



Assessing changes in human resource management to achieve strategic objectives during COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted humanity both in a negative and positive way. This study is important seeing that this pandemic has caused mayhem to livelihoods and organisations and presents challenges as well as offering some deep thinking for business leaders and departments of human resources to change the way they do business and live their personal life amid the pandemic. In most organisations, strategic human resource management has always been very important for the success of their businesses. This is so because it concerns the vertical alignment and relationship between functions and components of people management and the strategy of the business with the goal to empower human resources so that they can perform in the manner that is headed towards achieving the strategic needs of the organisation.

The researchers chose a qualitative research approach so that direct responses could be obtained from participants. A descriptive qualitative research design guided the study. This design is meant to obtain information in a way that helps the researcher to systematically deal with the current study by helping to answer the what, when, where as well as the how questions with regards to the research problem, as opposed to answering only the why question.

Key words: COVID-19 pandemic, disaster, Human Resources Management, recruitment processes and policies, strategic objectives.

Introduction and Problem Statement

In as far as strategy is concerned, the HRM unit is the connection between occupations and components of human resource management and the organisational strategy as well as establishing uniformity within the organisation. The main purpose is to effectively utilise human resources to serve the strategic needs of the organisation (Navío-Marco, Solórzano-García, & Palencia-González, 2019). As far as COVID-19 and its accompanying crises are concerned, there is a need to establish the impact that the pandemic has had on livelihoods, be it negative or positive. What

this pandemic has brought about is that it now challenges and offers some deep thinking for business leaders including the human resource management departments to change the way they do business and live personal life amid the pandemic. Organisations have been affected and are even cutting on performance management because of difficulties in measuring performance and disruptions in performance-based pay due to the COVID-19 crisis (Aguinisa & Burgi-Tianb, 2020).

Prasad and Vaidya (2020) point out that there are factors accompanying the COVID-19 pandemic which have a significant impact on how employees carry out their tasks because of workplace isolation and lack of communication. This then calls for managers and human resources management departments to understand how and what is required to manage employees working remotely (Aitken-Fox et al., 2020b).

Research Objective

- To assess how human resource management changed during the COVID-19 pandemic time.

Main Research Question

How did the human resource management function change to ensure that the strategic objective in a large private company is achieved during the COVID-19 time?

Sub-questions

- What has been the change in staffing needs during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How have the working conditions changed concerning health and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic time?
- How have the psychological challenges of staff changed during the COVID-19 pandemic era?
- What have been the changes in performance management during the COVID-19 pandemic time?

Literature Review

The literature review of any research work is a vital component linking the research to what already exists in the environs of the study. Also, a review of the literature provides direction to the research study being undertaken. A good grasp of literature terrain helps researchers to fill a gap in pre-existing research (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smith, 2004). As Attansason, Mpofu, Gitchel and Elias (2012) put it, a good literature review makes the researcher aware of what has already been researched on the subject thereby ensuring a better understanding of the research question. Recent literary studies by Asfahani (2024); Haque (2023), as well as by Garcia-Fernandez et al (2024), all present strategic and novel contributions to the field of HRM during the covid-19 era. Among these literary works, Zaman (2023) stands out by presenting a holistic view of pandemic-era strategic

HRM dynamics or shifts, including agility, technology adoption, onboarding, and how these have permanently changed the HRM landscape from how it was known previously, but still aligning with business strategy. This research joins many others as it forms part of a logical post-pandemic HRM discourse.

The nature of employment relationships during COVID-19

Budd and Bhawe (2010) define an employment relationship as the link between a worker and an employer through which individuals sell their labor power, and in return, the employer provides compensation. COVID-19 presented challenges for workers and employers (Biasi, 2020; Sagan & Schüller, 2020) to fully nourish this relationship due to imposed lockdowns and closures of businesses. COVID-19 transformed workplace relationships from traditional formats (Leighton & McKeown, 2020; Spark & Straub, 2020) to virtual workspaces and working-from-home (WFH).

