

Rethinking the role of HRM during COVID-19 pandemic era: Case of Kuwait

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Abstract

The recent pandemic in a shape of the new coronavirus COVID-19 has disrupted global economies and businesses and had unprecedented implications on organizations around the globe. The dramatic changes that were introduced due to the pandemic have influenced human resources management extensively. HR professionals were asked to navigate in the ambiguous present and unpredictable future by managing and guiding employees to cope with stress and adjust with the new remote working practices in an unprecedented speed, rate and scale. The coronavirus pandemic has forced HR professionals to rethink and redefine their role as the organizations started adjusting to enforced social distancing and a new working environment that they may have never imagined. The paper uses qualitative HR expert interviews as a research method. The article tackles to unveil the challenges HRM has been facing in Kuwait, determines the influence the crisis has on HRM and introduces the recommendations for managing the crisis from HRM point of view. The qualitative research findings indicate that organizations, alongside the HR professionals, should channel their efforts towards driving people transformation and enabling change, introducing flexible working practices, relying on new, innovative technology and developing the culture of trust & empathy to deal with the current or future crises.

1. Introduction

All over the world, COVID-19 pandemic has altered everyone's reality in just an overnight. Countries and its' economies, organizations and individuals have experienced the shock of a lockdown and the fear of ambiguity.

HRM professionals have a vital role to play in aiding organizations to navigate in the uncertain situation caused by the dramatic changes due to COVID-19 pandemic (Gigauri, 2020). The newspaper Economist beautifully compared the 2007-2009 financial crises to the current pandemic. If during the financial crises the role of talented Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) were highlighted, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a different challenge and emphasized on the importance and pivotal role of a smart, strategic and hard-headed Chief Human Resources Officers (CHROs). The perception of HR professionals have changed and are considered critical these days. Their duties are constantly evolving (The Economics, 2020).

The purpose of this research is to understand the level and magnitude of the challenges the HR experts have been facing in Kuwait during the COVID-19 pandemic and unveil the impact the crisis has on HRM. By the end of the paper, the suggestions and recommendations are provided to the organizations for managing the crises from HRM point of view.

The research data was gathered by conducting a semi-structured video conferencing interviews. The analytical direction of this study was determined by the research questions, alongside the theoretical framework.

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Below listed Research Questions (RQs) were identified for this study:

- RQ1: What are the challenges HRM has been facing in Kuwait during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- RQ2: How have Kuwaiti based organizations changed the HRM practices since COVID-19 breakout?
- RQ3: What are the recommendations for managing the current and possible future crises from the point of HR professionals/experts?

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: section II reviews the literature on the role of HRM during pandemic and presents the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 on Kuwait; section III describes the used methodology to gather the primary data for this research; section IV presents the research findings and results followed by the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The role of HRM in the pandemic era

The COVID-19 pandemic has forever altered the role of HR professionals in the workplace. Many experts believe that those days when HR just meant employee relations, payroll, recruitment, and disciplinary action administration are long gone. With the recent pandemic era came a new wave of changes that many organizations and managers are still trying to manage. However, the weight of change is falling more on HR managers and HR professionals (Lumen, 2020).

Around 61% of HR professionals believe that their role has become more difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic and 43% of HR professionals believe that their role has completely changed due to the current crisis (ADP Canada, 2020). However, HR professionals have shown tremendous sense of quick adaptation and agility. (Campbell, 2020). Here is how:

Working from home was a luxury and only around 5% of the workforce worked from home before the pandemic. The number of people working from home has increased gradually over the last five years all over the world (CIPD, 2020a). But the increase was not sufficient enough to prepare the workforce for the upcoming crises. In 2019, more than 50% of HR leaders struggled and were not able to upskill the employees with the necessary expertise to navigate an increasingly digitized workplace. Everybody believed that this “future of work” was a safe distance ahead — far enough, at least, to thoroughly prepare for (Bingham, 2020).

However, the world’s response to the pandemic has resulted in the fastest transformation of the workplace. Remote working has become a new normal and the world has gone from digitizing the relationship between organization-customer to employer-employee (Kirby, 2020). HR professionals have a significant role in providing the required assistance to its employees to overcome the difficulties brought by the unexpected and rapid changes in the workplace, not to mention the changes in the society (Carnevalle & Hatak, 2020). Besides the digital skills, which will enable but not guarantee flexibility, rapid adaptation and creativity of the employees, HR needs to concentrate on shoring up the collaboration skills of its digitally dispersed employees to smoothly transition to the virtual work. On the other hand, HR has a vital role in developing leaders, ensuring they are successful and holding them accountable for their team’s performance (Brower, 2020).

