Guest editorial: The changing role of HRM through crisis: from response to recovery

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is unlike any other crisis that human resource management (HRM) has had to deal with in modern times. As HRM scholars have pointed out, "at its core the COVID-19 pandemic is a human crisis" and that HRM has been "central to the response in organisations globally" (Collings *et al.*, 2021, p. 1). This crisis is unique in its breadth, scale and global impact. Within weeks of early global reporting in March–April 2020, millions of workers lost their jobs and terms such as "furloughs", become everyday language. Governments reacted with job support schemes for both workers and businesses, whilst millions of people succumbed to the virus. Organizations across the globe were forced to adapt significantly in many areas of work, working practices and HR policies and procedures. Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic wrought health and healthcare havoc, it simultaneously exposed the inequities in how different groups of workers experienced the pandemic's disruption (Butterick and Charlwood, 2021).

As the COVID-19 outbreak has developed, HRM scholars and management scholars generally, have started to investigate the pandemic-related issues affecting workers, management and organizations and have begun to reflect on established HRM approaches in the context of the pandemic. For example, Butterick and Charlwood (2021) question HRM's pre COVID-19 role in contributing to the contours of workers' inequity and call for a reflection on how to "do better". Stuart *et al.* (2021) reflect on the role of furloughs during a crisis and call for a "more collaborative HR", where job retention is a core element in order to deliver for both workers and business.

Crises and crisis management has long been a research focus for management scholars (Bundy *et al.*, 2017; Coombs and Laufer, 2018). A cursory search of Google scholar shows over 700,000 results for "crisis management" since 2018. This will increase exponentially as a consequence of COVID-19. Within academic research, different definitions of crisis and crisis management have been proposed and adopted, each of which has added to our understanding of crisis management. Although crises differ in their scale and breadth, they can be generally understood as events that are perceived by leaders and stakeholders to be important, unexpected and disruptive. Coombs (2015) defines crisis management as a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damage inflicted by a crisis. Bundy *et al.* (2017, p. 1663) recognize that crisis management broadly captures "organizational leaders' actions and communication that attempt to reduce the likelihood of a crisis, work to minimize harm from a crisis, and endeavour to re-establish order following a crisis". Crisis management typically has been viewed as a multi-phase process. For example, Coombs and Laufer (2018) and Bundy *et al.* (2017) suggest that crisis management involves three phases: the pre-crisis phase (prevention and preparation), the crisis response phase (crisis management) and the post-crisis phase (learning and revision).

The role of HRM in crisis management has begun to gain interest in the literature; yet, research in this field has largely adopted an internal perspective focusing on how HRM helps to manage risk and complexity during the crisis response stage (Bundy *et al.*, 2017). Such a focus, unfortunately, neglects a particularly important component of crisis management – organizational learning in the aftermath of a crisis, and the changing role of HRM as a critical crisis outcome. Furthermore, a recent review by Ererdi *et al.* (2020)

provided an overview of research on international HRM in the context of uncertainty and crisis from 2000 to 2018. The authors found that a great deal of HRM in the context of uncertainty and crisis had focused on political instability and hostile environments (e.g. 64% of all studies included). Research on crisis similar to COVID-19 pandemic represents the "most overlooked area of investigation" (Ererdi *et al.*, 2020, p. 25), with only three studies examined crises similar to COVID-19: those that has affected both organizations and their employees by threatening the basic social structure around places of work (e.g., Merlot and De Cieri, 2012; tsunami; Opdyke *et al.*, 2017, typhoons). While these studies have shed light on how HRM operates within significant crises, the profound and long-lasting implications of the COVID-19 pandemic will require deeper and more concerted analysis. As the crisis management research is moving beyond the "fix-the-problem" approach, scholars have highlighted the potential for organizations to utilize HRM as an effective tool during calamitous times (Collings *et al.*, 2021). In this special issue, we join the growing debate and suggest that the current global challenge of COVID-19 provides an opportune context for research which explores how HRM has dealt with, emerged from and evolved during the pandemic.

