

How COVID-19 Changed the Field of Human Resource Management

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Abstract

This paper reviews how COVID-19 changed the field of Human Resource Management. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Human Resource Managers were tasked with additional responsibilities regarding compliance with new regulations, making arrangements for employees to work at home, reconfiguring the work environment to be safer for onsite employees and customers, and expanding the focus on employee mental health issues. Human Resource Managers also needed to address employee responses to pandemic-related working conditions including labor relations issues and “The Great Resignation”. Throughout the pandemic, the Human Resource profession took on additional responsibilities and moved towards engaging in more strategic and higher-level decision making, and may never be the same.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, COVID-19 Regulations, COVID-19 workforce changes

Introduction

The pandemic continues to have multiple major impacts on business and society at a national and global level. Employers need to continually adapt to changing environmental, health, legal, social, political, market and economic conditions and crises. Unlike other major disruptions that impact businesses from an economic or market perspective, the pandemic impacted people in the most direct ways since employees were in life and death situations both at the workplace and in their personal lives.

Responsibility for complying with evolving regulations and government agency directives fell on all managers and employees. However, the responsibility for implementing many mandates and changing work modalities was handed to Human Resource managers. Human Resources (HR) became the focal point and conduit for many types of information and initiatives including health and safety, pivoting the company’s businesses to remote work, as well as handling traditional human resource functions in new ways. According to a survey of 1,000 Human Resource professionals, “98% of HR leaders report that the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed their role. HR professionals in the survey explained that the role has changed due to an increased emphasis on these top issues: 1) Workforce health and safety, 2) Employee mental health and emotional well-being, 3) The need for technology that keeps employees, managers, and HR teams connected” (Paychex.com, 2021, p. 5).

Researchers have noted this transition. Many organizations did not consider Human Resources as a strategic function before the COVID-19 pandemic (Rich et al., 2022). Farshchi (2020) notes that before the pandemic, some dismissed the Human Resource function as merely hiring, firing and compliance, “Now, Chief Human Resources Officers (CHROs) have become

linchpins in how businesses respond to the global COVID-19 pandemic” (p. 1). Horovitz (2022) quotes Johnny C. Taylor Jr., CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management, “You had to beg to get time before the full board in the past, but now HR chiefs are sitting in board meetings as active participants... There is a sea change in the profession that is unprecedented. This is a reset moment” (n.p.).

This study examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Human Resource Management, and why the profession has been permanently changed. This study reviews changing government laws and directives, expanded responsibilities, new modalities for existing functions, revealed disparities in the workforce, employee responses to pandemic-related changes, recruitment challenges, continuing trends, and the future of Human Resource Management.

Government Directives and Employment Laws

Complying with labor and employment regulations became more complex. “Particularly during the pandemic, HR leaders have increasingly been tasked with monitoring the ever-changing regulatory landscape to help business partners understand the intricacies of new local, state, and federal laws and how they apply to their business. HR leaders have had to remain agile with plans to adjust policies and inform employees and customers as regulations change” (Paychex.com, 2021, p. 15). Human Resource professionals in conjunction with colleagues from their Legal Departments, need to continually monitor and implement guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on sanitization, personal protective equipment, social distancing, testing and vaccinations. Human Resources was generally given the lead role in determining how to comply with the Occupational Health and Safety Administration’s (OSHA) guidelines as well (Daniels et al., 2022). Horovitz (2022) writes about an HR manager, “The last thing she ever expected to be doing as an HR chief was testing and deciding which Covid rapid tests would be right for her employees. But that’s all part of what she does now” (n.p.). It is viewed as another sign of HR’s expanding importance, that “Human Resources became in charge of vaccine strategy” (Harbart, 2021, n.p.). Attendance policies were adapted, as employers were told they should give paid time off for employees to get vaccinated and recover from any side effects, and for employees experiencing other COVID-19-related issues (OSHA.gov, 2022). Examples of new COVID-19-related compliance directives and guidelines, that generally fell under the purview of Human Resource Management to coordinate or implement, are described below:

