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Innovative crisis-response through best human resources practices during Covid-19

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Abstract

During Covid-19, Human Resources evolved as a pivotal organisational function, able to ensure continuity of the business by balancing demands of employees and business. Concurrently, it ensured operational vitality by navigating the crisis through implementing innovative human resources practices. Human Resources practitioners responded swiftly to the operational, administrative, and strategic challenges posed by the dynamics of external and internal changes. This qualitative and informative research explores the innovative practices implemented by human resources practitioners as a response to past health-pandemics and the Covid-19 crisis. A mix of inductive, deductive, and inductive-deductive thematic analysis was applied to present the findings from the literature review on Human Resources practices during health-pandemics before Covid-19 and during Covid-19 (published in 2020-2021). This study found Human Resources practitioners amongst the first responders to a health-related crisis. During a crisis, the HR role skews towards becoming a responsive change agent sustaining empathy and productivity whilst implementing new policies and practices, redefining the work, workforce, and the workplace in response to the changing external environment. The innovative HR practices implemented during the Covid-19 crisis will offer insights to the Management and HR practitioners, and will further guide the re-invention and championing of creative people management strategies for achieving human capital and organisational resilience. Decision-makers will understand the value of responsive practices at the time of global crisis.

Keywords: Covid-19; innovative HR; crisis theory; HR practices; pandemics; work; workforce; workplace

Introduction

After the global recession in 2009, the world witnessed rapid technological advancements and globalization of businesses. In the last five years, the nascent fourth industrial revolution transformed the business practices causing volatilities in the global business environment, demanding innovative business practices. The Covid-19 pandemic exponentially amplified these volatilities adding to the chaos causing economic shutdowns across the globe. The business world anticipated an economic recession as sudden lockdowns during Covid-19 caused global panic. For centuries, societies and businesses experienced the aftermath of local, national or international health-pandemics and economic recessions (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). McKibbin and Sidorenko (2006) highlighted the dyadic interdependence between the major health pandemics and the global recessions, a health pandemic leading to the economic crisis. The reports from the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2009) listed the significant economical volatilities since the 1920s (for example, in 1921, 1975, 1982, 1991, 2009 and the most current 2020). These economic crises are affiliated with preceding health pandemics (for example, Spanish flu – 1918, Hong Kong flu – the 1970s, AIDS – 1980s, H1N1 – 2009, and Covid-19 – 2020). Ceylan and Ozkan (2020) attributed health-related crisis as the instigator

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of the economic volatilities and suggested that the timely and effective management of health-pandemic reduces the long-term impact of economic crisis. Hence, this research focused on the practices used by human resources practitioners in overcoming the challenges posed by health-pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic, unlike other health pandemics, extended the affiliated adversaries to the global communities. It prompted nations and business organisations, across the world, to reassess their policies, practices and systems (Bodenhorn, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic raised questions on the effectiveness of existing practices in sustaining the business. The unpredictable nature of Covid-19 spread, sudden lockdowns, mobility obstructions, fearful workforce, indecisive management and temporary closure of businesses compelled rapid adjustments in the business functions (Bagnera & Steinberg, 2020). Many companies moved the financial resources across the geographical boundaries to withstand the economic impact. However, the same strategy cannot be applied to human capital when international borders are closed (Bodenhorn, 2020). The global impact of Covid-19 shifted the focus of this research to explore the innovative crisis response, for sustaining the business, through innovative human resources (hereafter, HR) practices during a globalized health-centred crisis.

In the management and organizational behaviour studies, the socio-economic crisis regarded HR practitioners as the first respondents to the employees' physical, psychological and emotional needs, suggesting the value of HR partnership in sustaining the businesses (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). During Covid-19, the HR practitioners proposed innovative actionable solutions to contain the crisis and maintain the continuity of business (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic elevated the opportunities for HR practitioners. The outlook towards HR role in leading the companies at adverse contingencies and supporting business progression through ambiguous time (Bhamra, Dani, & Burnard, 2011; Teo, Lee, & Lim, 2017) was tested during the Covid-19 pandemic. Amidst the ambiguity of the global pandemic, the reliance of the company's reputation, business continuity and employees' well-being upon the HR practices affirmed new merit of the HR profession. The severity and uncertainty with the ongoing health-related and economic fallout necessitated a resourceful response by the HR strategists, HR operations, and HR administration.

The Covid-19 pandemic created a unique business environment forcing companies to redefine their way of thinking and doing. Several businesses realised that a new way of thinking and doing is mandated for survival, and HR will be an integral change agent because they are the linking pin between the employees and the employer. An extensive literature exists on crisis management, and most recently on the management practices during Covid-19, the scholarly literature on the innovative HR response remains in dearth. Furthermore, literature is scarce on the innovative HR response during any pandemic and the role of HR practitioners as crisis responders. The purpose of this exploratory qualitative research is to explore the innovative crisis response through best human resources management practices implemented during Covid 19. This research investigated the innovative HR practices that evolved in past pandemics and during the Covid-19 pandemic and made recommendations for HR practitioners depicting best HR practices across different functions.

