

Theory Review: HRM's influence in enhancing employee experience during Covid-19

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Abstract

COVID-19 impacted how businesses interact with employees. No longer an HR topic, employee experience becomes an important driver for the overall productivity. This paper aims to identify various HR approaches to enhance employee experience, during the COVID-19 pandemic since the growing number of studies investigating HR practices only complicates the people strategy design. The Covid-19 pandemic made companies painfully aware of the fragility of all established business rules, and the need to design frameworks that can “survive” the current vast economic changes (as the stock market boom, low interest rates, massive IT investments, the cryptocurrency, 5G telecommunications, electric vehicles, extensive digital transformation, inflation, and the so-called *great resignation*). An added lagging problem companies are facing is the insecurity brought by the global inflation, and thus the necessity to become a place where people find safety and security. This can hardly be achieved without the support of a seasoned HR team as an integrated business function. While most of these changes are not favored by neither people nor companies, they prove that everything is evolving. Employees nowadays require purpose, appreciation, and meaningful work and can no longer be left blindsided regarding the value they bring to the companies. One possible response is to design sustainable HR practices supported by superb technology/digital transformation as a necessity to ensure business continuity, especially with more and more people working remotely. As flexible/hybrid working models are going mainstream, people must be compensated more, and more fairly. Therefore, this paper discusses research around the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on employee experience. Investigating secondary data of existing studies, thought leadership, notable articles, best practices, etc. published between 2019-2021, it summarizes results showing that technology/digitalization and HR play critical role in the people management success midst the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper illustrates the current knowledge diversity in terms of sustainable practices that can be applied, changes in the people landscape, and implications for the future of the business. It can be concluded that midst the COVID-19 pandemic, sustainable HR practices are undoubtedly an attractive topic. By adopting an appropriate HR strategy, companies can achieve great employee experience, strong culture, and agility.

Keywords: Covid-19 leadership, digitalization, employee experience, employee satisfaction, HR practices

Field: HR Management

1. INTRODUCTION

The human resource management (HRM) field has paid increasing attention to employee experience under various HRM practices, especially over the last decade (Hewett, et. al.,2018; Ostroff & Bowen, 2016; Sanders, et al, 2014). Employee experience at an individual level mediates the relationship between the company's practices and employees' attitudes/behaviors (Aryee, et al, 2012; Liao, et al, 2009); while at a strategic level, it has been identified as a forerunner of team performance (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Research has shown that all employee experience, engagement, and knowledge sharing bear positive impact on company performance. Hence, companies have been challenged to decide how to benefit from the changes and opportunities brought upon the Covid-19 pandemic. (Tanveer et. al., 2020). In COVID-19 time, companies must take a different approach on their employee strategy, by putting employee experience at the center which goes beyond increasing benefits or making the workplace more fun. Research is conducted to discover in what manner can the traditional HRM approach be reframed to better empower and engage people. (Plaskoff, 2017) One way to do that is by seeing employee experience as a strategic process that engages people via purpose and value. In the strategic HRM literature, a shared consensus is over the focus on systems rather than on individual practices since individual HR practices are likely to depend on other practices within the company. (Boon, et al, 2019)

The impact of HRM is not a novelty that was brought upon the Covid-19 pandemic. More than a decade ago, the importance of employees experience had been discussed, and how this experience might differ from the company's initial strategy (e.g., Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Nishii & Wright, 2008; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Nonetheless, especially with the Covid-19 pandemic, we witness strong increase in research examining employee experience, under the HR strategy (Boon, et al, 2019); which per se possesses various meanings for different stakeholders, such as HR, other leaders or the employees (Arthur & Boyles, 2007). Hence, there can be found noninterchangeable, yet valid viewpoints regarding HR's influence over employee experience. For instance, one would be from HR, focusing on set policies, another from leadership, focusing on what they had implemented in their team, and a third from employees, focusing on their own, unique experience over the same HR practices. Further research should investigate when and why these views are or are not aligned. Nonetheless most research focuses on the employee experience, toward the HR approach. (Boon, et al, 2019) Once the HRM strategy is rated by employee experience, the spotlight is on variations between employees, which is contradictory to former theoretical assumptions that HRM systems originate at a company level, and as such are implemented throughout the company.

