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ANNALES  
UNIVERSITATIS MARIAE CURIE-SKŁODOWSKA  
LUBLIN – POLONIA

VOL. LV, 2

SECTIO H

2021

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*HR Activities Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic across  
Levels of Analysis*

**Keywords:** human resource management; COVID-19; multilevel perspective; internalization process

**JEL:** J12; M12; M54

**How to quote this paper:** Austen, A., Kremmydas, E., & Szczepanik, M. (2021). HR Activities Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic across Levels of Analysis. *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska, sectio H – Oeconomia*, Vol. 55, No. 2.

### Abstract

**Theoretical background:** The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic heralded significant changes to existing HR activities followed by organizations and companies, trying to respond to government restrictions and new employment conditions. During these challenging times, employees are in the need of robust support by HR professionals in order to keep on performing, being motivated and thriving within their organizations and companies. Nonetheless, these modified HR activities are going through the stages of conception, actual implementation and, finally, they are experienced by employees. The intended, actual and experienced HR activities may evolve over time due to external and internal factors that are connected to pandemic. Understanding these changes is necessary for achieving effective HR management and optimal levels of organizational performance.

**Purpose of the article:** The aim of this article is to discuss the factors that affect HR activities through the framework of their internalization process. The factors that may be catalysts for changes of the HR activities on different levels: intended, actual and experienced activities over time are discussed and guidelines for future research are suggested.

**Research methods:** The article applies literature review of possible factors that may induce changes in intended, actual and experienced HR practices in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Main findings:** Absence of appropriate HR activities may increase anxiety and stress levels of employees. This negative impact can be potentially augmented by the perceived gap between employee expectations and the actual experience of these HR activities. In an effort to better understand these gaps occurring during the internalization process, we suggest that HR activities at the intended level may change due to business transformation, workplace transformation and employee well-being, while line manager's characteristics and interactions with HRM departments may be catalysts for change in the actual HR. Finally, the assessment of the outcome of HR activities, the way in which they are delivered, and their continuity could be considered as important factors at the experienced level of the internalization process.

## Introduction

The pandemic situation is changing in a dynamic, unprecedented and unpredictable manner and constitutes a challenge for both employers and employees, who are trying to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and make the required adjustments, while, at the same time, trying to maintain economic viability (Maya, Audibert, Sipala, Vandis, Carson, Prudente, & Murphy, 2020). One of the approaches to the alignment of working conditions with the pandemic event has been the use of working time flexibility, characterized by flexible planning and scheduling of working hours in which employees decide when to perform their duties (Demerouti, Derkx, ten Brummelhuis, & Bakker, 2014). Another approach is the independent planning of working hours, which may lead to their extension and overtime, as well as the willingness to constantly and quickly respond to messages (Kozhina & Vinokurov, 2020). Furthermore, many employers shifted to remote work, which is in alignment with the social distancing practices implemented during the pandemic event (Maya et al., 2020).

For many years, researchers have been interested in explaining how and why HR practices are linked to performance. Wright and Nishii (2013) address this issue through the causal chain which consists of intended, actual and perceived HR activities, followed by employee reactions, which, in turn, impact performance. Un-

derstanding the process during the current pandemic event, is of utmost importance. The main thesis of the paper is that intended, actual (also called “implemented”) and experienced (also called “perceived”) HR activities (which are called “levels of an internalization process of HR activities”) evolve over time. We assume that some external and internal factors resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic may cause unexpected changes in these activities. In other words, in the short-, mid- and long-term periods, HR-intended, actual and experienced activities may differ. Understanding these changes and the underlying reasons is necessary for effective HR management.

The aim of the paper is to discuss the factors that affect HR activities through the framework of their internalization process. We propose some underlying factors that could be potentially acting as catalysts for change of the HR intended, actual and experienced activities over time and suggest guidelines for future research.

## **Research method**

The paper is based on literature review focused on explanation of possible changes in intended, actual and experienced HR practices, which are also known as internalization process of HR, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature in this field is scarce. First, little is known about the internalization process, the research in this area is limited. The same relates to COVID-19. For such a reason, we made an attempt to present propositions and theoretical model of some potential factors that may change HR practices. WoS was searched for papers that may be useful for the explanation of internalization process and COVID-19, yet also relied on some reports on COVID-19 due to the fact that time span for conducting and publishing research in scientific journals resulted in a limited number of such publications around the topic at the time of authoring the current article.