Nature of enquiry and the research methodology

This research adopted a constructivist and an interpretive research paradigm (Creswell, 2009) because Covid-19 presented unique situations for businesses, employees, and HR



practitioners. These realities were experienced for the first time by the world. An interpretive lens was used to understand the practices implemented by HR practitioners. The literature published in Ebsco, Proquest, Elsevier, Emerald, JSTOR and Web of Science was reviewed along with reports published by McKinsey, Gartner, Deloitte, SHRM and CIPD. The literature published from January 2020 to July 2021 was reviewed to explore the HR practices implemented during Covid-19 (see References). The data was analysed by combining various methods of thematic analysis, using six stages proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Both researchers independently read and re-read records to familiarize themselves with the data. These records were the result of extraction, screening, and shortlisting (using the keywords – HR practices, human resources practices, innovative practices by HR, Covid-19 practices, Covid-19 and HR, HR practices in crisis and similar words) the literature from the database (289 records) and review of full papers (58 records). Using NVivo12 software, a total of 418 nodes were created, that were later grouped into nine main themes. The grouping was based on their homogenous characteristics. These themes were reviewed concerning the research purpose, narrowing the total number of thematic domains to five. The themes were classified and nomenclature for easier representation of the content and finally is presented in this paper. For understanding the innovative HR practices for pandemics before 2020, deductive thematic analysis was conducted since the pandemics were already known. Because the Covid-19 pandemic was ongoing at the time of this research and the relevant theories or framework were non-existent, inductive thematic analysis was carried out. The rationale was to understand the challenges faced by HR practitioners and their role as crisis responders. Innovative HR response was analysed using an inductive-deductive-inductive approach. The rationale for using Crisis theory is provided along with the analysis. Interpretive analysis was conducted to propose a conceptual framework for HR practitioners, policymakers, and scholars about developing strategies to manage HR during a crisis.

This research addressed four research objectives based on the review of the literature and logical propositions:

1. To understand the innovative HR practices that emerged during pandemics before the year 2020.
2. To understand the challenges faced by HR during the Covid-19 pandemic, 2020-2021.
3. To explore the role of HR as an innovative crisis responder.
4. To explore the innovative HR response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

At this stage, it becomes vital to understand the meaning of ‘innovative practice’ applied in this project. Innovative practice is the actual implementation or application of new ideas or new mindset or a new way of doing things with value addition (Baregheh et al., 2009). An innovative HR practice means planning and performing various HR functions in a new way, using a new process or approach to managing talent effectively for attaining organizational objectives.

Innovative HR practices during pandemics (1918 – 2019)

Pandemic is an expression of extensive health and/or economic crisis that affects many people. The word pandemic originates from the Greek words for *pan* (all) and *demos* (the people). Honigsbaum (2009) interpreted pandemic as a widespread epidemic of contagious

infections that impact a wider population. The Pandemic word was first used by a Medical practitioner, Gideon Harvey in 1666 A.D. (Morens, Folkers, & Fauci, 2009). Noah Webster, the first American lexicographer defined pandemic as a synonym of an epidemic (Morens et al., 2009; Qiu et al., 2017). Honigsbaum (2009) gave the reference of *The Times* media source that associated pandemic with global health issues such as the emergence of Spanish Flu, Hong Kong flu, Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-CoV), Swine Flu (H1N1), the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS-CoV), Ebola, and most recently Covid-19. However, the pandemic connotation is adopted to define the ambiguous influence of the health experiences over mega disruptive events related to global financial, social, and economic performance. This section highlights the influence of well-known pandemics (before Covid-19) on the emergence of new HR practices.

Spanish Flu - HR practices (1918-1919)

Spanish Flu, also known as the 1918 influenza-infected about 'one-third of the world' population with a death toll of 50 million (CDCP, 2019, Para 2). Lee and Warner (2005) noted a greater number of deaths from the Spanish Flu as compared to World War I. According to Palese (2004), the W-shaped mortality pattern during the Spanish flu affected the 20s-40s age group, the most productive group of the workforce. Additionally, the labour supply shortage, incited by the employees' absenteeism resulted in shorthanded business operations and the overall decline of the economic output (Bodenhorn, 2020).

Although Romer (1988) argues the reasons for the economic downfall in 1921 were the commodity prices collapse and not the flu-related mortality rates, the employment evidence from the 1920s significantly contradicts it. Scholars emphasized that the staggered business hours, mobility restrictions and illness-associated absenteeism instigated the economic collapse (Muellbauer, 2020). The available publications assert the detrimental impact of human loss on the labour markets with an additional 34 per cent of the female employees withdrawing from the active workforce (Bodenhorn, 2020). Therefore, considering the disproportions of the infected and expired workforce during the Spanish flu pandemic, the active employees anticipated a higher compensation (Brainerd & Siegler, 2003). Consequently, during the Spanish flu pandemic, the personnel managers were faced with several dilemmas: (1) balancing government demands and workforce availability, including recruitment, (2) proving a safe and healthy environment for employees, (3) paying overtime wages to factory workers who opted to work over the weekends and (4) meeting the demands of employees to raise wages (Benmelech & Frydman, 2020). The academic research on the HRM challenges during the Spanish flu offers limited evidence for a meaningful conclusion. Nevertheless, it indicates the value of good HR practices at the time of crisis and thereafter.

AIDS - HR practices (the 1980s)

The acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), with no available cure, erupted in 1980s and was established as one of the longest pandemics in human history, affecting a vast population (McKibbin & Sidorenko, 2006). In 1988, American companies reported 10% HIV infections among their staff (Leonard, 1988). Initially, researchers reported 30% infections among the active workforce in South Africa and the numbers progressively increased during the following years (Achmat & Cameron, 1995). The health science data evidenced that more than 60 million people have been infected with HIV/AIDS worldwide with a mortality rate



of 25 million (Greene, 2007). HIV/AIDS has significantly decreased the diversity of skills and qualifications in the labour market.

The strength of the ongoing disease imposed distinct requirements from the HR policies and practices (Baruch & Clancy, 2000). The inundated HRM policies struggled to balance between business demands and staffing quality. The recruitment function required flexibility and adaptability to the new health threats, and to the requirements to implement a mandatory AIDS screening test. HR practitioners had to adopt new selection practices, segregating the infected job candidates and unfortunately, often leading to discrimination. As a result, the diversity of the workforce was seriously overlooked in the interest of ensuring the required staffing levels.

