

COVID-19: Challenges and Changes for Human Resource Management Professionals

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic caused many adverse situations and uncertainty. It made many workers move from brick-and-mortar buildings to virtual remote environments. This also made employees work alone without the support of anyone. The lack of physical contact with others has likely to impede the career development and progress of employees. Hence, the roles of HRD professionals have gained significance. HRD managers could provide virtual mentoring, work-life balance, learning, support etc., for enhancing an overall sense of well-being and belongingness for employees working in remote environments. It not only made employees show resilient behaviour but also witnessed organizations adopt resilient work culture. Besides these, the pandemic offered some new strategies for organizations and HR managers. It made a revolutionary change in employment that provided insights into HRM interventions.

Keywords: Career development, Virtual work environment, Career resilience, Work-life balance, Learning, Mentoring, Conservation of resources theory, Social learning theory

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I. INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 has led to economic crisis, loss of lives and jobs. So, organizations should initiate strategies to recovery the challenges arising out of the crisis. McKinsey Institute, which tracks global economic trends, suggests that COVID-19 has moved the conversation about the future of work into the present (Lund et al. 2020). This highlights the need for a long-term view for developing strategies for creating resilience for future crises as coronavirus affected the careers of employees. This would further support employees as well as the organizations for gaining competitive advantage overtime. Due to COVID-19, organizations are revamping



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their interiors for facilitating social distancing, even when working directly with the public or clients is part of the job. COVID-19 showed various options of working, such as flexitime and work from home. It reinforced that some jobs can be done from home and people can meet online, which are cost effectively and safe than travelling to other areas (Friedman 2020). The pandemic made an increase interface of work and technology, having short and long-term consequences for the future of work.

II. THE REVIEW OF LITERATURE

COVID-19 made some organizations to a standstill while pushing other organizations to the limits of their capacities. This has significantly altered the nature of work environment and intensely affected employees in numerous industries, thus affecting the careers of employees in their present and future job roles. It has adverse impact on career development of employees that is evidenced in career shock literature (Hite & McDonald, 2020). The existence of a career shock “can differ in terms of predictability, and can be either have positive or negative valence (Akkermans et al., 2018, pp.4)”. Individually, job losses ultimately lead to the re-evaluation of the goals or a position by employees for creating a better fit (Akkermans et al., 2020). Social learning theory elucidates how individuals who work in isolation often become self-empowered and depend on their own cognitive abilities to perform work. Even employers made revisions in their work protocols to keep their organization and employees safe. The career shocks that are often made linked with individual perspective, also made organizations to reassess their own futures and that of their employees.

COVID-19 made organizations to invest in retaining talent and fostering a sustainable culture for supporting and exploring options to make employees engaged and grow over time (Chudzikowski et al., 2020). Hobfoll’s Conservation of Resources theory explains how careers are sustained, the potential effects of career shocks and how resources can impact career resilience (Akkermans et al., 2018; De Vos et al., 2020; Kossek and Perrigino 2016). The theory explains what happens when individuals are confronted with stress. According to Hobfoll (1989), people work to build and preserve resources and will try to reduce the loss of these resources during stress. The career shocks led to career resilience, which is related with traits, capacity or a process (Caza and Milton 2012; Kossek and Perrigino 2016; Mishra and McDonald 2017). Career resilience is mostly recognized as the process of adaptation and determination when faced with disruptions or difficulties because of today’s turbulent economic environment. Career resilience is pushes and encourages employees’ suppleness and determination, rather than changing the environment which often is the root cause of the problem (Adler, 2013; Britt et al. 2016; Rochat, Masdonati, and Dauwalder 2017). The theory highlights the significance of the environment during the stress and how it can deplete or enhance people’s resources (Hobfoll 2001). As inequalities among populations within countries and inequalities between countries have become more noticeable due to COVID-19 (Ren 2020), therefore, many people do not have the resources needed to be resilient while dealing with the career shock.

COVID-19 has many implications for human resource development (HRD) that mainly focus on building strategies for helping individuals within organizations.

