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## Human Resources (HR) lessons learned during the 2020 Pandemic: A literature review & perspective from HR professionals

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### Abstract

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has been the most devastating public health crisis since the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-1920. COVID-19 has impacted every human being and affected every operational system throughout the land. The pandemic has caused challenging times for businesses, financial markets, government agencies, academia, and one area that is frequently overlooked is the impact of COVID-19 and its implications for workplaces, working practices, and operationalization of Human Resource Management (HRM). As a result, the purpose of this literature review is to identify best practices implemented for the sustainability of Human Resource (HR) functions and the survival of institutions in the age of a dynamic public health crisis. This is a significant approach to better understanding the disruptions caused by COVID-19 on Human Resource Management, and to introducing how organizations have been impacted by this pandemic, then concluding with several HRM perspectives of recommendations on how organizations should prepare for the future. The findings obtained focused on four main pillars, (1) recruitment, retention, and the 'great' resignation, (2) employee well-being and wellness, (3) remote work options, practices, and professionalism, and (4) HR practitioners' leadership development, which continued to be salient themes interwoven throughout many articles. The implication of these findings suggests that talent and having the most experienced, operationalized, and professional individuals as part of one's organization are paramount to the organization's success. Upskilling is imperative, and all stakeholders must be open to the inevitability of change as change is constant.

**Keywords:** Human resources, human resource management, leadership, COVID-19, pandemic

### 1. Introduction

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has been the most devastating public health crisis incident since the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-1920. COVID-19 or SARS-CoV-2 first appeared in Wuhan, China, and quickly spread like wildfire across the globe; thus impacting countries and territories around the world within a matter of months. If one had to define the COVID-19 pandemic – it literally would mean, *affecting everyone* as there was no way to escape the impact of this virus. As of January 2022, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in the United States, the virus has been responsible for more than 860,000 deaths, and over 70 million cases of infection. Globally, over 262 billion individuals have been infected, and over five million people have died (World Health Organization, 2021) <sup>[41]</sup>. In March 2020, many countries and local municipalities' mitigation efforts included immediate lockdowns and implementation of social distancing measures (de-densification), thus having a tremendous impact on all HR functions within any institution globally. Several of the major HR areas affected include (1) recruitment, retention, and the 'great' resignation, (2) employee well-being and wellness, (3) remote work options, practices, and professionalism, and (4) HR practitioners' leadership development. The general school of thought is that post-pandemic change will bring innovation to all areas of HR. Changes in the recruitment process, new views on potential candidates, the benefits of using electronic resources that eliminate the concerns of time, distance, and space during the interview process, and other innovations, will also be future HR solutions (Huseynov, 2020) <sup>[20]</sup>.

When examining these five overarching pillars and their major impact on HR functions, the purpose of this literature review is to identify best practices implemented for the sustainability of HR functions and the survival of institutions, in the age of a dynamic public health crisis. This is a significant approach to better understanding the disruptions caused by COVID-19 on HR, and introducing how organizations have been impacted by this pandemic and methods of resolution.

### **The History of Human Resources**

According to Paycor (2021) <sup>[30]</sup>, the evolution of the discipline of Human Resources began in the early 1900s, in the United States, but also Europe. It was created under the umbrella of Personnel Management, at a time when employees' working conditions were often so poor that unions needed to be formed to protect employees' basic rights, including physical/occupational safety and some amount of reasonable pay for the labor they endured. For the next couple of decades, as businesses continued to grow and expand, employers were actively seeking ways to increase employee motivation and productivity. This led to organizations seeking to retain their employees, a vast number of organizational psychologists as well as conducting research studies to determine employee motivators (Powers, 2019) <sup>[31]</sup>. During the 1960s and 1970s, the United States Congress ratified further legislation to protect employees from discrimination and other negative employment practices, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC, 2022).

Eventually, personnel management evolved to human resources management, and as employers grew in size, they began to understand that human resources - the people - were their greatest assets and could serve as a competitive advantage. As Sinek (2012) <sup>[34]</sup> stated, "If we don't understand people, we don't understand business" (para. 1). Since then, human resources management has transformed to become more strategic in nature, with how to assist with hiring, and firing, compensation, and compliance, but also with how to manage the human resources of an organization to help achieve its highest levels of performance possible. This led to the development of other functional areas within HR, such as organizational development, change management, data analytics, and succession planning. Additionally, with the most recent trends in technology and the global economy, HR has become one of the most critical departmental functions within an organization (Oltra *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[29]</sup>. Societal shifts (both slight and those that are most dramatic), have thrust HR departments to be at the forefront of major organizational change. As described by Agovino *et al.*, (2020) <sup>[2]</sup> any type of social, political, environmental, technological, or fiscal issue impacts people, their attitudes, personal finances, job security, environment, culture, well-being, and what they expect from their employer. Employers are left with one choice; to respond to these new expectations. Before COVID-19, employers' HR expectations were mostly – for businesses to take accountability for corporate actions, demonstrate social responsibility, increase transparency, support employees throughout all levels of the organization, pay fair and livable wages, and be good stewards/citizens within the communities in which they employed staff and/or had customers; this dynamic has changed (Harbert, 2021) <sup>[18]</sup>.

