

Beyond The Pandemic: Human Resource Management Insights for Navigating Through Global Crises

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted individuals, corporations, and society as a whole. Due to the global health crisis, businesses were obliged to redefine Human Resources Management (HRM) to recruit and engage the finest personnel to achieve organizational goals. The epidemic brought forth a slew of hitherto unforeseen job circumstances. Thus, we explored the obstacles that HR managers faced and how they capitalized on the possibilities presented by the crisis. We adopted a qualitative method to learn about HR practitioners' experiences managing HR during the pandemic. The thematic analysis evaluated the data from 17 in-depth interviews. The resultant themes showed that switching from commuting to telecommuting, bridging the digital divide, driving through the uncertainty, managing the infodemic, remaining vigilant, hunting, engaging, and enriching the talent, sizing up the elbow grease, and nurturing trust are all challenging. Participants disclosed the opportunities for embracing e-HRM and the forefront of technology, bolstering the wrinkles, and flourishing the talents. The paper's theoretical contribution was to uncover newly emerging HR issues and possibilities. These insights will be crucial for HR practitioners in capitalizing on the positive aspects of the crisis while confronting the constraints.

Keywords: Challenges, COVID – 19, Crisis, HRM, Opportunities

1. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic had a massive effect on businesses, economies, and society. The outbreak spotted the significance of HRM more than ever as businesses require HR to continue operations while coping with crises. Resultantly, HR professionals' scope was broadened into more different roles to bring employee performance to its best.

HRM is one of the most important functions in an organization, and it plays a huge part in fostering talent, delivering service, and strengthening

the organization. HR leaders have to play a vital role in managing the workforce while balancing both organizational and employee demands. Efforts to rise to these challenges have often been heroic (Mark & Andy, 2021). The importance of HRM has been elevated recently, especially with the outbreak of coronavirus. The pandemic challenged the conventional HRM practices of most businesses (Mala, 2020). Across the globe, companies are mandating or encouraging

employees to Work From Home [WFH] (Meister, 2020).

The pandemic has paved the way for businesses to look for a new way of managing people. As the pandemic is still illusionary, businesses have to be agile and initiate remedial actions (Meister, 2020). Many views that the coronavirus could be an opportunity to re-think assumptions about their products, services, and business model. It is also discussed how the COVID - 19 pandemic is changing people's and organizations' lifestyles, hastening the Industrial Revolution 4.0 driven by artificial intelligence. It is primarily distinguished by robotics and mobile supercomputing. All of these have presented enormous challenges to human resource professionals. However, it has also created opportunities worth knowing about and comprehending, which can help organizations direct their future actions (Hamouche, 2021).

A crisis can act as a driving force for rapid innovation, resulting in rapid technological advances, policies, and procedures. According to Demirkaya (2006), a crisis can provide organizations with unexpected opportunities. COVID - 19 also drove many industrial resolutions to achieve corporate objectives, with HRM taking the lead. HRM practitioners will find such knowledge useful in confronting the challenges their organizations face. Most organizations are generally unprepared for crises (Wang *et al.*, 2009). The study aimed to explore the challenges and opportunities of the HRM that have emerged due to the pandemic, which will aid

organizations in better preparing for a similar future crisis.

HRM is defined as the efficient and effective utilization of HR to achieve the goals of an organization (Opatha, 2019). It is about how people are employed, managed, and developed in organizations (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020).

Conventional HRM practices are being significantly affected by COVID - 19 (Campello *et al.*, 2020). Its impact on businesses is reported as asymmetric across industries (Giupponi & Landais, 2020). Some industries (e.g., hospitality, leisure & recreational, retail, publishing) were experiencing a sharp decline in their business (Giupponi & Landais, 2020), leading to a temporarily shut down of operations (Bartik *et al.*, 2020). In contrast, surprisingly, some industries have been flourishing (e.g., education, healthcare, ICT) despite the setback of the pandemic (Giupponi & Landais, 2020). Organizations facing financial difficulties due to the pandemic have adopted down skilling by cutting back on recruitment of high-skill jobs instead of low-skill jobs. The aim was to reduce the recruitment costs to preserve the liquidity to remain in the business (Campello *et al.*, 2020). They have frozen or cut back all their recruitment or laid off their employees (Campello *et al.*, 2020; Giupponi & Landais, 2020). Indeed, millions of people found themselves unemployed due to the COVID-19 outbreak (Blustein *et al.*, 2020; Elsafty & Ragheb, 2020). On the contrary, organizations that experienced expansions during the pandemic have faced other types of staffing challenges.

The COVID-19 outbreak has influenced organizational performance management (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2020). Most organizations have reduced performance management due to difficulties measuring employees' performance and disrupting performance-based pay. Excellent employee performance is more critical than ever to sustain businesses during a crisis (Sembiring *et al.*, 2020). Despite the impediment, employees were pressed to maintain high levels of performance.