## **Literature review**

### **Intended HR activities and their changes over time**

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the HR functions of organizations undertake a herculean effort in order to ensure the viability and prosperity of their organizations and employees, for the immediate present, the mid-term future and of course, for the post-COVID-19 era. As such, senior HR leaders responsible for designing HR strategies alongside with the top-management, draft the intended HR activities that will ensure the above (Gigauri, 2020). Nonetheless, for this to happen, the environment within which the organization operates needs to be predictable if not controllable. There might be a wide range of reasons for which a conceived organizational strategy needs to be adapted to the new conditions. The same principle applies in SHRM,

thus intended practices may evolve over time (Mintzberg, 1978). Our review of currently existing literature with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic and its business impact from the perspective of HR, has identified business transformation, workplace transformation and employee well-being as three significant factors that may make it necessary to change intended activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed the ways in which business is conducted while at the same time has expedited the development of new technologies and products such as Artificial Intelligence and supercomputing (Meister, 2020). According to a survey conducted by McKinsey & Company (2020), companies have expedited the digitization of their customer and supply-chain interactions by a factor of seven years. As an outcome of this, organizations successfully handling the strategic impact of technology during the COVID-19 pandemic event, have developed a wide range of technological capabilities, have implemented more advanced technologies while at the same time they have increased their levels of experimenting and innovating (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Further to the above and according to survey conducted by KPMG that had a geographical span of 27 countries, it occurred that the organizations that quickly implemented digitally-enabling commercial interactions outperformed organizations that did not (Hernandez, 2020). Hence, the business transformation may change the espoused HR activities, which is reflected in the below proposition.

COVID-19 has become the catalyst for the most significant workplace transformation of recent times and for this reason there has been a great investment in various areas that promote this ongoing workplace transformation such as trainings related to remote work/work in quarantine, trainings of employees on how to be successful while working remotely and trainings of managers on how to remotely manage employees (Meister, 2020). In some cases, remote work has become the main work format (Agovino, Ladika, Roepe, Sammer, & Zeidner, 2020; Dongrie et al., 2020). Another aspect of the workplace transformation is the one of performance management where managers have adopted the use of online dashboards and digital data in order to evaluate workload and performance of teams (Gigauri, 2020). As a consequence of the above, respective intended HR activities of organizations need to be in alignment with the ongoing workplace transformation. As an example of this, such practices may include virtual recruitment and selection or virtual training instead of face-to-face interactions among others (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted even more the importance of employee well-being. Some evidence suggests that working conditions have deteriorated for many employees, resulting in greater risk of employees encountering job burnout (Kniffin et al., 2021). Organizations are extending their range of their well-being practices and services in order to deal with the physical and psychological well-being of their workforce, such as podcasts, self-care courses, exercise sessions to provide a range of advisory services to employees with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic (Meister, 2020), daily fumigation of work areas, purchasing healthy supplements and

food for their employees in order to boost their immune system, and implementing artificial intelligence pulse surveys in order to monitor the well-being of their employees (Dongrie et al., 2020).

### **Actual HR activities and their changes over time**

The core decision to implement the practices and the quality of implementation are the responsibility of line managers, usually influenced by signals from senior management and monitoring pressures from the HR department (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013). As Jiang and Messersmith (2018) claim, recognizing line managers' interactions with HRM departments and top managers are important in order to understand the relationships between HRM activities and achieved outcomes.

The interactions of line managers with cited constituencies involved in the implementation process, are connected to the availability of the financial, structural, and personnel resources to form HR capabilities necessary for the implementation (Piening, Baluch, & Ridder, 2014). Top managers are expected to set the appropriate support also by influencing the content of HR policies and by their own actions while implementing them (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013). They also need assistance from HR professionals who should provide, e.g. right people with right skills and advise on difficult issues (Op de Beeck et al., 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, this cooperation is of particular importance. Yet, in some situations, when the organization is experiencing serious problems, the resources spent on HR may be limited. The 2021 Gartner HR Budget and Staffing Survey shows that over one-third of the surveyed HR professionals declared decreasing the HR function budgets this year. We also suggest that the lack of competences of HR departments, their passive attitudes and poor communication (Smoliński & Zakrzewska, 2020) in some companies may be the obstacle in the process of supporting line managers and providing meaningful support during the pandemic event. As a consequence, line managers who HR-wise feel unqualified, may try to avoid their HR role (Op de Beeck et al., 2018). This may lead to instances where line managers face challenges with the implementation of the HR activities, which in turn may result in a lack of consistency of implemented actions.

