

Changes of HRM Practices Around the World in the Context of COVID-19: Implications for Bangladesh and Developing Countries

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ABSTRACT

A great deal of discussion concerning the impact of global pandemic COVID-19 on business and management has been going on for more than one year. As businesses across different sectors are adjusting to the new COVID-19 lifestyle, rebuilding processes and readjusting priorities are ongoing. Certainly, the people management issues will be among the very crucial ones. We need to understand the changing landscape of Human Resource Management (HRM) practices as organizations strive to cope with newly altered work environment from a people management perspective. The paper outlines the changes in HRM practices around the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To consolidate the changing picture, the study has been conducted by reviewing and analyzing the secondary data sources like authoritative reports by globally reputed leading consultancy firms, working knowledge papers of leading business schools, and reports and analysis of trusted popular media. It is likely that many changes in HRM will be common across the countries. Work from home, adoption of automation and AI resulting the reduction of frontline workers, dependency on digital technology, imperative for resilience, support for work-life-balance, balancing profit and people, redesigning the talent management and recruitment process, embracing remote onboarding and socialization, reconceptualization of office and workplace, etc. Are just some of the changes in the HR landscape. This study aims to suggest several avenues for local context, which will help HR leaders to better adopt and adapt to the changes discussed.

Keywords: COVID-19 ; HRM practices; Work from home; Work-life-balance; Digital technology

INTRODUCTION

World Health Organization (WHO) affirmed in December 2019, that a novel coronavirus known as COVID-19 started in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China, which showed an unknown disease evident in sickness among a bunch of individuals in Wuhan City and outrageously spread all over the world in a concise period [1]. When the COVID-19 pandemic started spreading across the world, thousands of people started facing severe health problems and death rates increased. The only way to halt the spread was to stop all social and business activities for an unspecified period. This led many countries to impose a lockdown in daily social and economic life. In such a scenario all business activities of all industries were fully stopped [2].

In this globally connected world, the lockdown impacted business activities to a varying degree. For example, the airlines, hospitality, hotel, the manufacturing industry is totally stopped, millions of people are likely to lose jobs in these sectors, many businesses are unable to bear the financial losses and enormous disruptions caused by the pandemic, which will take years to recover, if at all. Along with a wide

array of unique and fundamental challenges, COVID-19's impacts on workers and workplaces have been dramatic and have become a massive concern across the globe which is likely to lead to certain permanent. To get over the current situation, companies are trying to run offices and administration jobs through rebuilding processes and readjusting priorities [3]. No doubt, the people management issues will be among the very crucial ones. We need to understand the changing landscape of Human Resource Management (HRM) practices in specific contexts as organizations help their workforce cope with and adjust to their newly altered work environment from a people management perspective.

It is likely that many changes in HRM will be common across the countries. To keep the business operation going, the present trend of the COVID-19 crisis has forced HR personnel to re-think, re-design, and support departments by helping them put the right processes in place while also learning for future HR practices. When the pandemic ends, though none clearly can predict when, we will probably see a new world, a new lexicon, a new social norm with far-reaching economic and social destruction. The challenge for HR will be to continue

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developing employees who are innovative, proactive, committed, and dedicated to their employer while remaining positive and productive [4]. Also, it will be imperative how to enable the right changes of HRM practices while ensuring a unified communication between employer and employee. With this backdrop, this paper consolidated the recent trends and changes of HRM practices around the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, the paper developed some insights into the specific context of Bangladesh, developing countries, and emerging countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper is basically descriptive and analytical in nature. This qualitative study aims to present a deeper insight to analyze the changes in HRM practices around the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To consolidate the changing picture, we reviewed and analyzed mainly three types of sources:

- HR and management consulting firms' reports (McKinsey and Company, Boston Consulting Group, Bain and Company, etc.)- since these organizations are in the business of tracking these changes from the forefront. These firms have been doing this as part of their day-to-day operations, and on which, their existence depends largely. So, the quality of their reports and analysis therein can be taken as highly acceptable.
- Leading business schools' (Harvard Business School and the likes) ongoing working knowledge papers, generated by one or a group of faculty members housed in different centers and institutes in the business school-since they are also at the forefront of tracking these sweeping changes in the business, management, workplace, etc. and on which their existence also largely depends. So, these working knowledge papers can also be taken as highly valid.
- Leading business magazines (e.g., Financial Times, Fortune), which is though popular media, but are highly trusted and dependable. These media outlets also have been seriously tracking all these changes, since their existence also might be under threat amid sweeping changes.

