



Research Article

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## Unemployment and Innovation in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) during the First Year of COVID-19 Pandemic in Metropolitan Lima, Peru

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### Abstract

*Due to the increase in unemployment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in Metropolitan Lima (Peru), unemployment in 2020 rose to 16.5% (1.3 million unemployed) compared to the previous year. Through innovation, SMEs sought new strategies to continue growing in the highly competitive market, generating labour demand. Therefore, the research question proposed was: How has business innovation favoured the reduction of unemployment in SMEs during the pandemic caused by COVID-19 in Metropolitan Lima? In order to solve this problem, this research developed a qualitative approach using grounded theory. Data was collected by interviewing 17 key subjects, in addition to the observation of 12 businesses between the months of August and October 2021. The results show that the observed businesses that were able to successfully cope with the pandemic had to modify their structure or processes with new sales methods (home delivery), as well as novel promotion and advertising techniques.*

**Keywords:** unemployment; innovation; MSE; COVID-19; Peru

### 1. Introduction

In the period from 2014 to 2019 in Latin America, labour unemployment has increased from 5.6% (2014) to 21.9% (2019), this being the percentage of the population with the lowest per capita income and within this category we have people with an intermediate level of education such as professional technicians or incomplete university education (ECLAC, 2020). This situation has caused small and medium-sized enterprises (hereinafter SMEs) to be active for an average of one year (before closing) and at the same time, to increase their informality levels as far as 86.0%, as detailed in Table 1 (INEI, 2021).

**Table 1:** Estimated labour informality in SMEs, 2017-2019 – Percentages

Business size	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Microenterprise	90.0%	89.4%	89.4%	89.4%	89.8%	92.2%
MSE	83.3%	83.2%	82.6%	82.6%	83.3%	86.0%

In Peru, the concentration of the labour force is concentrated in the SMEs, which are the ones that drive the country's economy (Fernández-Bedoya et al., 2021a). It is worth mentioning that in 2019 most of the employment was in the mining, services, financial and energy sectors with 2.4%, as opposed to the manufacturing, construction and transportation sectors with 22.6%. Likewise, 75% of national employment was concentrated in commerce, services and agriculture (Gamero & Perez, 2020).

In mid-March 2020, health immobility began due to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This generated the temporary closure of SMEs, generating a lack of monetary income for workers in the various productive sectors and also affecting the job search of laid-off collaborators. Data show that 30% of citizens lost their jobs in May and 15% in July. (Quincho, 2021).

ECLAC (2021) mentions that in Latin America 99% of the companies are micro or small enterprises involved in the various commercial sectors, very vulnerable to the immobility measures decreed by the government. The main internal reasons for the failure of micro enterprises were related to the financial system (liquidity and payment of obligations), their management performed (inadequate administration), and the lack of contingency plans (Alvarado et al., 2021).

To cope with what happened, most companies opted for a change of strategy through the virtual mode in marketing, sales, and thus be able to re-enter the market (Concha et al., 2021; Fernández-Bedoya et al., 2021b). However, the remarkable thing about unemployment is that it maintains an inverse relationship with the level of education: in those jobs where direct contact with the customer is required for marketing (usually occupied by personnel with little education) became unnecessary activities. Meanwhile, necessary activities such as health, education, and administrative (considered a priority and exercised by people with high education), were not affected by the temporary closures (Caballero et al., 2020).

In Peru, the group affected by the pandemic includes young people, most of whom work informally (Malpartida et al., 2021). Given this absence of face-to-face work, companies switched to the digital modality, therefore, teleworking became a way out and therefore their employees adapted to the system (Rojas & Bustios, 2021; Suyo-Vega et al., 2022). Thus, SMEs had to adapt to this new market direction, adjust their production and marketing of their final products and services.

In this sense, the following research question was formulated: How has business innovation favoured the reduction of unemployment in SMEs during the pandemic caused by COVID-19 in Metropolitan Lima?