Furthermore, the possibility of permanent disability of the infected employees plunged on the organisation's compensation systems and HR budget. As reported by the World Health Organization in 2003, the estimated cost for medical treatment in the US was \$2,000 per patient per year, while in the African continent the amount ranged from 0.3% - 4.3% of the country's domestic GPA (World Health Organization, 2003). Equally high was the stress among the employees due to the fear of contracting the infection from a co-worker, leading to a decrease in employee's morale (Baruch & Clancy, 2000). Moreover, companies faced a significant increase in lawsuits for discriminatory practices and unjustified dismissals. Therefore, management and business operations relied on HR practitioners to devise inclusion policies and provide equal employment opportunities for infected individuals. Even the international HR practitioners avoided recruiting executives from countries with higher number of infections. The magnitude of AIDS and its disastrous effect impacted the labour exchange in the international labor market (Hope, 1995).

As new medications made it possible for persons with AIDS to continue working for longer periods, the issue of their entitlement to continued benefits assumed renewed importance. Such individuals could work part-time, and/or seasonal jobs, and contribute to their financial status. The changes had significant ramifications to the employment laws and HRM practices as the individuals with AIDS could commit to extended employment contracts, and fewer employees would opt for early disability retirement (Leonard, 1988). Most recently, the employment laws in diverse demographic clusters regulating the recruitment and employment terms for employees with infectious diseases such as AIDS has evolved and completed the on-site HRM practices in developing alternative policy options. Fairness of HRM functions, diversity and inclusion is central to people management practices. Therefore, tentativeness to employees' disability, including mental illness, has been the primary HRM focus during the pandemic events in the last decade.

SARS, H1N1, MERS and EBOLA - HR practices (2000-2019)

The equally disastrous twofold - social and economic impact was caused by the novel pandemics of the 21st century (2000 – 2019): SARS, H1N1 and MERS. An increase in the populations' global mobility enabled the faster spread of the newly emerged SARS (2003) and MERS (2012) influenza contagions among the other global infections illnesses (Ji, 2020). The spread of SARS influenza instigated massive unemployment across the Asian and the supplementary labour markets. Consequentially, the reported economic cost associated with SARS fell in the range of US \$ 20 to \$ 25 billion (Brahmbhatt & Dutta, 2008).

Unlike the previous pandemics, SARS induced involuntary terminations affected both blue- and white-collar employees. Many employees in the Far East companies were sent on unpaid leave. In 2003 Singapore registered the highest unemployment rate in 17 years - 4.7% (World Health Organization, 2003). An equally high jump of 6.0 per cent unemployment was reported in the Hong Kong labour market. The objective of the recruitment and compensation stop-gap introduced by the HRM in the organisations targeted protecting the retained employees' well-being (Qiu, Rutherford et al., 2017). The wage cut ranged from 15 per cent, including some of the benefits, to a 27.5 per cent salary cut for some of the Senior Managers (Brahmbhatt & Dutta, 2008). In the awake SARS, the organisations reported an immense number of mental issues among the workforce. Systematic analysis of stress and anxiety felt during the pandemic revealed 28.9% Post-traumatic stress disorder and 31.2% depressed employees (Douglas, Doughlas, et al., 2009). Overall, in the case of SARS, the uncontrollable spread of the virus caused not only medical risks but also a disproportionally significant psychological shock (Lee & Warner, 2005). As a result, the HR departments were required to develop and implement flexible wage pay systems. Further challenges to the sustainability of the HRM functions during the SARS pandemic were imposed by the evidenced employees' mental volatility and confidence crisis. In addition, the influenza pandemic disastrous effect altered the training function by mandating retraining and redeploying where possible (Lee & Warner, 2005). However, in certain cases the HR practitioners reported significant employee resistance to the retraining activities which challenged their further job opportunities and consequentially elevated the individual's depression levels. Owing to the technological progress, HRM was allowed some flexibility in the job design. The Information Technology (IT) systems made work-from-home possible and eased the labour market supply-demand shock. Therefore, the focus of the HRM remain into developing an innovative response to the employees' mental health and psychological well-being.

According to the academics, the tangible economic impact due to the MERS health pandemic in 2012 was evident across the globe (Qiu et al., 2017). The estimated decline of the countries' GDP due to the MERS-CoV was led by 32% in Kuwait, followed by 25% in Qatar, 16% in Saudi Arabia, and 12% in the UAE (Ceylan & Ozkan, 2020). MERS affected a widespread of counties from Saudi Arabia to South Korea and Taiwan with the highest mortality rate reported in Saudi Arabia (69.2%) (Park, Jung et al., 2018). The disease caused a visible polarization and discrimination within the labour markets, particularly in the Far East region. The most vulnerable group experiencing the economic effect of the health pandemic was the employees' age group of the 50s and above. Research data suggests that the unemployment rate of this group increased by about 17.18% in 2014 and 20.69% in 2016 (Lee & Cho, 2016). Additionally, the probability of temporary employment decreased by 1.66% in 2014 causing a further decrease of both full- and part-time working hours and possibilities for temporary employment (Lee & Cho, 2016). The majority of the employees' psychological adversaries were outcomes of the socio-economic conditions after SARS and H1N1 pandemics as well as the labour market structure in particular (Lee & Cho, 2016).

The research analysis highlighted the importance of the communication channels, in particular the internal communication by the HR, for ensuring the workforce psychological stability during a pandemic situation. The data indicated that during past and present pandemics, social awareness is a result of narrowed media channels. Mostly, employees in the 40s to 49s, or 60s and above heard of previous pandemics, while a big part of the younger employee groups hasn't been properly informed on the health risks and the associated company procedures.

