GLOBAL HR MANAGEMENT: THE PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Veronika Humphries
Joshua Tolleson
Taewoo Kim

Abstract

As with many other aspects of work and life, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted human resource management (HRM) practices internationally and domestically. We aimed to highlight the challenges managers had to face when adapting to remote work and implementing innovative solutions, including HRM practices in Europe and Asia, examining changes in workforce management and employee well-being. The main emphasis of human resource managers was on employees' need for flexibility, safety measures, and maintaining employee motivation and productivity. Some research suggests that corporate social responsibility can also play a role in addressing HRM challenges during a pandemic. We explored some HRM practices in Central and Eastern Europe, specifically in Portugal, where teleworking became prevalent. The Portuguese study showed that organizations were somewhat prepared but faced difficulties coping with the situation. Additionally, we discussed HRM practices in Taiwan, China, and Hong Kong, highlighting the influence of Western management practices and globalization. In the US, the pandemic has forced HRM to consider alternative work approaches and address disparities within the profession. Work-life balance concerns have been amplified, and HR departments were tasked with finding solutions to manage stress, telecommuting vs. office work debates, and employee well-being while maintaining organizational goals. Some scholars argue that the importance of conflict resolution and the competitive advantage of organizations that offer work-life flexibility is imperative during a pandemic. We suggest that, in the end, human resource managers adapted to the challenges posed by the pandemic and prioritized employee well-being, with many organizations continuing to employ similar workplace adjustments even after the pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

In a healthcare setting, preparing for a pandemic is part of evaluating a medical facility's resources and capabilities. In business, however, preparing for employee shortages, lockdowns, diminished profits, and many other changes was not something that managers were specifically trained for or even something that they had considered. Managing human resources and the workforce remotely, utilizing technological advancements to facilitate the rapid change in communication practices, required managers to find innovative solutions.

We will review how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed human resource management internationally (with a focus on Europe and Asia) and domestically. The discussion will include how previous research practices can guide how managers should respond to the challenges of a pandemic within an organization (Bailey & Breslin, 2021). The pandemic has brought forth the issue of employment inequalities, especially a specific segment of workers who have experienced more significant difficulties due to lockdown and untypical work tasks and environments (Butterick & Charlwood, 2020; Belser, 2020). A risk management view of managing human resources during a pandemic in 13 various industries is also an essential aspect of preparing for the future (Zhong, Li, Ding, & Liao, 2021). Managing human resources internationally poses much more significant challenges than performing the same tasks and facing similar challenges domestically. Including a pandemic in the equation can worsen an already difficult situation. Reviewing past human resources research with implications for the future could provide a foundation to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the workforce and the firm (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, & Zimmermann, 2020). Cooke et al. (2020) highlight their review of 30 years of human resource management research published in The International Journal of Human Resource Management between 1990 and 2020, providing an interesting snapshot of what subjects related to human resource management were deemed to be pressing issues. Now the focus of research is shifting in light of the pandemic to individualistic approaches to workforce management (Cooke, Dickmann, & Parry, 2020). We will also reiterate how corporate social responsibility can provide an umbrella to include pandemic readiness for human resource managers (Diaz-Carrion, Lopez-Fernandez, & Romero-Fernandez, 2017).

First, the review of international human resources management and practices in Central and Eastern Europe (Brewster & Morley, 2010) will commence, also highlighting changes in managing employees due to the pandemic in Portugal (Goncalves, et al., 2021). Lastly, human resource management research will be analyzed in three Eastern Asian countries: Taiwan, China, and Hong Kong (Chen, Chuang, & Chen, 2018) as well as changing trends in human resource management in China, Japan, and Korea spanning the last twenty-five years (Cook, Schuler, & Varma, 2020).