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was expanded to include long COVID-19 and the long-term effects of COVID-19 (EEOC.gov, 2022a). Guidelines specified reasonable accommodations for people with medical conditions that might place individuals at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19 (EEOC.gov, 2022a).
- If an employee has a medical condition that makes them high risk, they may be able to work from home as a reasonable accommodation, as long as the employee can do the regular job from home and the medical condition is a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act (EEOC.gov, 2022b).
- The ADA currently allows an employer to bar an employee from physical presence in the workplace if the employee refuses to have a temperature reading taken or refuses to answer

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questions about whether the employee has COVID-19, has symptoms associated with COVID-19, or has been tested for COVID-19 (EEOC.gov, 2022a.).

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Guidelines

- The CDC put forth multiple guidelines for employers that were frequently updated regarding testing, vaccinations, quarantine, isolation, personal protective equipment, types of masks, social distancing, ventilation, cleaning and disinfecting, among others (CDC.gov, 2021).
- Special guidelines were issued for specific workplaces such as health care facilities, schools, the transportation industry, manufacturing, hospitality establishments, correctional facilities and other workplaces (CDC.gov, 2021).

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

- For medical and religious exemptions, if an employee did not take a COVID-19 vaccine because of a disability or religious reason, the employee might be able to get an exception to an employer's vaccination requirement, and instead ask to use masks, social distancing, schedule changes, or reassignment, to stay safe at work (EEOC.gov, 2022b).
- Regarding retaliation, employers may not retaliate against employees who file charges with the EEOC alleging that their supervisor unlawfully disclosed confidential medical information (such as a COVID-19 diagnosis), even if the EEOC later decides there is no merit to the underlying charges (EEOC.gov, 2022a).

Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA)

- The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) covered most private and government employees for leaves taken or requested from April 1, 2020 through December 31, 2020, but there were some exemptions for small businesses with less than 50 employees from the child care provision. Two weeks of paid sick leave was provided when the employee was unable to work because the employee was quarantined, and/or experienced COVID-19 symptoms and was seeking a medical diagnosis, or because of a need to care for an individual subject to quarantine, or to care for a child whose school or child care provider was closed or unavailable for reasons related to COVID-19 (DOL.gov, 2022b).
- FFCRA also prohibits discrimination on the basis of FFCRA leave used (DOL.gov, 2022b).

Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)

- Documentation required for FMLA leave changed during the pandemic. In December 2020, the U.S. Department of Labor issued a memorandum stating that the "Wage and Hour Division will consider telemedicine visits to be in-person visits for purposes of establishing a serious health condition under the FMLA where certain conditions exist" (DOL.gov, 2022a). This impacted the documentation companies could require when approving FMLA leave for employees.

Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA)

- The Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA) prohibits employers from asking employees medical questions about family members. Employers cannot ask employees if they have family members who have COVID-19 or symptoms associated with COVID-19. However, employers can ask employees if they have had contact with anyone diagnosed with COVID-19 or who may have symptoms associated with COVID-19 (EEOC.gov, 2022a).

Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)

- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued a policy under HIPAA regarding under what circumstances employers can request or share vaccine information (HHS.gov, 2021).

Occupational Health and Safety Act (OSHA)

- Reporting requirements for OSHA now included recording and reporting COVID-19 infections and deaths (OSHA.gov, 2022).
- Protection from retaliation includes prohibiting “discharging or in any other way discriminating against an employee for raising a reasonable concern about infection control related to COVID-19 to the employer, the employer's agent, other employees, a government agency, or to the public, such as through print, online, social, or any other media; or against an employee for voluntarily providing and safely wearing their own PPE, such as a respirator, face shield, gloves, or surgical mask” (OSHA.gov, 2022).
- Recommendations from OSHA include: “At fixed workstations where unvaccinated or otherwise at-risk workers are not able to remain at least 6 feet away from other people, transparent shields or other solid barriers can separate these workers from other people. Barriers should block face-to-face pathways between individuals in order to prevent direct transmission of respiratory droplets, and any openings should be placed at the bottom and made as small as possible. The height and posture (sitting or standing) of affected workers, directional airflow, and fire safety should be considered when designing and installing barriers, as should the need for enhanced ventilation....Employers should provide face coverings to workers who request them at no cost and make replacements available to workers when they request them” (OSHA.gov, 2022).