Employee retention was not an exception but a daily operational challenge during COVID-19 (Elsafty & Ragheb, 2020; Major and Machin, 2020). Studies found that financial benefits such as bonuses were significantly associated with employee retention (Safuan & Kurnia, 2021; Sembiring *et al.*, 2020; Hamouche, 2021). As a preventative measure, some countries have implemented government policies that provide financial assistance to employees and organizations during this health crisis.

Training is critical in a crisis, notably a pandemic (Devyania *et al.*, 2020; Hamouche, 2020). It aids in the development of necessary skills for employees (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020). Organizations must reskill and upskill their workforce to deal with the new context of the 'distance economy' (Quaedackers *et al.*, 2020; Przytua *et al.*, 2020). They must ensure that there are no hazards in the workplace that could endanger their physical or psychological well-being.

COVID-19 has created a new workplace hazard, causing significant stress for employees and challenging managers (Hecker, 2020). The health impact of this hazard on employees varies depending on the working environment and their occupational role (Brooks *et al.*, 2018). The World Health Organization (WHO) has provided guidelines for organizations to protect their employees (WHO, 2020a), which is hard to internalize due to employee resistance (Gourinchas, 2020).

COVID-19's challenges have altered the traditional employee-employer relationship (Leighton & McKeown, 2020; Spurk & Straub, 2020; Sagan & Schüller, 2020). WFH has become the preferred option in many countries and thus in many businesses. As a result, the traditional boundaries of the workplace have vanished. Both parties could not meet their contractual obligations due to the lockdown and mandatory business closure (Biasi, 2020).

In summary, the shape and pace of HR activities are broadly challenged by COVID – 19, which makes HR managers' roles even bustling. Traditional HR methods have been overtaken by several new pandemic issues and possibilities that are still being investigated. We aimed to unveil them for a better understanding of the role of HRM in an age of a global crisis.

2. METHODS

We used a qualitative technique and a theme analysis to achieve our goals. The Human Resource Professionals (HRPs) who led the people managing duties throughout the epidemic were

the study's unit of analysis. They were obligated to ensure the availability of human resources, notwithstanding the circumstances. The profiles of the respondents are presented in Table 1. After conducting 14 interviews, we felt that new themes are absent. We realized that the phenomenon is adequately explored based on Yin's (2018) recommendation on data saturation. Nevertheless, we continue three more interviews to ensure that the research problem is not under-explored.

The data analysis approach of our study was inductive as we did not follow a predetermined structure. We went through all the recordings for a second time before they were transcribed. Data were organized according to the research objectives using a tableau format. Categorizing data into concepts/patterns was the next step in using both derived and emerged codes. Once coded, we started generating themes to better interpret the patterns.

The validity in the qualitative domain is a contingent construct, but we tried to ensure the study's rigor through data triangulation, providing a detailed description of the research, and creating an audit trail. As the search for disconfirming evidence results in nothing, we believe that the objectivity of the findings is established.

3. RESULTS

The participants were senior HRPs in 17 Sri Lankan organizations. Table 1 summarizes their demographic profiles.

We scanned the transcriptions sentence by sentence to find HRPs' shared experiences with challenges, opportunities, and strategies during the pandemic. As a result, we identified the following themes (See Annexures: Figure 1 & Figure 2) and described them in the following sections. We were mindful of the study's objectives during transcribing and subsequent data coding.

3.1. HRM challenges

Theme 1: Commuting to telecommuting and bridging the digital divide

Many companies have shifted to the WFH strategy to offer alternative work arrangements as remedial action (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Grant *et al.*, 2019). The WFH is often known as "remote work", "flexible workplace", "telework", "e-working", and "remote working" (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). Nilles (1988) initiated the WHF concept, where employees work in flexible workplaces, especially at home, using technology to execute duties (Messenger and Gschwind, 2016).

WFH is traditionally intended to benefit employees and employers by reducing travel time, avoiding office politics, using less office space, and saving significantly on utilities (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). However, we discovered that many people encountered difficulties transitioning from commuting to telecommuting.

A female head of HR at a stationery manufacturing company, for example, described how difficult it was to get everyone on board with the WFH arrangement.

She stated;

"The challenge that we face was, in-office they work from 8.30 am-5.00 pm, when they are working at home, they have more repercussions to them. Many mothers have kids".

Similarly, a Group HR/Admin Manager with over 15 years of people management experience was surprised by how difficult it was to persuade employees of their role in ensuring the smooth operation of WFH's flexible working arrangement.

The digital divide is the disparity between who does and does not benefit from the digital age. Access to advanced technologies increases digital literacy, whereas limited access leads to poor digital literacy. Different employees demonstrate varying levels of digital literacy within the same organization. A uniform WFH arrangement with a high demand for digital literacy would be difficult for employees with limited digital literacy. Employers find it difficult to bring everyone into a single virtual platform at the same time in order to avoid operational bottlenecks. Transitioning from commuting to telecommuting is not simple, as both parties have spent their entire working lives commuting to and from work.