Gone are the times when HR's sole focus was being transactional; ensuring compliance, following policies and procedures, performing administrative functions, and focusing on employee activities to keep them happy. HR is now the pivotal discipline within an organization that has been propelled forward to be a leading change agent, strategic partner, critical decision-maker, innovative and creative thinker, and people-minded implementer (Komm *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[23]</sup>. HR is the discipline that will as its namesake denotes, shape, mold, and prepare an organization for future growth and success.

### **Methods**

This paper consists of a general literature review, to provide comprehensive information and an informative overview relating to how HR, Human Resource Management (HRM), and organizations have been impacted by the pandemic from March 2020 to the present. The authors worked with the Louis Stokes Health Science Library and searched the following database systems: ProQuest, PubMed, Primo, EBSCO Academic Search Premier, Business Source Complete, Semantic Scholar, and Google Scholar. The search consisted of two measures: (1) exploring the database with salient words to include HR, HRM, and impact via the pandemic; and (2) using those same words to drill down and search organizations and administration, departments, and then including COVID-19. The systematic approach entailed searching PubMed: (Workforce/organization & administration[MeSH Major Topic] AND Covid); Primo (ExLibris discovery tool) or the library catalog, to put it simply: human resources COVID; EBSCO Academic Search Premier: HR COVID, HR Departments [subject term] and COVID; ProQuest ABI/Inform Global MAINSUBJECT.EXACT ("Human resources") AND ab(COVID) human resources departments AND COVID; and Business Source Complete: Personnel management and HR Consulting Services or Administration of HR Resource Programs and COVID. The dates included searching for articles starting January 1, 2020, until December 2021.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Recruit, Retain, and The Great Resignation**

The HR department is the cornerstone of any organization, especially as skilled HRM professionals, direct valuable components and operations within an institution, thus working toward increasing input, throughput, and output. Some of the many functions performed by HRM professionals include recruitment and training, total employee compensation, maintenance of employee records, policy and procedure development, and ensuring compliance with local, state, and federal legislation. While not an exhaustive list of responsibilities, these are some salient and primary obligations. Historically, recruiting, hiring, and retaining employees has been HRM's number one priority. Due to the nature of the dynamic evolution of HR within any institution and its complexities, institutions must have the ability to adapt to the public health, socioeconomic, and environmental shifts that are ever-changing (Figueroa *et al.*, 2019) <sup>[13]</sup>. The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has caused the workforce to reexamine the most important tenets and qualifications within an organization, thus making HR jobs more difficult to fulfill. Sheather and Slattery (2021) <sup>[35]</sup>, found that organizations were stretched

to their limits, and retaining employees was extremely problematic pre-pandemic. Conditions before the pandemic had a significant impact on employees including at times distress and mental health diagnoses, which often led to difficulties in HR's ability to recruit, retain and attract top talent, according to Denis *et al.*, (2021) <sup>[10]</sup>, proving the pandemic levels have only exacerbated this already trying process. Jones and colleagues (2021) <sup>[22]</sup> agreed the pandemic has affected the recruitment of employees in rural areas relating to the health care arena in Australia, which has affected the health and welfare of many communities, similar to what the United States experienced during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Jones *et al.*, (2021) <sup>[22]</sup> went on to further discern that building the gap and maintaining partnerships within communities is essential for organizations, to increase the possibility of maintaining gainful employment, which goes beyond initial hiring, as it takes communities and cohesive partnerships to attract practitioners in this environment.

### **Employee Well-being and Wellness**

In addition to having a solid fundamental understanding of hiring, retention, and the Great Resignation, successful employers will be those who understand and respond appropriately to the employee mental health crisis/challenge that has emerged as a result of COVID-19. Before COVID-19, there was an escalating mental health crisis/challenge brewing, in which employees were on the verge of burnout and experiencing high levels of stress. Employees were stretched too thin and overworked in their professional careers. According to Yu, Park, & Hyun (2021) <sup>[42]</sup>, studies have cited two-thirds of respondents as having experienced difficulties focusing on performing their jobs due to stress. That, along with balancing the demands of personal lives, such as children, school, family, etc. drove employees to constantly seek a "work-life balance" (p. 531).

