

Human Resource Management During Global Disruptions: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The research explores the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic global disruption and how it influenced human resource management (HRM). The study investigates the challenges experienced by organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic and how the human resource teams and the management responded and evolved to maintain and retain employees. The study draws from previous research and confirms the vulnerabilities of the traditional HR system to the COVID-19 disruptions. The vulnerabilities risked halting operations, including exposing employees to health risks. Only agile organizations survived the COVID-19 disruptions. Key lessons for HRM management include the importance of the organization's adaptability, the importance of human capital during disasters, and the need to prepare employees. Also, the role of empathetic leadership and transparent communication, changes in talent acquisition and retention strategies from the traditional methods, and workforce adaptability. The propositions for human resources practices allow organizations to deal with emerging human resources issues while adapting to new HR practices such as remote work and virtual recruitment.

Keyword: Human Resource Management (HRM); COVID-19 Pandemic; Organizational Adaptability; Employee Retention; Empathetic Leadership; Remote Work

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Significance

Human Resource Management (HRM) has long functioned as the central nervous system of organizational success, guiding workforce planning, shaping internal policies, and mediating between strategic goals and employee wellbeing. Historically, organizations operated under relatively stable socio-economic and geopolitical conditions, enabling HR systems to evolve gradually and focus on performance optimization, training, and labor cost efficiency. The foundational models in HRM were largely built upon predictable conditions and forward-looking growth assumptions [1].

However, the implicit expectation of operational continuity often left organizations ill-prepared to manage sudden, large-scale disruptions. These events—whether due to environmental crises, financial meltdowns, or health-related emergencies—have a profound impact on both the structure and function of human capital. Despite various instances of regional instability and organizational shocks, there was limited scholarly focus on how global-scale disruptions recalibrate the foundations of HRM [2]. This gap stemmed partly from a confidence in system redundancy and contingency protocols that, in practice, often fell short when rigorously tested.

Moreover, prevailing HR philosophies emphasized specialization and compartmentalization, limiting the flexibility required for system-wide adaptations. Employee wellbeing, remote work feasibility, and technology integration were considered secondary priorities in many traditional

models [3]. Workforce planning was more aligned with cyclical trends than with chaotic, nonlinear upheavals.

The lack of a unified resilience framework made HR departments reactive rather than strategic during moments of crisis. This reactive orientation often resulted in delayed decision-making, reduced workforce morale, and disjointed communication, compounding the adverse effects of disruptive events [4]. While scattered innovations emerged in isolated pockets—particularly in technologically advanced sectors—there remained a broader industry-wide inertia toward change.

This section sets the stage for rethinking HRM through the lens of sudden global disruptions. As organizations have increasingly been forced to pivot and adapt, the critical need to embed agility, psychological safety, and technological responsiveness into HRM practices has become more evident [5]. These elements are no longer optional but necessary foundations for future-proofing the workforce.

1.2 Purpose and Scope of the Study

This article investigates the evolving role of Human Resource Management during widespread global disruptions, with a particular emphasis on the challenges and innovations observed in the face of unforeseen systemic events. While disruptions are not new to organizational environments, the contemporary scale and scope of such events have revealed significant gaps in HRM readiness and adaptability [6]. The study aims to explore how existing HR frameworks responded under pressure and how they can be recalibrated to meet future challenges.

The objective is threefold. First, it evaluates the vulnerabilities in traditional HR models when confronted by high-impact disruptions. Second, it assesses the adaptive mechanisms employed by organizations, including digital transformation, flexible work models, and employee support systems. Third, it presents strategic and policy-oriented recommendations to build resilience into HR structures going forward [7].

This inquiry does not focus solely on any one region or sector. Instead, it draws upon cross-industry experiences to derive broader lessons that transcend specific domains. The study also pays special attention to the psychological, legal, and technological aspects of workforce management under duress [8].

By mapping the responses across industries such as healthcare, information technology, and manufacturing, the article captures diverse operational realities and HR interventions. The analysis highlights not just challenges but also the innovative practices that emerged as stop-gap or long-term solutions [9].

In sum, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of strategic HRM under global pressure, aiming to offer a multi-dimensional roadmap for HR professionals, corporate leaders, and policymakers.

1.3 Structure of the Article

The remainder of this article is organized into seven major sections, each contributing a layer to the overarching discussion on HRM during global disruptions. Following this introduction, the second section offers a conceptual foundation by defining global disruptions and examining past events that triggered significant HR reconfigurations [10]. It contextualizes workforce vulnerabilities through historical analysis and theoretical grounding.

The third section delves into the specific impacts of a recent disruptive event on HRM, analyzing transformations in remote work, employee welfare, and organizational legality. This sets the basis for Section 4, which highlights strategic adaptations such as agile HR models, crisis communication protocols, and workforce upskilling initiatives [11].

Section 5 presents comparative case studies from healthcare, IT, and manufacturing sectors to illustrate how different industries approached crisis HRM. Section 6 distills lessons learned and discusses long-term implications for organizational resilience and employee engagement [12].

Section 7 introduces policy recommendations tailored to organizations, governments, and HR professionals. Finally, Section 8 concludes with key insights and suggests avenues for future research to better prepare HR systems for ongoing uncertainty [13].

Together, these sections provide a comprehensive, evidence-based framework for understanding and strengthening HRM during large-scale global disruptions.

2. UNDERSTANDING GLOBAL DISRUPTIONS AND WORKFORCE VULNERABILITIES

2.1 Defining Global Disruptions

Global disruptions are defined as large-scale, unpredictable events that significantly affect economies, societies, and institutions across multiple regions simultaneously. These disruptions are characterized by their high impact, complexity, and the speed at which they unfold. While local crises often allow organizations to rely on regional contingency frameworks, global disruptions overwhelm multiple systems at once, neutralizing traditional response models and challenging leadership, supply chains, and human capital structures [5].

Disruptions can emerge from diverse sources, including pandemics, climate-related disasters, technological failures, financial crises, and geopolitical conflict. What distinguishes global disruptions from other challenges is their tendency to create cascading effects across industries, forcing organizations into simultaneous operational, legal, and cultural adaptations [6]. Unlike more isolated events, these disruptions provoke long-lasting institutional consequences, requiring systemic transformation rather than tactical adjustments.

From a human resource management (HRM) perspective, global disruptions exert intense pressure on workforce planning, talent mobility, and internal communication. They disrupt physical workplaces, create anxiety among employees, and demand rapid recalibration of employee engagement strategies. The inability to forecast such events and their multidimensional nature make them particularly difficult for HR departments to manage effectively [7].