Regarding unemployment, authors Parkin & Loria (2010) mention that its increase generates the loss of production and income, in addition to the loss of human capital, leading to an economic problem. Thus, SMEs that show innovation in production or marketing adapt more quickly to changes in their environment. A previous study (Cruz et al., 2021) showed that 81% of the companies that innovated were more competitive than the 19% that did not innovate; everything happens due to changes originated in the external environment and drives internal changes in the organization such as structure, technology or personnel (Robbins & Coulter, 2014). Finally, Chiavenato (2010) mentions that entrepreneurial initiatives and innovation are important points for a creative process and seeking the growth of the company by improving productivity. This mechanism generates new jobs and should be taken into account by Peruvian companies for their sustainable growth. However, the state should not be oblivious to what has happened, and should generate conditions for business growth and reduce the unemployment rate. The state has the capacity to increase public spending and reduce tax collection, as well as to increase social programs (Chiatchoua et al., 2020); in this way, it will stimulate consumption in families, thus generating a favourable scenario for unemployment in

Peru.

Innovation is the result of a creative process, and this must be converted into products or new work methods (Robbins & Coulter, 2014). Innovation also presents three aspects such as culture, structure and practice of human resources in a company (Porter, 2006), these changes were seen in the Peruvian SMEs, where some managed to adapt or react to the pandemic, modifying strategies in sales service, and the change to virtuality in the education sector. For Hunger & Wheelen (2007) the innovation process presents four categories with respect to its organizational capabilities that interact with its strategy, these being to improve core business, explore strategic advantages, develop new capabilities and create revolutionary modifications (pp. 303 - 304). For microenterprises, the strategies employed were a revolution in the way of acting and thinking of management and workers, in adapting to virtual tools such as mobile applications for sales and promotions of their products.

## 2. Methodology

The method used is grounded theory. According to Vargas (2011), this method means that theories are built from reality itself, with the objective of observation, analysis and reflection of the environment (p. 35), the authors conducted an analysis of unemployment and how innovation provides some contributions to the economic improvement of SMEs.

The collection of information was obtained from SMEs in Metropolitan Lima through the interview technique (17 key subjects) and observation (12 businesses) during the months of August to October 2021. Likewise, bibliographic materials and scientific articles through websites were used as a theoretical basis of information. Also this study presents the descriptive as the level used, due to the study on the factual realities and being characterized by the presentation and interpretation of the results obtained (Tamayo, 2015, p.52). Finally, the design used is non-experimental, according to Hernández et al. (2014) this is characterized by the deliberate non-manipulation of the study variables.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Unemployment in Peru due to COVID-19

Due to the pandemic, microenterprises were affected economically, increasing the unemployment rate. Mankiw (2012) considers this category to include people who worked with a regular salary, have their own business or work for a family member's business; it also takes into account those who were absent due to illness or strike. This resembles SME workers in Peru and SME owners before the pandemic, where people moved to the unemployed scale.

Samuelson & Nordhaus (2010) define it as those who do not present a job or have looked for one within the previous 04 weeks; being available for labour. They show as an indicator the unemployment rate, calculated as the number of unemployed people among the labour force and the labour force is the number of employed people plus the number of unemployed people (Parkin & Loria, 2010, p. 110). For De Gregorio (2012), the unemployment rate is the proportion of inhabitants who want to work but are unemployed. All these characteristics were present in most of the inhabitants of Metropolitan Lima during the pandemic.

In Lima (capital of Peru) before the arrival of COVID-19, the unemployment rate increased to 16.5% between June and August 2020, increasing by 1.3 million people with respect to 2019 (Gamero & Perez, 2020). This generated a reduction in wages and their quality of life. For Blanchard et al. (2012), if the unemployment rate increases then the real wage is reduced, since if company prices increase the real wage appears to be lower (pp. 165-167). If the wage is set above the full employment wage, it will generate unemployment, called classical unemployment (Larrain & Sachs). This reduction in the quality of life is observed in the increase of informal trade in Norte (street vendors). For Andrew & Ben (2004), unemployment presents two costs: one is production, because workers stop receiving

wages due to lack of work and the second is the personal or psychological one reflected by workers, especially when unemployment is a long period. Table 2 shows how the unemployment rate has increased in Metropolitan Lima in 2020 as of April, due to the unsustainability of the companies (INEI, 2021).