Stress, if not managed well, can cause a variety of physical issues, exacerbate mental health and lead to depression and other mental health illnesses. This impacts individual work performance and ultimately organizational performance (Yu *et al.*, 2021). According to Dongarwar *et al.*, (2020) <sup>[12]</sup>, 83% of U.S. workers have reported suffering from work-related stress with a loss of \$300 billion to American businesses (p. 360). Employers had already begun to feel the pressures mounting from their employees' level of stress and attempted to alleviate the burden with such programs as Employee Assistance Programs, supportive meditation programs, wellness programs, and additional mental health benefits to health insurance coverages. These were efforts made by employers to provide employee support for effective stress management under normal circumstances, pre-COVID-19.

Beyond the financial and economic disruptions, the impact of COVID-19 has been unimaginable at a global level. As noted by Vinberg and Danielsson (2021) <sup>[38]</sup>, COVID-19 has and will continue to "affect the health and socio-economic situation of millions of people worldwide" (p. 1). Vinberg and Danielsson (2021) <sup>[38]</sup>, further explain that the research suggests there is a range of negative health effects, such as mental health consequences due to shutdowns, the layoff of employees, and social distancing measures leading to loneliness and social isolation. According to Carbone (2021, p. 1), there were such dramatic and sudden changes to people's lives and livelihoods, which created a high level of

stress around the world. Evidence and research from prior epidemics, such as SARS, EBOLA, and MERS, support that "psychological distress and major depression can result from a pandemic or an epidemic outbreak" (Hamouche *et al.*, 2020, p. 4) <sup>[17]</sup>. As far back as the Great Depression, this national event was associated with greater anxiety and depression due to job insecurity and financial concerns (Wilson *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[39]</sup>.

### **Teleworking**

The digital age has provided employers with access to remote workers when monitoring daily production, personal information, trends, and accountability (Bersin, 2017) <sup>[7]</sup>. New patterns are taking shape at the front line and remotely, where staff is working around the clock, 24 hours, 7 days per week to deliver products, goods, and services (Church *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[5]</sup>. Remote working has allowed employers to allow staff to work remotely and have systems in place for staff to be held accountable. People and technology can help reduce costs through initiative-taking and predictive issue avoidance using automation. Managers can measure and improve the employee experience across IT Touchpoints to help create an integrated, secure hybrid workplace (Bersin, 2017) <sup>[7]</sup>.

### **HR Leadership and Development**

According to A.P. Barton (1903) vis-à-vis Christian Science Church, "Amid every crisis, lies great opportunity." John F. Kennedy (while campaigning for the United States presidency [1959-1960]), often said, "When written in Chinese, the word 'crisis' is composed of two characters – one represents danger, and the other represents opportunity". Never before has either of these statements been truer of leadership than since the effects of COVID-19 on the workforce/workplace. According to Dirani *et al.*, (2020) <sup>[11]</sup>, a crisis is an opportunity for a strong leader, one who is strategically focused, to directly confront and address the challenge so that it becomes an organization's competitive advantage. The strongest organizations have been those that have been able to effectively respond to the crisis. Research has consistently demonstrated that those organizations that have effectively responded to the crisis, rely upon their leadership team. In the time of crisis, organizations are likely to experience unimaginable disruptions. Leadership under crisis demands a different style of leadership and unless an organization's leadership can adapt, the organization will almost certainly suffer and potentially not survive. As Dirani *et al.*, (2020) <sup>[11]</sup> stated, "How leaders respond to the crisis could permanently shift the economic, social, and health foundations of their communities" (p. 381).

### **Discussion**

The immense amount of change and impact created by COVID-19 on the global economy and workforce catapulted the level of responsibility for organizations to a level that could not have been imagined or predicted. Meister and Brown (2020) <sup>[27]</sup> posited HR's importance within an organization is being increased by the changes and demands of the public health crisis, with staff seeking guidance from those within the HR realm specifically for tips and tricks on how to navigate the ever-changing landscape or the new normal. Further research has shown that 73% of employees are dependent upon employers for preparing for the future



(Meister *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[27]</sup>. Meister and colleagues further compared the role of the Chief Human Resource Officer (CHRO), to being equally as vital to an organization's success as a Chief Financial Officer (CFO) during the financial crisis in 2008 (Meister *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[27]</sup>; to guide an organization through muddy waters and into the future.