Literature identified several ways for dealing with the career issues, career shocks and build resilience due to COVID-19. HRD professionals play a significant role by acting as a catalyst of organizational change. They support and prepare the workforce in a remote work environment during and after the pandemic. So, HRD managers must ensure that employees should achieve their career goals and can still meet their organizational needs by adjusting to a virtual work environment (Yarberry & Sims, 2021). HRD professionals are encouraged to become organizational designers for the betterment of the work environment (Bennett, 2010) by implementing developmental strategies that differ from traditional activities prior to the workplace disruption. Hence, organizations must anticipate more digital transformation and strategize ways to apply virtual HRD for the betterment of their employees (Bennett & McWhorter, 2021). HRD plays an important role in helping individuals recover and sustain their careers (McDonald and Hite 2016). So, it is expected to heal the losses that arise during post COVID-19. So, creating workplaces that will be better prepared to address future disruptive events should be the major attention of HRD. As career choices, decisions, and strategies varies during early, mid and later career stages (Akkermans et al., 2018), HRD professionals needs to be aware of the differences in valence and individual responses to this crisis and work to help employees depending on their specific needs. It should foster employees' ability to manage career shocks (McDonald and Hite 2018). Seibert et al. (2016) viewed the importance of specific psychological and behavioural strategies for individuals that can be used during this process. These strategies should be related with the ways to develop a growth mind-set, reframe career goals, training and development opportunities, and build strong career networks.

Likewise, learning can be implemented as a key to sustainable careers (Heslin et al., 2020). Learning helps to adapt challenges and gives avenues for new ways of working. Next strategy can be moving from job specialization into more generalization for supporting the career growth of employees (Epstein 2019). Practicing self-care is another strategy for building one's own resources to ensure resilience such as focusing on learning and enhancing personal skill sets. Likewise, pursuing the support of others such as friends, family, colleagues etc., can help with emotional and social needs, as well as with learning (Bimrose et al. 2019). Additionally, attending to one's spiritual needs can help with coping and burnout (Skovholt et al., 2001). Similarly, the role of supervisor and their support is one of the most fundamental job resources for achieving career growth of employees (Graves & Karabayeva, 2020). The role of supervisor should not be underrated in virtual mode. If the supervisor-employee relationship is sub-par, then the virtual workers may be challenged to establish a virtual relationship that is critical for their career growth.

As technology has taken a significant role during and after pandemic, it has been suggested that HRD managers should formulate effective strategies for technology based workplace (Hughes, 2020). Such workplace is expected to be learning oriented and enough supportive for achieving employees' professional goals. Enabling learning is found to facilitate career development. Miller and Morris (2016) stated, "from a social learning perspective, virtual peers should influence individual behaviour for those who communicate in an online-only capacity in a manner that is generally similar to traditional peers' effects" (p. 1545). Another challenge of pandemic is to deal with work-life balance of employees. The work-life imbalance can lead to burnout, stress, and other career inhibitors. So,



managing work-life is an interest to HRD and human resource management (HRM) professionals (Hite & McDonald, 2020). The arrival of the pandemic conveyed an awareness that traditional employer strategies for supporting employees who are being challenged with maintaining this balance may not be adequate (Hammer, 2021).

Similarly, an effective way for dealing with employees' careers is virtual mentoring. Mentoring is often associated with social learning theory and is recognized as a career development activity that could be easily implemented in a virtual environment (Hite & McDonald, 2020). Krumboltz et al., (1976) established that learning experience also takes place when individuals are forced to respond to uncontrollable situations. However, realizing the positive impacts of mentoring on career development of employees is quite challenging in a virtual workplace as access to the organizational members is limited. Therefore, organizations should address this shortfall as a critical requirement and try to maintain proper connection with their members. Sevilla and Wells (1999) stated that: "Continuous professional development via virtual mentoring can also enable 'peak performance' regardless of the stage of one's career" (p. 9). Virtual mentoring has a dual benefit that is serving as a professional development activity and an opportunity to interface (Perren, 2003). It enables employees to stay connected with their mentors that make them feel valued.