The first major crisis in recent human history was the 2008 financial crisis, which also impacted human resource managers when they had to respond to substantial downsizing in the workforce having to create innovative ways to still carry out their usual business. Terms such as flexibility, employment processes, and wage and workforce adjustments are just a few that came to the forefront during this crisis (Sparrow et al., 2013; Fragouli & Christoforidis, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic created similar challenges, although, at this time, the life and well-being of the workforce were often at stake. Once again, flexible working hours and varying work schedules had to be established, and the relatively new phenomenon of working remotely for a large number of employees in the workforce was routinely implemented (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, & Zimmermann, 2020). For some employees, this caused immense stress and anxiety and the necessity to simultaneously manage a family (with the closure of childcare facilities) while working from home. Work-hours for many employees changed when child care responsibilities demanded an employee's time during the day, and employment-related tasks had to be completed late at night (Lobell, 2020). Other vital concepts imperative to address were the need for employee safety and well-being and maintaining employee motivation, morale, and productivity (Wenham, Smith, & Morgan, 2020).

A case study from Portugal surveyed 136 organizations in various areas of the country and asked about the change in human resource management practices and processes due to the pandemic. The processes that changed the most were related to activities that were either suspended, moved to be performed online, or if they remained face-to-face, safety measures were implemented. Changes also occurred in how employee exits were managed, contingency plans were modified, and internal communication within the organization intensified. The study presented that the most significant change appeared in the manifestation of teleworking, which indicated that more than 50% of the workforce at these companies worked remotely shortly after the state of emergency was declared. The next set of questions analyzed the level of preparedness for the pandemic and how well they adapted to the new situation after the pandemic. On a scale of 1 to 7 (fully prepared), organizations indicated that they were somewhat prepared, earning a score of 4. In contrast, a score of 6 was achieved when indicating their capability to cope with the situation (Goncalves, et al., 2021). In contrast, Caligiuri et al. (2020) referencing a study conducted by Ernst and Young in 2020, found that only 20% of top-level management felt that they were prepared for the pandemic in terms of human resource management (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, & Zimmermann, 2020). Thirty-four percent of the 500 Ernst and Young study participants were from the Americas, the same percentage from Europe, Middle East, India and Africa, and 32% were from the Asia-Pacific region (McWilliams, L, 2020). Both engaging in remote work and the fear of the emerging global recession inevitably causes stress in the workforce, which may lead to physical and mental health issues and create productivity challenges (Caligiuri 2022; The World Bank, 2022). The pandemic, as well as the financial crisis, forces HRM to conduct changes in the selection process and criteria of employees. Employees with higher adaptability and coping mechanisms with stress are in high demand. Training and employee support mechanisms must adapt to online platforms, managing HR remotely to ensure employee

well-being by adjusting stress and anxiety mitigation measures, often remotely (Hamouche, 2020). At the same time, employee work ethic and productivity should remain constant despite flexible work arrangements and virtual collaboration demands. Strategic management positions must be filled with leaders capable of adapting to ever-changing crisis situations while ensuring to hire the best talent possible, comprised of employees who are resilient, adaptable, and have an impeccable work ethic, even when not constantly scrutinized (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, & Zimmermann, 2020). A Spanish study (Garcia-Clemente & Congregardo, 2022) determined that companies subsidizing employee's wages for a short time during the pandemic showed a higher firm survival rate than those which did not.

Since most organizations indicated that their level of preparedness for a pandemic was quite low, perhaps Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and more specifically socially responsible human resource management (SR-HRM) should encompass areas related to employee well-being, especially in challenging environments, such as a pandemic or a financial crisis. This would require heightened social transparency and voluntary reporting from companies, following the guidance of the Global Reporting Initiative or the United Nations Global Compact (Diaz-Carrion, Lopez-Fernandez, & Romero-Fernandez, 2017). The International Organization for Standardization's ISO 26000 on Social Responsibility could be the platform to include human resource management practices in view of the company's commitment and dedication to sustainable practices and performance (International Organization for Standardization, 2022).