Expanded Responsibilities and New Tasks for Human Resource Management

Human Resources was tasked with finding ways to maintain continuity during the pandemic by redesigning policies and procedures for functions such as recruiting, staffing, onboarding, training, performance appraisal, employee benefits and services for employees. Several distinct approaches were implemented by employers to protect staff who were not laid off. The first was physical protection for employees in jobs that needed to be conducted onsite, such as most manufacturing, retail sales positions and other types of service jobs. The other was providing for remote work.

Protecting onsite workers

Collings et al. (2021a) write that retail workers were classified as essential workers, “Many front-line workers had no choice but to work on site. HR leaders were challenged to balance the safety and wellbeing of these workers, while keeping them motivated and ensuring stores and distribution centres remained open” (p. 824). Human Resource managers were responsible for implementing safety guidelines in conjunction with facilities staff. Protections included providing protective gowns, masks, gloves, sanitization, erecting barriers that provide separation between an employee and coworkers/customers, increasing the space between an employee and others, enhanced ventilation, and temporary modification of work schedules (EEOC.gov, 2022b). Many companies offered flexible work hours, and rotating or staggering shifts to limit the number of workers in the workplace at the same time (OSHA.gov, 2022). Some companies added outdoor break areas to decrease contact between workers (Dyal et al., 2020).

Providing for remote work

The other way organizations maintained continuity was pivoting to remote work, also known as telework or telecommuting. Remote work did not begin with the pandemic; however, it was greatly expanded. The biggest impact of COVID-19 may be remote work (Levanon, 2020; Liu, 2021). Carnevale & Hatak (2020) state, “Perhaps one of the most salient HRM challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic involves adjusting new and current employees to drastically altered work conditions, such as shifting to remote work environments” (p. 184). Some companies were able to deliver services remotely by phone, video, or web (OSHA.gov, 2022). Some companies provided laptops, software and technical training to their employees. Collings et al. (2021a) state that transitioning to remote work “Required a substantive digital transformation as organisations redesigned technology and work processes to perform tasks virtually, often for the first time, in addition to reskilling and upskilling employees” (p. 821). Employees not only needed information for their immediate job, but needed information from Human Resources regarding revised policies and procedures. Dubey (2020) writes about “HR Digitalization” by which employees could obtain information remotely on a real time basis. In addition to the technical connections, guidelines were established to protect confidential and competitive company data when employees were working from home. Sigahi et al. (2021) noted that some people working from home lacked “cyber knowledge”, and additional policies needed to be developed to maintain control, and ensure digital security.

New Modalities for Existing Human Resource Functions

Applying technology to Human Resource functions did not originate during the pandemic. However, the pandemic created an urgency to; obtain needed technologies, apply existing technologies, and/or expand how technologies are utilized. The necessity was to keep the business running while keeping people safe. Organizations with Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) were generally able to adapt more quickly. Dessler (2020) defines HRIS as “human resource software that unified HR management processes such as applicant tracking, hiring, training, performance management, benefits administration, and payroll into one automated system” (p. 607).

Staffing

Organizations transitioned to virtual forms of recruitment and selection. Due to COVID-19, “Given the increased emphasis on public safety, HR professionals heavily relied on technological capabilities to continue the necessary hiring and recruitment processes” (Votto et al., 2021, p. 10). Job interviews via Zoom became typical, rather than the traditional in-person interviews. Selection tests were often administered online rather than in-person. Maurer (2020) notes that facial expressions and engagement can be assessed with video calls, and states, “We’ve found there are many meaningful ways to engage with people besides face to face. You don’t need to shake someone’s hand to hire them” (n.p.).

