

An Empirical Study Of Reshaping Human Resource Practices And The Impact Of Covid-19 On Organizational Strategies

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly reshaped organizational dynamics worldwide influencing human resource practices, employee well-being, and workforce management strategies. This study explores the impact of COVID-19 on organizational strategies, focusing on human resource practices, employee well-being, and workforce management in Lusaka District, Zambia. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study combines qualitative and quantitative research methods. A sample of 150 employees and 10 HR managers was selected using stratified random sampling for employees and purposive sampling for HR managers from various organizations in Lusaka District. Data collection utilized structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to gather comprehensive insights. The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics with SPSS software, while the qualitative data underwent thematic analysis using Excel for coding and organization. The findings reveal that organizations responded to the pandemic by adopting remote work strategies, implementing digital transformation initiatives, and revising HR policies to enhance flexibility and support employee well-being. While many organizations reported increased productivity and improved work-life balance, challenges such as inadequate digital infrastructure, limited employee engagement, and rising stress levels were also evident. The study recommends that organizations invest in robust digital infrastructure, strengthen employee engagement and well-being programs, particularly mental health support, and develop flexible HR policies adaptable to future crises. Additionally, fostering digital literacy and remote work readiness across all sectors is crucial for enhancing organizational resilience and sustaining productivity in the post-pandemic era.

Key Word: *Human, Management, Digital, Remote, Organization.*

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I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and far-reaching effect on businesses worldwide, forcing organizations to rapidly adapt to an environment of uncertainty and disruption. With the onset of global lockdowns, social distancing measures, and constantly evolving government regulations, the business landscape underwent drastic changes. Amidst these challenges, the role of Human Resource Management (HRM) became even more pivotal, with HR leaders tasked with navigating the complexities of employee well-being, business continuity, and workforce management in a newly virtual and often isolated world (Deloitte, 2020). The pandemic highlighted the essential role of HR in ensuring that organizations not only survived the crisis but also thrived by rethinking workforce management practices, from recruitment to employee engagement. One of the most notable transformations that occurred in response to the pandemic was the widespread shift to remote working. According to the International Labour Organization (2020), over 70% of organizations globally adopted remote work strategies as an immediate response to the pandemic. While this transition allowed organizations to continue operations despite physical distancing measures, it presented numerous challenges. Maintaining productivity, fostering engagement, and supporting the mental and emotional well-being of employees working from home became urgent concerns. As remote work became the norm, HRM practices had to evolve rapidly to address the challenges of virtual work environments. HR leaders were no longer just focused on traditional functions such as hiring and training; they were also tasked with ensuring that employees felt supported in balancing their professional and personal lives. The pandemic placed a strain on employees' well-being, with many struggling to manage the blurred boundaries between work and home life, heightened stress, and a sense of isolation due to the lack of in-person interaction. This called for HR departments to rethink how to manage employee engagement and performance in a distributed workforce while addressing concerns related to burnout and mental health.

II. Material And Methods

This study will analyze the literatures related to the study and induce the finding of the impact of COVID-19 on HRM practices on organizational strategies. A comprehensive review is focused on the impact of COVID-19 on human resource practices, organizational strategies, employee well-being, and workforce management

III. Empirical Review

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about rapid changes in the global workforce, compelling organizations to adopt new human resource management (HRM) practices, rethink organizational strategies, and place heightened emphasis on employee well-being. The crisis caused a widespread shift toward remote work and virtual teams, disrupting traditional office-based employment models. In response, HR departments had to adjust their practices to support a workforce that faced unprecedented challenges, including work-life balance issues, isolation, and concerns about job security (Armstrong, 2021). Gigauri (2020) highlights that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digitalization in HRM, emphasizing the importance of digital tools in maintaining work-life balance and supporting remote work environments.

Globally, the pandemic accelerated the digital transformation of HRM practices. Organizations increasingly relied on digital tools for recruitment, performance management, employee engagement, and communication (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016). The need for technology-driven HR solutions became more apparent, as remote working required robust digital platforms to maintain organizational efficiency and support employees' needs.