Understanding the anatomy of global disruptions is crucial for designing resilient HR systems. Recognizing their attributes—volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity—can help organizations develop predictive models and flexible protocols. This foundational understanding sets the stage for analyzing how HRM has historically responded to such challenges and how it can evolve to address them more proactively.

2.2 Historical Overview of Disruptive Events Affecting HRM

Organizations have repeatedly been shaped by disruptive events that revealed the fragility of existing HRM systems. In particular, economic collapses, regional epidemics, and natural catastrophes have historically triggered waves of organizational reform and behavioral recalibration. However, responses to these events have varied widely depending on geographic, technological, and institutional maturity [8].

For instance, the economic recession that reverberated globally in the late 2000s forced businesses to implement cost-reduction measures such as mass layoffs, benefit cuts, and talent freezes. While these decisions preserved short-term financial viability, they also undermined employee trust and long-term workforce engagement [9]. The disruption highlighted the need for balancing economic efficiency with employee sustainability—an HR dilemma that remains unresolved in many quarters.

Similarly, health-related emergencies in various regions exposed the inadequacy of workplace health policies and the rigidity of traditional work structures. These events emphasized the limited scope of many HR policies, which

lacked the adaptability to handle prolonged disruptions and remote work arrangements [10].

Technological disruptions, including major cyberattacks or digital infrastructure failures, also demonstrated the critical need for digital literacy and business continuity planning within HR frameworks. These events revealed vulnerabilities in workforce preparedness and succession planning, especially in industries heavily reliant on manual processes [11].

While individual organizations have made significant strides post-crisis, there remains a notable absence of a unified, industry-wide framework for HR resilience. The historical trajectory demonstrates that reactive strategies dominate, and proactive, anticipatory planning is not yet a universal norm.

2.3 Workforce Vulnerabilities During Disruptions

Global disruptions intensify the exposure of workforce vulnerabilities that often lie dormant during periods of normalcy. These vulnerabilities manifest in both structural and psychological dimensions, affecting the organization's ability to maintain continuity, productivity, and employee well-being [12]. Structural vulnerabilities include an overreliance on physical workspaces, centralized operations, and rigid job roles that are not easily adaptable to sudden changes.

For example, many organizations historically operated under the assumption that proximity equates to productivity, leading to underinvestment in digital work infrastructure. As a result, the shift to remote work during disruptive periods created operational friction and access inequality, especially in organizations with outdated systems or technology gaps [13]. HR departments often found themselves scrambling to implement platforms, security policies, and performance monitoring tools in real-time, without established protocols or training plans.

Another critical area of vulnerability lies in communication systems. In times of crisis, poor internal communication can lead to panic, misinformation, and disengagement. Many HR teams lacked centralized crisis communication frameworks, resulting in inconsistent messaging and confusion among employees. This challenge is particularly pronounced in multinational corporations where time zones, languages, and cultural nuances further complicate messaging [14].

Psychologically, disruptions amplify stress, anxiety, and burnout—especially when job security is threatened or work-life boundaries are blurred. Employees with caregiving responsibilities or pre-existing health conditions often face disproportionate burdens. Yet, historical HR frameworks have been slow to institutionalize mental health support mechanisms or flexible scheduling arrangements [15].

Additionally, workforce segmentation—contract workers, part-timers, and gig economy contributors—faced an even greater risk of exclusion from organizational protections during disruptive periods. These groups typically fall outside traditional HR radar systems, resulting in a lack of tailored support, benefits, or communication [16].

Another layer of vulnerability is the absence of real-time workforce analytics, which impairs HR's ability to make data-driven decisions quickly. When disruptions occur, the lack of

integrated systems for attendance, productivity, health status, and feedback constrains decision-makers, extending response timelines and eroding trust.

Addressing these vulnerabilities requires more than temporary fixes. It demands a cultural shift within HRM—one that prioritizes resilience, inclusivity, and real-time adaptability. The following figure illustrates the progression of major global disruptions and corresponding HRM challenges over the past two decades.

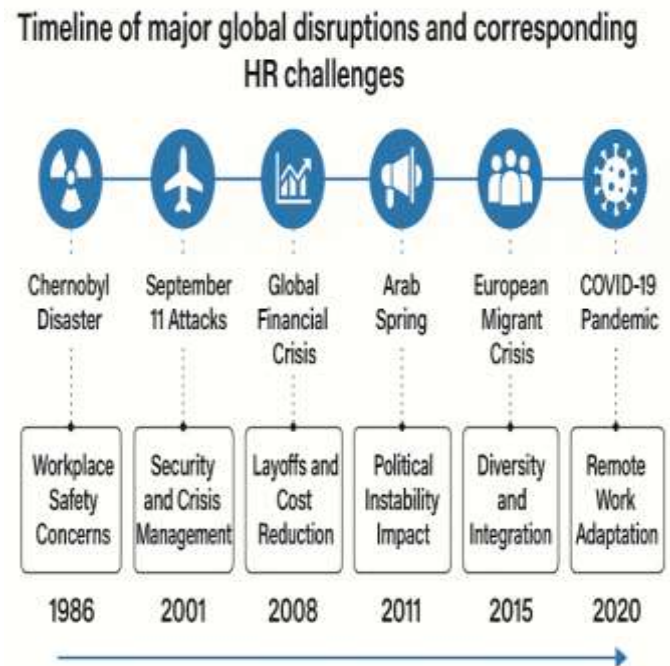


Figure 1: Timeline of major global disruptions and corresponding HR challenges.

3. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

3.1 Organizational Shock and HR Response Mechanisms

The sudden onset of widespread disruptions often triggers an immediate state of organizational shock, during which the structural and emotional bandwidth of leadership and HR systems are tested. HR departments, typically designed to function under stability, are suddenly thrust into high-stakes decision-making under significant uncertainty. Disruptions, by their nature, derail established hierarchies, communication protocols, and labor planning strategies [11].

Organizations that lacked agility in their HRM systems found themselves slow to react, particularly in initiating alternate staffing models or enabling remote work infrastructures. In contrast, firms with decentralized HR models and integrated crisis management protocols responded more effectively to sudden interruptions [12]. A common initial response involved reassigning duties, reducing non-essential roles, and implementing staggered shifts to minimize physical density, all while managing employee anxieties.

Additionally, HR departments had to rapidly develop workforce triage plans—prioritizing essential workers, defining roles that could transition to digital platforms, and suspending non-critical operations. These shifts required fast

updates to internal policies, even as regulatory frameworks remained static or undefined [13].

One of the most challenging aspects of the organizational shock phase was maintaining a semblance of normalcy. HR managers had to navigate between delivering difficult messages—such as furloughs or reduced benefits—and sustaining workforce morale. Without prior rehearsal or contingency planning, many were unprepared to address these demands with empathy and clarity [14].