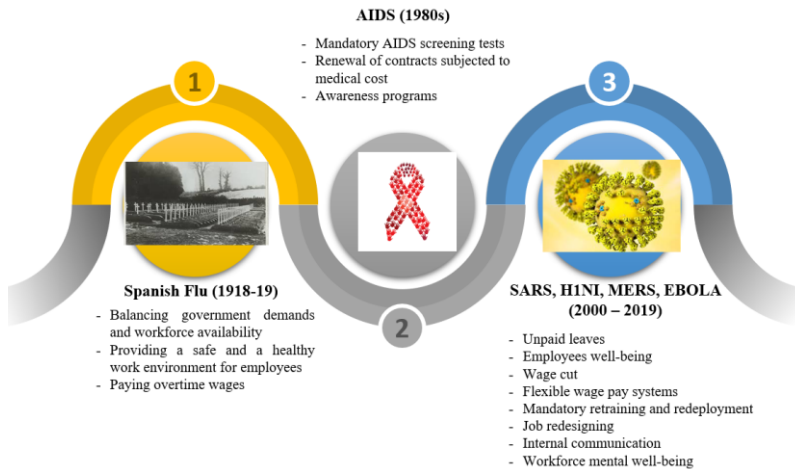


Even the most popular information sources such as Google and Bing had only 6 per cent coverage of MERS, while Facebook and Twitter contributed just 0.5 per cent to the global sources of pandemic information (Lin, McCloud et al., 2017). Thus, continuous internal communication by the HR department is a prerequisite for containing the stress levels and psychological issues among the employees.

The knowledge of the most efficient HR and media practices mature with each major health and economic challenge the society has to overcome. Furthermore, academics and management practitioners recognized the preventative role of prompt and factual communication for avoiding the chaotic financial behaviour of global markets in the future. One of the major criticism of the UN and WHO's response to the Ebola outbreak in 2013 was the limited communication on the pandemic causing a plethora of uncoordinated policies, and duplication of accountabilities and cost (Ippolito, Di Ciar, & Capobianchi, 2015). According to World Bank reports, the Ebola pandemic cost global economies more than the US \$ 2 billion and killed more than 11,000 people between 2013-2014 (Maurice, 2016; Qiu et al., 2017). The indirect impact on the economy worldwide was caused by the slowdown in the labour supply and demand ratio due to the increasing infections and mortality rates. The governments aggravated the negative socio-economic impact directed shut down of national borders and mandatory quarantine of certain demographic areas. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the authorities' decisions created communities' disconnection. People were not able to commute to work, wherever possible, and perform their daily duties which further disrupted businesses (International Labour Office, 2015). The focus of the HR practices turned towards empowering underrepresented labour groups such as women and developing employment-intensive infrastructure programmes for ensuring a continuum of public services and business sustainability. Post-traumatic stress disorders, stigma, nutritional and housing needs widened the labour market discrimination (Qiu et al., 2017). In addition to the physical illnesses, mental distress stemming from social stigmatization and work-related anxiety was equally demanding on the HRM practices (Li, Wan et al., 2015). Creating jobs and enhancing employees' skills along with the attentiveness to the workforce mental well-being desired major HR crisis adjustments. The continuum of the pattern of reinventing HRM practices is most recently witnessed during the Covid-19.

Figure 1 provides a summary of the good HR practices implemented to manage crises caused by various health pandemics. It indicates that different crises require novel and varied practices and a standard guideline cannot be set to manage human resources during pandemics. This is because different health pandemics presents unique challenges and practitioners architect good strategies and practices to overcome these challenges. Covid-19 pandemic is no exception to this assumption and hence the challenges posed for HR practitioners were explored.

Figure 1. Innovative HR practices during health pandemics (1918-2019)



Covid-19 Pandemic and challenges faced by HR practitioners (2020-2021)

In December 2019, the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) was first reported in Wuhan, China. The outbreak of Covid-19 spread across the world within a month and in January 2020, the World Health Organization announced public health emergency, which in March 2020 was declared as a pandemic. It remained an ongoing pandemic and existed when this research paper was written in December 2021. The fast transmission of the virus resulted in about 269 million infected cases and 5.3 million deaths across 224 countries, as per the data published by Worldometer, December 10, 2021. According to Ritchie, Mathieu et al. (2020), by December 10, 2021, 55.5% of the world population received at least one dose of the Covid-19 vaccine, 8.35 billion doses administered globally and about 30.58 million were administered each day.

The global pandemic caused by coronavirus caused economic disruption as well. According to the survey conducted by McKinsey, in April 2021, two-thirds of global executives expected ‘significant contraction in the world economy’s growth rate’ leading to either ‘a recession or a depression’ (Hanselman, 2021, Para 19). In October 2021, the executives expressed concerns over labour shortages. According to McKinsey’s report, these were the improved economic data compared to the year 2020 and the beginning of 2021. According to Szmigiera (2021), the global economy had a loss of economic output to the tune of around \$ 2.96 trillion. The unemployment rate in the U.S. alone reached 14.8% in April 2020, the highest unemployment rate since 1948 (Falk et al., 2021). The U.S bureau of labour statistics reported that in July 2020, 25% of the workforce worked from home or teleworked. According to a report by BBC, in March 2021, the UK unemployment rate was at 4.8% which could have increased if employees were not furloughed or claimed indefinite unpaid leaves (King, 2021).

Besides impacting the unemployment rate at national levels, the Covid-19 posed challenges for HR practitioners at organizational levels. Karoly et al., (2004) and Ware and Grantham (2003) highlighted that the work, workforce and workplace are interdependent and all are to be viewed together when any changes are planned and implemented. Inspired from the work of these authors and the thematic analysis of the existing literature, four sub-themes emerged, highlighting the challenges posed by Covid-19 – Challenges related to Work; Challenges



related to Workforce; Challenges related to Workplace; and Challenges originating from management and employees.