In Zambia, as in many other countries, the transition to remote work presented significant challenges, particularly in sectors reliant on face-to-face interactions (Zambia Statistics Agency, 2021). Despite these challenges, the pandemic also provided an opportunity for organizations to embrace technology and reshape their HR strategies for the future. The shift to remote work, while beneficial in many ways, also raised concerns related to employee well-being, including stress, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction. Several studies have explored the impact of COVID-19 on HR practices and employee well-being across different contexts. A study highlighted the struggles of organizations in maintaining employee engagement and performance during the transition to remote work. They found that the shift to remote work resulted in a decline in employee productivity and increased stress due to blurred work-life boundaries.

Global Studies

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly transformed human resource management (HRM) practices across various organizational contexts. A study conducted in Portugal titled COVID-19 and People Management: The View of Human Resource Managers aimed to document the changes in HRM practices resulting from the pandemic and to explore HR managers' outlook for the future. The research employed an exploratory design with a mixed-methods analysis, involving 136 Portuguese companies. Data were collected through surveys completed by HR managers. The study found that the main changes occurred in work and safety processes, training, work organization, recruitment and selection, induction and onboarding, and communication. The level of change was associated with the size of the organization. There was an increase in the use of teleworking and layoffs, and HR managers reported a positive assessment of their organizations' preparation and adaptation to the crisis. The study concluded that HR managers played a crucial role in adapting organizations to the challenges posed by the pandemic, with a significant shift towards digital HR practices. It recommended that organizations continue to invest in digital HR tools and maintain flexible work arrangements to enhance resilience in future crises. This study highlights the need for further research on the long-term impacts of digital HR practices and the role of HR managers in crisis management, areas that this study aims to explore in the Zambian context (Lopes et al., 2021).

Similarly, a study from Saudi Arabia titled Adapting Human Resources Management to Global Health Crises: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic aimed to analyze how HR policies and practices in Saudi Arabia adapted to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study involved interviews with 18 HR professionals from various organizations in Saudi Arabia. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes. Five main themes emerged: impact on HR policies and procedures, adaptive strategies and resilience, challenges and obstacles, employee engagement and productivity, and lessons learned. Key findings included rapid transitions to remote work, increased use of digital tools, and a focus on employee well-being. The study concluded that HR departments in Saudi Arabia demonstrated resilience and adaptability in response to the pandemic, emphasizing the importance of flexibility and clear communication. It recommended that organizations invest in digital infrastructure, prioritize employee well-being, and develop flexible HR policies to better prepare for future crises. This study provides insights into the HR adaptations in a Middle Eastern context, offering comparative perspectives for this study, which focuses on Zambia (Alshammari, 2023).

In Bangladesh, the study titled Remote Work and Changes in Organizational HR Practices During the Corona Pandemic aimed to examine the changes in HR practices in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic,

with a focus on remote work. The study utilized a quantitative approach, surveying employees across various organizations in Bangladesh. The study found that organizations rapidly adopted remote work policies, leading to changes in recruitment, training, and performance management practices. Challenges included technological limitations and resistance to change. The study concluded that while remote work offered flexibility, it also posed challenges related to technology and organizational culture. It recommended that organizations invest in digital infrastructure and provide training to employees and managers to effectively manage remote work. This study highlights the challenges faced by organizations in developing countries, which this study aims to explore within the Zambian context (Shahriar et al., 2022).

Amankwah-Amoah et al. (2021) found that SMEs faced paradoxical challenges during COVID-19, balancing survival needs with workforce management demands. Similarly, Caligiuri et al. (2020) emphasized that global HR strategies required unprecedented flexibility to address pandemic-induced disruptions.

Beirne et al. (2022) found that Irish organizations adapted HR practices by enhancing digital communication tools and flexible work arrangements, providing insights relevant to Zambia's urban contexts. Similarly, Contreras et al. (2020) explored e-leadership's role in facilitating teleworking, underscoring the need for adaptive leadership strategies during crises.

