or rely on their company's office system, which can be overwhelming. Moreover, the absence of non-verbal cues in virtual communication, such as body language, exacerbates challenges in conveying messages effectively. For those working remotely, the absence of external accountability can result in communication becoming solely work-related, potentially

impacting productivity. Consequently, the reliance on virtual apps can significantly affect a company's productivity, with poor communication potentially leading to adverse outcomes.

The Inter-Agency Task Force implemented Resolution No. 27 series of 2020 which outlines some recommendations in managing the COVID-19 situation. As stipulated, the Rapid Pass system shall be prospectively applied, with existing IATF IDs honored by member-agencies. This measure ensures the unhampered movement of cargo vehicles, public utility vehicles, Business Process Outsourcing companies, and export-oriented establishments, even without enrolling in the Rapid Pass system. Additionally, government officials and frontline personnel, along with their official vehicles, remain exempt from the strict home quarantine requirement during the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ).

Personal Challenges Encountered by Customs Brokers During the Covid-19 Pandemic. Table 2 highlights the personal-related problems faced by the Customs Brokers. Health-related problems were rated as "neutral," with an average weighted mean of 2.85, indicating that respondents did not totally encounter these issues.

Table 2
Mean Distribution of Personal-Related Challenges Encountered by Customs Brokers, (N=30)

PERSONAL-RELATED	Weighted Mean	Descriptive Interpretation
Health		
1. It has been difficult for the frontline Customs Brokers to maintain hygiene due to the absence of:		
1.1 hand sanitizers or alcohol	2.72	Neutral
1.2 hand washing	2.89	Neutral
1.3 Personal Protective Equipment (including facemask & face shield)	2.94	Neutral
<i>Average Weighted Mean</i>	<i>2.85</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
Safety		
2. The schedules are not arranged to limit the number of workers on shift at the same time.	2.97	Neutral
3. Physical distance between workers is not maintained.	2.83	Neutral
4. Offices and other facilities are not sanitized.	3.47	Agree
5. The health protocols are not properly followed.	3.06	Neutral
<i>Average Weighted Mean</i>	<i>3.08</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
Transportation		
6. It was difficult for me to travel to work because I did not have a vehicle that I could use.	3.06	Neutral
7. The lack and limited availability of public transport has become difficult as it has become more hassle as a commuter.	1.94	Disagree
8. The lack of availability of company vehicles has become difficult because it has become more hassle and can be said to be dangerous to the safety of the workers and workplace.	2.81	Neutral
<i>Average Weighted Mean</i>	<i>2.60</i>	<i>Disagree</i>
<i>Overall Average Weighted Mean</i>	<i>2.85</i>	<i>Neutral</i>

Similarly, safety-related problems received an average weighted mean of 3.08, also interpreted as "neutral." Conversely, transportation-related

problems were rated with an average weighted mean of 2.60, indicating disagreement among respondents regarding the presence of transportation-related challenges. Overall, personal-related problems were rated as "neutral," suggesting that respondents did not universally experience these challenges.

Given the government's implementation of safety protocols for frontline workers and companies, these measures should be enforced uniformly. Ensuring high levels of hand hygiene compliance remains an ongoing challenge, recognized as a vital strategy in preventing the transmission of COVID-19. Measures such as providing hand sanitizers or alcohol, promoting handwashing, and ensuring the availability of personal protective equipment including facemasks and face shields are crucial. Respondents may have rated these health-related challenges as neutral due to the absence of hand hygiene materials in their workplaces. However, individuals can take personal responsibility by providing these materials themselves to mitigate the risk of virus transmission.

Furthermore, companies should continue implementing practices to reduce potential virus exposure, such as regular disinfection of frequently touched surfaces. Maintaining hygienic conditions is essential in preventing and protecting against infectious disease outbreaks like COVID-19. With respect to transportation, the statement "It was difficult for me to travel to work because I did not have a vehicle that I could use" received the highest weighted mean of 3.06, interpreted as "neutral." This rating may be attributed to the provision of shuttle services by their offices from the respondents' workplaces to their residence, enabling easy travel even without personal vehicles.

Coping of Customs Brokers in Their Occupation-Related Challenges. Table 3 presents the coping strategies employed by the respondents to address occupation-related problems. It is evident from the table that respondents disagreed with coping strategies related to customs clearance, as indicated by an average weighted mean of 2.25 (disagree).

Table 3
Mean Distribution of Occupation-related Coping Strategies of Customs Brokers, (N=30)

OCCUPATION-RELATED	Weighted Mean	Descriptive Interpretation
Customs Clearance		
1. The flexible work arrangement is maintained and regularly connected online with your team just to check or update each other.	2.28	Disagree
2. The Customs clearance process was expedited with the help of ICT Projects implemented by the Bureau.	2.75	Neutral
3. It is important to know and be familiar with applications that can be used for virtual work-connected meetings.	2.03	Disagree
4. Need to become resilient in adopting changes in my work environment.	1.94	Disagree
<i>Average Weighted Mean</i>	<i>2.25</i>	<i>Disagree</i>
Transportation of Goods		
5. The IATF (Inter-Agency Task Force) ID issued by the DTI (Department of Trade and Industry) helped to ease the passage of containers containing essential goods at military checkpoints to its designated location.	2.58	Disagree
<i>Average Weighted Mean</i>	<i>2.58</i>	<i>Disagree</i>
Overall Average Weighted Mean	2.42	Disagree

Similarly, transportation-related problems were also rated with disagreement as justified by an average weighted mean of 2.58. Overall, respondents disagreed with statements related to coping strategies for occupation-related problems, as indicated by an overall average weighted mean of 2.42.