**Table 2:** Metropolitan Lima: Unemployment Rate 2012 – 2020

Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2012	7.8%	8.3%	8.7%	8.1%	7.2%	6.3%	6.2%	6.7%	6.6%	6.2%	5.9%	5.6%
2013	6.1%	6.4%	6.4%	5.6%	5.7%	5.8%	6.0%	5.6%	5.9%	5.8%	5.8%	5.7%
2014	6.4%	7.0%	6.9%	6.3%	5.8%	5.7%	5.7%	5.9%	5.6%	5.7%	5.4%	5.6%
2015	6.4%	6.9%	7.0%	6.8%	7.0%	6.8%	6.4%	6.1%	6.4%	5.8%	5.8%	5.7%
2016	6.6%	6.9%	7.2%	7.0%	7.1%	7.0%	7.1%	6.8%	6.5%	6.2%	5.8%	6.2%
2017	7.2%	7.7%	7.7%	6.8%	6.6%	6.9%	7.1%	6.7%	6.4%	6.2%	6.6%	6.5%
2018	7.3%	8.0%	8.1%	7.3%	6.6%	6.2%	6.2%	6.1%	6.2%	6.4%	6.2%	6.1%
2019	6.5%	7.6%	8.2%	7.3%	6.7%	6.3%	6.0%	5.8%	5.8%	6.4%	6.3%	6.1%
2020	6.3%	7.1%	7.8%	9.0%	13.1%	16.3%	16.4%	15.6%	16.5%	16.4%	15.1%	13.8%

The average unemployment rate in 2019 was 6%, increasing to 16.5% in September 2020, causing economic problems and therefore a decrease in the quality of life of families in Metropolitan Lima. The pandemic has increased poverty and has contributed to reduce the economic picture-affecting people's physical and mental health (Caballero et al., 2020).

Employment in companies with less than 10 workers (the smallest) from April to June 2020 was reduced by 66% and companies with more than 50 workers by 37% (Instituto Peruano de Economía, 2020), with this impact being greater in the smallest companies due to the vulnerability and informality that they present in their structure. The informal sector is defined as unincorporated productive units that are not registered with SUNAT. The informal sector contributes 17% to the gross value of production, where the largest share is agriculture and fishing with 84%, followed by restaurants and lodging with 47% and transport and communications with 32%; finally, the construction sector participates with 24% (INEI, 2021).

### 3.2 Increase in SMEs in Metropolitan Lima

During the last decade, an increase in the number of SMEs has been observed in Peru, giving a boost to economic growth and opportunity in search of improving the quality of life. Mostacero (2018) mentions that high unemployment and poverty rates affect economic and social development, in turn, self-employment serves as an alternative, but unfortunately, because it does not meet the necessary conditions it has a short lifetime reaching informality. Another problem for SMEs is the fulfilment of tax obligations, generating an increase in informality and affecting the Peruvian economy, where the tax pressure for 2017 was 12.9% (Tuesta & Espinoza, 2020). Table 3 shows the number of micro, small and medium-sized companies in Peru up to 2019 (Ministerio de la producción, 2022).

**Table 3:** Peru: Evolution of micro, small and medium formal companies

Year	Microenterprise	Small enterprise	Medium enterprise
2012	1,270,009	68,243	2,451
2013	1,439,778	70,708	2,520
2014	1,518,284	71,313	2,635
2015	1,607,305	72,664	2,712
2016	1,652,071	74,085	2,621
2017	1,836,848	60,702	2,034

Year	Microenterprise	Small enterprise	Medium enterprise
2018	2,130,127	79,143	2,711
2019	2,292,250	82,057	2,937
2020	1,703,745	73,623	2,749

The creation of Microenterprises has been increasing from 2012 to 2019 by 80.49%, small enterprises by 20.24%, and medium enterprises only increased by 19.83%. These three types of companies cover approximately 59% of the economically active employed population, which is why the state considers them as employment generating companies (Ministerio de la producción, 2020). For Peru, the formation of microenterprises supports its potential source of employment generation, however, in the year 2020 in the midst of the pandemic, a reduction of 25.7% was observed according to Table 4, where it directly affected people with low economic resources and generated an increase in business informality. On the other hand, the number of companies that were deregistered in the first quarter of 2021 compared to 2020 was 904 in Metropolitan Lima.