Other than the employee upskilling, promoting the lifelong learning and developing the talent pipeline is still an important concentration point for HR even during the pandemic (McElgunn, 2020). It is noteworthy that LinkedIn Learning traffic has increased threefold since pandemic. Similarly, other educational portals have also experienced the soar in the demand. The emphasize falls on tech upskilling, mindfulness and stress management (Ark, 2020). This showcases employees’ heightened desire to learn, grow and actively harness this time to invest in self-development. HR’s role is to use this time to increase talent capability and subsequently foster employee morale and motivation by offering access to these online platforms for free or reimbursing the online training fees. Introduction of the latter achieves a clear win-win situation from employer-employee perspective (Caligiuri and others. 2020).

As remote working is becoming a new normal, employees will have a particularly difficult time working effectively in their stress-induced, cognitively reduced state (Caligiuri & others. 2020). HR professionals will be left to cope with their employees’ stress caused by the removal of boundaries between work and family (Giurge & Bohns, 2020). HR professionals are realizing that they need to concentrate on employee well-being and necessary measures need to be taken to ensure it. Measures need to range from supporting employees to regain an effective work-life balance to answering the questions and addressing their fears on returning to the physical workplace (CIPD, 2020b). HR professionals are also required to develop a thorough safety, security and health protection protocols to be shared with employees (Vnoučková, 2020).

Not only HR professionals have a role to facilitate and support employees through this uncertain transformation, but they are also responsible to retain the employees (Buck & Watson, 2002). As we navigate through the current pandemic, organizational leadership and HR professionals require “trust” and “transparency” to serve as a foundation in order to create high-performing and efficient teams working together to tackle the uncertainty and ambiguity (Bingham, 2020). Edelman (2020) research shows that most credible source of communication is named to be an employer and people trust their employers more than their governments or media when it comes to the communications related to the current pandemic. The research was conducted in 10 leading countries, specifically in Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, South Africa, South Korea, the U.K. and the U.S. It confirms the role employers and more specifically HR must play as a source of reliable, transparent and timely information (Edelman 2020).

Another role HRM has to play during the current pandemic is to ensure employee engagement, increase concentration and instill the camaraderie. “Managing fully or partially remote teams is a skill that will transcend the pandemic, and organizations will need to adjust how work gets done in response” (Brower, 2020). For that purposes, HR has a role to periodically conduct quick employee engagement surveys and collect feedback that provides leadership with a necessary barometer to understand the gaps. Specifically, whether managers need to double down on monitoring, motivation and keeping people on board.

Overall, HR has been recently entrusted a fundamentally influential role to contribute to the success of the organizations during and beyond the pandemic. “Taking the lead in reimagining the organization, developing talent strategies, addressing wellbeing and work-life, administering HR systems and facilitating reentry to the office are all critical and uniquely skilled contributions HR can make” (Brower, 2020).

2.2. Socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on Kuwait

Since December 2019, when the novel coronavirus, known as COVID-19, first appeared in China, it has spread rapidly around the world and a global pandemic began (World Health Organization, 2020). The first COVID-19 infection in Kuwait was confirmed on February 24, 2020 (Kuwait News Agency, 2020).

In order to protect the society and health system, authorities in Kuwait have taken very strict containment measures (*suspension of schools and universities, suspension of work in government sector, closure of the airport, curfew and lockdown*) as a response to the increasing number of cases that have caused sharp decline in the economic activity. Therefore, the Kuwait’s government and the Central Bank of Kuwait have adopted a package of other economic (*fiscal, monetary and macro-financial*) measures to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), to mitigate the economic damage and to maintain employment (International Monetary Fund, 2020).

According to the preliminary assessment of the United Nations (2020), the possible social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kuwait go beyond the health crisis. Supply and demand shocks are expected to cause unparalleled sectorial changes, sudden adoption of online learning is anticipated to put learners at risk and disrupt the country’s efforts to turn into the knowledge-based economy; however consequences on the labor market may be more considerable.