Recent research found only 15 studies explicitly utilizing an approach where the entire focus is on a single employee's attitude/evaluation of HR approaches. (Boon, et al, 2019) Hence, it would be logical to explicitly distinguish between one's experience of and the actual HR approach/system since employee experience should be treated as a proximal outcome of one's perception of the HR system. (Boon, et al, 2019) To measure the HRM impact, individual item

referents and evaluative items can be utilized in research. (Boon, et al, 2019) For an example, there are studies investigating how satisfied with or motivated employees feel by HRM's approach (Runhaar, et al, 2013).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought reinvention of many companies, imposing new policies and procedures, testing the company's capacity to adapt, think and plan differently, thus requiring more people-focused HR strategy. Many studies have emphasized business innovation as a necessity due to changes in how business is conducted, starting from social distancing and limited face-to-face business. (Vahdat, 2021) Hoping to sustain performance and productivity, companies respond to these pressing problems via technology. (Vahdat, 2021) Therefore, there is interest in understanding the role of technology in HRM approaches, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Current research divides published articles into several groups, including articles related to the role of communication technology, cloud computing and teleworking. After collecting key challenges, and potential solutions for them, the conclusion was that authentic (HR) leadership was a noteworthy approach that should be applied in these circumstances. Such HR approach makes employee health and wellbeing a top priority, and its sustainability is dictated by how companies deal with the current crisis. (Vahdat, 2021)

Another recent research tried to present a systematic review of almost 500 empirical studies, on over 500 HRM systems, whose development was additionally analyzed over time. While important trends were identified, linking their conceptualization and measurement its results suggested that the comprehensive conceptualization and lack of clarity in HR strategy is impairing research progress. Much of the research to date does not show in what manner the synergies and interactions of HR practices operate. (Boon, et al, 2019) On top of this, leaders today need to manage their companies in time of vast changes (the stock market boom, low interest rates, massive IT investments, the cryptocurrency, 5G telecommunications, electric vehicles, extensive digital transformation, inflation, and the so-called great resignation to name a few).

One new research in the area of employee experience showed that benefits are not the solution to increasing employee engagement. (Plaskoff, 2017) Companies should find way to understand each of their employees more deeply, and co-design experiences in the workplace that show genuine care. Companies should embrace all-inclusive approach, experiment, iterate, build their HR approach organically, while acknowledging that the mere process is just as important, if not more important, than the end goal. (Plaskoff, 2017) Research has been conducted to identify employee experience practices that are applied in international companies and to analyze their impact on psychological state, during the pandemic. The study considered that employee experience drivers during COVID-19 are technology, communication, trust in leadership, health, and well-being. (Barik, Yadav, 2021) Furthermore, the research tried to explain that by applying such approaches companies can minimize psychological distance among their employees. It is worth mentioning that further quantitative testing should be conducted to check effectiveness in regard to company productivity. (Barik, Yadav, 2021) Another recent research explored how employees (in the health care sector) were managed during the period 2020-2021 since it had been crucial to the overall social and economic crisis and the conclusion was that the most important

areas from strategic HRM that required urgent attention during COVID-19 pandemic were: appropriate communication of the requirements of the new normal and identification of the most skillful employees for adapting to the changes and forecasting the forthcoming trends. (Eftimov & Bozinovska, 2021)

This paper contributes to the employee experience field in two ways. **First**, the *employee experience* concept is clarified and research progress which has been incorporated under this umbrella is reviewed. Moreover, extant literature is critically summarized, and future research directions are proposed. **Second**, this paper extends prior reviews in this domain, presenting new insights. Below the adopted research is explained; then, the difference between the HRM strategies in regard to employee experience are investigated. **Lastly**, empirical findings are critically reviewed, and insights are offered into how research in these areas should advance.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A systematic literature search was conducted which involved published studies investigating HRM strategies which can be related to employee experience, and published between 2019 and 2021, in well-renowned, international journals such as the: *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *Human Resource Management Journal*, *Journal of Management* and the *Journal of Management Studies*. The year 2019 was chosen as the start year for the analysis because, around this time, the covid-19 pandemic began; in addition to the continuing trend of HRM receiving more and more attention in both research and practice. (Hewett, et. al.,2018) To be included in the theory review, a research paper had to meet the following criteria.