Among the companies that were deregistered, there was a predominance of businesses of natural persons, where in the first quarter of 2020 there were 8169 and in the same quarter of 2021, there were 3670 businesses (See Table 4), due to the weak and late reaction to the effects of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 (INEI, 2021).

**Table 4:** Metropolitan Lima and Callao, new and deregistered companies by legal organization, 2020 – 2021

Legal organization	Companies registered			Companies unregistered		
	2020 – Q1	2021 – Q1	Percentage	2020 – Q1	2021 – Q1	Percentage
Natural person with business	38552	42745	62.1 %	17760	7970	98.5 %
Corporation	10302	11793	17.1 %	5320	38	0.5 %
Civil society	244	161	0.3 %	173	22	0.3 %
Limited liability commercial company	1709	1653	2.4 %	1043	6	0.1 %
Limited liability sole proprietorship.	8074	9568	13.9 %	3807	10	0.1 %
Associations	1698	1875	2.7 %	1677	5	0.1 %
Others	909	1016	1.5 %	404	36	0.4 %
Total	61488	68811	100 %	30184	8087	100 %

### 3.3 Entrepreneurial innovation in SMEs in Metropolitan Lima as a response to unemployment by COVID-19

As an alternative for growth, companies innovate. This means realizing new ideas in products, strategies or working methods more efficiently with creativity in mind (Robbins & Coulter, 2014), which is not used fully in Peruvian SMEs. In turn, innovation implies that organizations systematically observe internal or external variations or changes and see these as opportunities (Drucker, 2002).

Some microenterprises have opted to develop new products, enter new markets or seek new commercial relationships to maintain sales growth in the face of difficulties; this is called product management (Chase et al., 2009). Organizations opt for new strategies such as structural and organizational change to improve processes and continue to compete in their local or international environment (Segundo & Janqui, 2021).

In the case of entrepreneurs in Metropolitan Lima, they opted for the use of social networks for advertising (marketing) and home delivery, they adapted to payment methods using their mobile devices. In countries with high rates of entrepreneurship, strategies focus on digital marketing in promotion and sales, adapting to consumer needs such as easy payments using mobile applications (Abad et al, 2022).

For the authors Valencia & Duche (2019) there is a high correlation between management

innovation and competitive success in companies, this should drive innovation in organizations in either processes, marketing, product or technological position to be accepted by consumers. Therefore, in the face of the pandemic, managers must seek ways to change strategies totally or partially (with respect to a certain area) to face the changes presented in the environment (Acuña, 2021; García et al, 2021) and thus improve business competitiveness.

Given the current situation, the Peruvian state cannot be oblivious to the problem, it has to present supports to promote business innovation such as the Innóvate Perú program, which promotes the social, economic and health reactivation of the country and is aimed at both SMEs and large companies (Ministerio de la Producción, 2022).

#### 4. Conclusion

Metropolitan Lima is known for its diversity of entrepreneurs, which in the years prior to the pandemic caused by COVID-19 has been on the rise. In the face of the pandemic, these microenterprises were affected, even closing their activities, all due to their reduced capital, financing and low business knowledge. The reduction of enterprises then led to an increase in unemployment and informality, reducing the quality of life of the affected people and small entrepreneurs.

Other SMEs bet on innovation, modifying their process structure and adding new sales and promotion methods. These SMEs saw the health crisis as an opportunity in the face of the lack of supply for families, introducing advertising strategies (taking advantage of social networks), sales, and delivery of products through cellular devices and online payment methods. Thus, they favored the creation of new jobs such as motorized delivery personnel.

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