Challenges related to work

During the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially from March 2020, the lockdowns across many countries and travel restrictions disrupted the status quo. Kaushik and Guleria (2020) posited that the governments imposed various regulations to prevent the spreading of Covid-19 and these regulations were inconsistent. It became highly difficult for HR practitioners to maintain normalcy. The sudden disturbances in performing the work forced HR practitioners to reevaluate the 'work' itself and to revise HR strategies (Hamouche, 2021). The report by Deloitte noted that HR practitioners needed to assess the actual work and predict the changes Covid-19 may bring to these changes (Schwartz et al., 2020). According to Carnevale and Hatak (2020), companies resorted to grouping the essential work and non-essential work. Further, the critical job roles were to be identified, contingency plans were to be made for the non-critical or less-prioritized work, and resources were to be planned to ensure critical functions are not affected. The Covid-19 changed some industries and some jobs or changed the modus operandi to perform the job (Ren, Cao & Chin, 2020). For example, the face-to-face customer service shifted to online services; the teaching job moved to virtual classrooms; the goods and services were procured online and delivered at doorsteps. Several jobs were displaced during Covid-19. The HR practitioners were challenged with conducting the scenario analysis (Schwartz et al., 2020) so that adequate plans and arrangements could be devised. They also had to strategize the temporary closures. Due to unpredictable losses in businesses, HR practitioners had to plan and execute layoffs, furloughs, and redundancies in a very short period. They worked with managers and employees during this phase by open communication and by offering proper information (Hamouche, 2021) and a virtual off-boarding process. The other work-related challenges were to make plans for work disruptions as well as for re-activation of work (Schwartz et al., 2020) in event of governments easing the lockdowns, vaccinations of employees, or recovering from the pandemic.

Challenges related to workforce

Society at large was impacted by Covid-19 and employees were no exception. Carnevale and Hatak (2020) noted that during 2020, there were disproportionate effects on employees' work-life balance. Bingham (2020) categorized the challenges for HR practitioners and employees as complex challenges due to the unpredictable nature of the pandemic. The changing government regulations, based on the number of infected cases, were to be communicated to the employees. Furthermore, in the initial period of Covid-19, HR practitioners needed to be informative so that they could raise awareness amongst the employees (Schwartz et al., 2020) through different communication channels. Because many work-premises were closed, virtual communication strategies were to be developed. The messages to the employees needed to be carefully drafted to provide correct information whilst managing employees' stress. Also, HR needed to establish an employee support system and respond to employees' queries. The infected employees and their close contacts were at-risk employees. HR had to develop protocols (Schwartz et al., 2020), whilst following the government guidelines (Bagnera & Steinberg, 2020), for such employees and to provide them with the necessary support. Many companies, during the extended lockdowns, offered employees to avail their annual leaves or

to undergo unpaid leaves. The leave policies were to be reviewed because of travel restrictions. The infected employees, or the ones with close contacts or showing the symptoms of Covid-19 reported absenteeism while such provisions were non-existing in the HR policies. HR had to respond to Covid-19 related absenteeism. It was also noted that a small proportion of employees were reluctant to come to the workplace and refused the work. Negi, Pant and Kishor (2021) reported that engaged employees were more adaptive than non-engaged employees. This created an immediate shortage of labour supply (Elsafy & Ragheb, 2020) and the social distancing norms, security concerns, and non-mobility of the workforce posed additional challenges to recruiting workforce (Bierema, 2020).

Challenges related to workplace

The temporary closures of business premises and containment of coronavirus at operational businesses transformed the workplace. The HR practitioners had to enforce social distancing norms. This meant rearchitecting the workplace ensuring social distancing policies are adhered to. The open working spaces or close sitting spaces were to be re-arranged to create space between employees' workspace. The planned events and meetings were to be rescheduled or cancelled and revised protocols were to be drafted to contain the spread of coronavirus at the workplace. In case of any employee found of being infected, the workplace was to be contaminated and sanitized (Lee, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2020). Furthermore, provisions were to be made for employees working from home by facilitating a virtual workplace. Hamouche (2021) pointed out that work-from-home as a workplace was the biggest challenge for HR practitioners because they had to ensure that the working tools and technological tools for communication are available to perform the job. The policies were to be designed for time and attendance, both at the physical workplace and virtual workplace. For the physical workplace, HR had to devise a new time and attendance system, moving away from check-in and check-out using finger scan or signing in the register. New job-cards and tasks submission forms were to be modeled to track the progress of employees working-from-home. Moreover, the policies related to business travel were to be revised. These were some workspace related challenges that HR practitioners experienced during 2020-21 in light of Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, HR practitioners had to ensure that the managers and supervisors are equipped (skills and tools) to manage remote teams through effective communication, support, supervision, setting realistic performance objectives and monitoring the work progress (Aitken-Fox et al., 2020; Hamouche, 2021).

Challenges from the top management and employees

The Covid-19 infused stress, anxiety and uncertainty amongst the top management and employees posing additional challenges for HR practitioners. Many researchers reported that the leadership of business organizations were not prepared to face the Covid-19 pandemic and initially had negligible information. Elsafy and Ragheb (2020) pointed out that the unclear management plans and poor communication from the management delayed timely actions by HR practitioners when the Covid-19 outbreak started in early 2020. Further, the financial uncertainty, lack of preparedness for remote work management, and unclear guidelines related to permissible actions (or non-permissible actions) added to the challenges for HR practitioners (Elsafy & Ragheb, 2020; Kaushik & Guleria, 2020).

In addition to lack of support from the management, there were pressures from the employees as well. The employees lack skills to work remotely and the absence of resources to work-



from-home aggravated the resistance from employees towards sudden changes in HR policies and procedures. Employees had concerns related to job security, cutbacks in compensation and benefits, deferment of promotions and career advancements, and managing work and life when other members of the family co-habiting and carrying out their work/studies. Wong, Ho et al. (2020) posited that the Covid-19 enhanced employees' stress and reduced their motivation. The authors' proposed management develop proper guidelines and transparent communication with employees during crisis times to retain employees and to boost their morale. Employees also had fear of contracting Covid-19 and staying connected with their team members and social groups from work. The employees' well-being was another challenge for HR practitioners. The HR practitioners encountered numerous challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic and responded to these challenges by developing and implementing innovative HR practices.

Emergence of HR practitioners as innovative crisis responder – Crisis theory

The previous section indicates that HR practitioners faced insurmountable challenges during Covid-19. These were instigated by complicated and complex circumstances created by the Covid-19 pandemic, that disturbed the current settings and directed HR practitioners to propose innovative solutions, to manage the chaos caused by the pandemic. This is Crisis, as defined by Turner (1996), "an acute emotional upset in an individual's usual steady-state, accompanied by a perceived breakdown in his or her usual coping abilities. A crisis state is time-limited, taking weeks or months for an adaptive or maladaptive resolution to be reached" (P.170).