The second group of factors is related to the emotions that shape attitudes and behaviors of line managers in the process of implementation of HR activities. Research conducted by Trullen, Bos-Nehles and Valverde (2020) depicted the manner in which emotions influence other relevant implementation constructs such as legitimacy or resistance behaviors. When line managers are expected to implement HR activities that have recently emerged and, therefore, are unfamiliar to them, they may fail to appreciate the legitimacy of those practices (Ryu & Kim, 2013). Additionally, implementation of new HR activities, threatens the comfort that comes with the familiarity of previous behavior and results in discomfort because individuals must learn new unfamiliar behaviors with unknown effectiveness (Wright & Nishii, 2013). In our opinion, such situations may appear in the pandemic and may result in changes of actual HR activities.

### **Experienced HR activities and their changes over time**

HR activities at the experienced level, which may be understood as a communication mechanism between an employer and employee, provide employees with messages enclosing not only the content but also the manner of their implementation, and may raise objections from employees who will not always agree with the practices or the reasons for their implementation (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Presented considerations of employees' experience of HR practices during the COVID-19 pandemic can be based on the approaches that have been adopted when considering employee HR perceptions: the "what", "how", and "why" of HR activities (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016; Wang, Kim, Rafferty, & Sanders, 2020).

By examining the perceived "what" of HR activities, one should bear in mind the subjectivity of the experience of HR practices by individual employees, which makes it crucial for the practices to be made aware of and recognized by employees, since only then will they be able to influence their behavior and attitudes (Piening et al., 2014). If the HR activities are perceived by employees as representing the employer's goodwill, they should evoke positive reactions (Wang et al., 2020). Moreover, according to Wright and Nishii (2013) and Piening et al. (2014), past experiences of employees in the area of received support from an organization, have an impact on how they perceive and interpret HR activities. In other words, employees assess the HR activities and their perception may change over time and depending on perceived advantages (e.g. improving work during a pandemic or improving its safety,) they will be more readily adopted than those weakening well-being and work-life balance.

On the other hand, the perception of "how" of HR activities, relates essentially to the process by which these messages are delivered to employees and assumes that no HR system will be effective if it is not understood consistently, i.e. where there is alignment between words and actions. Important elements of communicating HR processes that make them effectively experienced by employees are also: the continuity of the use of HR practices understood as the degree to which they are systematically used over time and the fairness of HR practices, i.e. the way in which access to HR practices and allocation of results is perceived as fair (Piening et al., 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic, which has so significantly changed people's lives in every aspect, can largely affect the continuity and regularity of HR processes, e.g. due to challenges involving maintaining financial liquidity by organizations and the emanating changes in project implementation priorities or even in some cases their disruption. This can inevitably cause many workers to feel job insecurity. In addition, the experience of fairness and honesty with regard to HR practices by some employees may be disturbed, due to work overload resulting from additional obligations related to the introduction of remote or hybrid work, or job cuts and increased absenteeism resulting from the pandemic.

The perception of "why" of HR activities refers to the causal explanations by employees of the reasons (motivation) for managers to implement specific HR prac-

tices (Wang et al., 2020). Employees may differ in their opinions about why those HR activities were put into place and differences of opinion may result from experiential disablers, i.e. instrumental motives, their ability to understand the situation but also unclear communication (Makhecha, Srinivasan, Prabhu, & Mukherji, 2016). During a pandemic event, employees can base their decisions on short-term thinking to help them navigate these difficult times safely and adapt their decisions to their own and family's needs. Then, for example, compulsory remote work may be treated by some as an unpleasant isolation, and by others as an appropriate solution to the problems of providing care for children, also remotely learning. Also, the competencies and age of employees may play an important role in the way HR practices are experienced during a pandemic event – older employees are usually more mature, more competent and better regulate emotions when experiencing negative events at work but may be discriminated due to their age, while young employees may feel high job insecurity, and middle-aged workers are more likely to experience work-life conflicts (Scheibe & Zacher, 2013; Mäkkikangas, Kinnunen, Feldt, & Schaufeli, 2016). Moreover, the limited communication of HR activities from HR and line managers – especially under heavy business pressure which may be typical in pandemic – may change the perception of HR activities by employees (Makhecha et al., 2016).