Globally, including in South Africa, working conditions had to be adapted and aligned to organisations' strategies aimed at fighting the pandemic. This included social distancing in the workplace, compulsory hand sanitation, wearing of masks, as well as all necessary Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). To mitigate the new challenges imposed by COVID-19 and new global health protocols and regimes for its containment, new skills were learned to ensure business continuity. Organisations had to respond quickly to learn new skills, especially technological ones so that the business would continue amid the pandemic and have employees stay employed. These skills included performing most of the functions online, such as leave management, performance management, and many more.

Overtime, working remotely, and the hybrid model

Overtime suddenly became very key in the operations of many organisations as there were shortages at times, due to some employees having been positively diagnosed with COVID-19. This led to work and productivity suffering, thereby requiring other employees to work overtime to close the gap. In compliance with COVID-19 protocols, some employees were requested to work from home and report performance and production online while reporting to offices or workplaces on certain days in the week.

COVID-19 and the disruption of performance assessment

The pandemic proved that it was very difficult to manage performance and achievements using the traditional way. Managers and supervisors had to come up with adjusted strategies to manage performance and assess achievements during the pandemic.

Organisations were affected and even had to cut back performance management processes and procedures because of difficulties in measuring performance and disruptions in calculating performance-based pay due to the COVID-19 crisis (Aguinisa & Burgi-Tianb, 2020). Prasad and Vaidya (2020) point out that there are factors brought on by the COVID-19 virus which have a huge influence on the performance of employees due to workplace isolation and lack of

communication. Thus, it called for managers and human resources management departments to understand how to manage employees working remotely (Aitken-Fox et al., 2020b).

Effects of COVID-19 on staffing in an organisation

According to Ployhart (2006), staffing refers to the process of attracting, selecting, and retaining competent individuals to achieve organisational goals. That granted, it now appears that the impact of COVID-19 negatively reshaped the process of staffing in all organisations (Campello, Kankanhalli, & Muthukrishnan, 2020). Most industries were severely impacted and experienced a sharp decline in their business (Giupponi & Landais, 2020). This led to some organisations temporarily closing shop (Bartik, et al., 2020), while other industries saw their business flourishing during the pandemic (Giupponi & Landais, 2020).

Due to COVID-19, organisations literally changed and adapted working conditions by having to either work from home (WFH) or even do shift work, to ensure that they are not out of business (Aitken-Fox et al., 2020a, 2020b; Gourinchas, 2020; Koirala & Acharya, 2020). Thus, they found new ways and opportunities to run business (Leonardi, 2020), more particularly, non-manufacturing organisations (Gourinchas, 2020). However, deploying mechanisms to sustain business and keep jobs did not quite prevent most people from losing their jobs due to the COVID-19 outbreak (Blustein et al., 2020; Elsafty & Ragheb, 2020). Thus, HR departments had to be consistently focused and adapt accordingly (Bartik et al., 2020).

COVID-19 dictated creative ways of doing work. It enhanced the creativity of managers and HR departments and facilitated a shift from traditional face-to-face socialisation methods to virtual ones (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). It helped maintain staffing levels within the organisation while respecting physical distancing measures. HR managers were now forced to ensure that all employees working from home had the tools they needed to do their jobs, are properly monitored through all kinds of systems, and were working according to their obligations (Aitken-Fox et al., 2020b; Hamche, 2020). In addition, HR departments needed to support inexperienced line managers leading remote teams (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, & Zimmermann, 2020).

With this pandemic, organisations were not only facing COVID-19 in the physical sense, but they were also posing significant risks to the mental health of individuals (Brooks et al., 2020). Employees were working remotely and feeling more isolated as they were torn between work and personal life (Prasad & Vaidya, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations were always short-staffed. With employees getting infected, and having to either isolate or quarantine, sometimes recruiters were faced with the restrictions of not being able to conduct face-to-face interviews, and maintaining social distancing (Giupponi & Landais, 2020). As a result, all human resource management departments had to quickly learn how to use virtual recruitment and selection methods (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Maurer, 2020) which brought its own challenges relating to the use of ICTs.