Supply and demand shocks

The preventive health measures (mobility restrictions, closure of restaurants, entertainment facilities and shops) taken by authorities in Kuwait resulted in a decline in supply and demand at the local and international level.

The COVID-19 pandemic had negative effect on trade dynamics, which declined by 34% during the first half of the year 2020. Import fell by 18,8%. Industrial and transport equipment (capital goods) dropped by 30%, intermediate goods by 26% and primary and processed industrial supplies declined by 26%. In addition, import of consumption goods fell by 6.8% and durable goods by 38%. Food and beverages for households have stayed relatively unchanged. During the same period the price of Kuwait Export Crude sharply fell to \$39 per barrel and oil exports (90% of total exports) plunged to 42%. Export of non-oil goods also decreased. Specifically, intermediate goods plummeted by 26%, capital goods by 53%, and consumption goods fell by 33% (Hijazeen, 2020).

The deficiency of supplies has limited organizations’ operations, changed domestic consumption, lowered demand for goods, and caused inflation that rose to 2% in the third quarter in 2020 (Al-Matrouk & Al-Nakib, 2020).

Unparalleled sectorial changes

Since the beginning of the pandemic various sectors and industries have been hit differently. Many businesses, especially those in private sector and SMEs have already faced a drastic fall in revenues. To some extent, it was related to restricted supply chains and decreased demand. As per the Kuwait Business Impact Survey (Bensiri

PR, 2020) the hardest hit sectors in Kuwait have been *professional services* (46% have suspended their operations and 37% had revenue drop by more than a half), *contracting, construction, architecture* (39% have suspended their operations and 31% had decline in revenue by 80%) and *retail* (36% have suspended their operations and 46% had revenue drop by more than a half). It is believed that if this crisis continues it may lead to employee lay offs or business closures.

Learners at risk

Closure of academic institutions as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic is putting all students at risk. In order to minimize the negative impact and facilitate the continuity of learning, private and public schools and universities introduced an online learning as an alternative to the traditional face-to-face learning (Alhouti, 2020). Conversely, this shift towards digital approach has raised many questions on the digital preparedness among students and teachers, and consequently quality of education (Sahu, 2020). This may represent a risk to interruption of the government's effort to become knowledge-driven economy.

Labor market changes

Since 2019, Kuwait has experienced slowdown in employment growth. The downward trend has continued, especially in the private sector, due to the implications of COVID-19 containment measures taken by the country from the middle of March, 2020.

Employment growth among Kuwaiti employees showed decline for the third consecutive quarter. In the second quarter it fell to 1.7% from 2.4% in the first quarter in 2020, and from 3.2% in the fourth quarter in 2019. It was led by a slowdown in both public sector hiring, which dropped from 3.6% to 2.9% in the first quarter in 2020 and to 2.2% in the second quarter, while the private sector recorded a drop from 1.6% to 1.4% in the first quarter and to 1% in the second quarter in 2020. The overall employment growth in Kuwait declined by approximately 1% in the second quarter after an increase of 1.2% in the first quarter in 2020 (Al-Fakir & El-Mahmah, 2020) (El-Mahmah, 2020).

As many expatriates were projected to leave by the end of 2020, after around 5% of the total expatriates population who already left between March and July 2020 due to proposed changes to the residency law, this forecasts further employment decline and skilled labor shortages in both public and private sectors. A continuous fall in the number of expatriates in Kuwait and worsening situation in the labor market may also have negative effect on consumer spending outlook (El-Mahmah, 2020).

If the COVID-19 crisis persists, it may have long-term impact on the social and economic dynamics, job creation and future development. Therefore, this paper focuses on the implications of the crisis on HRM in Kuwait and provides recommendations for managing the current and possible future crises from the point of HR professionals/experts.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Methodology

For this study an exploratory qualitative research methodology involving semi-structured interviews (SSI) were chosen. The SSI approach was deemed to be the appropriate choice as it produces rich data that can be used in qualitative research analysis (Lofland, 1971). Moreover, it provides a great room for interviewee thought exploration and triggers their reflection (Tracy, 2012), not to mention the benefit of controlling the introduction and flow of topics by the interviewer (Mishler, 1986).

The study used expert interviews to collect the primary data for the research. The research participants were chosen on the ground of their characteristics, hence adopting the purposeful sampling approach.