## Results

As a result of presented literature review, the following propositions were formulated:

Proposition 1: Business transformation amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic may induce changes in the intended HR activities of an organization over time.

Proposition 2: Workplace transformation amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic may induce changes in the intended HR activities of an organization over time.

Proposition 3: Employee well-being amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic may induce changes in the intended HR activities of an organization over time.

Proposition 4: Lack of support from top managers and HR departments given to line managers amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic may induce changes in the actual HR activities of an organization over time.

Proposition 5: Emotions of line managers amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic may induce changes in the actual HR activities of an organization over time.

Proposition 6: The assessment of the benefits of HR activities experienced by employees amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic may induce changes in the experienced HR activities of an organization over time.

Proposition 7: The way in which HR activities are delivered to employees in terms of consistency of HRM messages, continuity of HR activities and their fairness amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic may induce changes in the experienced HR activities of an organization over time.

Proposition 8: Causal explanations of HR activities by employees amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic may induce changes in the experienced HR activities of an organization over time.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model.

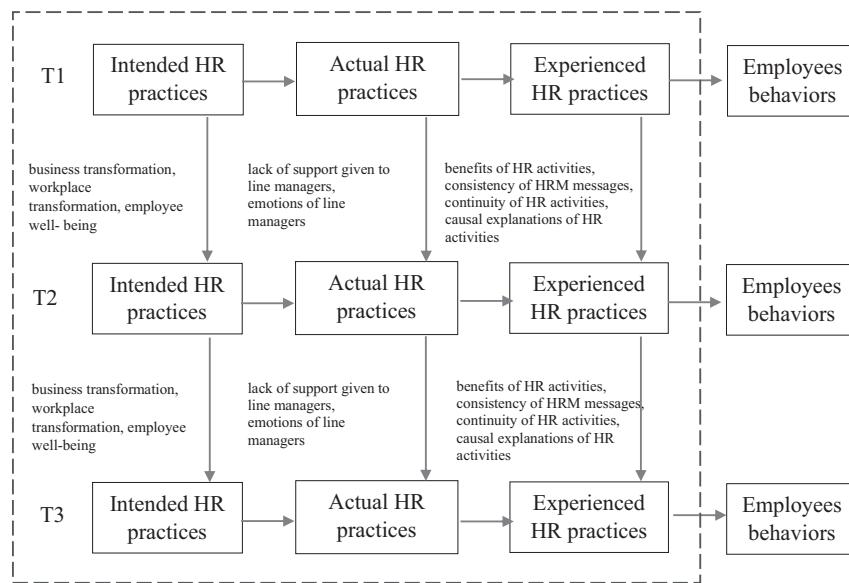


Figure 1. Conceptual model

Source: Authors' own study.

## Conclusions

Lack of appropriate HR activities during the COVID-19 pandemic may increase the anxiety and uncertainty of employees. If there is a perceived gap between employee expectations and experiences of the HR activities, then there will be a reduced likelihood for them to display the desired behaviors and they may even leave the organization, which, in turn, will negatively impact the overall organizational performance. Thus, it is important to understand the process of delivery of HR solutions during the pandemic event. In the current article, we focused on understanding the specificity of internalization process of HR activities and proposed to consider some factors that may induce changes in HR activities over time that may lead to unexpected changes in intended, actual and perceived HR activities. Firstly, we suggest that business transformation, workplace transformation and employee well-being make it necessary to change intended activities. Secondly, we assumed that line managers' characteristics and their interactions with HRM departments and

top managers may lead to unexpected changes in actual HR activities. Finally, we proposed some potential variables while referring to the expected internalization level: the assessment of the benefits of HR activities experienced by employees, the way in which HR activities are delivered to employees in terms of consistency of HRM messages, continuity of HR activities and the characteristics of employees referring to the causal explanations of HR activities.

The formulated propositions may serve as a source of inspiration for future research. Such research would be multilevel in terms, i.e. they would relate to different levels of internalization process of HRM activities. As a consequence, it would be necessary to involve respondents who design HR activities, implement them and assess as final receivers. Furthermore, as the propositions relate to the time dimension, it would be necessary to conduct multilevel research by focusing on understanding if and how these suggested factors may induce changes in the HR activities over time. Additionally, since the COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented event for modern HR management, we have limited knowledge about various psychological consequences on individuals. Such challenges require understanding of various work-related processes in areas such as work–family issues, remote work, virtual teamwork or job insecurity (Rudolph et al., 2021).

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