### HR Finance

Similar to recruitment, after making thousands of dollars of investments in hiring and educating individuals for specific and career specialty positions, retaining new employees has become significantly more essential. In 2015, according to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM, [2022]) <sup>[18]</sup>, a study conducted assessed organizational average cost per hire and assessed it as over \$4,000 per employee ([n=2048]; Navarra, 2022). Bersin (2013) <sup>[7]</sup> noted that turnover cost is approximately a minimum of 1.5 to 2x an employee's annual salary. The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly contributed to the bottom line of employers with attrition rates being extremely high. With the aforementioned costs, a loss of 125 employees within one accounting year could cost an organization well over \$1,000,000 (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022) <sup>[37]</sup>. Before the pandemic, finding the right talent was difficult. Leaders looked at technology to help with the search process. Organizational culture was affected, competitive advantage disrupted, opportunities threatened, and legislation printed by *ad-hoc* changes and adjustments. From this perspective, the approach of a new strategy undoubtedly includes supporting talent from within, identifying and recruiting talent from the outside of the organization, as well as maintaining and providing opportunities to gain experience within the organization. This approach also denotes the need for using appropriate and personalized means of motivation (Necula, 2021) <sup>[28]</sup>, to thwart the mass exodus that appears to be occurring according to the (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022) <sup>[37]</sup>.

Economists have nicknamed this mass exodus the Great Resignation (Sheather & Slattery, 2021) <sup>[35]</sup>. As organizations continue to look for ways to provide opportunities to retain talent, employees are demanding growth and development (upskilling), and companies are now providing upskilling as a competitive benefit. Additional benefits to counter the great resignation include increasing 401k contributions; reduction in health care premiums; recruitment and retention bonuses, flexible scheduling; telecommuting; higher pay; making front-line jobs more appealing, and expanding employee recognition programs (Sheather & Slattery, 2021) <sup>[35]</sup>.

Turbulence surrounds both today's workforce and workplace, and the workforce and workplace of tomorrow will be vastly different from that of today (Ibarra, 2020). Organizations need specific skills and attributes of their leaders, as well as those at all levels of the workforce and workplace. Employees will have markedly different needs and preferences, and workers will have different views based on their experiences, culture, ethnicity, and education (Ibarra, 2020) <sup>[21]</sup>.

### Employee Wellness & Mental Health

In addition to job insecurity and financial concerns, the COVID-19 pandemic can be related to many stressors that may drain employees' mental health, during and after this

pandemic. Hamouche *et al.*, (2020) <sup>[17]</sup> further explain the main stressors that can be experienced by employees during a pandemic are employees': 1) "Perception of their own of safety, threat, and risk of contagion, 2) Infobesity and the Unknown, 3) Quarantine and confinement, and 4) Stigma and social exclusion" (p. 4). Employees from every industry were impacted and research has been dedicated to a few, including health care, migrant workers, cruise line, and hospitality.

According to Giorgi (2020) <sup>[15]</sup>, research has demonstrated that, among healthcare workers, COVID-19 has caused sleep disturbances in healthcare workers and thoughts of suicide. They further suggest that COVID-19 has brought extremely high levels of stress, insomnia, substance (alcohol and drug) misuse, depression, and symptoms typically seen with post-traumatic stress disorder ([PTSD], p. 5). These types of symptoms and behaviors seem most prevalent, not only in healthcare workers, but also in migrant workers, line workers, emergency responders, younger people, and emergency responders (Horsch, et. al., 2020) <sup>[19]</sup>. Several research studies have referred to COVID-19 as a psychological pandemic and healthcare workers need psychological personal protection equipment (PPE) to protect themselves.

While not as widely studied or researched, these same issues are prevalent among other frontline workers, including migrant workers, and young adult workers. Azizi (2021, p. 2) <sup>[4]</sup> identified issues among employees in the cruise line industries who experienced high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress. Yu *et al.*, (2021) stated, that empirical analysis suggests that "attributes of epidemic attributes create stress for hotel employees, which impacts their overall performance" (p. 544). Additional research is needed with employees in other industries.

As the pandemic continues with new waves and mutations of the virus, employers will need to continue to monitor not only the physical health but the emotional and mental health well-being of their employees. As Grigore (2020) <sup>[16]</sup> noted the signs and symptoms of mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, and stress, are often missed and the impact of mental health on a business is underestimated. Employers will need to manage these issues as they will impact an employee's productivity and business outcomes. Giorgi (2020) <sup>[15]</sup> refers to experts who predict that COVID-19 will take a toll, not only on those who have psychiatric problems pre-COVID-19 but also on those who have never experienced any type of issues or symptoms. Employers will need to manage these issues as they will impact an employee's productivity and business outcomes. Further research will be needed for additional risks, other industries, and occupations that continue to experience significant levels of stress and anxiety, especially as the pandemic continues.