As such, a participant from a major automobile manufacturer described it as;

"Challenge was the virtual arrangement."

Remote working is not always detrimental to staff well-being, according to Caligiuri *et al.* (2020). Not having to commute can make it easier to achieve a work-life balance

and have more control over schedules (Chung *et al.*, 2020). During a prolonged "lockdown," presenteeism, stress, loneliness, and burnout are serious issues (Moyo *et al.*, 2022).

The digital crisis has accelerated companies' digital adoption, with experimentation and investment in digital technologies playing a key role in assisting companies in successfully navigating the problem. The participants expressed how difficult it was to make the digital transition concrete within the working lives of their subordinates.

Employees did not have access to physical resources and equipment at home as they used to. At a time, at least 62 percent of the workforce was working remotely (Brenan, 2020). Furthermore, teleworking reduces spontaneous interpersonal communication; organizations had to rely on informal communication networks to disseminate knowledge, facilitate innovation, and increase productivity (Nonaka, 1994; Rogers, 1983). Nonetheless, despite the difficulties encountered in implementing WFH strategies, they recognized the positive outcomes of WFH, such as lower absenteeism and turnover, higher talent retention, job satisfaction, and higher productivity (Mello 2007; Robertson *et al.*, 2003).

Theme 2: Drive-thru the uncertainty

The sudden pandemic hit challenged managers to implement their plans as expected. The coronavirus disease was fundamentally a physical health crisis (CIPD, 2020; Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015). However, its wide-ranging impact on society and business has multiple implications for mental

health. HR professionals have become ever more critical in supporting the management of disruption (Ulrich, 2020).

According to the HR Manager of a leading apparel company who took part in the study;

“When this COVID – 19 situations affected us in March, last year, so when we lockdown nearly one year, one-month period of March to April, we couldn’t forecast what would happen to the business. So, during this pandemic situation, we faced many difficulties in forecasting HR planning. When we were in March & April 2020, we didn’t have any idea, whether we can continue the business at this level. Without forecasting that one, we couldn’t come to conclusion that, whether we need to recruit people, or to terminate people..... likewise.”

The COVID-19 crisis had called into question most of the traditional planning cycle's assumptions. Existing operational models no longer assisted managers in effectively addressing the challenges presented by this crisis (Finn & Minsore, 2020). Most businesses were significantly disrupted by the ever-changing and loosely defined health guidelines, resulting in routine operational inconsistencies. Managers had to change the Personal Hygiene Guidelines (PHG) and Common Health Policies on a regular basis, which was difficult. One participant from the Stationary industry expressed her views on this as;

“Main challenge was the government. They were not sticking to one decision, and as well their

guidelines were not clear at any time. The government didn’t give proper instructions, so it was a huge challenge.”

This was demonstrated when the HR Manager for a large IT company stated that employees were more likely to follow PHG at work when the government announced them as public health guidelines rather than when the company imposed them. He noted;

“They always wished health guidelines to come from the side of the government. When the health guidelines were issued by the government, we felt much easy in imposing them at the workplace than the implementation of our own PHGs.”

The pandemic period was a black hole for all HR leaders. Nonetheless, they had to keep the business running in order to avoid failure. People who were concerned about the pandemic's spread began stockpiling essential foods and medicines. As a result, there was an increase in demand for these items, which was appealing to suppliers. Businesses were struggling to cope with the number of people coming to work as they couldn't keep a fixed number of staff on board. The uncertainty in both the business and general environment made it difficult to get started or set up.

This was summed up by one of the participants as;

“We were like driving a car in the mist”.

We recognized that the driving - uncertainty was a common challenge faced by the HR managers during the pandemic.

Theme 3: Managing the Infodemic & remain vigilant

During a disease outbreak, an infodemic is defined as an abundance of information, including false or misleading information, in both digital and physical environments. It may exacerbate outbreaks when people are unsure what they need to do to protect their own and their colleagues' health. Increased digitization (i.e., increased use of social media and the internet) can help fill information gaps faster while also amplifying harmful messages (WHO, 2021).

Effective communication became a critical requirement for businesses in order to keep people informed about the disease and pandemic. The novel COVID - 19 virus was an alien concept that had not been researched or generalized prior to its appearance, so it was associated with a lot of misinformation. People were concerned about their health, the future, or job changes. It was critical to coordinate people who were isolated in remote locations. The views of a participant attached to the garment industry confirmed this.

“The main barrier of HR in the pandemic was, the distance with the employees, and the difficulty to have live conversations with them. So, you know how important that, when it comes to HR matters, such as grievances, performance matters...”

Managers relied heavily on up-to-date and real-time employee data to make sound decisions, but dealing with outdated and unavailable employee databases appeared to be a headache for many businesses. Understanding workers' concerns and suggestions

from the staff had a significant impact on how quickly and effectively we addressed the crisis.