3.1.1. Expert Interview Method

Expert Interviews, as a qualitative empirical research method, have been developed considerably and widely used since late 20th century. This method is considered to be more efficient and concentrated method of gathering data than using systematic quantitative surveys (Meuser & Nagel, 2009), as respondents are highly qualified in the researched question, hence eliminating the need to use additional screening and probing questions to receive the genuine responses (Libakova & Sertakova, 2015). This type of qualitative research method provides reliable data due to the respondents' high competency (Dorussen, Lenz & Blavoukos, 2005).

Moreover, not only experts have the technical, interpretive (i.e. also referred as "know-why"), procedural knowledge ("know-how") in their areas of expertise, they are also seen as crystallization points for practical insider knowledge (Bogner, Littig & Menz, 2009), have experience derived from their functional status within

the organization (Mergel, Edelman, & Haug, 2019) and possess the ability to solve problems in their field (Meuser & Nagel, 2009).

3.2. Data Collection

The following criteria have been devised to invite experts for this research as semi-structured interview respondents:

Table 1. Expert characteristics and categories

Expert Characteristic	Category
Having a theoretical knowledge of HRM and being involved in different research activities in the field of HR, thus having connections with HR professionals in Kuwait.	HR Trainers & Educators
Having worked with or currently working with different organizations in regards to human resources management issues.	HR Consultants
Having a theoretical, as well as practical experience in the field of HRM.	HR Professionals

Source: Authors

As a result, all interview participants have relevant factual knowledge about current pandemic and its effect on HRM function and daily HR activities. The latter is due to their position in the organization or their relation to other HR professionals/experts in different Kuwaiti organizations, hence possessing the information or are privileged to access such information (Mergel, Edelman, & Haug, 2019). The research team agreed that the respondents could come from both governmental and private organizations.

For this study all interviews were conducted via different video-conferencing tools, such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom, depending on the preference of the participant. The interviews were conducted during the month of December and beginning of January. As a first step of the interview process, the participants were informed about the research purpose, expected benefits, and their rights for withdrawal from the research at any time, data protection and confidentiality.

Respondents' approval were sought out to record the interviews for the transcribing purposes. On top of that, typed notes were taken during the interviews to enable researchers to track key points and to return to them later during the interview. Duration of each interview was between 45-60 minutes. All interviews were semi-structured and followed similar guidelines to allow data comparison and to keep the interview within the desired research topic boundaries (Gigauri, 2020). The questions were mostly open-ended to motivate participants to provide their responses freely and openly (Kvale, 1996). The interviewees were expected to provide thorough answers. When the answers were not sufficiently elaborated or clarified, the probing questions were deployed (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Overall the interview consisted of open-ended questions that were derived from 4 main themes:

Table 2. Interview Themes

Part	Description of the Main Theme
I	Expert demographics, their experience and field of expertise
II	Challenges of HRM professionals in the pandemic
III	Influence of the pandemic on HRM Practices
IV	Future role of HRM and expert recommendations for post-pandemic

Source: Authors

3.3. Sampling

Any research project that is based on expert interviews will be successful depending on the number of conducted interviews and the quality of the interviewed experts. Number of research participants, on the other hand, depends on research question, accessibility of the respondents, available resources and availability of the potential interviewees (Baker & Edwards, 2012). The sampling should be kept as long as it expands the breadth and depth of knowledge of the researched topic and the sampling should be concluded once the research does not gain any new insight or the knowledge about the investigated issue (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). The same was confirmed by Saunders and others (2018) who argued that recruitment and participant interviews should be

terminated when the data saturation is reached and the provided information is beginning to be redundant. Saldana (2013) states that approximately 20 to 30 interviews need to be conducted in order to gain a deep understanding of the researched topic.

For this study, in total **45 experts were contacted** and invited to the video conferencing interview, out of which **28 agreed to participate**, a response rate of **62%**. A summary of expert characteristics is provided in Table 4. Expert recruitment was conducted via LinkedIn and researchers' professional contacts. Preliminary interview questions, alongside the research purpose were sent to those experts, who expressed their interest to participate in the research study.