Ragazou (2021) explained the four stages in the life cycle of a crisis – prodromal stage, acute stage, chronic stage, and crisis resolution stage. The first stage of the Covid-19 crisis was short-lived (Jan – Mar 2020) and soon acute crisis stage and chronic stage co-existed while HR practitioners attempted to resolve the crisis. The second stage is characterised by companies not predicting and realising the gravitas of the crisis. In this stage, companies are required to respond immediately as the crisis has already started damaging the business. In the third phase, the companies accepted the crisis and anticipated a long term impact on business (Bierema, 2020; Gurchiek, 2020).

Vardarlier (2016) postulated that the crisis (economical or health) influences HR practices. According to the researcher, the crisis caused panic amongst the employees and management leading to high employee turnover and loss of talent. It also demotivates employees and lowers their performance (Aitken-Fox et al., 2020; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Hamouche, 2021). During the crisis, the leaders of companies are misinformed, indecisive and fail to assure employees that further creating a negative image of the company and adding to the psychological problems of employees. Moreover, because of uncertain circumstances, companies cancel recruitments, increase employees' workloads and curtail professional development. Ragazou (2021) proposed that the companies that realize and accept the existence of crisis are better equipped with devising plans to combat it. Vardarlier (2016) compared the traditional HR practices and modern HR practices implemented to manage crisis and pointed out that the crisis is better managed if the crisis management team is structured to manage gossip, communicate effectively, advise management and support employees. The researcher also posited that employee assistance programs, talent management, hiring part-time employees, offering alternative work place, providing flexible

working hours, continuing the health benefits (in part of subsidized), and adequate budgeting are modern HR practices to manage crisis. Notably, the HR plays a crucial role is responding to the different stages of crisis using innovative and modern HR practices.

Innovative HR response to Covid-19 pandemic

There exist several definitions of innovation (Al-Ansari, 2014; Baregheh et al., 2009; Pandya & Shah, 2018). In the context of HR management, Easa and Orra (2020) defined innovation as a ‘deliberate behaviour directed toward new ideas and processes, that is new to the adopting unit and beneficial for the organization and society’ (P.8). The authors found HR practitioners incorporating innovative practices through improving the practice and building HR management systems. Lai and Wong (2020) reported some of the innovative practices implemented by HR during the Covid-19 crisis such as reducing the working hours or working days and offering unpaid vacation instead of terminating the employment contracts. The researchers posited that such actions may later lead to voluntary terminations. It is advised that HR make manpower plans to manage talent loss.

Shil, Barman et al., (2020), used the 5P’s of the strategic quality management model by Mildred Golden Pryor, and reported changes in HR across purpose, principles, process, people, and performance. Based on the Boston Consulting Group report of 2020, the authors reported that during Covid-19, the HR realigned their strategies, changed their plans, amended operating guidelines, built technological capabilities, optimized budget allocations, made flexible work plans, revised remunerations, facilitated remote work, equipped employees with safety equipment, redesigned jobs, and created virtual monitoring and feedback systems. Like these, several innovative practices were implemented by HR practitioners as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic and are discussed in this section. However, the literature segregating the HR practices influenced by and/or influencing the work itself, the workforce, and the workplace remained scant. For many companies, these practices were introduced and the implementation was very rapid. Following the themes from the challenges, these innovative responses are grouped in three categories – Work-related, Workforce related, and Workplace related practices. Table 1 presents the challenges faced by the HR practitioners during Covid-19, the crisis it caused, and the innovative practices implemented by HR as a response to the crisis.



Table 1. Covid-19 HR Challenges, Crisis and HR innovative-responses to challenges

	WORK	WORKFORCE	WORKPLACE	MANAGEMENT and EMPLOYEES
CHALLENGES	Categorizing critical roles	Employee well-being	Remote workplace	Unclear management plans
	Developing workforce plans	Sudden absences	Virtual workplace	Financial uncertainty
	Developing backup plans	Refusal to work	Social distancing guidelines	Lack of resources
	Ensuring continuity of work	At-risk employees	Contamination and sanitization	Lack of preparedness
	Re-evaluation of actual work	Communication with employees	Workplace design	Unclear communication
	Temporary closures	Lack of awareness	Employee services	Work-life balance
	Redundancies	Immobility of workforce	Meetings at workplace	Inappropriate decisions
	Disruption in work	Disengaged and non-productive workforce	Visitors and commute	
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CRISIS	Panic; Misinformation; Lack of Communication; Lockdown; Quarantines; Social Distancing; Health and Safety Concerns; Job insecurities; Compensation reductions; Stress; Burnouts; Psychological issues; Employees immobility; Employees Resistance; Increased workload			
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INNOVATIVE HR RESPONSE	Talent analytics	Compensation - hazard pay, health benefits, employee relief fund, bonuses	Virtual workplace	Crisis management policies and guidelines
	Critical skill inventory	Working hours - reduced hours, quarantines	Remote work assistance	Flexible hours
	Reengineered workforce plans	Work-from-home guidelines	Reduced office visits	Virtual coffee sessions
	Mobility plans	Setting virtual teams	Disinfection of work areas	Online town hall meetings
	Virtual recruitments	Condensed training programs	Chief well-being Officers	Bulletin boards
	Contractual employments	Imposing travel restrictions	Enriched roles of health-safety officers	Reallocation of funds
	Overseas recruitment	Remote monitoring of performance	Revised office plans	Job-plans
	Virtual onboarding	Leaves - Emergency, extended family leaves, preponed annual leaves	Revision in employee entertainment activities	Proactive measures
	Remote work guidelines	Revised performance management systems	Technological platforms	Priority task-map
	Redefining competencies	Employee well-being - PCR tests; Psychological helplines and centers	Changes in providing food and beverages	Prompt communication tools
	Unpaid leaves for non-critical work	Employer Surveillance	Revised grievance system	
	Furloughed and layoffs	Adjusted career plans	Virtual social gatherings	