The pandemic crisis forced many organizations to provide services digitally and highlighted the need for information technology skills. This brought inequalities in the society by making the lives of the certain segments of the population harder who are not enough savvy with technical skills. Many employees who had stable jobs and incomes before COVID-19 became precarious workers and face negative psychological consequences (ILO, 2020). Many changes in society and government took place. Financial Times (2020) editorial argued that in the post-COVID-19, governments become more involved in their economies by considering public services as essential investments. Elsafty and Ragheb (2020) viewed that access to organizational information and updating employees about organizational planning can significantly lead to organizational trust, employees' retention and motivation. It is not only the employees who should be resilient rather organizations have should be resilient enough for dealing with the uncertainties (Ngoc Su et al., 2021). This requires organizations to work strategically. Performing strategic planning for handling resources such as finance or human resources is a challenge for managers and HRM practitioners. So, HR managers should know how to manage the resources tactfully for achieving the organizational goals in a time of crisis, which requires strategic agility (Liu, Lee & Lee, 2020). HRM practitioners need to support managers who are leading remote teams (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, & Zimmermann, 2020). HRM practitioners should understand that working in isolation may affect employees' mental health due to lack of interaction between employees, lack of peer advice, and lack of communication, which are the sources of stress (Prasad & Vaidya, 2020). This made HR managers to deal with the challenges of employee engagement and develop a sense of belongingness to ensure organizational success, and prevent recruitment costs (Lund et al., 2021; Przytuła, Strzelec, and Krysińska-Kościańska (2020). To this effect, many HRM practitioners have implemented employee supportive activities, such as creating virtual socialization activities, e.g., virtual lunch or coffee breaks (Carnevale & Hatak,

2020). As organizations adopted down skilling by cutting back on recruitment of high-skill jobs more than low-skill jobs in order to sustain their business (Campello, Kankanhalli, & Muthukrishnan, 2020), employee retention developed as a major challenge for HR managers. This occurred due to compensation management problems (Elsafy & Ragheb, 2020) as attracting qualified employees represent a challenge as employees often look for job opportunities in sectors that were not less affected by pandemic (Ngoc Su et al., 2021).

COVID-19, though posed severe challenges for organizations and HRM professionals, it also opened the door to prospects that can help organizations to direct their future actions. COVID-19 has challenged organizations' creativity and innovation about the future of work (Hite & McDonald, 2020). Moreover, it has pressed organizations to reconsideration their HRM strategies. This made organizations to go beyond the traditional models of managing human resources for maintaining the sustainability of their businesses. Even in changes took place in legislation of different countries to support organizations during unforeseen transformations (Sagan & Schüller, 2020). Even remote working system adopted by organizations is expected to continue in the future, beyond COVID-19 (Aitken-Fox et al., 2020b), but less intensely as compared with the peak of COVID-19 (Lund et al., 2021). The remote working offers employees to have flexible working hours, save commuting time, foster job control, fulfilling job goals etc. (Prasad & Vaidya, 2020). Addition to this, it offers organizations the opportunities to save the costs of resources, e.g., office space. The pandemic showed options to sustain businesses and shorten the distance between employees and their employers (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). The challenges of Covid-19 showed the requirements of rebuilding the organizational culture by adopting of flexible work arrangements and hybrid working model (AM et al., 2020).

III. CONCLUSION

COVID-19, followed by required virtual remote work environments, can influence individuals' emotional and cognitive responses, their learning abilities, resilience, adaptability etc., thereby impacting their career development. The field of HRD is responsible for enabling long-term organizational well-being and employees' career development. According to Lepak et al. (2005), HRD professionals can involve in transactional and transformational activities such as career management, training, skill and competency awareness during the time of change. Such activities enable organizations to prepare for the changes and respond to environmental uncertainty such as the COVID-19 outbreak (Garavan, 2007). The paper aims to broaden the scope of management and organizational research by accessing the impact of the COVID-19 on HRM. It identifies the main challenges and opportunities that occurred in the pandemic, thus providing meaningful insights for managers and HRM practitioners.

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