Interestingly, among the coping strategies for customs clearance, only statement 2, "The customs clearance process was expedited with the help of ICT projects implemented by the Bureau," received a neutral rating (M=2.75). This may be attributed to the observation that the digitalization of Customs procedures, as highlighted by the World Customs Organization (WCO, 2020a), facilitated the enforcement of social distancing requirements during outbreaks of infectious diseases such as COVID-19. However, transportation-related coping strategies were rated as disagree by the respondents. This indicates a lack of agreement among respondents regarding the use of IATF ID to ease the passage of containers containing essential goods to their designated locations. According to the Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA), utilizing the IATF ID enables a balance between facilitating the operations of companies or agencies during Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) without compromising the health and safety of workers. Despite this, respondents disagreed with the effectiveness of these coping strategies, as reflected in Table 3.

Coping of Customs Brokers on their Personal Challenges. As shown in Table 4, the respondents showed agreement with coping strategies implemented by ports to address

health-related problems, as evidenced by an average weighted mean of 3.45 (agree). Health-related coping strategies received high agreement among respondents, with the workplace providing hand sanitizers or alcohol and hand washing facilities. However, personal protective equipment (PPE) received a neutral rating (M=3.25), indicating that some respondents provided their own PPE. According to the World Customs Organization (WCO, 2020b), it is appropriate for companies or agencies to provide PPE to staff. However, they strongly agreed that they have provided their essentials if the port does not provide them with 4.68 mean (strongly agree). On the other hand, coping strategies for safety-related problems received a neutral rating, with an average weighted mean of 2.68. Conversely, strategies for transportation-related challenges were rated as disagree by respondents, with an average weighted mean of 2.33. Overall, coping strategies for personal-related problems received an average weighted mean of 3.29, interpreted as neutral.

Table 4
Mean Distribution of Personal Coping Strategies of Customs Brokers, (N=30)

PERSONAL-RELATED	Weighted Mean	Descriptive Interpretation
Health		
1. The port has provided the following:		
1.1 Hand sanitizers or alcohol	3.58	Agree
1.2 Handwashing	3.53	Agree
1.3 Personal Protective Equipment (including facemask & face shield)	3.25	Neutral
<i>Average Weighted Mean</i>	<i>3.45</i>	<i>Agree</i>
2. If the port does not provide the essentials needed for this Pandemic, I bring my own:		
2.1 Hand sanitizers or alcohol	4.72	Strongly Agree
2.2 Personal Protective Equipment (including facemask & face shield)	4.64	Strongly Agree
<i>Average Weighted Mean</i>	<i>4.68</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
Safety		
3. The schedules are arranged to limit the number of workers on shift at the same time.	2.39	Disagree
4. The workers are maintaining the physical distance of each within the port and the facilities.	3.00	Neutral
5. The port is strictly following the safety protocol by sanitizing every facility every day.	2.64	Neutral
<i>Average Weighted Mean</i>	<i>2.68</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
Transportation		
6. The company provides shuttle service for the workers, so it helped to go to our workplace.	2.33	Disagree
<i>Average Weighted Mean</i>	<i>2.33</i>	<i>Disagree</i>
Overall Average Weighted Mean	3.29	Neutral

Regarding safety-related challenges, some respondents disagreed with the scheduling arrangements that limit the number of workers on shift at the same time. This suggests difficulties in scheduling arrangements within their workplace. For transportation-related strategies, respondents disagreed with the provided coping strategies. This disagreement may stem from the rigidity of transportation arrangements for customs brokers, as noted by Mark Almase. Additionally, providing shuttle

services, as suggested by Nitin Lahoti, could enhance employee well-being and productivity. However, despite these observations, the overall result for coping strategies for personal-related challenges was neutral, as indicated by the average weighted mean of 3.29.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study had shed light on the challenges faced by customs brokers during the COVID-19 pandemic and the coping strategies they employed. The results indicated that customs clearance procedures using online processes and familiarity with virtual meeting applications were perceived as challenging by the respondents. This suggests that there may be room for improvement in the digitization of customs procedures to facilitate the efficient movement of essential goods. Additionally, transportation-related challenges, such as difficulties in travel due to the lack of personal vehicles, highlight the need for accessible transportation options for customs brokers.

Moreover, the study reveals the importance of implementing effective coping strategies to address these challenges. While coping strategies related to health received high agreement among respondents, with the provision of hand sanitizers and handwashing facilities by ports, safety-related coping strategies were rated neutral. This indicates that there may be variability in the implementation of safety protocols across workplaces. Furthermore, transportation-related coping strategies were rated disagree, suggesting that current transportation arrangements may have not adequately met the needs of customs brokers.

Overall, the study showed the importance of addressing unique challenges faced by customs brokers during the pandemic to ensure the efficient facilitation of essential goods. Enhancing digitization efforts, providing adequate safety measures, and improving transportation options can contribute to mitigating these challenges. Future research could further explore the effectiveness of specific coping strategies and identify additional

measures to support customs brokers in their vital role during times of crisis.

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