Regional Studies

Regionally, empirical work conducted in Ghana adds significant depth to the understanding of HRM transformations during the pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa. A study titled *Employee Perception of Electronic Human Resource Management and COVID-19 Restrictions in Public Organizations: The Experience of Ghana Revenue Authority* focused specifically on the Ghana Revenue Authority. The aim was to assess employee perceptions of electronic human resource management (e-HRM) practices adopted during the lockdown and restricted work periods. Employing a qualitative research design, the study used interviews to gather data directly from employees, thus capturing experiential insights. Results showed a mixed reception to the e-HRM rollout; while some employees appreciated the increased flexibility and streamlined workflows, others reported frustrations stemming from inadequate digital access and limited technical support. These findings reflect the persistent digital divide in many African countries, particularly between urban and rural areas, and highlight the uneven capacity of public organizations to adopt and sustain digital solutions. The study concluded that e-HRM systems could be beneficial in enhancing efficiency and reducing bureaucracy but required significant investments in ICT infrastructure and human capital development. It recommended targeted training and resource allocation to bridge the digital gap. Notably, the study's focus on a single public institution limits its applicability to private sector contexts or SMEs, which are predominant in Zambia. This current study aims to extend the conversation by including multiple organizational types in the Zambian setting, thereby capturing a broader spectrum of HRM adaptations and challenges (Abane et al., 2023).

Although conducted outside of Africa, the study titled *The Influence of the Labour Market and COVID-19 on Human Resource Practices in SMEs in China* provides crucial comparative insights relevant to developing economies. This longitudinal qualitative research involved interviews with owners and HR managers from 52 Chinese SMEs before and after the pandemic. The study aimed to explore how the pandemic reshaped perceptions of labor markets and influenced HR strategies in response to increased uncertainty. A key finding was the shift from general labor shortages to specialized talent shortages, accompanied by a growing emphasis on flexible and efficiency-oriented HR practices. Furthermore, the research documented geographical disparities in access to talent and resources, reinforcing the challenges of HRM in unevenly developed regions. The conclusion emphasized the necessity for SMEs to adopt flexible and adaptive HR strategies to enhance organizational resilience. Recommendations included upskilling programs to nurture specialized talent and policy incentives to support SME adaptation. While China differs significantly from Zambia in terms of scale and economic structure, the challenges related to SME resilience, labor market volatility, and digital readiness are equally pertinent. The Zambian context, marked by an even more constrained labor market and limited technological infrastructure, presents an opportunity to deepen the understanding of how SMEs can adapt HR practices in times of crisis (Li et al., 2024).

Local studies

In the context of Zambia, a study by the International Labour Organization (2020) explored how the COVID-19 pandemic affected workforce management. The report noted that remote work was more prevalent in urban areas such as Lusaka, while rural areas faced significant challenges in adopting remote work due to limited digital infrastructure. This disparity further exacerbated inequalities within the workforce, particularly in informal sectors and SMEs. Mwanza and Ingwe (2021) found that Zambian SMEs faced significant disruptions due to COVID-19, with survival rates varying by sector. Employee well-being declined significantly across sectors, with stress levels increasing due to job insecurity and work-life imbalance (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). These findings emphasize the need for a more inclusive approach to workforce management that accounts for varying access to

resources and digital tools across different sectors and regions. However, there are notable gaps in the literature. Most studies focus on the global impact of the pandemic on HRM practices, with limited research on how HR practices were reshaped specifically within the Zambian context. Additionally, while much of the existing research has focused on the immediate effects of the pandemic, fewer studies have explored the long-term implications for HR practices in the post-pandemic era, especially in developing countries like Zambia.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in several key theories that help explain the changes in HRM practices, employee well-being, and workforce management during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993) posits that investments in human capital (e.g., training, education, health, and well-being) enhance employee productivity and organizational performance. This theory is relevant to understanding how organizations, particularly in Zambia, have invested in employee well-being during the pandemic to maintain productivity despite the challenges posed by remote work. The theory suggests that HRM practices aimed at improving employee health and work-life balance can lead to greater organizational success.