A country's legal, political, and economic environment often determines the forces and voluntary corporate subjugations to sustainable standards. The World Economic Forum calls for managing the world past the pandemic and its consequences, while the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in goal #8 asks for the promotion of sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth and full and productive employment and decent work for all (United Nations, 2022).

THE ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

The unprecedented economic growth in Asia has brought various changes in business practices, impacting everyday life as well. Part of the business mosaic is the specific role that human resource management plays in the changing business culture of the region, reflecting on employee expectations due to societal changes connected to a shift in employability, compensation, but also family relations. Rowley et al. (2016) found that previous human resource management practices based on various cultural aspects even within different regions in Asia are still prevalent or at least exist in a hybrid form, including some convergence towards Western HRM practices. What demonstrates its presence in most Asian countries are the aspects of paternalism, the focus on long-term outcomes, benevolence in terms of similar and shared expectations within a team, collaboration with the utmost effort to avoid conflict, and good relationships within a place of employment are more highly regarded than specific expertise. Lastly, each employee is expected to take ownership of their work and contributions to the team and the company they work for. Management practices in the Asia Pacific region, specifically

Korea, China, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Indonesia, have different HRM approaches based mostly on long-standing historical and cultural paradigms. Korea still employs the *yongo* system as well as the informal attributes of human resource management. *Yongo* is based on a paternalistic model emphasizing seniority within the organization. However, as with other Western influences, the search for best practices in human resources management, especially with the heightened presence of Western businesses in the Asian region, is also on the rise. Due to globalization, HRM practices are also changing, although each country and region appears to be at a different stage of this modification (Rowley, Bae, Horak, & Bacouel-Kentjens, 2016).

Similarly to *yongo* in Korea, *guanxi*, a deeply-rooted hierarchical system of relationships and rules of behavior connecting members of various levels in society (Fang Law et al., 2009), is used in China, although both convergence and divergence were found in management practices, especially when it comes to implementing performance appraisals. Recently, appraisals have been more likely to include quantitative as well as qualitative methods in the forms of surveys and interviews. (Cook, Schuler, & Varma, 2020).

Due to their geographic proximity, businesses and employees in Taiwan, Vietnam, and Indonesia often work in virtual teams. Studies found that the willingness to share information within a group is often not supported if inadequate leadership, language barriers, and interactions within a team are not sufficiently employed. As described in 2017, the Asia Pacific region is certainly not homogenous. Cooke et al. (2020) reviewed the use of western scholarly publications involving human resources management. They found that the publication of such articles has dramatically expanded in the last twenty-five years. With the expansion of global firms in this region, there is an inclination toward western management practices, with a focus on employee well-being, green human resource management, employee voice, diversity, and inclusion, and with the pandemic, an enhancement of crisis response. Chen et al. (2018) studied the paradigm shift in human resource management practices in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China. Similarly to other regions in Asia, the change could be attributed to more Western companies conducting business in the area and, of course, the influence of overall globalization and technological advances where information could be more easily disseminated.

HR IN THE US

In addition to reviewing the HR COVID-19 response internationally, we also examined how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the HR profession domestically. The pandemic required HR Management (HRM) to consider alternative approaches to work schedules and an employee's daily work life while also spotlighting fundamental inequalities in the HR profession (Butterick & Charwood, 2021). While many of the consequential effects the pandemic has made in HR departments across the US are still being navigated, the root causes of disparate treatment and unfair practices are being uncovered post-pandemic. Work-life balance concerns have also been brought to the surface, and, as a result, HR departments are being faced with decisions regarding how to address various perspectives on how work-life balance should be reached for employees.