Onboarding and New Hire Training

Human Resources needed to switch to virtual onboarding, virtual training and digitizing documents for hiring and training which requires collaboration between HR and IT departments (Bingham, 2020). Onboarding documents for employee benefits and tax withholding were mainly submitted online. The need for all types of training increased, both for new employees, and for existing employees (Rich et al., 2022, p. 86). Combining HRIS with Artificial Intelligence allowed employees to connect with software that explained company guidelines, company procedures and employee benefits, and could be completed anywhere (Arora et al., 2021). Digital virtual assistants can guide a new employee through the onboarding process and help employees to complete mandatory training (Chowdhury, et al., 2022). Some HRIS enable employees to self-enroll in benefits and other programs such as flexible spending accounts (Dessler, 2020).

Additional Training for Existing Employees

HRIS has seen growth in capabilities for employee training and development, including tracking employee participation and making training more interactive (Votto et al., 2021). Existing employees needed training to handle new responsibilities, and also learn how to do their existing jobs in a new way. Training helped employees adapt to changing roles and modalities. Many businesses were short staffed due to employee absences. Higher levels of absenteeism were caused by employees ill with COVID-19 or exposed to COVID-19, the fear of contracting COVID-19, family illness, quarantines, or the need to home school children. To cover labor shortages, many workers were redeployed to new positions. In some cases, employee responsibilities were just increased, and this caused problems if the employees did not have the “proper training, resources or support” (Rich et al., 2022, p. 86).

Performance Management

More employers are using technology to monitor their employees by tracking computer use, employee communications, and time clocked in and out” (Baker, 2021). Paychex.com (2021) writes that more than half of HR leaders are opting to assess team performance instead of individual employee performance since, “Now more than ever HR teams must execute strategies that support the needs of the modern worker, requiring collaboration across all functions of an HR team” (p. 10). According to Arora et al., (2021), “HR analytics makes it simpler to collect, retrieve and document various types of data related to performance from various resources” (p. 291).

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Communications and Meetings

Employees needed to communicate electronically and attend meetings virtually to a much greater degree. Holding meetings by Zoom and other electronic video platforms became the norm. Human Resource personnel needed to manage new Business Etiquette rules for Zoom meetings (Harper, 2020). For more formal online meetings, there are now revised Roberts Rules for Electronic Meetings (Robert et al., 2020).

Employee Benefits

Human Resource departments manage the benefits and services provided to employees. The preference and importance of various benefits changed as a result of the pandemic. Survey results reported that health benefits, support for family, and retirement planning emerged as the year's leading benefits. For the first time in several years, life insurance emerged as one of the top 5 benefits (Paychex.com, 2021). Human Resource managers needed to revise and enhance some benefit programs provided to employees. Additional support for employees often included additional sick days, financial assistance, adjusted schedules and assistance finding child care (Baker, 2021). One of the top trends for benefits is HR moving toward a more personalized benefits approach "where the goal is to create a culture of care that meets the needs of all workers" (Meister, 2022, p. 5).

Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)

Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), generally coordinated by Human Resources, provide counseling and advisory services to employees with personal issues, and sometimes also to their family members. Daniels et al. (2022), notes an increase in requests for information about Employee Assistance Programs during the pandemic.

Employees were impacted differently by the pandemic, and these differences were present in employees' financial, social, technological, and family support needs (Daniels et al., 2022, p. 196). Rich et al. (2022), state, "The pandemic has significantly increased the amount of stress and anxiety for workers. In addition to the direct stressors induced by health concerns associated with COVID-19, many workers are facing challenging, ambiguous, conflicting, and often unreasonable job demands. In turn, the type and level of support expected by employees from their employers has evolved as well" (p. 87). Leaders "should understand the unique concerns of workers and develop appropriate interventions" (Daniels et al., 2022, p. 215). Several authors note burnout was especially acute among healthcare workers during COVID-19 including depression, anxiety, insomnia, alcohol/drug abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Sheather & Slattery, 2021; Daniels et al., 2022). Trougakos et al. (2020) state that training on emotional coping methods such as resilience, stress management, and work-life balance may be especially helpful.