First, it had to discuss a broader HRM approach, practice or strategy; i.e. a system or multiple practices affecting most of or the entire company, instead of a single practice, which would focus on a specific part or function or team in the company. This way, the research would bring larger impact to the overall employee experience, compared to a single practice (Combs et al., 2006). Thus, the research reviewed had to capture employee experiences across HRM strategies, thus avoiding single practices. **Second**, the selected articles had to be related to the most frequently studied and more complex HR practices relating to employee experience such as employee development, motivation, capacity, performance, compensation, or communication. (Boselie et al., 2005, Appelbaum et al., 2000). The purpose of establishing this criterion was to enhance the relevance of the research and to make the findings more applicable not only for further research, but also for the HRM practitioners. **Third**, to review a theoretical viewpoint, only studies which addressed theoretical perspective of employee experience with regards of HRM were considered. **Fourth**, the research had to consider the Covid-19 pandemic influence over the business, especially as factor affecting employee experience. This criterion was set as to understand implications of the changes brought upon the COVID-19 pandemic over companies, instead of focusing on a longer period of time. Hence, none of the longitudinal studies published were taken into consideration. **Fifth**, the research paper had to be published in either of the above-mentioned noteworthy journals. This criterion was set as to ensure that the theory reviewed is relevant, meaningful, and well examined by notable, international scholars.

Research Process Description

While establishing the search criteria, all *Abstracts* of the articles published during the selected time in the selected period were read. At a first glance, hundreds of studies were found via Google Scholar based on search words. Nevertheless, after articles had been more meticulously examined, many studies were excluded because they had not meet (at least one of the) the aforementioned criteria. Consequently, 16 studies in total were included in this review. All of the selected studies were published in dedicated, well-endowed HR-focused journals. Throughout the review, the words *HR strategy* and *HR approaches* as well as *HR* and *HRM* are used interchangeably as synonyms.

Research Studies Description

All studies included in the review are cross-sectional as they collect data at a specific point in time i.e., during the Covid-19 pandemic. Only one of the reviewed papers was quantitative and descriptive, as it described data status via systematic, statistical analysis. Its purpose was to arrange research, clarify novelty, and point HRM implications and challenges. This paper conducted a systematic search in over 1,500 documents, or 41 articles studying HRM strategic topic. (José & Amparo, 2019). The remaining 15 studies included in the review were of qualitative nature. Since there are many types of research under qualitative research, for the purposes of this research we distinguished between the following types (Glaser & Strauss, 1967):

- **Systematic review research**, a synopsis of all the theory on a given topic while meeting pre-defined eligibility criteria where firstly a question is formulated, studies are searched, the quality of studies is assessed, the evidence is summarized, and findings are interpreted;
- **Case studies**, in-depth (groups of) people or institutions research; communication exploring or content analysis, obtained via case studies or other qualitative studies;
- **Phenomenological research**, experience analysis gotten from descriptions by the subjects;
- **Ethnographic research**, data collection from knowledgeable informants, from specific culture groups;
- **Grounded theory research**, data collection and analysis, followed by theory development during which constant comparison is made between the gathered data;
- **Historical research**, past data recognition, positioning, assessing, and synthesis; and process of external and internal criticism of the past data;
- **Action research**, research searching for action to improve the practice and investigate effects of that action.