Balancing work and life can be difficult. While work-life balance concerns were recognized pre-COVID-19, the pandemic has shifted the perception of work-life to many in the workforce. While technological advancements have allowed more options for work settings, balancing work and life has become even more challenging. Employees are struggling to adjust their work-life obligations while maintaining performance expectations (Hammer, 2021). HRM is being looked to for solutions for various HR-related issues, including employees' levels of stress, the internal telecommute vs. office debates many organizations have and continue to face across the US, as well as finding a delicate balance between emphasizing employees' mental and physical well-being while remaining committed to performance goals and outcomes of the organization (Noe, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in a change in priorities for many individuals in the workforce. Long-term illnesses and deaths suffered amidst the pandemic forced individuals to focus their time and efforts on family and loved ones. HR professionals have found themselves at the forefront of being points of contact for employees who have endured many hardships during the pandemic. Organizations implemented strategic solutions to ensure the overall well-being of their workers, such as implementing mental health days off, built-in breaks during the workday, flextime scheduling, as well as telecommuting options.

Employees have been able to utilize these solutions to improve work-life balance, but HR professionals also have to address employees who wish to "return to normal" by working in a traditional office setting throughout the day. These employees who wish to return to traditional work-life often times resent or question their colleagues who choose not to return to the office full-time, or who are perceived as not working as often. As a result, some organizations and HR departments are faced with internal divides between employees who welcome more flexibility and options for work-life balance and those employees who prefer the traditional work-life (Bailey & Rehman, 2022).

The work-life debate further emphasizes the importance of conflict-resolution abilities HR professionals must possess in order to avoid many detrimental outcomes (dysfunctional turnover, decreased productivity, absenteeism, etc.). Organizations that support flextime and additional work-life options often find themselves holding competitive advantages in HR recruitment and selection (McGuiness, 2023). Many job candidates, especially younger workers, place high value in work-life balance. Consequently, those candidates will forgo working for companies that do not offer work-life flexibility options. HRM must take this into consideration when formulating strategic plan initiatives across all HR functions (Francis, 2022). Across the United States, various work sectors have been forced to evaluate practices related to HR, including telecommuting.

One of the main consequences of the pandemic was the utilization of remote work, which many employers decided to continue to use even after the pandemic ended (Parker et al., 2022). Zhang et al. (2021) demonstrated that businesses incorporating a work from home policy were more successful in surviving the pandemic and many decided to continue to utilize this form of work policy. The following data is based on the *Covid-19 Research: How the Pandemic is Challenging and Changing Employers* initiative by SHRM surveying 2278 Human Resource professionals during the first week of April in 2020, where 75% or respondents indicated that they have utilized remote-work for their workforce.

HR practices	Changes	Percentages	
		Have taken this action	**Considering action**
Hiring	Delaying new hire	50%	17%
	No longer hiring	50%	19%
Pay	Decreased hours	38%	28%
	Decreased pay rate	19%	21%
Workforce	Laid employees off	30%	28%
	Permanently cut headcount	15%	24%
	Hired more employees	14%	N/A
Leave policy	Offering additional paid leave	32%	18%
	Offering additional unpaid leave	34%	25%
Remote-work	Having remote-work policy	75%	N/A
	Providing resources to support adjustment to remote work	33%	N/A
Training	Additional pandemic related education	54%	24%
	Noticeable increase in requests for information about employee assistance program	33%	N/A

Table 2
The changes in HRM in the U.S during the Covid-19 Pandemic

This chart is based on the survey conducted by SHRM research in 2020 (Society of Human Resource Management, 2022)

Novel forms of employment emerged during the pandemic, when freelance-, contingent-, and gig-workers have been increasingly utilized. Despite adding value to the organization, these categories of workers are often overlooked especially with regards to training and development opportunities (Hamouche & Chabani, 2021).

HR professionals across the United States face a dichotomy when facing decisions regarding employee workplace policies and procedures. In organizations that have the capabilities to offer both telecommuting and non-telecommuting work settings, deciding how to balance the perception of fairness. HR departments often have to weigh the probability of organizational goals, such as productivity levels and overall employee performance, with the factor of employee morale. A concern many HR departments have been forced to address is the employees who are unable to

work from home for a variety of reasons. One of the primary reasons employees cannot work from home is a lack of reliable internet connection. Workers who could not work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic were treated as disposable commodities, as did those on temporary contracts. In addition, workers were also more likely to experience a loss of income (Butterick, & Charlwood, 2020).