This early-phase response determined not only business continuity but also employee trust, which would later influence post-crisis recovery trajectories. HR's role expanded from policy execution to being the emotional core of organizational resilience.

3.2 Remote Work and Digital Transformation

Among the most visible consequences of global disruptions has been the mass shift toward remote work, a transition that redefined traditional models of presence, productivity, and collaboration. HR departments that had previously viewed digital work arrangements as supplemental were suddenly required to mainstream them under crisis conditions [15]. The absence of standardized procedures and pre-existing infrastructure presented an enormous challenge.

The rapid migration to digital platforms exposed deep inequalities between firms based on technological readiness. While some organizations already operated with cloud-based systems, virtual private networks, and digital performance tools, others had to scramble for laptops, establish remote access, and draft interim policies to maintain continuity [16]. Moreover, not all job roles translated easily into virtual formats, creating tension between operational feasibility and employee expectations.

Managers had to be retrained to lead distributed teams without micromanaging, while HRM evolved to include digital engagement, cyber hygiene education, and virtual wellness programs [17]. Time zone disparities, language barriers, and employee isolation became common issues, prompting HR to shift focus from task management to outcomes and well-being.

Importantly, this transformation also shifted metrics for performance appraisal. Traditional tools that emphasized visibility and punctuality were replaced—or in many cases abandoned—in favor of result-oriented frameworks. These changes demanded a cultural shift, not just a technical one [18].

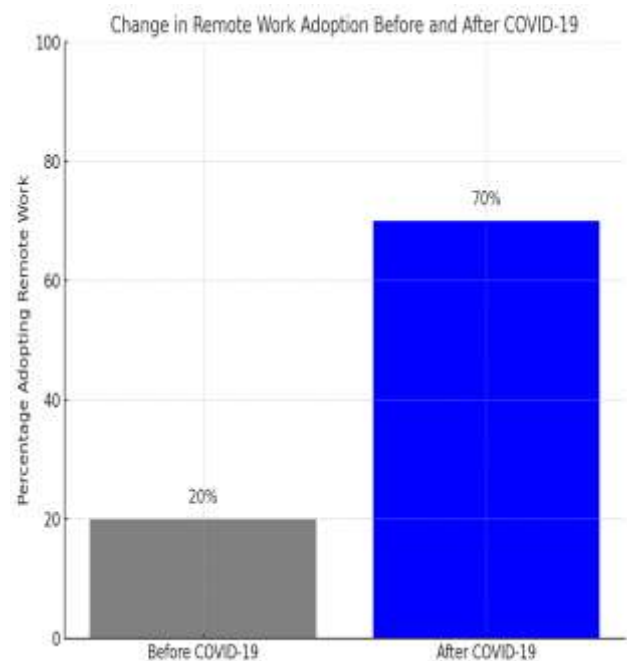


Figure 2: Change in remote work adoption before and after COVID-19.

Another unintended consequence of remote work adoption was the blurring of personal and professional boundaries. The home became a hybrid space, introducing new challenges related to privacy, ergonomics, and work-life balance. HR had to respond by issuing guidance on remote work best practices, offering mental health days, and restructuring team workflows to reduce digital fatigue [19].

This digital transformation also prompted discussions around long-term talent mobility. With geography becoming less relevant, access to global talent pools increased, but so did competition and expectations for asynchronous collaboration. The HR function evolved to accommodate this new paradigm of borderless work.

3.3 Legal and Policy Adjustments (Workplace Safety, Labor Laws)

As global disruptions escalated, the rigidity of existing labor laws and workplace safety regulations came under scrutiny. HR managers were required to reinterpret or supplement outdated provisions in real time to meet emerging needs. For many jurisdictions, the legal infrastructure was not adequately designed to accommodate mass remote work, sudden furloughs, or emergency health surveillance protocols [20].

Workplace safety took on new dimensions. Traditional compliance focused on physical hazards, but disruptions introduced concerns like viral transmission, psychological distress, and environmental instability. Organizations that continued in-person operations had to retrofit their facilities with social distancing markers, contactless entry systems, and sanitation schedules—sometimes with no regulatory roadmap [21].

Simultaneously, HR teams were navigating complex terrain regarding employee privacy and consent. New policies involving symptom reporting, exposure tracing, or biometric monitoring had to balance organizational duty of care with legal boundaries on data collection [22]. This created ethical

dilemmas and legal gray zones that required HR to liaise closely with legal counsel and compliance teams. Furloughs, temporary layoffs, and reduced work hours also introduced challenges, particularly in countries without clear protocols for such scenarios. HR departments had to interpret how benefit plans, insurance coverage, and pension contributions were affected. In many cases, these issues intersected with collective bargaining agreements, requiring delicate negotiations with labor unions [23].

Table 1: Summary of COVID-19 HRM Policy Adaptations Across Selected Countries

| Country | Remote Work Mandates | Employee Well-being Support | Job Retention/Furlough Schemes | Legal/Policy Adjustments |
|----------------|--|---|--|--|
| Germany | Strongly recommended; supported by digital subsidies | Mental health hotline; subsidized counseling | Kurzarbeit (short-time work scheme) | Temporary relaxation of working time regulations |
| South Korea | Encouraged with phased infrastructure rollout | Psychological resilience campaigns via public TV | Wage subsidies for SMEs maintaining staff | Revised workplace hygiene guidelines enforced |
| Canada | Enforced by provinces; tech grants offered | Employer-led virtual wellness programs expanded | Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) | Emergency leave entitlements added to labor codes |
| India | Adopted variably; driven by corporate leadership | Telemedicine and self-care apps introduced | EPFO relief schemes and deferred contribution policies | Guidelines on staggered shifts, health checks mandated |
| United Kingdom | Recommended for all non-essential roles | NHS and employer partnerships for mental health support | Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) | New provisions for statutory sick pay and self-isolation |
| Australia | Widespread | Remote | JobKeeper | Flexible |

| Country | Remote Work Mandates | Employee Well-being Support | Job Retention/Furlough Schemes | Legal/Policy Adjustments |
|---------|--|--|--------------------------------|--|
| India | Implementation supported by government | Health consults; employee check-in initiatives | Wage subsidy program | Work agreements and emergency leave provisions added |

Remote work also created jurisdictional issues—employees working across borders raised questions around tax obligations, employment law compliance, and labor dispute resolution. HR teams were often the first to identify these risks but lacked centralized mechanisms for addressing them swiftly.

To future-proof HRM, labor laws will need to evolve to accommodate distributed workforces, redefine workplace safety, and clarify employer responsibilities under unpredictable circumstances.