“The main thing was to keep the most accurate and up-to-date database.

Some phone numbers were not working. There was no way to contact employees. There were different residential addresses. Getting accurate information from employees was extremely a challenge.”

The pandemic was an emergency in which businesses had to do everything possible to ensure the health and safety of their employees. Traditional health and safety policies and practices had to be modified in order to successfully deal with the crisis. It was difficult, especially for managers in charge of large teams.

“During the pandemic period, it was a challenge to keep our people safe.

With this situation, the company adopted that anybody who joined the company has to undergo the Rapid Antigen Test, prior to employment. It was a huge cost to the company as well, but to make sure that the people were infected or not, we had to do it.”

That's how Strategic HR personnel from a large conglomerate expressed how vigilant they were during this life-critical period. He added,

“As per the guidelines of the Medical Officer of Health (MOH), if somebody got detected inside the factory, we couldn't send them out. Then we had to manage that also. We had to take care of people as well.

You know, that was really challenging as we were not either

well aware or experienced in dealing with this type of situation.”

When developing crisis plans, HR professionals should prioritize the safety and wellness of employees' physical, mental, and psychological health, according to Vardarlier (2016) Contingency planning should consider both short-term and long-term goals in areas such as resourcing, talent management, reward, performance, and learning and development. However, balancing employee care with accountability has proven difficult (Ulrich, 2020), despite the fact that it is widely acknowledged that safety and well-being are critical strategic aspects of crisis management (Nizamidou, 2019).

To prevent the virus from spreading among workers, management had to closely monitor every single employee's behavior. Maintaining worker discipline, for example, appeared to be the most difficult task ever.

“To get the right discipline at work, in terms of safety, that was a real challenge as we had to protect our staff from getting affected.”

Employers had only a minor impact on the pandemic's control, but their managerial approach could help to prevent the virus's spread. Employee health, resilience, and well-being became increasingly difficult as businesses began to operate in pandemic situations. Effective information management and vigilance during and after a pandemic were critical.

Theme 4: Hunting for and engaging talents

The ensuing "Great Resignation" prompted employees across industries to rethink their careers, prioritize their well-being, and, in many cases, make major life changes (Rajapakshe, 2021). Talent acquisition may be the most difficult challenge confronting HR today. Aside from supporting advanced technologies like virtual reality and artificial intelligence, finding the right talent is extremely difficult. The virus spread among employees in an unpredictable pattern, making optimal talent engagement difficult. Similarly, a closer look at the facts and what we heard from participants suggests that the truth was more painful. For instance, the group HR manager of an automobile company stated that;

“Our biggest challenge was to fill the vacancies with the selected candidates as many who were selected and informed to report did not turn around.”

As per the shared experiences, most companies had forgone the induction process due to WFH arrangements. It was witnessed by many HR leaders when one stated;

“A kind of challenge that came along with the recruitment was induction.

When we recruit a person, they started WFH, and the orientation and familiarization became puzzling for us as they were staying at home, and were not reporting to work physically to meet each other. Even the physical reporting teams were confined to a roster, so the familiarization became unachievable.”

Most businesses had already begun to hire talent, and contingent labor was on the rise as businesses assessed how the economy would recover. Tim Sackett, SHRM-SCP, president of HRU Technical Resources (2021), stated that 2021 was not the time to make a decision about building talent. Before adding permanent staff in 2021, organizations wanted to ensure that they could sustain themselves in the long term.

Theme 5: Enriching the talent & sizing the elbow grease

Employee training has unquestionably been a higher focus in recent years. The unexpected global health crisis caused work routines to be interrupted in enterprises worldwide. Employee learning and development has been one of the most affected work areas. In-person, classroom-based skills training has become unfeasible due to the obligation to shift employees to WFH. With the transition to online platforms, there was serious concern on how to handle the training programs effectively while getting the interaction and engagement of the participants. This has become a considerable challenge for many business organizations. An informant from the agriculture sector stated that;

“Challenge was completing the training plan. And how effectively we can get used to the virtual training plan. Some staff members were not familiar with the zoom or any other digital platforms. Therefore, conducting training programs & awareness sessions was a great challenge we had.”

The value of performance evaluation is particularly questioned during a

crisis like COVID-19. Time becomes one of the most valuable resources as employees at all levels are pulled in different directions and tasked with doing more with less. Under normal circumstances, completing performance appraisal tasks takes a significant amount of time, which is frequently regarded as an additional layer of burden to employees and managers on top of their numerous existing obligations (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021). Performance evaluation was not immune to the pandemic, as companies struggled to track employee performance, particularly after switching to WFH. Anna Tavis, an NYU professor of human capital management, noted in an interview with Harvard Business Review how the company's treatment of its employees in this situation made or broke the culture. She hypothesized that performance evaluations during the pandemic reinforced corporate culture. The answers of the study participants ratified it.;

“We couldn't perform performance appraisals from March to September as we had to call 100, 200 workers for duty on an abnormal pattern.