Overview of the special issue papers

The aim of this special issue is to contribute to early and developing discussions about the impact of COVID-19 on HRM. The paper by De Clerq and Pereira presents findings from Portugal on the way in which pandemic threats and other life-threatening crises not only accentuate avoidance behavior in employees, but also negatively impacts the spirit of volunteerism and, in particular, change-oriented volunteerism. The role of HR managers in leveraging a cultural environment to avoid such a counter-productive spiral was found to be critical and essential during such crises. The paper also reinforces the need for ensuring that the way in which work is designed allows for, and encourages, innovative behavior, a sense of control over how work is performed and, provides a psychologically safe work environment. This is an important contribution to the study of how organizational citizenship behavior is impacted by both crises and periods of significant change, particularly when such change is likely to persist.

The paper by Szulc, McGregor and Cakir discusses their research on the impact of COVID-19 on disadvantaged and/or minority groups. This study, on how the need for hybrid and remote work during the pandemic impacted neurodivergent employees, provides an important reminder of the need for HR professionals to develop practices and responses that are both inclusive and diverse in application. Szulc *et al.*'s study found that changes to work design necessitating remote working conditions led to drastic changes to routine and reduced interpersonal communication opportunities, which created extraordinary challenges for those living with neurodivergent conditions. The findings also indicated that remote working provided a welcome break from the sensory overload that often exists in work environments, highlighting the difficulties a "normal" work environment presents for neurodiverse workers. This paper reinforces that HR as a profession needs to understand the diverse nature of their employees needs and respond accordingly, not just with empathy and understanding, but through a lens of collaborative and adaptive learning and understanding.

Maddox-Daines' paper investigates how HR professionals in the UK supported employee well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a cross sector study, in which HR professionals, in both the private and public sector, discussed their reactions to the crisis and how well they believed their respective employers managed their workforce during such times. Disappointingly the findings, irrespective of sector in which respondents worked, revealed that business continuity plans were "useless", due to their data and process focus rather than people focus. Employee well-being and performance was measured by online "presenteeism", ignoring the significant and fundamental shift in work design and

interpersonal relationships when staff were required to work in a remote setting. Not surprisingly, participants reported working longer hours, burn-out, tension and stress as a result of the change to not only the way in which work was performed but how it was managed and monitored. The paper also highlighted the significant impact of poor leadership during times of significant change. One respondent, who as a Head of HR reported, "never feeling so ill equipped and so out of their depth" and "not being looked after". Maddox-Daines' study provides a necessary reminder that people and not process management skills are the most critical in times of crisis.

Manroop and Petrovski, in their paper "Exploring Layers of Context-Related Work-from-Home Demands During Covid-19 Pandemic", reveal the contextual demands of the new ways of working precipitated by the pandemic. Not only does the paper reinforce the need for a realistic job preview to be provided to employees when required to shift to working from home, but also includes a number of suggestions for interventions to be employed to assist employees in navigating such a change in work design. This is an important contribution to this special issue given that hybrid and remote work is very much a key characteristic of the new work order.

Hastuti and Timming, in their contribution to the special issue, unpack how we can use existing data analytics to support the mental health of employees during times of crisis. They remind us of the tools and interventions HR professionals have available to them to both predict or highlight potential risks, as well as to trigger the offer of preventative and intervention strategies, to assist in supporting the mental health of employees. The use of such information is of course vital when managing employees we no longer see or interact with in a highly visible or intimate manner.

Finally, Aitken-Fox *et al.* in their paper "Making sense of a mess: 'doing' resilience in the vortex of a crisis", explore the nature of resilience as an outcome of organizational practice in response to a crisis. Their data indicate how HR professionals made sense of, responded to and made decisions about, how to deal with the impact of COVID-19 on their organizations. Most importantly, the authors argue that organizational resilience is not a "state" but a "process". HR professionals made decisions in the vortex of the COVID-19 pandemic that contributed to the building of organizational resilience as an *ongoing accomplishment,* rather than implementing a response that reflected some preconceived idea of what organizational resilience is.

The seriousness of the global impact of COVID-19 on society, economies, organizations and individuals will be reflected in an increase in research into HRM. This will involve research into the impact of COVID-19 on HR practice in general, but also specifically, in the areas of recruitment, performance management, learning and development and rewards. These directions research and commentary are already underway (Adikaram *et al.*, 2021; Bennett, 2021; Caligiuri *et al.*, 2020; Collings *et al.*, 2021b; Hamouche, 2021). Furthermore, there is already growing research into the impact of COVID-19 on work, working practices and work design (Galanti *et al.*, 2021; Hu, 2020; Klonek *et al.*, 2022). This special issue contributes to what is likely to be a very substantial volume of research on these topics in the next few years.

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