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) emphasizes the importance of reciprocal relationships between employers and employees. It argues that employees are more likely to engage in behaviors that benefit the organization when they feel supported by their employer. During the pandemic, HRM practices such as flexible work arrangements, mental health support, and communication played a crucial role in fostering trust and maintaining employee engagement. This theory underpins the study's focus on the role of HR practices in promoting employee well-being and engagement during times of crisis.

Contingency Theory

Contingency Theory (Fiedler, 1964) asserts that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to management; instead, organizational strategies and practices must be adapted to suit the specific circumstances. This theory is relevant to the study as it highlights the need for HRM practices to be flexible and adaptable in response to the unique challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. In Zambia, for example, HR practices had to be adjusted according to the organization's size, resources, and the availability of technology for remote work.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study illustrates the relationships between key independent and dependent variables. These variables are interrelated and contribute to reshaping human resource practices, organizational strategies, and workforce management in the post-pandemic era. The table below presents a visual representation of how these variables are linked, followed by a discussion of their interactions.

Organizational Strategies and Employee Well-being

Organizational strategies, such as the shift to remote work and digital transformation, significantly impact employee well-being. When organizations rapidly transition to remote work, employees may experience increased stress due to changes in work environment and demands. For instance, remote work can blur the boundaries between personal and professional life, leading to decreased work-life balance and higher levels of stress. However, digital transformation initiatives such as providing employees with access to collaborative tools may support flexibility, improving overall job satisfaction (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016).

HR Practices and Employee Well-being

HR practices such as recruitment, performance management, and employee well-being programs play a crucial role in supporting employee mental health and ensuring a balanced work-life environment. HR's ability to design and implement support systems, such as mental health programs and flexible working hours, can enhance job satisfaction and alleviate stress. Furthermore, recruitment strategies that prioritize flexibility and remote work opportunities contribute to improved employee well-being by allowing individuals to balance their personal and professional lives more effectively.

Organizational Strategies and Workforce Management

Organizational strategies that focus on remote work and digital transformation influence workforce management. The successful implementation of remote work strategies can lead to enhanced workforce productivity and employee engagement. However, poorly managed transitions to remote work can lead to a decline in employee engagement and productivity due to factors such as isolation or inadequate technological

tools (Morgeson et al., 2015). Thus, organizational strategies must be carefully aligned with workforce management goals to maintain high levels of productivity and engagement.

HR Practices and Workforce Management

HR practices directly affect workforce management, particularly regarding employee productivity and engagement. HR practices such as performance management, employee engagement initiatives, and the provision of remote work resources impact the effectiveness of workforce management. For example, performance management systems adapted for remote work environments can improve productivity by ensuring employees remain aligned with organizational goals. Additionally, engaging employees through virtual team-building activities and recognition programs can maintain motivation and commitment during times of remote work. The framework suggests that organizational strategies and HR practices (independent variables) directly influence employee well-being and workforce management (dependent variables). The relationship is influenced by the use of technology and the adaptability of HRM practices in response to the pandemic's challenges.

IV. Conclusion

While many studies have explored the immediate effects of the pandemic on HR practices and employee well-being, there is limited research on the long-term impact of these changes on organizational strategies, employee satisfaction, and workforce management. In addition, while the role of technology in reshaping HR practices is recognized, there is a need for more research on how organizations in developing countries like Zambia are leveraging technology to manage remote work and maintain employee engagement, especially in areas with limited access to digital tools. Some studies focus on stress and work-life balance, few have thoroughly explored the nuanced ways in which COVID-19 has affected the mental health of employees, particularly in developing countries where mental health support systems may be less developed.

The study offers a comprehensive review of existing literature on organizational responses to crises, with a particular focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. It examines previous studies on remote work, digital transformation, HR practices, employee well-being, and productivity during times of disruption. The chapter highlights the global shift to remote work as a significant organizational response to the pandemic and reviews the challenges and benefits associated with this transition. It also explores HR practices such as recruitment, performance management, employee engagement, and well-being initiatives, emphasizing the critical role HR played in supporting employees through the crisis. The literature review concludes by identifying gaps in existing research, particularly with regard to how organizations in Lusaka District adapted to the pandemic, thus justifying the need for this study.

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