After September, we were able to conduct performance appraisals. We scheduled it online and performed it.

However, we couldn't monitor previous performance. E.g., If today we identify a positive case, then we had to send him home and arrange a replacement. Therefore, giving increments based on performance, we had to think twice, because we couldn't monitor performance properly.”

Companies, like most activities nowadays, most likely review

performance remotely. However, due to technological constraints, effectiveness remains questionable. As a result, systematic, fair, and timely performance evaluation felt like the most difficult challenge. Surprisingly, most WFH settings made it impossible to witness employees' physical exertion. Many participants reported that not every employee was equipped with sophisticated tools. As a result, measuring effort against predetermined standards appeared unfair and unrealistic. As a result, we identified talent enrichment and measuring physical performance as the next challenges employers faced during the COVID - 19 pandemic.

Theme 6: Nurturing the trust

The impact of COVID-19 on organizations was of many forms. One of the immediate consequences of the disruption was the challenge faced by supervisors to lead their staff who were out of sight by the life-threatening global disaster. The sudden shift from having workers work in the office to having them work remotely had revealed an unpleasant truth: that most businesses fail to develop trusting mutual relationships with their employees. The pandemic itself created a hard time for everyone where companies had put their every effort to support employees to make them comfortable, secure, and motivated. The majority of our participants evidenced it as quoted below.

"Another thing is sometimes the morale was also down from our employees during the curfew and lockdown situations and the people were under stress. You know, they

couldn't go out for any reason. They couldn't go to any outlet. They couldn't have what they wanted...I mean the consumable items."

"The HR team and the management team had to convince the employees to report to work despite the ongoing health hazard. There, trust played a big role. We happen to get down our CEO, and higher management to talk to them personally."

Moreover, another HR leader from a large finance company expressed that;

"We had to earn their trust to reach us regardless of the risk of being affected. We used many methods to showcase the safe side we provided at work. But getting them back to work was difficult. We added an insurance cover immediately to persuade them."

An innovative family-based social media platform had been utilized by one of the leading automobile manufacturers to nourish employees' trust. Through and among the workers' family members' encouragement, the company influenced the workers to return to work.

Physical interactions count a lot in developing trust. Juichi Yamagiwa, primatologist, and president of Kyoto University, once at an interview (2019) with Kintopia, stated that building trust requires real-life physical connections. Lack of trust has been detected as the governing reason for the collapse of many virtual businesses. As such, trust is nurtured in the presence of physical interactions, which was far-reaching during the pandemic.

However, it was said more easily than done. Participants noted that the

rumors were the main barrier. Many added that terrifying false information was circulating mainly through social media, weakening the efforts to develop employees' trust to continue their work.

Hence, everyone admitted that it was challenging to develop trust. One participant stated it as;

"The dark part of the pandemic was you need to convince them in a certain ethical manner."

Thus, we evidenced that the employers encountered problems establishing trust in their employees. Developing trusting working relationships improves company performance over time and even outperforms organizations without a strong trust culture.

Concludingly, respondents stressed six main themes, namely, "commuting to telecommuting & bridging the digital divide", "drive-thru the uncertainty", "managing the infodemic & remain vigilant", and "hunting for and engaging talents", and "nurturing the trust". Apart from them, few participants were signaling about the uncertainty on the part of governmental decisions and regulations. They expressed the hardship they underwent when honoring the political turmoil. In general, we witnessed that the participants find many of the challenges are anomalous; thus, unpredictable to be addressed by contingency plans as usual.

Next, we dug for hidden blessings, the opportunities associated with COVID - 19 pandemic.

3.2. HRM opportunities

On the surface, the pandemic was disruptive. Yet, a deeper examination of the practical experience of combatting it by the corporate world showed ample opportunities brought forward by it. We next inquired about the pandemic's white side, which was advantageous to the HRPs.

Many companies grabbed the opportunities derived from the crisis, and they have paved new paths to respond to the problem more effectively. The following opportunities were identified in the analysis of the experiences shared by the HR professionals (See Annexure: Figure 2).

Theme 1: Embrace e-HRM & forefront of technology

In the wake of the pandemic, many companies were forced to rely on technology platforms with resources to continue operations (Poulsen & Ipsen, 2017). While telework was typically used for short periods of time (e.g., one or two days per week), many workers were forced to telework full-time in order to prevent the virus from spreading (Chung & Lippe, 2020). Others have used it to build more personal relationships with colleagues through virtual windows and cross-organizational teams.