Table 3. Characteristics of respondents (R) - interviewed experts

Category	N
Gender	
Male	11
Female	17
Age group	
18-30 years	6
31-40 years	18
51-60 years	3
61 years and more	1
Expert characteristics	
Educators/Trainers	3
HR Consultants	2
HR Professionals	23
Size of the organization experts work for	
Micro organization (1-9 employees)	1
Small organization (10-49 employees)	1
Medium sized organization (50-249 employees)	2
Large organization (250 and more employees)	24
Part of the executive team	
Yes (Reporting directly to CEO)	6
No (Not reporting directly to CEO)	22
Years of experience in HRM field	
Up to 10 years	16
More than 10 years	12
Company Sector	
Private	24
Public	4

Source: Authors

3.4. Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis approach was used to interpret and analyze the collected data. The data was reviewed for several times until the recurring regularities emerged (Merriam, 1998). Those thematic parts and passages that had similar elements have been noticed and identified (Bogner, Littig & Menz, 2009). The interview transcripts were re-reviewed for several times until themes, issues and categories emerged that were consistent, yet distinct. The latter were labeled appropriately (Merriam, 1998). Afterwards, the sorting of the data was conducted accordingly based on similar themes and subthemes, as well as conflicting viewpoints (Flick, 2013). Moreover, the passages from various expert interviews that were thematically similar were grouped together (Bogner, Littig & Menz, 2009). The purpose of the latter was to further conceptualize and reveal the commonly shared expert opinions (Gigauri, 2020).

4. Research Findings

4.1. Main challenges of HR professionals in the COVID-19 pandemic

During the interview experts have reported that the pandemic crisis has affected “employee morale”, specifically HR has struggled to provide reassurance to its employees, hence keep employee’s engagement, motivation and morale high. Due to the curfew and lock-downs that were introduced for several times in Kuwait, HR’s challenge became to ensure employees’ proper mental health and well-being.

HR had to quickly adapt to a new normal and to devise new safety measures and safety protocols, especially for those employees who would have been returning to the physical workplace. This required HR’s constant collaboration with other departments to ensure compliance with the governmental regulations. Moreover, HR had to closely follow-up with the governmental decisions and continuously renew the contingency plan.

During pandemic, some employees were stuck outside of Kuwait due to the sudden airport closure. Hence, HR was to follow-up and recommend the plan of action for those employees. As most of these employees could not continue working remotely, the decision had to be made fast whether to keep, lay off, temporarily suspend their contracts or request to take a mandatory paid/unpaid leave. HR was challenged to maintain regular compensation schemes. Due to the pressure coming from the organizational leadership caused by the financial difficulties, HR had to find a fine balance between cost/benefit reduction to satisfy the management and employee productivity maintenance.

Staff retention was also named as one of the challenges HRM has faced during pandemic. Considering that majority of the workforce are expatriates in Kuwait, most of the employees’ have decided to flee the country and return to their home. The challenge was to hire the replacements as government has stopped issuing new work visas and, on top of that the airport was closed. Hence, the overseas recruitment was “out of the picture” (R23). Those organizations who found a replacement in local market faced another issue with visa transferability due to the introduced visa restrictions in the country.

HR experts have also encountered challenges with establishing a transparent communication with its employees. HR had a tedious but utmost important responsibility to keep employees informed by “making awareness leaflets on ongoing basis, following up with developments at the state level, translating it in English and delivering them to employees” (R12).

HR experts have also struggled to ensure and control employees’ performance levels. One of the respondent (i.e. R4) has described that the challenge was to “achieve the targets while working remotely” as remote-work required “changing employees’ mentality on working from home concept” (R20).

Overall, interviewed experts confirmed that sudden pandemic outbreak was perceived as a shock by most of the organizations and, hence, revealed the ugly truth of not having enough crisis management experience to efficiently deal with the pandemic.

The identified challenges that HR has been facing during pandemic in Kuwait are listed below:

Table 4. Challenges caused by COVID-19 pandemic to HRM in Kuwait

Expert-identified main challenges to HRM
Managing employee morale, motivation and engagement
Ensuring employee mental health and well-being
Devising new procedures and protocols to be followed
Staff retention and problems with local/overseas recruitment
Cost Reduction
Establishing transparent communication
Lack of remote-online management experience
Lack of sufficient crisis management knowledge and experience

Source: Authors

4.2. Changes in HRM practices caused by the pandemic

If HR was considered more administrative function prior to pandemic, currently HR "became the mastermind and consultant of the employer", "as the pandemic revealed the true meaning of human resources" - says Respondent 10. Majority of the experts agree with this statement, emphasizing on that "organizations have realized the importance of HRM more than before. Nowadays, HR is the leading role in the organization. Without proper HRM practices the organizations can plummet" (R1).