3.4 Employee Well-being, Mental Health, and Burnout

While the operational implications of global disruptions were immediately visible, the psychological toll emerged more gradually. Employees found themselves navigating overlapping stressors—health anxieties, financial instability, caregiving demands, and isolation. Historically, HRM systems had limited provisions for mental health support, and those that existed were often stigmatized or underutilized [24].

The sudden spike in emotional distress highlighted critical gaps in organizational well-being programs. HR departments were compelled to pivot from viewing wellness as an optional perk to a core element of workforce sustainability. This required a shift in strategy, resource allocation, and leadership mindset [25]. Emergency mental health hotlines, access to counselors, and manager training in empathetic leadership became essential interventions.

Burnout became particularly pronounced in sectors with high operational demands such as healthcare, logistics, and customer support. In these settings, extended hours, traumatic exposure, and moral fatigue led to declines in performance, morale, and retention [26]. HR's traditional performance management tools were ill-equipped to recognize or respond to these signs early.

Even in less exposed sectors, the monotony and cognitive load of remote work—compounded by back-to-back virtual meetings—led to digital exhaustion. Recognizing this, some HR leaders introduced "no-meeting" days, mandated screen breaks, or offered additional time off. Still, these were short-term remedies to long-standing cultural challenges around presenteeism and overwork [27].

Employees from marginalized communities experienced disproportionate effects, whether due to limited access to healthcare or increased exposure risk. HR professionals began exploring more inclusive strategies, such as targeted support

groups, culturally competent counseling, and flexible schedules to accommodate different household structures [28].

Ultimately, employee well-being emerged not just as an HR responsibility but as an organizational imperative. It underscored the need for integrated wellness frameworks, continuous feedback loops, and systemic adjustments that prioritize the human element in human resources.

4. STRATEGIC HRM ADAPTATIONS AND INNOVATIONS

4.1 Agile HR Models and Decision-Making

Agility in human resource management refers to the capacity of HR systems to respond rapidly and effectively to unpredictable changes without compromising organizational continuity. Traditional HR models, often built on linear planning and rigid hierarchies, proved inadequate in managing disruption-induced complexities. In contrast, agile HR models prioritize responsiveness, decentralization, and cross-functional collaboration to enhance resilience [15].

Agile HR structures leverage iterative planning, continuous feedback loops, and flexible deployment of human capital. This allows for faster decision-making cycles, particularly in crisis environments where delays can exacerbate uncertainty. In practice, agile HR teams are embedded within cross-departmental units and empowered to experiment with solutions, drawing on real-time data and frontline insights [16]. This horizontal structure enables quicker policy formulation and deployment of workforce-related interventions.

One of the hallmarks of agile HR is its reliance on scenario planning rather than predictive modeling. Instead of preparing for a single forecasted outcome, HR leaders develop multiple contingency paths that can be activated depending on crisis progression. This requires a cultural shift from perfection to adaptability and tolerance for ambiguity [17].

Moreover, agile models often make use of digital dashboards and HR analytics to monitor changes in workforce capacity, engagement, and sentiment. These tools provide critical inputs for dynamic staffing, benefits realignment, and resource distribution, enabling HR to pivot strategies with minimal friction.

Organizations that had previously piloted agile structures—particularly in tech and professional services sectors—were better equipped to manage disruptions. Their HR departments operated not as policy enforcers but as strategic partners capable of steering transformation initiatives under fluid circumstances [18].

4.2 Talent Management During Crises: Recruitment, Retention, and Re-skilling

Talent management undergoes a profound transformation during periods of disruption. The usual cadence of hiring, onboarding, and development is disrupted, requiring HR to reorient priorities toward resilience, flexibility, and internal mobility. Recruitment strategies shift from long-term capability building to immediate gap-filling, often under budget constraints and compressed timelines [19].

The first challenge lies in identifying roles that are mission-critical and ensuring continuity of skills for those functions.

This often means redistributing internal talent or accelerating temporary hires with minimal onboarding requirements. Automated recruitment systems and virtual assessments become central tools in maintaining recruitment pipelines without compromising safety or speed [20]. However, the quality of hires in such conditions varies, especially when organizations must prioritize urgency over fit.

Retention also takes on new meaning during crises. Rather than relying on bonuses or traditional incentives, HR must foster trust, transparency, and emotional security to keep key employees engaged. Open communication about job security, role clarity, and mental health support significantly enhances retention, particularly in uncertain environments [21].

Re-skilling emerges as a critical component of crisis-era talent management. Many job roles become obsolete or evolve rapidly, necessitating the deployment of internal training modules, peer learning platforms, and competency-based workshops. Organizations that had already invested in learning management systems found it easier to redeploy talent across functional silos [22]. In contrast, those reliant on static job descriptions struggled to meet emergent skill demands.

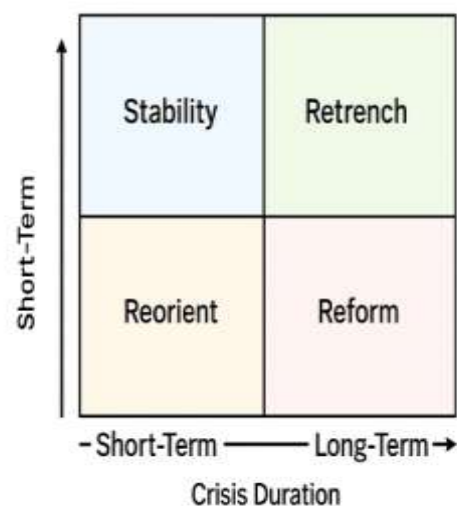


Figure 3: Strategic HR response matrix based on crisis intensity and duration.

A key success factor in crisis talent management is adaptability—not just of employees, but of the HR frameworks guiding them. Talent strategies need to become fluid, integrated with business continuity plans, and supported by data that tracks emerging skill gaps. This means shifting from long-term career mapping to just-in-time competency development.

Moreover, employee development must be aligned with psychological safety. Encouraging employees to take on unfamiliar roles in uncertain environments requires not just training but also support systems that allow for learning without penalization [23]. This holistic approach ensures that HR plays both a tactical and humanistic role in preserving organizational viability through disruptions.

4.3 Crisis Communication and Leadership in HR

Effective communication is the bedrock of crisis leadership in HR. During disruptions, employees look to HR not only for

procedural guidance but also for reassurance, clarity, and continuity. Yet, many HR systems have historically focused on transactional communication—updates about policies, deadlines, and compliance—leaving a vacuum in empathetic and strategic messaging during high-stress scenarios [24].