"During the COVID – 19, we had to circulate an email saying that there would be an online training session and all have to connect with this. Our participation ratio was very high. That was the good side of it." (R3)

"For executives and above category, we had all the interviews online. We set up an online facility for us. We

started to get used to, even for meetings and all we used to work with online. That's the great opportunity we realized." (R11)

"The good thing I saw in crisis and the pandemic was virtual means of working. We learned to do training online. To share messages to employees, we used Microsoft forms/Teams, Imo. like systems. We could get immediate responses and analyze data very quickly using these tools. Data analysis was pretty simple." (R5)

"The processes were easier than the earlier method. We managed around 40 recruitments last year. Our induction program usually runs for two days. During the pandemic, we conducted the induction, the full program at a lower /zero cost than earlier. I also believe if we could go for physical induction, that is fine, but there seems no way that we can do it so far. So, we continued with the virtual one. It gives us a new way of thinking and virtual working and all.

We optimized our resources for working online and adopted new techniques, and digitalization all came up. We invested in e-learning, e-commerce, and all. So, all were opportunities rather than challenges." (R16)

As COVID-19 infections spread around the world between January and March 2020, countries ordered employers to shut down operations and, if possible, implement full-time teleworking for their employees. Because of its valuable opportunities, E-HRM, which was supposed to be a temporary, short-term fix, lasted months. For many businesses, this was

a hidden blessing, as these technological transformations frequently fail due to employee resistance.

Theme 2: Bolster the wrinkles

The pandemic is an eye-opening era for the vast majority who could unearth their creative and novel ideas to come up with marvel innovations. As per the views of our participants, it is interesting to report how the pandemic has bolstered wrinkles.

"Several innovations came in. Some people produced new machines. Yes, a lot of creative ideas came up, especially on the production floor. There were activities to which 5-10 people contributed, but due to innovation of small machines, it was reduced to 2 -3 people, which was aided in gaining huge saving in the cadre." (R2)

"To prevent the spread of disease, they came up with their own suggestions. So will do this, will do this way.... like that we got lots of suggestions too. Many who were not involved earlier got involved by giving suggestions." (R4)

"Every week, on Tuesdays the COVID – 19 operation team met shop floor workers, they came up with beautiful ideas even we couldn't think of. Because their awareness about the situation was greater than ours." (R1)

Under certain conditions, crises can facilitate people's efforts toward creativity and innovation (Tan *et al.*, 2020). As a result, the pandemic changed how people thought and acted. It provided numerous opportunities for organizations in terms of new product development,

cost efficiencies, simplified procedures, increased employee involvement, and new, quick, and effective communication channels.

Theme 3 Flourishing the talents

The management teams have taken regular awareness sessions, and thereby the employees had a good understanding of the impact of the pandemic on the overall business performance. Hence everyone performed above their average to usefully respond to the critical phenomena. This was evidenced by the experiences of our participants as presented below.

"One thing was teamwork. Our HR team and the management were highly boosted. After the pandemic, we were able to produce more than 200 metric tons with about 800 employees. It was a huge jump. We wondered how it happened. Because everybody was working towards a goal. Even the engineering, and technical, everybody was on the floor. Managers, executives, and everybody were on the floor. Since we didn't have an additional cadre, even the HR people were also working on the floor."(R4).

He further added that;

"Another thing was, even the managing director, directors, senior managers, and everybody got together, we conducted sunrise meetings. That was not there earlier. Those were the good side of the pandemic. Furthermore, even the senior managers and also the general manager was given the responsibility to achieve the target to contribute to the overall mission." (R4)

"The pandemic was the best opportunity given to the HR people. It was a show time for their talents to get the best out of their team regardless of their norms towards pandemics. The best practice you can do in a pandemic is to maintain a very good understanding and have good relationships with people and retain them". (R12)

Alternatively, some participants highlighted how they were refining organizational talents by letting go of the rotten apples. For instance, R8 stated,

"Pandemic was a good weapon to get rid of the unwanted people." (R8)

R14, R 3, & R 7 also commented on how helpful the pandemic was to let go of people without the right attitude and skills. Hence, it is proved that the corporates' talents started flourishing during the pandemic period.

"It was a common goal. We didn't maintain the gap, designation, standards, or anything, everybody was working towards one goal. We were also involved. That was a good opportunity that we got through it collectively." (R15)

It's no secret that COVID - 19 has caused problems for numerous businesses worldwide. Many companies struggled to stay afloat during this pandemic, with significant declines in revenue and fewer sales. Given the current economic climate, business leaders must celebrate corporate and employee successes when they occur.

"Even if the wins were minor, try to share them with your team regularly. Examples may be a new sale, a great

story, a comment from a consumer, and a new partnership with another company.” (R7)

Employers have understood that there are still possibilities and triumphs available throughout this crisis. That is essential for keeping their employees' morale and motivation high during this period.