Management of employee compensation during COVID-19

Remuneration management refers to the internal and external rewards that employees receive for completing their work, both monetary, such as base salary and all kinds of bonuses, and employee perks, including non-financial rewards (Martocchio, 2017). Literature attests that the level of compensation can affect employee motivation, which is not only for performance (Safuan & Kurnia, 2021, Sembiring et al., 2020) but also for employee retention (Elsafy & Ragheb, 2020) purposes in an organisation.

In managing compensation, managers and human resource management departments might face a few challenges regarding the level of risks posed by the pandemic in their respective organisations, that is, whether the level of compensation offered to employees is commensurate with the level of risk that the employees encounter daily (Hecker, 2020).

COVID-19 and the implications of new technology in the workplace

New technology supports workplace safety and health. During a raging pandemic, ICTs helped with the implementation of decisions to keep employees at home and protect them from the risk of infection, ensuring that they were not lost to the organisation. (Gao, et al 2020). Organisations looked at new ways of handling their HRM practices (Przytuła, Strzelec & Krysińska-Kościńska, 2020) and used Artificial Intelligence (AI) in their HR departments as automation proved to be an effective tool to prevent disruption to operational and management practices while ensuring physical distancing and employee protection (Devyania et al., 2020).

With the above suggestions, Lund et al. (2021) stated that to increase organisational operational flexibility and agility; managers and human resource departments needed to emphasise the necessary tasks and activities related to work rather than the overall work. Lund et al. (2021) added that these interventions must aim not only to reduce costs associated with recruitment but also to have a positive impact on employee motivation and retention.

Performance management systems had to be adjusted and reviewed to adapt performance objectives to new organisational and employee realities. HR managers had to proactively deal with any thought of quitting the organisation. Managers, assisted by human resource management departments needed to provide continuous feedback that helped to gauge any success during the new normal (Ngoc Su et al., 2021), and prevent possible dissatisfaction and conflicts and instead promote organisational flexibility, agility, and employee motivation and retention.

Develop new IT skills for workers

As the COVID-19 pandemic posed serious challenges to organisations, employees had to undergo training in information, communication, and technologies (ICTs) to acquire new ICT skills and adapt to doing business in a new environment. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced work schedules for different groups of employees, and non-pharmaceutical safety measures such as physical distancing and wearing protective masks which made physical presence in the workplace

effective (Akbarpour et al., 2020). Rapid reskilling, which involved learning new skills required for a completely different job environment was introduced (Greer & Payne, 2014) as a way of adjusting the organisation's operations to suit the demands of the COVID-19 operational environment.

Changing leadership, management competencies and a culture of trust

The role of organisational leaders is critical in any change process. It is, therefore, suggested that management within organisations should critically consider implementing training to improve leadership and management skills to meet the current challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020).

The promotion of honestly sharing one another's feelings, conducting open communication, and listening to others without laying any judgment or blame while disagreeing with others respectfully (Budd & Bhawe, 2010) were upheld. Creation of agile workplaces based on the belief that work is an activity, not a place, became key. Thus, agile work is about bringing people, processes, connectivity, technology, time, and place together to find the most appropriate and effective way of working to accomplish a specific task (Hamouche, 2020).

Increased absenteeism and withdrawal behaviors

Absenteeism refers to a worker's habitual absence from work, usually intentionally and without good reason. Continued absenteeism, especially if it was a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, was costly to employers. Job losses due to COVID-19 reduced company productivity. The cost of COVID-19 absenteeism in the organisation led to both financial and productive waste. Organisations needed to adopt strategies to reduce the loss of productivity and negative economic impact of COVID-19 and improve human resource management during the pandemic (Dayour et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic and outbreak response strategies deployed in organisations, including those studied, significantly disrupted daily operations (Kniffin, 2021). This situation ultimately led to fatigue, headaches, burnout, anxiety, turnover, reduced productivity, increased costs, and increased risk of accidents, incidents, and injuries. The outbreak presented psychological impacts on the mental health of employees, increasing their intention to leave. Additionally, concerns about worker health and emotional distress were consistently raised by employees in relation to the pandemic and outbreak responses (Blake et al., 2020).