### Telework and Technology

The digital age is upon us and how we operate is critical. Having the right technology is paramount (Church *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[5]</sup>. Seeing the need to make adaptable changes, organizations such as Centre Hospitalier de l'Université De Montreal's (CHUM) pharmacy department, decided to take another look at telework during the pandemic. The department's experience with telework began as an experiment to respond to prescription validation overload in the evenings before the pandemic. Due to this experiment,

the organization had experience with telework and was able to address difficulties related to the concept of teleworking and technology including difficulty communicating with other hospital staff from a distance and measuring validation performance (Adam *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[1]</sup>. The first wave of teleworking setbacks was easily resolved. The vast majority of the 84 pharmacists and some certified pharmacy technicians (PhT) were granted remote access to all necessary hospital software. During the first wave, one pharmacist, twelve PhTs, and three of the eight pharmacists in the oncology outpatient unit were changed to telework. The CHUM gave all employees a one-week timeframe to allow them to install all the necessary software and also provided IT support where needed.

A follow-up was required to evaluate the performance and reliability of the pharmacists' teleworking to ensure they were able to fully complete all work as assigned. An analysis of the number of validated prescriptions showed that the pharmacist validates 27% more prescriptions within the telework space when compared to a centralized workstation within the hospital without impacting the performance of the pharmacists in the hospital (Adam *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[1]</sup>. According to Adam *et al.*, (2021) <sup>[1]</sup>, these data points encouraged the CHUM to change a second position dedicated to prescription validation at their emergency satellite into telework five months after the beginning of the first wave of COVID-19. Although the period of observation is shorter, the data is significant only when all pharmacists are compared with each other (Adam *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[1]</sup>.

### Leadership

Opportunities lie in how an organization manages itself out of a crisis. Dirani *et al.* (2020) <sup>[11]</sup>, contend that universally, across the globe, COVID-19 seems to be the highest test of leadership. Leadership during crises operates quite differently than normal business practices. Since COVID-19 completely disrupted every aspect of the world, including business operations, organizations and their leadership needed to respond appropriately. Leadership under a crisis requires a completely distinct set of skills and savvy. For many organizations, that did not have effective leadership before the crisis, it made it more vexing during the pandemic for planning, and management, and created more financial issues. For instance, Dirani and colleagues (2020) <sup>[11]</sup>, explained that more organizations filed for bankruptcy in the United States during this pandemic for multiple reasons, but the lack of strong or effective leadership had a major impact on many organizations.

Research has demonstrated that different levels of leadership and styles are required to navigate an organization through very rough waters as employees are looking for someone to chart the course, set their minds and worries at ease, help manage their emotional concerns, and help individuals understand how to move forward and continue without a major impact (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Talbert, 2020) <sup>[25, 36]</sup>. As Wooten and James (2008) <sup>[40]</sup> stated, although most executives understand the implications of an organizational crisis, they are ill-equipped to deal with crises. Wooten and James (2008) <sup>[40]</sup>, further engaged in research on the types of leadership competencies (which are limited) and, at the time of this writing, categorized only three types of organizational crisis: accidents, scandals, and product safety and health incidents (p. 356). According to

Ahern and Loh (2021) <sup>[3]</sup>, examples of leadership during a crisis have been more evident in military and emergency management types of work. However, the magnitude of COVID-19 left no-military and non-emergency sector organizations leaders completely blind-sided, and without a map, as to how to manage a crisis of this magnitude.

The literature suggests leadership under crises to be vastly different. As Lagowski and colleagues stated (2020), the skills needed – a combination of emotional, physical, social, and technical - go beyond the typical skills needed and demand a completely different skill set to lead through a crisis, which can be an enormous challenge. Leadership must be able to assess and process information quickly, be very decisive, set a direction, maintain calm and manage fear, be talented and skillful in communication and empathy; and have the ability to build and sustain trust, and create and sustain an environment that promotes collaboration, resiliency, flexibility and adapts to change.