4. DISCUSSION

The present study highlights the HRM challenges and opportunities in the era of the COVID - 19 pandemic. Based on the views of HR professionals, it is clear that many companies have undergone a hard time managing their workforce and gradually converted challenges into opportunities by identifying the white side of the crisis. It is also vital to note that the crisis is not only about danger, chaos, or disaster. It can also provide opportunities for change and growth if handled well (Przytuła *et al.*, 2020; Kraus *et al.*, 2020; Will, 2021). WFH arrangements, digital literacy of employees, business uncertainty, communication and coordination, staffing, conducting effective training, employee health and safety, government decisions, performance evaluation, and convincing employees are identified as the major challenges experienced by HR managers. Among the emerging opportunities is the promotion of virtual HR functions, innovative thinking, adoption of new technologies, a transformation of leadership role, and talent identification. Overall, the HR managers have played a more forefront and strategic role during the crisis by managing employees to continue the operations. The

arrangements of new health protocols, shifting to virtual platforms, and uplifting employee morale were critical areas HR managers had to deal with.

5. CONCLUSION

The pandemic's effects have vastly challenged how people and businesses continue, and we still hold out a small hope for getting released from these types of crises in the future. This risk thrived because the COVID-19 pandemic was unseen and had zero predictability.

Navigating through extreme events such as COVID-19, thus, mandates identifying their challenges and opportunities in advance. Furthermore, because of the strategic importance of human resources, it will assure the survival and sustainability of organizations of any size. The novelty of the challenges has made the existing literature less applicable. There, we attempted to generate a notable contribution to unearthing the crisis management strategies from an HR perspective. Similarly, the current study has the theoretical significance of identifying HRM-specific challenges and opportunities during a crisis: the COVID-19 pandemic. The empirical contribution provides HRPs with insights to successfully develop crisis management strategies. As a result, possible HR interventions can be identified to respond to and be resilient in a similar crisis.

ANNEXURES

Table 1: Profiles of the Respondents

Respondent	Position	Gender	Educational & Professional Qualifications	Experience in the field of HR	Business Organization	
					Size	Nature
R1	Group Head of HR & Administration	Male	Degree Master	12	Large	Automobile
R2	Group HR/Admin Manager	Male	Degree Doctoral candidate	15	Large	Confectionary
R3	Group Head of Human Resources & Sustainability	Male	Degree Master	02	Large	Construction
R4	Head of HR	Female	National Diploma in Talent Development Degree	13	Medium	Stationary
R5	Head of HR	Male	Degree	05	Medium	Apparel
R6	Deputy General Manager- Employee Engagement & Transformation	Male	Degree	14		Agriculture
R7	Group HR/Admin Manager	Male	Degree	10	Large	Telecommunication

			Doctoral candidate			
R8	Head of HR	Female	Degree Master	08	Medium	Education
R9	Group Head of HR	Female	Degree Master	11	Large	Finance
R10	Head of HR	Male	Degree	12	Medium	Agriculture
R11	Head of HR	Male	Degree	06	Medium	Transportation
R12	Head of HR	Male	Degree Master DBA	10	Large	Information Technology
R13	Group HR/Admin Manager	Male	Degree Doctoral candidate	10	Large	Agriculture
R14	Group HR/Admin Manager	Male	Degree MBA	15	Large	Confectionary
R15	Head of HR	Male	Degree	06	Large	Transportation
R16	Head of Admin	Female	Advanced level	10	Small	Agriculture
R17	Head of Admin	Female	Degree	08	Small	Apparel

Source: Author Generated (2021)