After gathering the sources, the most common changes and trends were sorted to bring out different discourses which were the outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic in HRM practices. Then, based on the findings, a broader perspective was illustrated in the discussion and analysis section from where the recommendations have been drawn.

Changing landscape of people, work, and workplace

After reviewing all these sources, we have found that, as businesses and economies restart core activities, HR teams need to refocus and realign their efforts. To keep the business operation going, the present trend of the COVID-19 crisis has forced HR personnel to re-think, re-design, and support departments by helping them put the right processes in place to continue working from home during any adversity. Here is how the role of HR and the workplace will need to change.

Reconceptualization of office and workplace: It is now clear that business as usual will be different in the world of work in the post-COVID-19 world. The future of work will be increasingly hybrid, and this presents both challenges and opportunities such as reimagining the entire employee experience and creating conditions that allow employees to thrive in the workplace of the future one that will be far less office-centric. This means developing new hybrid working models that enable employees to move seamlessly between onsite and remote work, as well as thinking about the appropriate physical

space both size and shape for the hybrid office [5]. Onset COVID-19 many companies send their employees home to keep them safe and sound but now, with COVID vaccinations rising, the prospect of returning to old office routines appears more possible. On the other hand, it seems unlikely companies do away with zoom and return the workplace to its pre-COVID ways. At least that's not the future of work because the workplace as we used to know is dead and the pandemic has challenged conventional thinking about work in other ways, too perhaps permanently. So, business leaders have to create a new work world by prioritizing face time at the office, considering a flexible hybrid approach, showing compassion amid the stress, being sensitive to trauma and burnout, proving that your building is healthy, and being fair when deciding who works remotely. These will keep employees both happy and productive, and prepare for the "next normal" [6].

COVID-19 is rewriting the rules of the workplace in light of the lockdown for employees' work-life balance, wellbeing, autonomy, and motivation. It seems unlikely that everyone will willingly go back to being in an office full-time as well as there will be trade-offs between what's best for an individual and their employer as employees will need a reason to "go to work" and that means offices need to change [7].

Redesigning the talent management and recruitment process: In a Harvard Business Review report 'The Post-Pandemic Rules of Talent Management', mentioned that it's time to embrace the truly global talent pool that is available to drive growth, regardless of where people call home because, at the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, talent left the building, and was unlikely to come back while technology was moving humanity away from the office and back into homes, with talent that can come from anywhere [8]. As we look to the future, it's time to unleash these new ways of working for the long-term, with a focus on well-being, equality, and productivity that can work for both employers and employees long after this crisis ends.

Although hiring is already a forgotten luxury for many firms, at least for the time being, others are still bringing aboard new people, such as those who made hiring commitments before the outbreak worsened. And then there are others like Amazon, Walmart, online service providers that are hiring to fill new demand [9].

The pandemic has upended many companies to rethink traditional ways of the recruitment process. In a period of steep unemployment, it might seem that companies looking to add workers would be in the driver's seat. But job openings have also been rising in recent months, meaning that competition for top talent remains keen and in uncertain times, bringing on the right people is more important than ever, thus providing an opportunity to reform outdated recruiting practices [10].

Embracing remote onboarding and socialization: COVID-19 has already turned many companies into remote workplaces, but without much guidance on how this new virtual reality can affect the once routine HR practice of onboarding new employees. Remote work or onboarding will quickly become more the norm which requires new skills, capabilities, and processes, so organizations should start learning now how to prepare for the work from anywhere future [9].

Large and established organizations can have a transition to a hybrid or a majority-remote regime and only management can make that happen. If managers support synchronous and asynchronous communication and problem-solving, encourage virtual socialization, lead initiatives to collate knowledge online, team building and mentoring, administer data security, and set an example by becoming work from anywhere employees themselves, then workers would not be drawn to get face time and organizations may indeed emerge as the future of work [11].

Acceptance and proliferation of “work from home” mode: When the COVID-19 epidemic started spreading across the world, thousands of people started facing severe health problems and death rates increased. The only way to halt the spread was to stop all social and business activities for an unspecified period. To get over the massive disruption in businesses, companies are trying to run offices through "work from home" mode.