Crisis communication requires both speed and sensitivity. HR leaders must navigate a delicate balance between being transparent about the challenges and instilling confidence in the organization's path forward. In the absence of clear communication, uncertainty escalates, misinformation spreads, and employee engagement deteriorates rapidly. Thus, communication must be frequent, two-way, and grounded in both facts and empathy [25].

The emergence of digital communication platforms offered HR an expanded toolkit for reaching dispersed teams. Tools such as enterprise chat systems, intranet dashboards, and virtual town halls allowed for real-time dissemination of updates and interactive engagement. However, access does not guarantee effectiveness. HR needed to curate messages carefully—choosing the right tone, channel, and frequency for different employee groups [26].

Leaders in HR were also expected to model resilience. Their visibility during crisis—whether through video addresses, email updates, or direct dialogue—became a symbol of organizational steadiness. Leadership visibility and authenticity were found to correlate strongly with employee trust and emotional safety [27]. This placed pressure on HR executives to move beyond operational roles into communicative leadership positions.

Importantly, crisis communication is not a one-time event but a continuous process. It involves active listening, responding to feedback, and adjusting messages as the situation evolves. Many HR teams initiated pulse surveys to gather real-time data on employee sentiment, which then informed tailored communications around specific concerns like job security, workload, or mental health [28].

Cultural competency also played a role. In multinational organizations, messages had to be adapted to reflect local norms, languages, and sensitivities. This required coordination across regional HR teams and a nuanced understanding of diverse communication expectations. Inadequate localization often led to misinterpretations or perceptions of insensitivity, eroding trust in corporate leadership [29].

Additionally, communication needed to be embedded in decision-making frameworks. HR policies announced without prior engagement or explanation risked being met with resistance. By incorporating feedback mechanisms into policy rollouts, HR leaders could demonstrate transparency and shared ownership.

Ultimately, effective crisis communication is an act of leadership. It transcends information delivery and becomes a tool for unifying, motivating, and stabilizing the workforce during periods of heightened instability. As organizations plan for the future, investing in crisis communication training and protocols will be as essential as technical or strategic preparedness.

5. COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES ACROSS INDUSTRIES

5.1 Healthcare Sector: Frontline Worker Support

The healthcare sector represents one of the most acutely affected industries during global disruptions. Human Resource Management (HRM) systems within hospitals and clinics were immediately challenged by surges in patient volume, supply shortages, and staff vulnerability. The crisis disproportionately affected frontline health workers who were both exposed to occupational risk and emotionally burdened by their roles [19].

In this environment, HR had to quickly move beyond routine administrative functions and take on emergency workforce coordination, mental health triage, and logistical planning. One of the earliest adjustments was the redeployment of specialized staff, such as anesthesiologists and surgical nurses, to intensive care units. These shifts required rapid retraining and re-credentialing, often under time constraints and resource limitations [20].

HR departments in healthcare also initiated crisis accommodation strategies, including hotel lodging for staff unable to return home due to exposure risks or long shifts. In some cases, organizations partnered with local agencies to facilitate transportation, meals, and child-care services for essential personnel [21]. These support systems were vital in maintaining morale and preventing absenteeism.

Another critical area of adaptation involved mental health. Burnout, secondary trauma, and moral injury became widespread concerns. Progressive HR teams introduced on-site counselors, debriefing sessions, and rotating recovery shifts to reduce cumulative stress [22]. Some institutions established 'wellness zones' where employees could briefly disconnect from clinical demands.

2. Table 2: HRM Adaptations by Industry Type and Disruption Exposure Level

| Industry Type | Disruption Exposure Level | Key HRM Adaptations |
|---------------|---------------------------|--|
| Healthcare | Very High | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emergency staffing redeployment - On-site mental health support - Safety protocols and PPE access |
| IT & Tech | Medium | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Full remote work implementation - Digital hiring and onboarding - Asynchronous collaboration tools |
| Manufacturing | High | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Staggered shifts and shift redesign - Physical layout reconfiguration - On-site safety |

| Industry Type | Disruption Exposure Level | Key HRM Adaptations |
|--------------------|---------------------------|---|
| | | communication |
| Education | High | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Virtual classrooms and digital content creation - Remote training for staff - Flexible work hours |
| Retail & Logistics | Very High | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contactless operations - Health screening and rotation systems - Hazard pay and leave flexibility |
| Financial Services | Medium | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hybrid workforce models - Customer service digitization - Remote compliance and security training |

However, the scope of these interventions varied significantly by geography and institutional funding. While well-resourced hospitals adapted with relative speed, underfunded facilities often struggled to implement even basic staff protections. This disparity revealed systemic weaknesses in the HRM frameworks of healthcare systems globally [23].

5.2 IT and Tech Sector: Managing High-Volume Remote Workforces

In contrast to sectors grounded in physical operations, the IT and tech industry transitioned more readily to remote work during global disruptions. Pre-existing infrastructure such as cloud-based systems, collaborative platforms, and decentralized project teams allowed for a smoother operational pivot. However, HR departments in this sector still encountered unprecedented challenges in managing workforce scalability, productivity, and well-being under remote conditions [24].

One of the immediate HRM responses was the scaling up of digital onboarding processes. Companies that were still conducting in-person recruitment and training had to rapidly digitize their entire talent acquisition lifecycle. HR departments implemented virtual interviews, document verification tools, and online orientation modules to maintain hiring pipelines [25].

The shift to remote work also transformed performance management. Traditional key performance indicators (KPIs) based on office presence and time tracking became obsolete. HR teams were compelled to adopt more flexible, output-driven metrics. In agile tech companies, this meant increased reliance on sprint goals, deliverable milestones, and peer feedback systems [26].

HR also had to address collaboration fatigue, particularly in globally distributed teams. Employees reported burnout from

excessive video meetings, lack of boundaries between work and home, and reduced informal interactions that typically foster creativity. To mitigate this, some HR departments introduced asynchronous communication models and set meeting-free hours [27].