The impact of COVID-19 on staff training and career development

The sudden onset of the global health crisis caused by COVID-19 disrupted organisational work patterns around the world, especially employee learning and development. Mandates to transition employees to work from home made it impossible to offer in-person or classroom-based skills training for them. Many businesses had to implement or expand their online business models.

Demand for digital skills training increased, and lockdown-related restrictions significantly changed how organisations trained their employees.

The normal way through which we work and learn was seriously impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in unprecedented ways. Remote meetings and training for reorienting employees to become familiar with the new procedures had to be instituted. It helped raise awareness about COVID-19 and reduced the risk of spreading the virus and prevented mental health problems caused by the struggle to cope with the ongoing persistence of the pandemic (Quedackers et al., 2020).

According to Przytuła, Strzelec, and Krysińska-Kościańska (2020), forced virtual work demands that organisations put in place such as programs to reskill and upskill their competencies, were necessitated by dynamic times of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). All of this led to global feelings of anxiety and fear.

HR's compelling new role in response to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic caused tremendous disruption to human lives and businesses. Human Resources (HR) is key to supporting organisations and accelerating change in the workplace. Organisations need to rethink, rethink, and rethink how they develop, serve, and empower their organisations through positive HR strategies to deliver the most engaging work experience (Forbes, 2020). Topics on positive HR strategies are complex and include employee support, leadership development, compensation and benefits, shifts, and strategic partnerships across the organisation.

Social capital, diversity, equity, and inclusion

People need to feel a sense of community, common purpose, and camaraderie. Social capital is the goodwill, friendships, connections, and shared understanding that allows us to work together most effectively. Talent plays a role in helping organisations build and maintain social capital among their employees. The pandemic disproportionately impacted different population groups, and again HR had a role to play to ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Change in staffing needs during the COVID-19 pandemic

Work is part of life, and fulfilling life includes opportunities to contribute to worthwhile endeavors through work. The pandemic expanded empathy for work life, and this view renewed opportunities to offer flexible work, childcare, and additional work-life options. Work-life balance and mental health need to be considered concurrently. No two lives are the same, and balance has a different meaning for each person. How to achieve it must support options for where employees work, when they work, and even the extent of support in their home office with furniture and ergonomic solutions. HR helped to drive new and expanded approaches to supporting working life (Bower, 2020).

Changes to working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ensuring health and safety at work is a very important issue. Companies that invest in workplace safety achieve better performance, lower turnover, and help their employees work more effectively. COVID-19 forced businesses to act quickly and decisively to keep their employees safe. As employers struggled to slow the spread of the virus while maintaining a supportive and productive work environment, they had to adapt new business processes and address existing gaps (Watkins, 2022). From social distancing practices to the availability of remote work, the pandemic figuratively stripped away the masks that mask flaws in organisational working conditions (Watkins, 2022).

COVID-19 changed assumptions about worker safety, health, and well-being and accelerated the resolution of these issues. The pandemic also highlighted typical social issues faced by workers, such as childcare, sick leave, and disability issues, as well as medical safety concerns that require specialist treatment.

Research Methodology

Population

The population is about 50 employees at an organisation in South Africa, at various levels of employment and in different departments, namely executive management, line management, supervisors, drivers, cleaners, and messengers. These are the employees who hold positions such as departmental heads, line managers and supervisors, directors, and senior executives.