Davis revealed how COVID-19 has revolutionized working from home at a staggering speed which is perhaps just a beginning [7]. Today the biggest business change is that many companies have been forced to implement Work From Home (WFH) mode for their employees in a limited way. Companies have tried to cope up with economic turbulence caused due to COVID-19 through the usage of disruptive technology by the WFH concept [2]. As business heads have control over their essential teammates, so it is time to decide who could continue the 'work from home' model [12].

Boosting managerial support for work-life-balance: Rachel Schallom and Fortune staff asserted in one newspaper article that seemingly overnight, our friends, family, colleagues, and communities have changed their lives in critical ways as the past year has transformed nearly every aspect of our world. Living through a global pandemic has driven dramatic shifts in our jobs, eating habits, childcare, and even our collective sense of time that promises to have many longer-lasting effects [13]. Gjaja, et al. explained how people and organizations alike are adopting new behaviors such as a new kind of work-life balance as work and family mix [14]. Likewise, students have also shifted to e-learning through videoconferencing systems like schools and universities shutdown. According to the rapidly spreading virus forced a precipitous shift to remote work at many companies, like everyone else, the CEOs of the firms are facing difficult decisions about their vulnerable parents as the increased difficulty and risks of traveling separated them from family to be closer to the employees [15]. Moreover, the CEOs, married to working spouses, are getting lost in looking after the kids as their spouses are frontline workers.

Managers must acknowledge that COVID-19 is putting an enormous strain on people, especially working parents, while also holding them accountable for getting their work done which seems to a conflict between predictability and flexibility. So, they should build routines into the workday without unduly burdening parents, while at the same time experimenting with new ways of working and communicating so that everyone's needs are accommodated fairly [16]. A generous dose of compassion will make us all stronger as we rebuild and remake our world in the year ahead.

Adoption of automation and AI resulting reduction of frontline worker: In a very short window of time, the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the ways consumers, employees, and organizations interact. The virus most severely disturbed arenas with the highest overall physical proximity scores: Medical care, personal care, on-site customer service, and leisure and travel which includes frontline workers who frequently interact with strangers and requires on-site presence. To respond to this situation urgently, governments, healthcare providers, and businesses have looked to applications of automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in hospitals, airports, transportation systems, recreation and scenic areas, hotels, restaurants, and communities in general to compensate for the unavailability of human workers [3].

Moreover, many companies deployed automation and AI in warehouses, grocery stores, call centers, and manufacturing plants to reduce workplace density and cope with surges in demand which

is definitely an utmost acceleration in adoption of automation and AI. As we are in a period of continuous learning, the lessons may be unchosen and unwanted, but they can be leveraged to guide future actions [17].

According to a McKinsey and Company report 'The future of work after COVID-19' jobs with the highest physical proximity are likely to be the most disrupted as the pandemic has brought up some trends that might reshape work and the workforce skills required with diverse economic and labor market after the pandemic recedes. As a result, the frontline workers will be among the very first groups to be replaced by automation and AI [3].

Enhanced dependency on digital devices consequent rise of global service: Senior Partner of McKinsey and Company, said, most companies had some kind of business continuity planning effort to address vulnerabilities in their operations, but we have seen a real step-change in how robust those plans need to be and how much value there is in creating a more resilient supply chain through digital technology to operate more flexibly while providing visibility and transparency [18]. Moreover, remote work and virtual meetings are likely to continue, and companies and policymakers may help facilitate workforce transitions by expanding and enhancing the digital infrastructure [3]. End-to-End (E2E) digital approaches can transform the customer experience and benefit both the financial and cultural value of a company which is currently a must for CEOs to see that resiliency [18].

A Bain research shows about 60% of people using videoconferencing today plan to use it just as much or more, and the consumers expect to maintain or increase the use of food delivery platforms after the pandemic is over [19]. So, people and organizations alike are investing to ensure a sustainable alteration to meet customer demand through online goods purchasing service [14].

During the next few years, nearly every company will bring its functional activities together in E2E fashion as the need for resilience which brings the value generated into the spotlight such as supporting and protecting key resources of the company, protecting liquidity through end-to-end oversight of procure-to-pay and order-to-cash processes, and providing executive teams with timely data to make informed decisions [20].