Wellness Programs

Mental health and wellness took on a new urgency during the pandemic. Paychex.com (2021), states, "It will be crucial for HR leaders to consider expanding their benefits programs beyond traditional offerings that prioritize wellness, in order to foster a workplace that allows your

employees, and your business to thrive” (p. 19). Lewis (2020) predicts an increased role for Human Resource professionals to focus on health and wellness benefits in both the private and public sector. “The role of Human Resource Development (HRD) becomes critical and emphasizes the significance of human capital’s well-being during a crisis” (Dirani et al., 2020, p. 383).

Economic and Social Disparities Revealed by the Pandemic

At the start of the pandemic, governments issued “stay at home” orders that banned all but essential in-person (onsite) types of work. As businesses shut down, situations were very different for: 1) Employees who were fired or furloughed; 2) Employees who were required to work onsite; 3) Employees who were able to work at home. Human Resource Managers were integral to handling all three types of situations.

The pandemic revealed social and economic disparities in the workforce. Some employees stayed on the payroll, some did not. For those who remained on the payroll, disparities existed between those who could work at home, and others who worked onsite in environments considered unsafe. There was disparity between onsite employees because while some employers provided adequate protection to employees from COVID-19, some did not, resulting in many employees becoming sick and dying because of the lack of precautions taken to protect them.

Layoffs and Furloughs

Daniels et al. (2022) note that the pandemic resulted in massive job losses for American workers. Liu (2021) notes that Human Resource workers were tasked with processing employee layoffs and furloughs. Between February 2020 and April 2020, the U.S. went from having more jobs available than unemployed people, to 23.1 million being unemployed mostly due to layoffs (p. 198). Collings et al. (2021a) note that challenges resulted when some companies overly focused on the short-term risk and cut too many employees. Further, “Some employees were harmed by firms’ continued narrow focus on short-term financial outcomes while failing to balance employee needs” (Collings et al., 2021b, p. 1380).

There were disparities between how different employers handled these layoffs and furloughs, “During the COVID-19 crisis, some businesses closed their doors with little to no support for workers, while other organizations introduced new processes and resources” (Daniels et al., 2022, p. 215). The types of needed support that may or may not have been provided, would include assistance with health insurance, unemployment claims, and/or assistance finding new work” (Daniels et al., 2022, p. 197).

Many American workers suffered economically despite the aid programs put in place. The Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) was designed to provide loans to help businesses continue to pay their employees during the pandemic, and re-hire staff. In many cases it did. Unfortunately, most of the funds did not go to the employees, it went to business owners and shareholders (Landen, 2022). Cowley (2022) reports that 72% of the money went to people whose household income is in America’s top 20 percent. Unemployment insurance was expanded both for the amount of time unemployed workers were eligible and the categories of workers (i.e., self-employed) who were eligible. However, Donnan & Pickert (2021) report that at least 9 million Americans who lost their jobs in the pandemic did not get help from unemployment insurance because of bureaucratic issues, different rules in different locations, fraud prevention efforts that inadvertently denied innocent people’s claims, and too few staff to process claims.

Essential Workers/Onsite Employees

Most U.S. workers (60%) do not have jobs that can be done from home (Parker et al., 2022). Employees in industries such as transportation, food production, food distribution and health care were deemed to be “essential workers” and needed to report to work onsite. Situations were also very different between onsite employees, some who had their work hours (and income) cut, and others who worked to exhaustion covering for co-workers who were absent due to illness, being exposed to COVID-19, fear of getting infected, or needing to care for children whose schools and day care closed. “Of course, mass cuts mean more work for the people who remain, who then turn to HR for support in managing it all. The cuts have made too much work for too few people” (Liu, 2021, n.p.).