Work-related innovative HR practices

The acute Covid-19 crisis was characterised by sudden closures of business and for continuity of the operations, HR practitioners segregated the essential work with non-essential work. Though the companies' employee data contained the records related to available competencies, it did not account for the critical skills. During Covid-19, HR practitioners undertook critical skills inventory to determine the skills available within the company to perform essential functions. The competencies required were redefined and grouped for on-premises work and off-premises work (remote or virtual). The manpower plans were re-engineered based on the analysis of talent data and coordinated with the scenario analysis. The mobility plans were developed to meet the competency gaps. The professional development, that otherwise would have taken five years, was completed by many companies within a week to ensure employees are competent to work off-premises. The shortage of talent for off-premises work was fulfilled by recruiting candidates virtually and on short-term tenures. For on-site work, contractual employments were developed for specific projects or tasks (gig economy). The recruitment and selection process were carried out virtually along with the virtual onboarding process. The excess talent or manpower for non-essential work was either offered unpaid leave or was furloughed/ terminated.

Workforce related innovative HR practices

The Covid-19 instilled fear, uncertainty, stress, anxiety, burnout, isolation, and disengagement amongst the employees. Employee well-being became the priority for HR practitioners, especially when employees were working-from-home or on virtual platforms. Many employers arranged polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing for employees at the workplace or medical centres. Furthermore, employers either sponsored fees for psychological centres or opened psychological helplines to provide virtual consultations and support to the employees. The communication channels and media were upgraded for prompt communication with employees. The companies amended their compensation and benefits structures allocating hazard pay for employees who were at risk of being exposed to coronavirus. Companies also provided healthcare benefits for employees who tested positive for Covid-19. Additionally, childcare allowances were released when schools were closed down. Some companies used their employee relief fund to provide salaries to their employees. To avoid contamination, some benefits were removed temporarily during the Covid-19 period, including food and beverage provisions at the workplace, creches or child care facility at premises, training planned for career advancements and banning employees' travel during their approved leaves.

There were significant changes in the working hours where companies reduced the working hours or divided the employees in shifts to reduce the number of employees at the work location. The HR practitioners also devised regulations for quarantine in cases of covid-19 detections or close contacts or travelling from another country. The HR policies were amended for emergency leaves, extended family leaves and annual leaves to support employees to cope with Covid-19 contractions and to retain the spread of infections by imposing domestic and global travel restrictions. The concept of work-from-home became popular during Covid-19 as a massive workforce adopted this practice. HR practitioners developed guidelines for work-for-home to account for the work performed. Accordingly, the performance management systems were modified where goals were amended (more



lenient), remote monitoring systems were introduced including employer surveillance tools like spyware. As dependencies on technologies exponentially increased during Covid-19, the HR practitioners offered condensed training programs. The career advancement plans for individuals were refined because the job descriptions changed and some jobs became obsolete and some new jobs emerged (Ren et al., 2020). In addition, the international availability of the workforce was leveraged for virtual work, changing the definition of the workplace too. Pandya (2019) postulated that HR professionals with virtual competencies would be a necessity in future and that became evident during Covid-19.

Workplace related innovative HR practices

The definition of the workplace for numerous employees and employers changed during Covid-19. Following the work-from-home movement, the work offices moved from the company's premises to households. HR practitioners facilitated the transition by redesigning the work platforms and developing procedures for the virtual workplace, setting virtual teams, providing remote work assistance, and revising the mode of submitting the work. They trained the supervisors and managers to provide remote work assistance. These innovative practices were for off-premises employees. For on-premises employees, performing necessary functions, HR practitioners focused on health and safety aspects. The workplace was disinfected on regular basis to contain the Covid-19 spread. Furthermore, the seating arrangement, office workspaces, and meeting areas were re-arranged to maintain the social distance between individuals. Additionally, new policies were passed to minimise the visitations from outsiders and new protocols were implemented to allow entry of employees and necessary visitors. The protocols included showing PCR test results at the entrance, wearing personal protection equipment, and following safety guidelines prescribed by the competent authorities. The published literature also suggests that during Covid-19, companies appointed Chief Well-being Officers or enhanced the roles of health-safety officers. The employee entertainment activities were assessed to limit the Covid-19 spread and instead of open food courts, cafeteria or buffets, the food and beverages were served in the pre-packed boxes. Carnevale and Hatak (2020) mentioned HR practitioners supported their employees by social-virtual lunches and coffee breaks.

According to Kohlls (2020), the treatment of employees during a pandemic will be remembered by the communities in the future. Therefore, the reflection on the HR practices during the ongoing Covid-19 viral pandemic is relevant to both academics and executives action-research efforts. Covid-19 unprecedented sweeping throughout the world health and economic structures is considered a turning point for the government and management practices (Sogani, 2020). The formidable challenges influenza imposed on all economic and social sectors triggers a new outlook of the future of human and industry resilience (Dirani et al., 2020). The scale and speed of business collapse across the globe necessitated urgent modifications of the existing HRM practices that will pave the way for future jobs design and workforce characteristics.