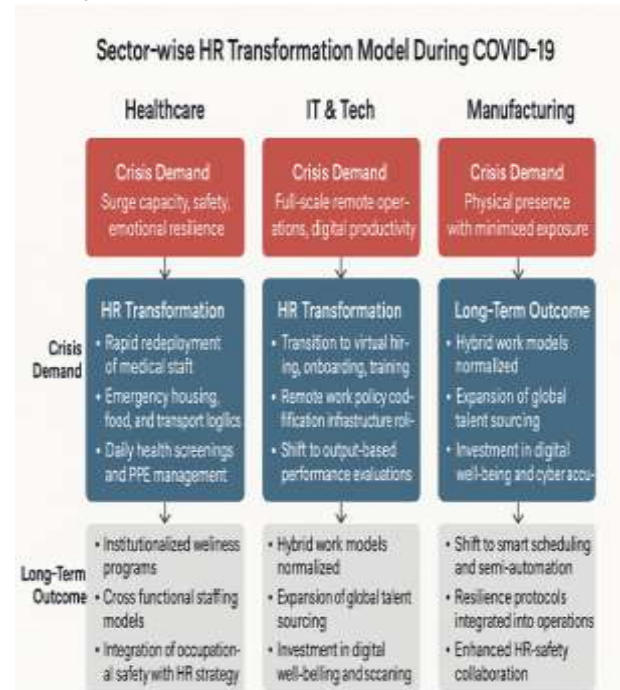


Figure 4: Sector-wise HR Transformation Model During COVID-19

Importantly, this disruption spurred a reevaluation of office culture and geographic hiring strategies. With location rendered irrelevant, companies began accessing broader talent pools, leading to new HR compliance challenges around taxation, local labor laws, and compensation calibration for remote employees working across jurisdictions [28].

Employee engagement and retention were also redefined. Tech firms began offering digital wellness subscriptions, remote team-building events, and microlearning platforms. While turnover remained a concern in high-demand skill areas, these proactive HR interventions helped sustain organizational cohesion and productivity through instability.

5.3 Manufacturing Sector: Labor Redesign and Shift Management

Manufacturing, due to its dependency on physical infrastructure and tightly choreographed labor processes, faced unique HR challenges during global disruptions. Unlike sectors that could shift operations online, most manufacturing facilities required on-site presence, creating urgent needs for labor redesign, risk mitigation, and shift optimization [29].

HR departments were tasked with balancing continuity of production with worker safety. One of the first adaptations was the introduction of staggered shifts to reduce workforce density and minimize exposure risks. These shifts required careful coordination between production planning and workforce availability, especially in plants where skilled labor was not easily interchangeable [30].

Redesigning workflows to incorporate physical distancing also led to a reengineering of floor layouts, station spacing,

and movement protocols. HR collaborated with operations and safety departments to facilitate these changes, sometimes requiring reclassification of job roles or temporary reassignment to accommodate altered task sequences [31].

Another major concern was absenteeism. Employees—especially those with pre-existing health conditions or caregiving responsibilities—either could not or were reluctant to attend work. HR had to implement flexible attendance policies, allow unpaid leave without penalty, and establish rapid-response plans for filling sudden labor gaps [32].

Communication was also critical. In environments where workers lacked regular access to digital tools, HR departments resorted to analog methods—posting printed notices, using loudspeaker announcements, and assigning in-person liaisons to convey updates regarding safety protocols, benefits, and policy changes.

The introduction of hazard pay and daily health screenings were among the more immediate support measures. In more advanced settings, HR initiated training on new safety procedures and automated certain repetitive functions to reduce human contact [33]. Yet, disparities in automation capability led to inconsistent outcomes across facilities.

Despite these barriers, manufacturing HR departments showed innovation in workforce deployment, introducing hybrid models that combined automation with skeleton crews. These adjustments highlighted the importance of integrating HR into operational resilience planning—not as an auxiliary function but as a core pillar of continuity.

6. LESSONS LEARNED AND LONG-TERM HRM IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Institutional Learning and HRM Resilience Frameworks

Global disruptions have proven to be critical learning moments for institutions, especially in relation to Human Resource Management (HRM) resilience. The abrupt shocks faced by organizations compelled HR departments to reassess not only their operational procedures but also their foundational assumptions about workforce stability, employee engagement, and leadership roles [23].

Institutional learning in this context refers to the ability of HR systems to capture, internalize, and apply insights from past disruptions to future scenarios. Organizations that actively documented their response strategies, employee feedback, and performance outcomes during times of crisis were better positioned to transform those experiences into sustainable frameworks [24]. These learnings became essential blueprints for redesigning emergency policies, agile staffing models, and well-being protocols.

One key realization was the need to decentralize HR decision-making. Centralized structures often created bottlenecks, especially in geographically dispersed organizations. Empowering local HR units with decision authority—while maintaining centralized oversight—proved to be a more responsive model for managing fluid situations [25].

Another outcome of institutional learning was the evolution of crisis scenario libraries. HR departments began building repositories of “if-then” response matrices aligned with different disruption types, enabling faster and more

coordinated decision-making. These frameworks also helped reinforce a culture of continuous learning and preparedness [26].

Lastly, cross-functional collaboration emerged as a cornerstone of resilience. HR departments that worked closely with finance, operations, and IT gained a more comprehensive understanding of organizational vulnerabilities, which in turn informed more adaptive and holistic HR strategies.

6.2 Embedding Flexibility and Digital Readiness in HR

The necessity of flexibility in HR structures became indisputable during prolonged disruptions. Organizations that previously maintained rigid job classifications and centralized decision-making systems struggled to respond to dynamic operational challenges. Embedding flexibility requires a deliberate shift in HR philosophy, from control-oriented policies to adaptability-focused frameworks [27].

Workforce flexibility manifests in several forms—flexible schedules, hybrid work models, job sharing, and cross-training. HR departments began restructuring roles to be more modular, allowing employees to pivot across functions when primary duties were paused or modified. This role elasticity not only maintained productivity but also supported employee engagement by offering continued relevance and utility [28].

Technology served as the primary enabler of this flexibility. From cloud-based HR information systems to digital workflow platforms, tech integration allowed for real-time adjustments in attendance, task assignments, and resource allocation. Organizations that had already embraced HR digitalization were better equipped to coordinate remote teams, monitor performance metrics, and deliver training interventions asynchronously [29].

However, digital readiness extended beyond technology access. It encompassed digital literacy, cybersecurity awareness, and the institutional culture to support virtual collaboration. HR teams introduced internal training programs to improve employee comfort with digital platforms, while also emphasizing virtual etiquette, time management, and online accountability structures [30].