A concerning factor brought to light by Butterick and Charlwood (2020), stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, is the perceived and, in many instances, fundamental inequalities regarding how HR professionals conduct themselves. To modify and correct the detrimental effects of HR inequalities, we must first recognize the actions taken and what root causes led to the acts of unequal treatment of US workers in a diverse range of work sectors. We will later cover cultural shifts in society that have put inequality in the workplace under a microscope, and there is strong optimism that over a period of time, these cultural shifts will usher in changes in mindsets, as well as HR policies, that will eliminate existing practices that are unfair and unjust (Wolfe, Harknett, Schneider, 2021).

Nonprofit employees, specifically women, and minorities, have faced added difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women, who make up an overwhelming majority of the nonprofit workforce sector in the United States, have endured additional childcare responsibilities in addition to an increase in work duties. In some instances, a loss in childcare support due to school and daycare closures has required women to change their career aspirations and goals, often having to tend to their children while sacrificing career advancement and financial gains (Stewart & Keunzi, 2021). While the COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on issues of unequal treatment of women in the workplace, the glass-ceiling factor for women looking to move into the ranks of executive leadership roles continues to serve as a harsh reminder that much work is to be done to reach equality regarding women in leadership positions.

In order to address and remedy instances of added stresses women face in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic, HR departments and organizational leadership recognize that changes must be made to meet the needed accommodations women in the workplace seek and require in today's ever-changing workplace. Organizations are allowing for more flexibility in work schedules as well as more adaptive workspaces. Flextime scheduling and an increase in the number of hours worked at home are some ways organizations are enriching their employees' jobs (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2022). As time goes on, the overall impact of the additional offerings presented by organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic will be measured more efficiently and accurately.

Minorities primarily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic face additional barriers to equitable workplaces. Statistics have shown that African Americans have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Artiga, Corallo, & Pham, 2020). Areas such as health care inequality, overall health, food insecurity, underrepresentation in government and the medical profession, as well as disparities in participatory democracy and public engagement, have resulted in the systematic oppression of African Americans in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Black or African American individuals are 1.1 times more

likely to be either hospitalized or die from COVID-19 compared to White, Non-Hispanic individuals. In addition, the CDC reports there is evidence that people in racial and ethnic groups are more likely to live in areas with high rates of new COVID-19 infections (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).

Since 2020, the world has seen a cultural shift in regard to racial justice and how fairness is perceived versus the reality of inequalities that exist in both the workplace as well as in society as a whole. From an HR perspective, HR professionals cannot simply stand idle and choose not to explore beneficial changes that reflect the local, national, and global cultural shifts that have occurred and continue to evolve. In the US, many in the workforce, as well as job candidates, are increasingly holding organizations accountable for ensuring fairness and equality for all employees, regardless of age, sex, race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation.

The advancements and reliance on technology were increasingly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Inequalities and unfairness mentioned previously in this paper were further brought to the forefront in large part to individual's abilities to broadcast their opinions, global happenings, etc., on their mobile devices and personal computers. Organizations and HR departments frequently utilize social media and other internet-based platforms to serve as communicative platforms for the workforce. HR professionals will need to continue leveraging modern technologies to promote organizational goals while striding for fair practices, which must start by identifying organization's highest-priority aspects of fairness (Whiteman, 2020). By following White's recommendation, it would allow organizations to reemphasize the importance that all employees should experience success and advance in their respective careers.

HR professional bodies, such as the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) in the United States, suggest professional codes of conduct with the intent of advancing human dignity and justice (SHRM, 2014). While these professional codes of conduct are influential blueprints no concrete actions have been taken to enforce nor measure the professional codes of conduct by SHRM and other entities with governance. As a result, there have been no levels of accountability that HR Professionals have been held to during the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations must embrace and enforce regulations that call for equality and balance in the treatment of all employees in the workforce. The culture of organizations must be shifted to welcome a workplace of diversity, inclusion, and, perhaps most important, empathy.