Imperative for resilience in the face of uncertainty: As the COVID-19 pandemic has separated people from their workplaces, coworkers, and familiar daily routines, so, actively fostering a sense of inclusion at work is so critical right now. Because in many cases, it has added stress, led to a drop in morale, and fragmented team cohesion, all of which can result in dampened work performance [21]. However, adjusting to the new normal is no longer a want but a must-have for businesses as the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that business is all about people. Whether we're working from home, or onsite a turning point for HR leaders is the way strategy formulations such as matters of leadership, workforce engagement, productivity, and skills, with their sensitivity to sustain communication, collaboration, capacity, and culture for the future of work.

Instead of establishing a plan and ensuring the organization sticks to it, managers must understand and respond continuously to dynamic and wrenching change by reexamining their collective thought processes and challenge their assumptions as due to COVID-19 the radically changed circumstances call for new forms of leadership, new ways of working, and new operating models. Crisis-tested managers will develop a tolerance of ambiguity, a quickened operating cadence, and a culture of constant refinement, review, and revision [4].

Balancing profit and people: The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted labor markets globally during 2020 where we can notice some sudden consequences such as millions of people were furloughed or lost jobs, and others rapidly adjusted to WFH as offices closed [3].

As companies are challenged to be creative when managing their human capital because of the cost-cutting that continues across the raging economy, firms announced some other initiatives such as four-day workweeks, unpaid leave, pay freezes, elimination of bonuses, and reduced vacation allowance without letting employees go. Moreover, the actions will likely affect all employees, even those not impacted directly no matter which tools a firm use, that is why, it is better to maintain efficiency, transparency, fairness, and compassion while utilizing two-way communication tools such as virtual forums to allow employees to voice their concerns [22].

DISCUSSION

Implications for Bangladesh and developing countries

In summary, we can say, the many of the changes are not temporary, for the time being, or stand-alone. The COVID-19 phenomenon will have a lasting impact on life, society, economy, and business. So naturally, there will be a significant impact on management and its functional areas like HRM practices, as well. To understand and organize the multiple ways of how the role of HR and workplace will need to change, this article just noted a few of them: (1) Acceptance and Proliferation of "Work from Home" mode, (2) Adoption of Automation and AI Resulting Reduction of Frontline Worker, (3) Enhanced Dependency on Digital Technology Consequent Rise of Global Service, (4) Imperative for Resilience in the face of Uncertainty, (5) Boosting Managerial Support for Work-Life-Balance, (6) Balancing Profit and People, (7) Redesigning the Talent Management and Recruitment Process, (8) Embracing Remote Onboarding and Socialization, and (9) Reconceptualization of Office and Workplace.

Most of the above discussion came from developed country sources, be it management and HR consulting companies, leading business schools, or leading popular media, but the sources themselves are very much global in their scope and coverage. So many things will be common for developing countries and emerging economies also. So, managers living and working in developing countries, need to look for global best practices. Earlier, in pre-COVID days, managers of developing countries overlooked, in general, many management and HRM best practices, simply saying that 'those western or developed country best practices' are not readily applicable' in their 'not-so-developed country' context. Companies and their managers need efficiency, but now they need to have more compassion in designing HR policies and need to have a more 'sharing and caring' attitude in HR practice. No doubt, this will need a paradigm shift from 'superstar' lone performance to more egalitarian, collective, and synergistic performance. Companies need to evolve into more 'social' as entities where long-term resilience and continuity will be more important than short-term, quarter-to-quarter earnings and or share price race, which had been termed 'unhealthy' even in normal days, before the COVID-19.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic has brought up some trends that may reshape work and the workforce skills required with diverse economic and labor market after the pandemic recedes. Companies need to redesign and create a more resilient supply chain providing visibility and transparency.

Moreover, remote work and virtual meetings are likely to continue, and companies and policymakers may help facilitate workforce transitions by expanding and enhancing the digital infrastructure through End-to-end (E2E) digital approaches. Crisis-tested managers have to develop a tolerance of ambiguity and a culture of constant refinement, review, and revision. Managers must work harder to ensure the work-life balance of themselves and their employees. Developing and emerging country managers need to adopt the 'new era' best practices and customize them according to the particular social context of their operating environment. In general, there will have to be a paradigm shift in 'thought process', which will value more collective, egalitarian, and social, yet long-term and resilient characterization of businesses, management, and HR practices.

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