Concerns about disparity go well beyond economics. “It is also a matter of social injustice that ‘essential workers’ often work under poor working conditions, earn low wages, and cannot refuse unsafe work due to financial restrictions, thus risking their lives and their families” (Sigahi et al., 2021 p. 12). Thorbecke (2020) notes the “disproportionate percentage of minorities who are deemed ‘essential workers’ in this crisis, and being asked to continue coming to work -- potentially exposing themselves and their families to the virus” (n.p.). The result was that “Workers in many ‘essential’ occupations were significantly more likely to get sick and to die as a result of COVID-19 than the rest of the working age population” (Butterick & Charlwood, 2021, pp. 850-851). The fact that many essential worker categories were very low paid hourly workers, “raises questions about the social legitimacy of the HRM practices that produced such large divergences between these workers' (low) market value and (high) value to society” (Winton & Howcroft, 2020). How jobs are evaluated is an issue that needs to be resolved.

Fay & Ghadimi (2020) state that Human Resource Managers and Labor Leaders need to be aware of government decisions and new public policies because of “disproportionate impacts on certain employee groups, both contemporaneously and after the crisis has ended” (pp. 817-818). While companies cannot control government policies, Human Resource managers must thoroughly evaluate the available options to maintain compliance. “It will also be helpful to understand the longer-term implication of HR responses to COVID-19 for diversity and inclusion. How can organisations ensure that particular employee groups are not unduly disadvantaged in the longer-term?” (Collings et al., 2021a, p. 829).

Employees Working from Home

Even working at home revealed social and economic disparities. The interior of people's homes was on display to other students (in school settings) and employees during video meetings. This led to a need for people to be able to disguise their backgrounds. For people working in places that would not appear professional, blurry or virtual backgrounds can be used. “Not everyone has a beautiful home office. A lot of us are working in closets and crazy places... That's fine, but then make adjustments so you can have your camera on without being embarrassed about the background” (Leonhardt, 2022, n.p.).

Employee Responses to Pandemic-Related Changes

COVID-19's impact on employees has been profound, but employee responses, and the impact of employee responses on businesses, have been equally profound. These responses changed the workforce in ways that created additional challenges for all managers, especially Human Resource managers, whose role was to deal with an increase in unionization efforts, labor disputes, lawsuits and employees quitting in massive numbers, leading to the term "The Great Resignation" (Hirsch, 2021).

Unionization, Labor Disputes and Lawsuits

Unionization

Regarding labor relations, starting with the onset of the pandemic, there was an increase in activities toward unionization, "Some of this was due to employee frustration with believing that employers were not adequately protecting them. When employees believe that their company does not care about them or is not sharing information, this exponentially heightens the risk of an organizing drive and the chances that the organizing drive will result in a union vote" (Rosenkrantz, 2021, n.p.). The unionization effort for Amazon in Staten Island New York began with protests that the facility was not safe, that not enough was being done to protect employees from COVID-19, and that employees who protested were retaliated against (Kantor, 2021). For existing union contracts, because new circumstances arose that could not have been anticipated when collective bargaining agreements were negotiated, new bargaining items were possible such as: Working conditions for telework employees, hazard pay for onsite employees, employees' rights to refuse dangerous work, asking for businesses to close temporarily for cleaning and sanitizing, and protocols for employee COVID-19 testing or screening (Cornell.edu, 2020).

Labor Disputes

Some employees conducted walkouts and strikes, "While some fast-food employees conducted walkouts to protest a lack of personal protective equipment, farm workers conducted strikes to demand safer working conditions and increased hazard pay" (Daniels et al., 2022).

Lawsuits

Employees filed lawsuits against their companies based on what their employers did, or failed to do, "Expecting better organizational support from their employers during the pandemic, numerous workers filed lawsuits against their organizations related to issues such as Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) interference, wrongful termination, discrimination, and workplace safety" (Daniels, et al., 2022, p. 195).