HR leaders have an opportunity to champion changes in strategic HRM approaches that can result in a better understanding of inadequate and ineffective human resource management practices currently in place. By developing a better understanding of these shortcomings, HR leaders can take the lessons learned and hardships experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic as catalysts for a better, more empathetic approach to human resource management. In many organizational settings, HR departments serve as catalysts for establishing corporate values and the overall culture. As a result, HR professionals, in conjunction with executive leadership, have the capability to benchmark other companies' efforts as well as survey their existing workforce for ideas and solutions regarding fair treatment.

The pandemic also tested the resilience of many organizations, prompting them to employ novel ways of interaction with their customers, contributing to the survival of the firm (Yu et al., 2022; Martín-Rojas et al., 2023). For example, car dealerships would use virtual car walkarounds and real estate agencies would use virtual home tours, posting also on social media. The following table summarizes responses based on a sample of 416 small business executives from companies with less than 500 employees surveyed online in the United States between May and June of 2020.

Table 1			
The changes in HRM during the Covid-19 Pandemic			
Small Business Innovations	Examples	Rate of Adoption	Plans to keep Permanently
New technology Processes	Offering virtual homes or car tours	29%	85%
New revenue streams	Shifting to e-commerce/online sales	24%	73%
New safety measures	Barriers between staff and customers	23%	66%
New customer service and delivery processes	Grocery delivery service	21%	61%
New employee practices	Hazard pay	13%	62%

SHRM Covid-19 Research: Small Business Innovations (Society of Human Resource Management, 2022)

A shift toward overall digitalization of employment practices and business service offerings is an ongoing trend, only accelerated during the pandemic (Pisu et al., 2021). The utilization of e-commerce and incorporation of technological innovation thus created a shift toward digitalization of business practices that continue to be employed even after the pandemic (Martín-Rojas et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the field of international and domestic human resource management (HRM) internationally and domestically. Managers worldwide have faced unprecedented challenges in managing their workforce remotely, adapting to rapid changes in communication practices, and addressing employment inequalities brought forth by the pandemic. The article examined the effects of the pandemic on HRM in Europe, Asia, and the United States. In Europe, the pandemic has compelled organizations to implement flexible working hours, remote work arrangements, and safety measures to protect employees. However, levels of preparedness varied, with some organizations indicating a lack of readiness regarding HR management. The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and socially responsible HRM emerged as a potential solution to prioritize employee well-being, especially during challenging

times like a pandemic. Embracing sustainable practices and reporting, guided by international standards, could enhance HRM strategies and mitigate the impact of crises on the workforce.

The Asian perspective highlighted the influence of cultural factors on HRM practices. While some countries still maintain traditional approaches rooted in hierarchical structures and long-term outcomes, Western management practices are gradually being adopted due to globalization. The pandemic has accelerated the adoption of crisis response strategies, employee well-being initiatives, diversity and inclusion, and green HRM practices in the region. The influence of Western companies and technological advancements have facilitated the dissemination of new HRM trends.

In the United States, the pandemic has highlighted inequalities within the HR profession and emphasized the importance of work-life balance. HR departments have been tasked with addressing employees' stress levels, determining the balance between remote work and office presence, and managing conflicts arising from differing work-life preferences. Organizations that have embraced flexibility and work-life options have gained a competitive advantage in recruitment and selection. Telecommuting has become a prominent practice, even post-pandemic, reshaping HRM strategies in various sectors. The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated innovative solutions and a reevaluation of HRM practices worldwide. It has highlighted the importance of employee well-being, adaptability, and resilience during crises. HR professionals have played a crucial role in supporting employees and implementing strategies to maintain productivity and engagement. As organizations move forward, incorporating sustainable practices, embracing CSR, and prioritizing work-life balance will be integral to effective HRM strategies in a rapidly changing world.

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