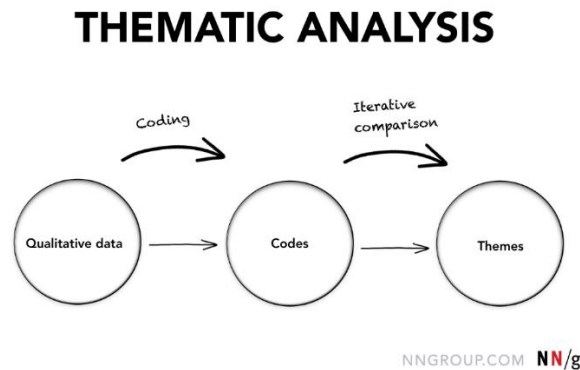
Sample method/technique and size

In research, a sample is a group of people, things, or items taken from a large population for measurement (participants for this study were selected using the stratified purposive sampling technique, which is also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, in which researchers rely on their own judgment when choosing members of the population to participate in their surveys (Bhattacharjee, 2012). This technique was chosen because it is one of the most cost-effective and time-efficient sampling methods available. The researchers identified and selected a limited number of information-rich worker categories as primary data sources that could contribute to their research.

Data collection instruments, coding, and analysis

Data collection is the gathering of participants' thoughts, opinions and beliefs about certain topics. This study used a semi-structured interview guide to collect data from participants. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, the researchers could not physically visit participants. Pre-prepared questions were sent by email to the participants and data were collected on the ZOOM platform in video and audio format which were later transcribed and stored as script. Transcribed

data were coded, and categories, sub-themes, and themes emerged from the data (Bryman, 2012) followed by a qualitative thematic analysis with the identity of participants anonymised.



Source: Rozala, 2022.

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to systematically organise and analyse complex data sets; it is a search for themes that can capture the narratives in the available data sets, and it involves the identification of themes through careful reading and re-reading of the transcribed data (King, 2004; Rice & Ezzy, 1999). A rigorous thematic analysis approach can produce insightful and trustworthy findings (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). Dawadi (2020) comments that this thematic analysis approach, due to its accessibility, transparency and flexibility, renders the analysis more valid.

Ethical consideration

Participants were made aware of their rights and privileges in the research, through signing a prior informed consent form (Bryman, 2012) which made them understand that participation was voluntary. Furthermore, assurance was given regarding the anonymity of the use of data, and that it would be used only for academic purposes.

Presentation of Results

Theme 1: Changes in HRM function and strategic objectives during COVID-19.

P05: *“Human resource management had to switch to remote working conditions in order to achieve their objective.”*

P11: *“... however, some HR functions (staff performance and leave management for example) were conducted online, as compared to the pre-COVID-19 period.”*

P07: *“By moving away from using traditional way of communicating to staff to virtual meetings... interviews are held virtually.”*

P02: *...staff working in open plan offices had to take turns working from home ...staff medical profiling took place to reduce exposure to those that are vulnerable (co-morbidities and above 55yrs).*

Theme 2: Staffing needs change due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

P02: *"New employees were appointed for short-staffed departments."*

P05: *"To keep workers productive training is necessary to improve service delivery in the new working conditions".*

P14: *"Staff members were no longer reporting on duty daily but on alternate days...leading to performance dropping."*

Theme 3: Health and safety conditions in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic time.

P05: *"Different working hours and rotation was introduced so that departments can function at 50% capacity for health and safety reasons."*

P06: *"...the wearing of masks was compulsory, social distancing, sanitizing, and hand washing were compulsory."*

Theme 4: Psychological challenges of staff changed during the COVID-19 pandemic era

P02: *"Bereavement, isolation, and fear are triggering mental health conditions or exacerbating existing ones."*

P02 had this to say: *"I was in serious distress seeing how some of my colleagues just perished, rendering service from same service point I'm based at"*

P06: *"Many were feeling stressed and had drinking and eating disorder."*

P11: *"... An increased level of stress, anxiety, clinical depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder...amongst others"*

Observation and Analysis

The management of the organisation as well as of the human resource were mindful of the negative impact that could affect the pursuit of the strategic objective of the company given the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying restrictions and effects as discussed in verbatim by P05, P11, P07, and P02. The organisation had to adapt its policies and its implementation of key functions like recruitment and training to ensure the successful achievement of the set objectives. In doing so, the organisation moved slightly away from its normal ways of staffing. Recruitment processes were relaxed in line with efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19. This was in line with International Labor Organization prescripts for containment of the pandemic. Although similar studies have been carried out on the impact of COVID-19 on HRM practices, most have focused on immediate or short-term solutions to navigate this pandemic. This study presents

significant novelty by presenting how HRM practices have been significantly and permanently altered since the onset of COVID-19. Recruitment, training, workforce agility and even organisational culture-were all permanently affected, as most practices shifted to online modalities (ILO, 2020)