Recruitment and selection

Given the COVID-19 downturn, it is unsurprising to hear from the experts that the need for hiring decreased or was put on pause. Hiring became limited either because of the "financial issues, fewer available positions" (R6), or "fewer people on the labor market due to airport closure or work visa restrictions" (R7). Consequently, organizations had to "focus on the local talent, which not always fulfilled the required needs" (R8). More organizations turned to technology to find talent. Experts have stated increased use of "virtual interviews, virtual panel interviews or virtual career days for hiring of university graduates" (R4).

Training and development

It is noteworthy that the majority of the organization's concentration on training has decreased substantially during the pandemic. The decrease has been manifested either in offering less formal training hours and/or not offering the trainings at all to the employees. Those organizations that continued to emphasize on the employee training have ensured to cover the changes in the working conditions during the trainings. The topics of the training varied in different organizations and included remote working, use of new technology/software/applications and etc. The latter was more specifically noticed in the experts coming from the educational/training field. They had to quickly adapt to online teaching in order not to distract the course-delivery process. The trainings were conducted remotely/online even for those employees who were asked to physically report to work. Only 2 experts mentioned about face-to-face on-the-job trainings or hybrid training method - mixture of both online and face-to-face.

Performance management

The experts were asked to compare the purpose of performance evaluation before and during the pandemic. The finding was rather interesting: if prior to the pandemic, majority of the organizations used performance evaluations to identify promotion/increment opportunities for its employees, currently the emphasis has shifted. As per the experts' answers, currently the performance evaluation is conducted to control/monitor employee performance and with no or rare consequence of promotion/increment. Performance evaluation has become a "formal procedure. No consequence is followed" (R1). The experts explained the latter due to economic recession and financial crises. Experts have identified that in those organizations where promotions were still given to the employees, the latter was decided based on KPIs, specific project achievements and going an "extra mile" (R26). While for other organizations, the decision was purely based on management preferences and was approved on an exceptional, case-to-case basis. Respondent 1 has summarized the latter point very well: "Promotion is given to only those staff who proved to be critical during pandemic or the organization was afraid to lose the employee as the replacement would be very difficult."

Compensations and benefits

When it comes to the correlation with performance evaluation and pay rises, the majority of the experts have claimed that pay raises, promotions and incentives are not related or moderately related to performance evaluations since pandemic. Half of the respondents have mentioned that the organizations overlooked and modified their compensation and benefits practices during pandemic. "Due to the pandemic effect" and "low income, benefits were decreased to cover the loss" (R10). Others have opted to use different measures, such as "50% deduction" of the salary till July (R3), "introduction of a new type of leave (COVID-19 leave)" (R16), exclusion of out-of-the-country staff from the payroll (R21), and salary delays. Mainly incentive packages, increments and promotions were frozen temporarily and benefits were only exceptionally granted to key staff.

Employee well-being

The experts were asked to specify what measures have been taken by their organizations during the pandemic to monitor employee well-being. The below categories were identified and listed below based on the frequency of use.

Table 5. Measures taken during pandemic to monitor employee well-being

Category
HR helpline
HR e-connects
Leadership memos
Leadership calls
Well-being “learning sessions”
Activity trackers/tools/apps
Counselling helpline

Source: Authors

It is noteworthy that only 4 experts mentioned about implementing counseling helplines. While others believed the latter idea was excellent, they either did not think about it or did not have the right, qualified staff to introduce such a measure in their organizations.

Employee engagement

As for the employee engagement, organizations opted to 4 main practices outlined below:

- a) Virtual team meetings
- b) Employee surveys
- c) Teleconferences
- d) Leadership briefings

The abovementioned methods were used in combination or individually. The experts have noticed that the employees' engagement was increased when more than one engagement method was followed.

Employee morale

In order to tackle the current pandemic situation and especially to maintain employees' high morale, majority of the organizations in Kuwait ensured frequent communication with its staff. The experts have stated that listening to an employee feedback and ensuring full transparency & discretion was the key point to keep high morale in the organization. It is noteworthy that some organizations opted to provide employee recognition during the pandemic to boost their staff motivation and others chose to utilize the pandemic period to ensure staff training and their development. On the other hand, there were organizations that ignored the importance of safeguarding their staff morale and, as a result, did nothing to boost it, not to mention to maintain it on the same level.