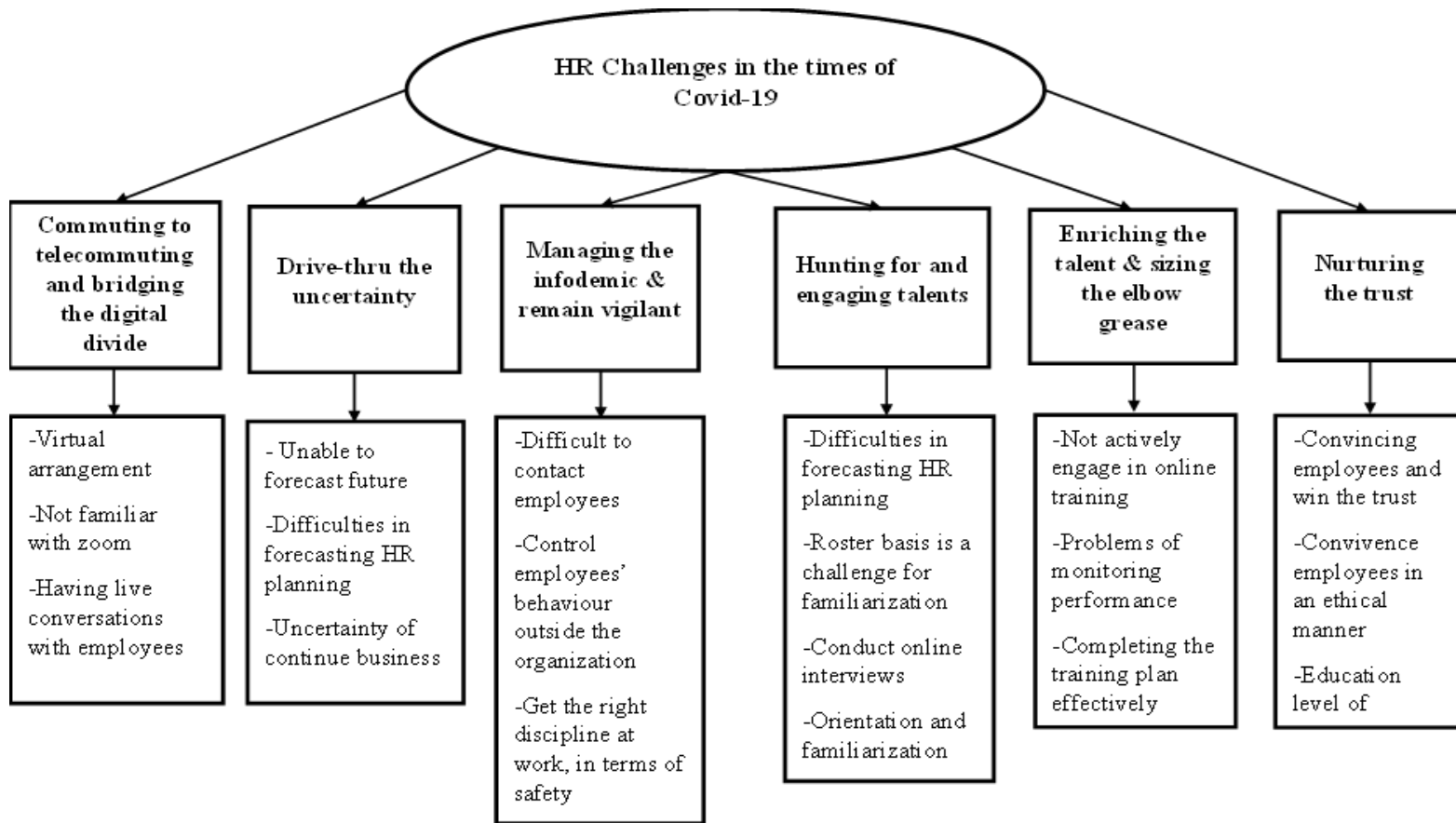


Figure 1: Themes for HR Challenges

Note. Developed by the Authors based on the Interview Data (2021)

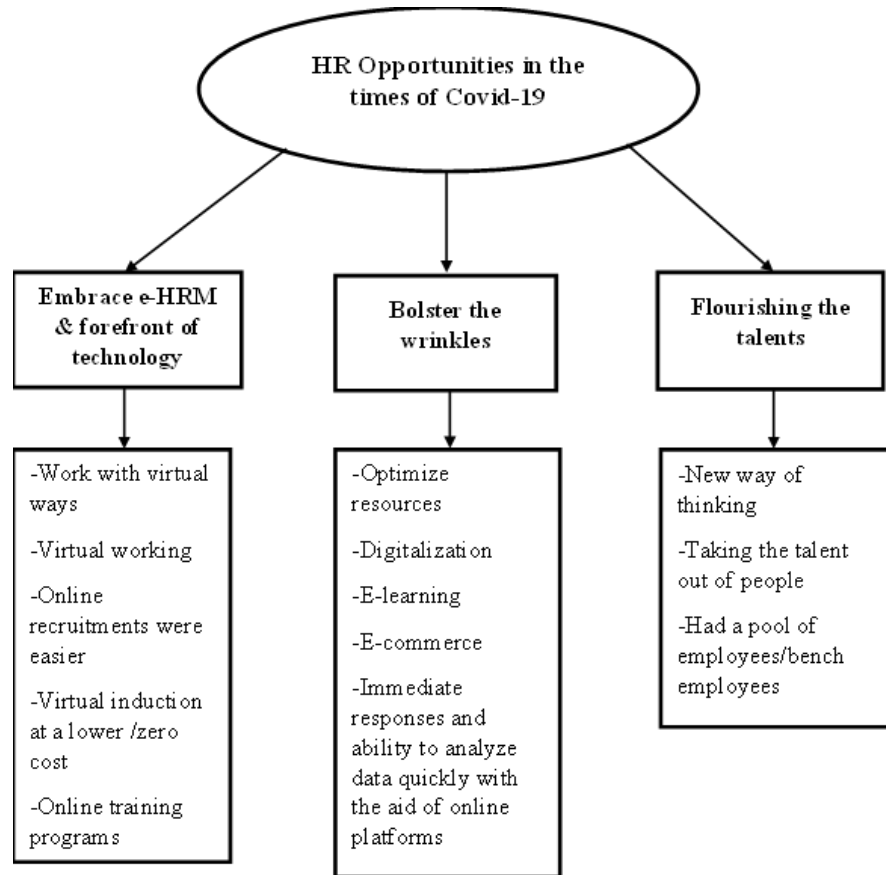


Figure 2: Themes for HR Opportunities

Note. Developed by the Authors based on the Interview Data (2021)

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