In addition, how people report for duty and carry out their tasks became more flexible in that some employees, more particularly managers, were given resources to work with and attend meetings from home. Technological platforms to accommodate the current situation of the pandemic, like online training, online recruitment, online employee self-service, and many more were created, to ensure, in the process, compliance with COVID-19 protocols and regulations.

Secondly, employees noted that certain staffing needs had to be adapted to accommodate the disaster of the pandemic, lest the organisation got negatively affected. The traditional way of conducting training, skills assessments, refresher courses and workshops for the employees had to go strictly online. In this way, this study stands out in that it indicated beyond reasonable doubt that the pandemic accelerated HR digitalisation, AI-driven recruitment as well as e-learning in place of face-to-face training or refresher courses. Where employees were getting infected and falling sick, even getting exhausted as they began to be overworked, the organisation, instead of putting aside a budget to supplement its workforce by physically employing additional people, had the choice of choosing virtual onboarding.

Thirdly, to ensure the continued health and safety of the employees during COVID-19, the organisation, in line with COVID-19 protocols and regulations, (see verbatim P05 and P06 above), imposed restrictions of movements in the workplace, introduced technological means like online pay slips, online signing of payments by cost center managers, paid more attention to the promotion of good health and hygiene through regular hand washing, sanitising and provision of PPE. In addition, the organisation had to investigate and introduce a more flexible way of doing work like staff rotation to decongest the workplace.

Fourthly, it is evidently notable that there has been a shift in psychological effects on staff during the COVID-19 pandemic era. The employees feared getting infected by the virus as evident in verbatims from theme 4 by participants P02, P06, and P13. Employees struggled to deal with the thought of dying from the coronavirus as they witnessed the death of some of their own colleagues and the effect of the images of death on electronic media platforms. As they battled with the fear, they experienced heightened stress and anxiety, while depression and nervousness became the order of the day. This study corroborates findings by Lee (2021) who investigated changes in workplace practices during the COVID-19 pandemic where the roles of emotion, psychological safety, and organisation support during the pandemic were discussed. Findings by Nguyen (2020) show that managers and human resources professionals who were inexperienced in working-from-home (WFH) practices, had to learn to lead, motivate and interact with their employees in new ways. Nguyen (2020) further highlighted that managers were subjected to using remote monitoring, time-tracking systems, and other surveillance tools to monitor employees'

productivity. As supervisors were unable to see their subordinates at work, pervasive tracking such as giving more work, requiring work reports, or calling for daily meetings became ways to manage employees in the WFH setting. Fifthly and lastly, the organisation needed to act swiftly to counteract the negative effects that COVID-19 could have on the performance management of the employees, and that of the organisation in general. There was a need for adaptation to change and the introduction of new ways to enhance the evidently declining performance and, of course, the drop in service delivery by strengthening training on performance whilst guarding against absenteeism.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that many changes were effected and incorporated into how the HRM department of this organisation was to achieve its strategic goals during the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes were guided by policy documents that had been promulgated at the UN, WHO and ILO levels. The organisation also made use of guidelines in the Disaster Management Act for crafting safer workplace practices meant to curb the spread of the corona virus in the workplace. Safe practices such as the wearing of face masks, regular washing and/or sanitisation of hands and social distancing practices were adopted. For the organisation to achieve its objectives, work from home was also adopted; reskilling and greater use of ICTs in HRM functions were introduced. As a recommendation, the organisation needs to accelerate the digital transformation of its HR Functions, such as investing in HR technology platforms for activities such as digital onboarding, e-recruitment, as well as providing advanced digital literacy to their HR personnel so that they can efficiently manage their hybrid teams and ensure effective virtual HR management throughout the organisation.

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