Table 3: Emerging Long-Term HR Strategies from Pandemic Response Data

| Strategic Focus Area | Pre-Disruption Status | Pandemic Response Action | Post-Disruption Long-Term Strategy |
|---------------------------|---|--|--|
| Workplace Flexibility | Office-based with limited remote options | Mass adoption of remote and hybrid models | Institutionalized flexible work policies (hybrid, remote, staggered) |
| Digital HR Infrastructure | Fragmented systems, paper-heavy workflows | Accelerated adoption of cloud HR platforms | Integrated, cloud-based HRIS with real-time analytics |
| Employee Well-being | Wellness considered | Mental health | Embedded wellness |

| Strategic Focus Area | Pre-Disruption Status | Pandemic Response Action | Post-Disruption Long-Term Strategy |
|-----------------------------|--|---|--|
| | peripheral or optional | support, burnout mitigation | programs and mental health policies in core HR agenda |
| Performance Management | Time-based evaluations and in-person supervision | Shift to outcomes and goal-based metrics | Agile, feedback-oriented performance systems with digital tools |
| Talent Development | Linear career paths and static training modules | On-demand re-skilling and up-skilling | Continuous learning culture with micro-credentials and digital platforms |
| Crisis Preparedness | Ad-hoc emergency planning within HR | Rapid response teams and business continuity committees | Formal crisis response protocols and simulation-based HR readiness |
| Inclusion and Equity | Compliance-focused DEI initiatives | Tailored support for vulnerable groups | Proactive DEI strategies in recruitment, leadership, and retention |
| Global Workforce Management | Centralized, location-bound operations | Expansion of remote global teams | Distributed team management with localized compliance frameworks |

Performance management systems also underwent transformation. With employees distributed and routines disrupted, traditional supervision models became obsolete. HR transitioned to more outcome-based evaluation frameworks, driven by trust, autonomy, and continuous feedback loops. This evolution not only increased productivity but also reflected a deeper alignment with employee-centered values [31].

Digital readiness in HRM is now recognized as a foundational capacity rather than a strategic add-on. Building flexible HR policies, backed by robust technology and inclusive practices, ensures that organizations remain adaptable in the face of ongoing uncertainty.

6.3 Shaping the Future of Work Post-COVID

Although the disruptions may have subsided, their structural consequences on workforce dynamics continue to shape the trajectory of work. The future of work is no longer being

predicted based on technological speculation alone—it is now being redefined through the lens of lived experience and organizational adaptation [32].

One of the most significant long-term shifts is the normalization of hybrid work environments. Organizations across sectors have begun adopting models that blend in-person collaboration with remote autonomy. This transition has prompted HR departments to redefine office design, redefine productivity, and reevaluate employee benefits, such as stipends for home office setup and internet access [33].

Workplace culture has also undergone transformation. Flexibility, trust, and inclusivity are no longer considered differentiators but core expectations. HR leaders are tasked with cultivating engagement in environments where traditional physical cues of culture—such as shared spaces and informal gatherings—are diminished. As a response, many teams have implemented digital rituals, recognition programs, and collaborative tools that mimic communal presence [34].

Moreover, the accelerated shift toward automation and artificial intelligence is influencing workforce composition. HR must now develop strategies for upskilling, ethical technology adoption, and inclusion of tech-enabled job roles. This entails continuous workforce planning that aligns evolving business needs with human capital development [35].

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have gained renewed focus in this future-oriented framework. The crisis amplified structural inequalities, pushing HRM to prioritize equitable access to opportunities, safe working environments, and culturally competent leadership [36].

Finally, the psychological contract between employer and employee has changed. Job security, well-being, and purpose are now as important as compensation and career progression. HR strategies must respond to these evolving expectations with sincerity and agility to maintain long-term workforce resilience and loyalty.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

7.1 For Organizations: Building Crisis-Resilient HR Infrastructures

To navigate future global disruptions effectively, organizations must build HR infrastructures that prioritize adaptability, redundancy, and foresight. Crisis-resilient HR systems go beyond temporary fixes—they embed preparedness into core operations. This requires a departure from linear planning models and a shift toward modular, scenario-based frameworks that support fluid responses [27].

One critical area involves the decentralization of decision-making. Centralized HR models, while efficient in routine operations, tend to falter when rapid, localized responses are needed. Empowering regional HR units to act autonomously, with standardized escalation protocols, ensures quicker and context-sensitive interventions [28]. These structures must be reinforced by interoperable data systems that allow real-time visibility into workforce metrics across locations.

Another pillar of resilience is infrastructure redundancy. This includes overlapping systems for payroll, benefits

administration, and communication tools, ensuring continuity even when primary systems are compromised. Investment in cloud-based HR platforms, secure communication channels, and backup access solutions is fundamental to sustaining operations during disruption [29].

Crisis simulation exercises, often used in security and emergency planning, should become standard in HR. These simulations test readiness and reveal bottlenecks in organizational communication, talent deployment, and support systems. Regular testing also helps normalize adaptive behaviors among staff and leadership.

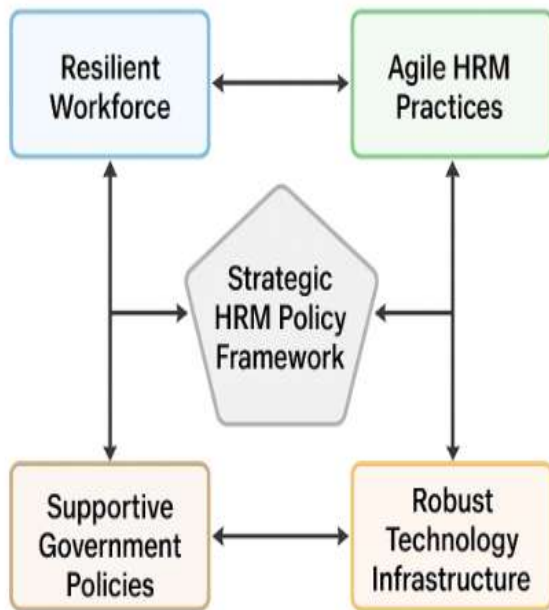


Figure 5: Proposed strategic HRM policy framework for future global disruptions.

Ultimately, HR resilience must be treated as a strategic asset. Organizations that frame HR not just as a compliance function but as a driver of institutional agility will be better equipped to weather uncertainty and protect both their workforce and business continuity.

7.2 For Governments: Enabling Supportive Labor Policies

Governments play an indispensable role in shaping the labor environment within which HR systems operate. During times of disruption, policy clarity, flexibility, and responsiveness become even more crucial. However, many labor codes remain rooted in traditional, location-bound employment models and fail to accommodate contemporary realities such as remote work, platform-based labor, and non-standard employment relationships [30].

One area requiring urgent attention is the legal infrastructure surrounding flexible and remote work. Governments should enact labor policies that define rights and responsibilities in distributed work models. This includes standards on digital ergonomics, overtime calculation in remote contexts, and jurisdictional tax treatment of mobile employees [31]. Without clear frameworks, both employers and employees face uncertainty and potential noncompliance.

Social protection mechanisms must also be updated. Gig and contract workers are often excluded from benefits such as healthcare, paid leave, or unemployment support. Inclusive

legislation that accounts for the evolving nature of work will ensure broader workforce security and encourage employer compliance [32].

Governments should also create fast-response labor task forces that collaborate with industry representatives during emergencies. These bodies can facilitate real-time regulatory adjustments and disseminate best practices for workforce management under stress.