4.3. The future of HRM in the face of the pandemic

Experts state that organizations have realized the value of HR during this pandemic, recognized that people are the backbone to its success and, hence, there should be more emphasize on people management in the future by providing HR executives the right to participate in executive decision making process to echo the people's opinion.

Experts believe that most important recommendation for managing current and/or possible future crises is to have a crisis management plan in place. Not only there should be a specific team of people dedicated for a crisis management, but key employees should be trained in it to embrace a forward thinking mindset. The latter will ensure the organization's readiness and potential of successfully navigating through the crises. Experts believed that those organizations that were successful during the current pandemic were the ones who devoted their time and energy on crises management and contingency plan developments and the ones who adopted long-term instead of short-term thinking/planning.

Experts also believe that adopting a transparent communication with its employees, being empathetic, supportive and providing the necessary trainings are another utmost important recommendations to be considered for current and future crises situations. Respondent 1 has rightfully highlighted that "emphasize should be on your employees - they are the backbone of the organization's success". Investing in people and developing their soft skills were also the recommendations provided by the experts during the interview. From the recruitment

perspective, the experts have emphasized the need to alter the priorities by concentrating on hiring those who are stress resilient and showcase its full potential while working under pressure.

Experts believe that remote working has become a new normal, hence the organizations and HR professionals need to adapt to a new reality. This can be done by improvement of the systems for easier remote working experience, offering more flexible working hours to ensure work-life balance and proper stress management. Respondent 17 has also rightfully identified another recommendation: "replacing full-time employees with contingent workers as a cost-saving measure" to allow more flexibility.

As the pandemic has showcased that remote working is possible and can potentially replace the traditional employment, HRM's emphasize on maintaining employee engagement has also soared. As new technologies are being adopted more frequently, HRM's function became to supervise this process and ensure employees' conformity. Moreover, the new focus is on building better employee-manager relationships; teamwork and team dynamics are now encouraged more than ever in the workplace.

When it comes to future concentration of HRM, majority of the experts specified that HRM would require adjustment to a new normal and "channel efforts towards driving people transformation and enabling change" (R26). "Developing organization culture of trust and empathy to build work from home workplace relationship dynamics" (R21), introducing flexible working practices and relying on new technology were also identified as important concentrations of the future of HRM. As employees' retention is already becoming problematic, HRM's future concentration would be to assist business in recovery by getting involved in business decision-making. Maintaining healthy and safe working environment would continue to be important through coming years and HRM will play the major role in ensuring it.

5. Conclusion

The objective of this research was to provide the foundation for understanding the implications of COVID-19 for the role of HRM. The interview study enabled us to identify the key challenges faced by HR professionals/experts and explore how the crisis affected HRM practices. The major shift in HRM practices resulting from the crisis is highlighted below.

Major shift in HRM practices due to COVID-19 in Kuwait

- Digitizing recruitment process
- Driving the people transformation and enabling the change
- Emphasizing on upskilling the employees
- Providing trainings and developing crisis management skills
- Establishing transparent communication based on trust and full discretion
- Replacing short-term thinking with long-term thinking mindset

The research results showcase insightful findings for HR experts and organizations in Kuwait. HR professionals need to understand their pivotal role to help organizations to smoothly maneuver into this crisis. On the other hand, they need to know how to boost employee morale, motivation and engagement during remote-working, develop soft skills to easily adapt to changed workplace practices and digitization, provide assistance to cope with personal stress and, most importantly, find the right balance between cost reduction and employee productivity maintenance.

The research findings have shown that primary concern of HR professionals and experts in Kuwait is to boost employee morale, motivation and engagement. Failing to keep employees motivated and engaged is related to a range of outcomes, including dissatisfaction, lower job performance, and turnover. Therefore, future research should focus on identifying strategies that organizations in Kuwait could apply in order to prevent the loss of talent, reduce turnover and its related costs.

As for the limitations, lack of accessibility of experts and inability of having face-to-face interaction with interviewees, mainly due to the pandemic situation in the country, was a main downfall. Time was another limitation as interviews and data analysis were time consuming to conduct. Finally, lack of prior research studies on the topic in the region is considered to be another limitation.

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