According to Dirani *et al.* (2020) <sup>[11]</sup>, “a crisis can destabilize the organization” (p. 382), and its workforce. Therefore, one of the most critical functions of leadership is to ensure the organization is stabilized and able to effectively move through a crisis and shift from normal operations to crisis management mode. During situations of crisis, information often comes from a variety of sources, and often this information may be changing, competing, and contradictory. In addition, information may be coming from a variety of non-traditional sources which leadership has to sort through, often generating outside of their area of expertise. A leader needs to very effectively sift through all of these complications and maintain a deliberate calm, look at the situation objectively, and “focus on how to navigate the situation” (Lagowska *et al.*, p. 2).

This was the case with COVID-19, as information was changing frequently, and seemingly based on the political climate, opinions, and best practices were heavily tied to political parties, and emotionally charged, and during the initial outbreak, scientific and evidence-based information was either changing or challenged. Employees looked to their leaders for confidence and a way forward, and in some cases not only about work but also about the clinical information. As stated by Ahern and Loh (2020) <sup>[3]</sup>, establishing and building confidence among employees requires leaders to make tough decisions and afford employees some sense of control. This also requires difficult choices with high stakes, where there is no right or wrong answer, and as discussed by Kaul *et al.*, (2020) <sup>[24]</sup>, the most effective leaders are those who can lead the organization and their employees, by demonstrating forward-thinking, courage, and make difficult decisions.

According to Kaul *et al.*, (2020) <sup>[24]</sup>, successful leaders are those who can discern and navigate through conflicting and competing information and data, succinctly and quickly, and decisively translate and operationalize this into a plan to move forward. Throughout this process, leaders must communicate. The elements of successful and effective communication are related to the frequency, content, and approach. Communication must be clear and consistent, communicating the gravity of the challenge, yet adaptive (Kaul *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[24]</sup>. A vital component of communication is transparency, as that is an important principle in crisis management, including what leadership knows and does not know (Forster, 2020) <sup>[14]</sup>. This would also include “candor and frankness about the uncertainties that exist” (Ahern &

Loh, 2020, p. 266) [3]. The communication should also include information available to staff as they should be able to access the information and have an active voice. Incorporating authentic and values-based leadership can create a shared vision and sense of purpose for staff, as well as anchor core values. As Kaul *et al.*, (2020) [24] stated, “crisis is an opportune time to rediscover one’s core values” (p. 812). Employees will look for leaders to model behaviors and ensure leaders’ actions match their spoken words.

While a leader needs to be decisive and intentional, the leader should also be adaptive, flexible, and nimble. Since decisions during crises can be made based on imperfect information, a leader needs to be able to modify or change course. Crises will evolve, and a leader has to subscribe to an iterative strategy (Kaul *et al.*, 2020) [24]. Leaders must communicate and demonstrate empathy. As Forster *et al.*, (2020) [14] point out empathy from leadership is crucial, and this is particularly necessary when there is a high degree of occurrence of human tragedy. This is extremely critical during COVID-19 as many have fallen ill to the virus, lost loved ones, or at the very least, every single person’s life was disrupted and experienced some other type of significant shift or loss associated with COVID-19.

Trust is the guiding principle in which several leadership models, such as servant leadership and situational leadership (both of which follow relationship-based principles), are deeply rooted. It is not only a foundational element of leadership theories but is of extreme importance as trust is the driving force for organizations. This is especially true in crises since organizational resilience is built on psychological trust and safety (Ahern & Loh, 2021) [3]. To move through the crisis and build strong relationships, employees must feel they can trust their leadership.

Last and equally as important is the organization’s ability to create itself and subsequently move it, through and beyond the crisis. This can be determined by the resiliency of an organization. As defined by Dirani and colleagues (2020) [11], an organization must use resiliency to move beyond the crisis to a place better than it was pre-crisis. Leaders also should adopt an agile and adaptive mindset, be innovative and creative, and adapt to any challenges in the future (Dirani *et al.*, 2020, p. 380) [11]. Resiliency is what moves an organization through and creates sustainability. Without resiliency, organizations may become stagnant or worse, not survive. Leadership is key to creating resiliency as it is based on leaders who can build relationships and trust, as those are “prerequisites of organizational resiliency” (Salehi *et al.*, 2021, p. 13) [33].

Some agree with A.P. Barton, that crisis can generate a burning platform that is the opportunity to drive transformational change (Kaul *et al.*, 2020) [24]. This has certainly been the case and many industries, and organizations have turned crises into opportunities. Examples of this include the medical field, which adapted long-overdue technology to support telemedicine. Another example is education, where virtual learning has been integrated into the didactic experience.