According to McGuire et al. (2021), a crisis of any sort can destabilize the organisation and the human capital due to the distress of the environment they have to work in; therefore, the role of the HR partnership should be measured by its' ability to create life- and organization-sustaining systems. During a crisis, the loss of the consistency of workplace safety causes major lay-offs, job insecurity, and stress among employees (Kerns, 2017). Furthermore, the

organisational talent has a higher tendency in leaving the job; therefore, stripping the organisation from the main capabilities and organisational knowledge (Adkins et al., 2001; Ramlall, 2004). In addition, the higher attrition rates may cause psychological distress among the employees. As aforementioned, the continuous flow of trustful information regarding the external and internal status, and the future goals of the company, is paramount for maintaining the employees' resilience during a pandemic. The HRM principal focus should be protecting the stakeholders by informing them of the external physical treat followed by the organisational complications (Coombs, 2007). Moreover, the internal communication on the corrective actions, or what has been done to protect the human resources from the crisis adversaries now and in the future will develop stronger individuals' stress coping mechanisms. Pandya and Janahi (2021) highlighted the value of HR technologies, especially Artificial intelligence in managing HR functions. Being frontiers in the response to Covid-19, the HR practitioners' empathy for the infected employees, and genuine concern with the employees' well-being both mentally and physically, along with their families will enable sustainable employee performance (Reinsch & Patel, 2003). As a result, the HRM role outgrows the company boundaries and extends to the wider communities and personal life of the employees and dependents.

Therefore, HR audit and succession planning processes are mandatory for ensuring the availability of the required human resources competencies and organisation-sustaining systems for retaining the top performers. In the realization that voluntarily terminations during a pandemic are not the most efficient strategy, the HR practitioners attempted more innovative strategies to mitigate the mental health consequences of Covid-19 such as work from home, flexible work time, redefining the workplaces, flexible medical plans, and compensation systems (Douglas et al., 2009; Naudé, Dickie, & Butler, 2012).

As an active participant in the crisis management team, the goal of the HRM practices is to support business motivation for bouncing back and resuming productivity. However, employees traumatic experiences with the pandemic demand for a complex HRM emotional and interpersonal support such as psychological empowerment, recognition of achievements, and positive reinforcement of the revised company policies (Dirani et al., 2020). Promoting mental health and reducing workplace stress will further enable employees' productivity and innovation in times of pandemics such as Covid-19. Based on the reviewed academic publications and global agencies reports, the most affected HR micro functions are the workforce planning, talent acquisition, people management, mental support, compensation and benefits concerning the medical insurance and paying overtime, length of the contractual obligations, exit procedures including redundancy and voluntary resignations, employee educational programs, succession planning and retention (Finsterwalder & Kuppelwieser, 2020; Zhou, Zogan et al., 2020). About the macro-HRM, the HR budget and policies required emergency revision to respond to the company and employees' needs, and avoid the occupational hazard caused by the Covid-19 (Lee & Warner, 2005). The re-assessment of the HRM practices highlighted the requirements for revisiting the conventional stressors and organisational coping methods throughout history and developing an innovative HRM model able to bounce back from the future pandemics (Douglas et al., 2009).

The practices discussed in this section may not be novel for some companies, but in several small and medium enterprises, these were implemented for the first time. Even for the larger organizations, the cumulative implementation of these innovative HR practices was observed



for the first time supporting the innovative aspect that focuses on improving the processes and services of HR functions.

Conclusion and recommendations

There is no doubt that Covid-19 disrupted the economies at the global level and posed challenges to business practitioners for conducting day to day operations. The impact of Covid-19 was experienced by all stakeholders, in particular the employees. The HR functions faced struggles to maintain a balance between continuing the business and ensuring the physical and emotional well-being of the employees. From a business point of view, the HR practitioners emerged as the first responders against the crisis posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. They revamped the policies and procedures to redefine, redesign, and reengineer the work, workforce, and workplace to accommodate the changes enforced by the Covid-19 pandemic. Health pandemics, as established by the researchers, can have both exogenous and endogenous impacts on the economic activities as a result of the human tragedy (Floud & McCloskey, 1994). The ability of the HRM to deal with uncertainty during the major health and business crisis has proven the novelty of the HRM practices to both operations and human capital sustainability.

In this process of change, key distinctive HR strategies for managing talent have increasingly evolved and become pivotal for operational resilience. Furthermore, these practices were fundamental to the rapid responses for curtailing the spread of Covid-19. Establishing these novel models as founding pillars, the HR practitioners are suggested to revisit and reflect on the people management changes made during the crisis and align them with the purpose of existence, operation, and development of talent and ultimately, for the sustainability of a business. Komm, Pollner et al. (2021) suggested HR practitioners address 'Who we are, How we operate, and How we grow' for re-inventing the HR functionality and to prepare for the possibility of future adversaries. The HR practitioners are recommended to understand the altered business purpose, that may have changed due to Covid-19. For sustaining the progressive HR practices, they are suggested to use collective intelligence by incorporating ideas and suggestions from all stakeholders. This will assist in developing an innovative culture and improve the attitude of employees and management to embrace the ever-evolving HR practices. It is also recommended to establish and expand on the Business Analytics and HRIS systems for the inventory of the talent competencies, which can further improve the efficiency of the critical manpower planning. The upskilling of talent is also needed so that future crisis can be managed effectively, without experiencing a shortage of skills. Additionally, the HR practitioners are advised to develop a Crisis Management plan to incorporate rapid decision-making processes and procedures. The crises are better resolved with less bureaucracy, decentralized management, and flat structures. A review of existing organizational structures, with a crisis responder lens, is suggested to eliminate redundant roles and add critical positions. The work behaviour of employees must be assessed to identify a flexible and cost-effective workforce because, at time of crises, companies required a workforce that is multi-tasking, possess specialist as well as generalist competencies, and is cost-effective. Furthermore, the strategic HR plans must include the retention strategies and career development plans for valued employees, and the recruitment strategies must be developed to recruit employees for a virtual workplace as well as on-premises work. The performance management system must be re-engineered to fairly evaluate the performance of employees working remotely or virtually. Accordingly, the incentive schemes must be revised. The key

factor in the HR practices is employees' post-crisis well-being, which will ensure employees are physically and psychologically fit to work. Building a resilient and agile system, in addition to digital HR platforms will withstand and defeat future crises. From an expert perspective, the HR practitioners must create an HR ecosystem that combines effective HR technology, provisions for remote support, and capable HR practitioners competent to work actively in any circumstances.

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