Investment in national HRM innovation centers—platforms that provide toolkits, training, and policy prototypes—can accelerate the public sector's ability to support private enterprises. Such centers serve as knowledge hubs during crisis periods and enable coordinated responses across industries [33].

In summary, labor policy reform is not just a legislative concern but a strategic necessity. Governments that enable adaptive, inclusive, and responsive labor environments empower organizations to act with confidence and accountability in the face of global disruptions.

7.3 For HR Professionals: Training and Scenario Planning

Human Resource professionals are the linchpins of organizational response during global disruptions. Yet, many practitioners are underprepared for the dynamic demands of crisis contexts. To address this gap, targeted training and strategic scenario planning must become core competencies in the HR profession [34].

Training should begin with foundational knowledge in risk management, business continuity, and organizational psychology. HR leaders must understand how to assess vulnerability, manage stress across workforce segments, and engage with cross-functional teams under pressure. This knowledge enables proactive engagement, rather than reactive policy enforcement, during critical periods.

Equally important is the ability to conduct and interpret scenario planning. HR professionals should be skilled in developing workforce response models across multiple disruption intensities—ranging from supply chain interruptions to public health emergencies [35]. These models must address talent mobility, well-being strategies, and system redundancy.

Professional certification bodies and academic institutions can support this shift by embedding crisis management into HR curricula. Certification updates should include modules on agile leadership, crisis communication, remote team dynamics, and digital tool proficiency. Micro-credentials in these areas can enhance professional agility and organizational credibility.

HR networks must also emphasize peer-to-peer learning. During disruptions, best practices emerge quickly but unevenly. HR communities that facilitate rapid knowledge exchange—via forums, webinars, and case study banks—can shorten response times and improve decision quality across organizations [36].

Moreover, leadership development programs within HR should cultivate emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making, and cultural agility. These qualities enhance the capacity of HR professionals to lead with clarity, compassion,

and accountability, particularly when institutional uncertainty is at its peak.

In conclusion, the professionalization of crisis-responsive HR is not optional. It is a vital investment in workforce stability, business continuity, and organizational relevance in an unpredictable world.

8. CONCLUSION

8.1 Recap of Key Findings

This article has explored the multidimensional role of Human Resource Management (HRM) during global disruptions, with emphasis on how organizations, institutions, and individuals adapt to sudden, high-impact changes. Across sectors and geographic contexts, a consistent theme emerged: traditional HR systems, largely designed for stable environments, were ill-prepared for the pace and complexity of system-wide disruptions. Yet within this unpreparedness, innovative adaptations were observed.

The early phases of disruption revealed organizational vulnerabilities, particularly in communication, workforce mobility, and digital infrastructure. HR departments were compelled to move beyond transactional functions and assume leadership roles in crisis management, well-being, and business continuity. The mass adoption of remote work, once considered peripheral, became a central pillar of operational strategy. HR leaders oversaw this transformation while also addressing legal ambiguities, mental health concerns, and the redefinition of workplace culture.

Case studies across healthcare, technology, and manufacturing industries illustrated how sector-specific realities influenced HR responses. From supporting frontline workers in clinical settings to re-engineering shift patterns in manufacturing, the ability of HRM to innovate under pressure was evident. These experiences yielded critical insights into institutional learning, digital readiness, and organizational resilience.

Ultimately, the crisis functioned as an inflection point—exposing the limitations of existing HR models while simultaneously accelerating their evolution. The strategies, tools, and mindsets developed in response to disruption are now informing long-term HRM policies and structures. These learnings, if institutionalized, will form the basis for more resilient, equitable, and adaptive work environments capable of withstanding future shocks.

8.2 Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings of this study carry important implications for both the theoretical underpinnings of HRM and its practical implementation in dynamic environments. From a theoretical standpoint, there is a clear need to expand existing HR models to account for volatility, uncertainty, and systemic risk. Traditional theories emphasizing stability, incremental development, and control no longer suffice in explaining workforce dynamics under conditions of prolonged disruption. Instead, models that incorporate agility, digital fluency, and employee-centric resilience are more relevant and urgent.

The concept of psychological safety, often discussed in the context of innovation and team performance, gains new dimensions during a crisis. It now encompasses job security, mental well-being, and trust in organizational leadership.

Likewise, performance management theories must shift away from metrics tied to visibility and process adherence, focusing instead on outcomes, engagement, and adaptability. These theoretical refinements can enhance the relevance and applicability of HRM frameworks in a rapidly changing world.

On a practical level, organizations must institutionalize the lessons learned by retooling their HR infrastructures. This includes rethinking workforce planning, talent development, and policy design to embed flexibility, equity, and technological responsiveness. HR professionals need to be equipped not only with compliance and administrative skills but also with strategic, communicative, and analytical capabilities.

Moreover, collaboration between HR, operations, IT, and legal departments must be normalized. Disruptions do not occur in silos; thus, responses must be equally integrated. Cross-functional alignment ensures that HR strategies are informed by broader organizational priorities while remaining employee-centric.

Taken together, the implications highlight the need for HRM to evolve from a support function to a strategic partner—one that plays a pivotal role in shaping organizational futures.

8.3 Future Research Directions

While this article offers a comprehensive review of HRM adaptations during global disruptions, several avenues for future research remain open and essential. First, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term effectiveness of the policies and strategies introduced during crises. Many HR responses were reactive and designed under time constraints; evaluating their sustainability and unintended consequences will provide deeper insights into their overall value.

Second, comparative studies across different socio-economic and cultural contexts can illuminate how local values, governance structures, and resource availability influence HRM resilience. For instance, the degree of state involvement in labor regulation, the prevalence of informal work, and digital infrastructure maturity significantly affect the success of adaptive HR strategies. Cross-country or cross-sector research can help develop more universally adaptable HRM frameworks.

Third, the psychological dimensions of crisis-era work—such as chronic stress, burnout, and post-traumatic growth—merit greater empirical attention. While mental health has emerged as a priority, the mechanisms through which HR policies can promote emotional resilience remain underexplored. This includes not just formal interventions but also the design of work itself, leadership behavior, and organizational culture.

Another important direction involves the role of technology in redefining HR functions. Future research should investigate the ethical, operational, and equity implications of AI-driven recruitment, algorithmic performance monitoring, and remote work surveillance. These tools offer efficiency but also pose risks that need careful scrutiny.

Finally, there is scope to explore how HRM can contribute to global challenges beyond organizational boundaries—such as climate resilience, social justice, and digital inclusion. The expanding role of HR offers a rich field of study for

academics and practitioners seeking to understand how people management intersects with global systems.

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