### **Perspective from HR Gurus**

At this point of moving towards the endemic phase of this pandemic, organizational leaders, especially at the HR level should now continue planning and preparing for the future and the next pandemic or any future crisis. As previously

stated, HRM plays a critical role in preparing for the next pandemic. To recapitulate, complement the abovementioned strategies, and offer further insight into how C-Suite leaders and HRM should plan and prepare for the next major crisis. Here are some next steps that individuals can take to ensure their organization is prepared for future pandemics and is well-positioned to respond quickly and effectively to any future threats. Table 1 lists several salient points relating to the perspective of HR professionals. Table 2 is a copy of an action preparedness plan guide, and Table 3 is a copy of an example template of an emergency action guideline plan.

### **Conclusion**

All of the aforementioned elements are major for HR organizations and leaders to understand, cultivate, and use to prepare for the next major calamity. As many organizational leaders work to predict the future of their business and daily operations, the conversation inevitably shifts toward the most critical enabler of all, our talent. and having the most experienced, operationalized, and professional individuals as part of one’s organization. Charles Darwin (1859), vis-à-vis *The Origin of Species*, postulated that it is not the smartest or strongest of a species that survives, but rather the segment of the most adaptable species. Upskilling will be imperative, however, employees, as well as employers/ organizations, must be open to change as Darwin suggests, by adopting new processes and creating action plans, etc.

Additional research should focus specifically on measuring and studying those organizations that were most successful and weathered the tsunami we now know as COVID-19, to identify those key characteristics of leadership that created their success and positioned them for competitive advantage. As Kaul *et al.*, (2020) [24] stated, “*The progressive leader will identify new paradigms and opportunities that present themselves as a result of such a crisis*” (p. 811). As we continue to move through this crisis, the analysis must continue. “It is impossible to know what the new world will look like, but its shape will depend on the decisions leaders make now” (Dirani, *et al.*, 2020, p. 380) [11].

One of the most salient lessons HRM practitioners appear to have learned during the COVID-19 pandemic is the need to increase skills and technical knowledge for all employees, where appropriate. Cultivating this prolific practice gives organizations more of an advantage in business acumen and efficiency. Human resources and senior leadership must collectively engage in strategic workforce planning, including digital and workforce transformation, as this will help businesses manage change and increase performance along with productivity. According to new research (Rasskazova *et al.*, 2019) [32], Human Resource departments will become more strategic in embracing new opportunities through technologies and supporting organizations in their goals and objectives. Organizations and Human Resource Departments that cultivate some of these strategies and curate well-thought-out business plans will be more organized and ready ahead of the next public health calamity.

Finally, HRM learned that agility is essential during times of crisis. They need to respond quickly to changing circumstances, whether adapting to new safety guidelines or changing business priorities. By being agile and responsive, HRM can help their organization navigate the challenges of

the pandemic and emerge stronger on the other side. The aforementioned steps are some additional recommendations for organizations to consider and take into account as they

are planning for the future. By adopting these steps, organizations are well-positioned to respond quickly and effectively to any future threats.

**Table 1:** The Perspective of Human Resources Gurus

Suggestions / Recommendations	Explanations
Effective Communication	Communication is essential for everything in our everyday life. More importantly, effective communication is the ultimate ingredient for success in an organization. HR leaders need to communicate regularly and effectively with employees, keeping them informed about the latest developments and providing them with guidance on how to stay safe and healthy. Clear and transparent communication helps to build trust and maintain morale among employees. HR leaders are the key to ensuring that the message is clear, concise, and consistent throughout the organization.
Develop and implement remote work policies	Remote work has become more prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic, and HR leaders should develop policies that outline expectations for remote work, including communication, productivity, and performance measurement.
Create employee wellness programs	HR leaders should create employee wellness programs that focus on mental health and stress management. These programs can include counseling, employee assistance programs, and mindfulness training.
Foster a culture of flexibility	During a pandemic, HR leaders should foster a culture of flexibility and adaptability. This includes being open to remote work, flexible scheduling, and providing additional support to employees who may be struggling.
Invest in technology (new apparatus)	HR leaders should invest in technology that enables remote work and virtual collaboration. This includes video conferencing tools, collaboration software, and virtual training tools. Explore further other tools that can give your organization the ability to increase efficiency and be more effective, which is frequently overlooked by many organizations.
Create action plan/contingency plan, review, & update frequently (i.e., XXXXXX)	HR leaders should create an action plan/contingency plans that outline how the organization will respond to a pandemic, including how it will communicate with employees, how it will continue to provide essential services, and how it will manage staffing needs.
Build relationships with key stakeholders	HR leaders should build relationships with key stakeholders, including local public health officials and emergency management personnel. This will help the organization stay up to date on the latest developments and respond quickly to emerging threats.
Review and update existing pandemic plans	HR leaders should review and update their organization's pandemic plans to ensure they are current and relevant. This includes updating policies and procedures, identifying key roles and responsibilities, and establishing clear communication channels.
The need for flexibility	HR leaders know that being flexible is essential during a crisis. They found new ways of working that accommodated the needs of employees, whether that meant working remotely or adopting new safety protocols in the workplace. By being flexible and adaptable, HR leaders are able to keep employees safe and productive.