The Great Resignation

"At a deeper level, they have also suggested that, for millions of people, the experience of living through the pandemic has transformed their attitudes to the job market for good. This may also be the explanation for the fact that in April and May, 2021, even as the economic recovery

began to gather steam, 7.6 million Americans decided to quit jobs they already had. So startling was this statistic that it quickly became dubbed ‘The Great Resignation’” (Hirsch, 2021, p. 440).

Other authors’ writings on the Great Resignation note that the pandemic provided workers with “optimal conditions to reflect on and reevaluate their personal and professional priorities” (Rich et al., 2022, p. 86). The pandemic made employees aware of the sacrifices they made for their jobs, including long commutes and long working hours. These factors, “appear to have persuaded large numbers of workers to re-examine their core employment proposition” (Hirsch, 2021, p. 440). A survey asking about employee intentions to quit or change professions revealed that the employees’ primary reason “was the poor way they believed they had been or were being treated by their companies” (Hirsch, 2021, p. 440). Vesoulis (2021) writes, “[Employees] ‘don’t want to return to backbreaking or boring, low wage, sh-t jobs,’ Robert Reich, former U.S. Secretary of Labor in the Clinton Administration, tells TIME. ‘Workers are burned out. They’re fed up. They’re fried. In the wake of so much hardship, and illness and death during the past year, they’re not going to take it anymore’” (n.p.).

As opposed to being motivated to leave a current job due to a bad situation, some authors note that labor shortages provided better opportunities for employees to find better jobs, including for higher pay (Hirsch, 2021). Vesoulis (2021) notes, “Workers have more bargaining power than they have had in the immediate past or the recent past...if they don’t like the situation they’re in now, they can leave” (Vesoulis, 2021, n.p.). Whether turnover is due to employees running away from a bad situation, or, running toward a better situation, Human Resource managers are having a more difficult time hiring staff.

Challenges in Rehiring Former Employees and Difficulty in Hiring New Employees

Regarding rehiring laid off or furloughed employees, HR workers “have been tasked with laying off tens of millions of workers, then trying to hire them back during a global health crisis” (Liu, 2021, n.p.). As noted above, employees were hesitant to return to companies that they felt treated them poorly or put them in dangerous situations. When rehiring staff, rehired employees need a letter clearly stating what has changed in the work environment including health and safety procedures (Indeed.com, 2020). Any changes to compensation need to be clearly stated. Human Resource policies need to determine whether to reinstate seniority to the date of first hire, any lost vacation and sick days, and any benefits that would accrue by seniority.

Regarding compensation, Hirsch (2021) states, “In the USA, businesses large and small, particularly in the retail and hospitality sectors, had to radically adjust their offerings to reflect the fact that they couldn’t hire enough staff to keep up. Faced with a record 9.2 million job openings, US employers deployed a range of incentives, increasing wages and offering signing bonuses, even at the small business level” (p. 439). For new hires, many companies are offering improved pay, but “we suspect that the true story of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it relates to work will be about the conditions of work and the benefits that go with them” (Hirsch, 2021, p. 441).

Continuing Trends in the Workforce

The pandemic’s impact internally within businesses, and externally on the labor force will continue well beyond the pandemic. Human Resources will continue to be a focal point for these trends:

Remote and Hybrid Work

The proportion of work done remotely and in a hybrid format will continue to be higher post-pandemic, “Today, more workers say they are doing this [working from home] by choice rather than necessity...61% now say they are choosing not to go into their workplace...And many (44%) say working from home has made it easier for them to get their work done and meet deadlines, while very few (10%) say it’s been harder to do this” (Parker et al., 2022, pp. 4-5). Companies will be offering a variety of options to employees to provide more flexibility (Hirsch, 2021). Human Resources will be influential in establishing policies for longer-term and/or permanent remote and hybrid work arrangements.