Most of the studies included in this theory review (15 out of 16), can be further placed in two major groups of qualitative study. More specifically, five can be classified as some form of systematic review, of a theory study (Khalid, N., Islam, D.M., 2020; Beurden, J.V, et al, 2021; Ezerdi, C., 2021; Collings, D.G., et al, 2021; Loon, M., et al, 2020); while ten can be classified as some form of case study (Stuart, M., et al, 2021;(Dirani, K.M., 2020; Kulik., C.T., 2021; Peiris, J. 2021; Butterick, M., Charlwood, A., 2021; Arulrajah, A. A., 2020; Peiris, J.M, 2021; Uttarwar, S., Chitranshi. J., 2021; Shambi, J., 2021; Bailey, K. Breslin, D., 2021). Additionally, one study can

be classified as a historical research study, as it exhibits synthesis of past data. (Bailey, K. Breslin, D., 2021).

3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Considering all 16 studies, only one was exclusively focused on employee experience (Shambi, 2021) while all other examined the HR effect on employee experience in a more subsidiary manner, or it could be induced from the authors conclusions. While theory published during the Covid-19 pandemic does not extensively focus on employee experience as a concept yet, the practice and former research are rather different. Companies must understand their employee experience and co-design them to boost people engagement; thus the contemporary design principles in management should also be applied for employee experience management. (Plaskoff, 2017) The HRM relatedness/impact on employee experience is more evident among the most influential practitioners and consultants. For instance, according to *McKinsey*, this time [during the COVID-19 pandemic] is shaping possibilities via employee experience (Emmett, et al, 2021); according to *Gartner*, employee experience is a trend that HRM leaders cannot ignore (Kropp, 2021); *Deloitte* dedicates research on reimagining and crafting the employee experience (Mazor, 2022); while according to *Harvard Business Review*, employee experience is one of the 11 trends that will shape the work in 2022 and beyond (Kropp & McRae, 2022). Evidently, there is clear disparity between the theoretical-academic world and the practitioners' real-life viewpoint. This gap between theory and practice could be due to several reasons: a) researchers solely rely on theoretical possibilities without viably applying them in real-life business applications b) some theories had been tested and evaluated on small data and had not been exposed on large range data yet or c) some theories had originated only for research purposes (Omari, 2021).

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the studies that were reviewed is that researchers were more reluctant to carry out quantitative research and more prone to qualitative analysis, especially systematic review, and case studies. One of the assumptions about this could be that via qualitative analysis (especially via systematic review and case studies) one can carry out synopsis of all the theory on the topic of the HRM and employee experience; research other findings in the same domain; and future findings could be more easily recommended. Additionally, the case study approach allows for deeper research in specific (groups of) people and content analysis which is applicable for exploring new concepts/changes, such as the COVID-19 pandemic influence over business.

5. CONCLUSION

COVID-19 changed the way companies manage their employees, and it is all orchestrated by the full-stack HRM team. The ever-changing environment makes employees require security, appreciation, and meaningful experiences; thus, sustainable HRM practices help ensure business continuity. There is some amount of meaningful research published between 2019-2021, proving the value of HRM's impact on the overall employee experience and diversity of

practices that can be further applied. By adopting an appropriate HRM strategy, companies can achieve great employee experience, strong culture, and agility. Especially during these uncertain times, companies more than ever recognize the need to put the spotlight on their employees, while struggling with employee engagement, well-being and designing meaningful employee experiences in the workplace. While most HRM approaches are still rooted in traditional frameworks, companies realize they do not work any longer in the modern workplace. In regard to the research limitations, it could be concluded that it should further result in a joint, international collaboration, assessing a longer period of time and allowing for information to be understood more broadly. The major practical implication of this paper is that companies should explore the HRM approaches/strategies more extensively, to alleviate uncertainty and improve the overall employee experience. In terms of this paper's originality, it leads to the advancement of scientific knowledge in the HRM domain via the exploration of the employee experience paradigm. It motivates companies to reinvent their existing HR approaches/ strategies and maximize employee experience by focusing on employees' well-being and quality of life. Consequently, a lot more in-depth studies would yield even more valuable insights into this subject matter.

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