Collective philosophy from the perspective of HR professionals.

**Table 2:** Action Preparedness Plan for Organizations and Educational Institutions Here is a general template for an action preparedness plan for organizations and educational institutions:

<b>Introduction</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain the plan's purpose and to whom it is intended to use and follow in an event of an emergency.</li> <li>• Outline the different types of emergencies or crises that could occur on campus.</li> </ul>
<b>Prevention</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Detail the measures and policies in place to prevent emergencies and crises from occurring.</li> <li>• Identify potential risks and how to mitigate them.</li> <li>• Provide guidelines for identifying and reporting potential threats and the course of action to take to prevent such events.</li> <li>• Establish a clear chain of command and communication protocols.</li> <li>• Define roles and responsibilities for key personnel and teams.</li> <li>• Develop procedures for responding to different types of emergencies.</li> <li>• Provide instructions for evacuations, sheltering-in-place, and other emergency actions.</li> <li>• Establish a system for coordinating with external emergency responders.</li> </ul>
<b>Recovery</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish procedures for assessing and addressing physical and emotional damage.</li> <li>• Develop a plan for resuming operations and restoring services.</li> <li>• Provide guidelines for communicating with stakeholders and the media.</li> <li>• Outline procedures for debriefing and evaluating the response to the emergency.</li> </ul>
<b>Training and Testing</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Detail training requirements for staff, faculty, and students.</li> <li>• Develop a schedule for conducting emergency drills and exercises.</li> <li>• Establish a system for documenting and evaluating training and testing.</li> </ul>
<b>Plan Maintenance and Review</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a system for updating and maintaining the plan.</li> <li>• Set a timeline for regular reviews and updates.</li> <li>• Identify key stakeholders who should be involved in the review process.</li> </ul>



Conclusion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summarize the plan and its key components.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stress the importance of preparedness and the role of everyone in the campus community in ensuring a safe and effective response to emergencies and crises.</li> </ul>

**Note:** This is just a general template, and each organization/higher education institution should tailor their plan to their specific needs and risks. It is also important to regularly review and update the plan to ensure that it remains relevant and effective. Reviewing such a plan 2-3 times a year might be the best action, but each organization must plan accordingly and align to its practice. OpenAI. (2023). ChatGPT (March 14 version), Emergency preparedness guide model. <https://chat.openai.com>

Table 3: Emergency Action Guidelines

Emergency Action Preparedness: In the event of an emergency/crisis, this template can be used to plan for emergencies. Incident Command Manager, along with key stakeholders are responsible for the implementation, education, and execution of these actions.

Human resources issues	Considerations	Action Plan	Person Responsible
Recruit, retain and the Great Resignation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the strengths/opportunities for your recruitment and retention?</li> <li>How do you mitigate for the Great Resignation?</li> <li>What do you need to do to increase your recruitment and retention efforts?</li> <li>What are the key positions that are most critical and how do you onboard them?</li> </ul>		
Employee Well Being and Wellness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How are you assessing employee well-being and wellness?</li> <li>What type of programs do you offer? How do you measure effectiveness?</li> <li>What type of training do your leaders need to support employee well-being and wellness?</li> </ul>		
Teleworking/Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What systems and supplies are in place to support telework?</li> <li>What type of telework policy do you want to develop and implement – will the organization support a fully remote workforce? hybrid?</li> <li>How does this impact your culture?</li> <li>Are your leaders positioned to manage under this new arrangement and workforce?</li> <li>What types of issues does this raise, regarding management style, communication, productivity?</li> </ul>		
HR Leadership and Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are your leadership strengths and opportunities?</li> <li>What is your organizational culture?</li> <li>How healthy is your organization in terms of trust, compassion, competent leadership, and EQ?</li> <li>Who in your organization can lead you through crisis, stabilize the organization, and sustain?</li> <li>How well do your leaders and the organization manage change?</li> <li>How will staff reach HR during a crisis?</li> <li>How well do your benefit plans suit the needs of your workforce?</li> <li>What policies/procedures do you need to review to ensure they are updated, appropriate, and relevant for emergency situations?</li> </ul>		



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