Health and Safety

“It [the pandemic] has shown enterprises that the health, safety, and well-being of their people is not something that can be taken for granted. In good times and bad, CHROs [Chief Human Resource Officers] must serve as a guardian to their people, using data and technology to monitor their whereabouts, advocate for their safety, and engage their skills” (Farshchi, 2020). According to Baker (2021), “The pandemic has increased the trend of employers playing an expanded role in their employees’ financial, physical and mental well-being”. Rich et al. (2022), state, “Employees will likely require more emotional support from their employers in general, and organizations need to focus on the mental health and well-being of their employees” (p. 87).

Compensation

As noted, the disparity between the critical importance of essential workers, vs. the low pay rates for these workers needs to be addressed. Compensation needs to be commensurate with the value a job provides. While increases in wage rates have occurred, more needs to be done. Compensation is not just wages and salaries, but also benefits and services provided to employees. Health insurance and paid sick days can ensure low wage workers get the healthcare they need, and can recover at home when ill. Human Resource compensation professionals will be instrumental in these roles.

Work Life Balance

For employees working at home, the pandemic led to an increased inability to separate work and private life, “These newfound demands have further blurred work and family roles, thus making it more difficult than ever to maintain adequate work-family role boundaries” (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020, p. 184). For employees working at home, policies need to be set for hours of work, and limits for the time employees may be actively working outside of business hours.

The Future of Human Resource Management

Expanded Roles for Human Resource Management

Dirani et al. (2020) note that, “Another HRD role is to be a link between employees and leaders. They need to voice employees’ concerns about work, suggest solutions to leaders, and

make sure leaders listen to and provide psychological empowerment and supervisory support for their employees at the time of crisis” (p. 383). “The pandemic renewed the emphasis on the people part of HR’s job, putting the ‘human’ back in Human Resources” (Harbart, 2021). Evidence of the expanded role of Human Resource Management is the job growth in the field, “the sheer number of HR jobs posted on Indeed was up 150% in early January of this year vs. one year earlier” (Horovitz, 2022).

Elevated Status for Human Resource Management

Looking forward, “HR leaders are uniquely placed to navigate the paradox emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic and this has placed them front and centre in organisational responses to the crisis, and how they perform is likely to impact organisational sustainability and the lives of workers around the globe. This has the potential to permanently elevate the status of the HR function, but that will depend on how HR leaders respond to the crisis” (Collings et al., 2021a, p. 829). Several authors note the expanded roles and elevated status of Human Resource Management, and describe how the future of Human Resource Management was changed by COVID-19:

- “The COVID-19 pandemic has placed HR squarely in the spotlight and how HR leaders navigate the crisis will influence the ensuing status and profile of the function” (Collings et al., 2021a, p. 828).
- “Further, 80% of chief human resource officers say they are now actively partnering with their CEOs on company culture” (Horovitz, 2022, n.p.).
- “HR has cemented its position as the right hand of the CEO, helping navigate complex people-centric challenges” (Harbart, 2021, n.p.).
- “Core to this will be HR’s success in maintaining its influence at the board level while ensuring excellence in execution of HR activities” (Collings et al., 2021a, p. 827).
- “Welcome to the new world of HR. A convergence of economic and cultural trends is elevating the stature—if not the power—of HR departments nationally, even as pressure intensifies to do more with less” (Horovitz, 2022, n.p.).

Conclusion

Human Resource Management, which in many companies was viewed as a more transactional business function, became central to designing and implementing strategic and operational changes during the pandemic, and continues in a changed role. “The COVID-19 pandemic threw employers and employees into chaos and uncertainty, with no clear end in sight. HR operated in crisis mode for much of 2020 and the first half of 2021, figuring out how employees could work from home, trying to provide extra mental and physical health support, and working more than ever on C-level strategies for keeping their organizations functioning. As the dust continues to settle and companies adjust to a new normal, the role of HR has fundamentally changed” (Harbart, 2021, n.p.).

The workplace may never be the same. As existing situations are resolved, and new situations arise, adaptations are needed at the strategic and operational level for the whole organization. Human Resource Management can continue to successfully be the bridge between employees and upper management to ensure a proactive and successful approach is taken for current and future challenges.

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