

# Unveiling the hidden dynamics: role of HRM in supporting the health and safety of healthcare workers in the post-Covid 19 pandemic world of work: an integrative review

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## ABSTRACT

The main purpose of the study was to uncover the hidden dynamics of HRM's role in supporting the health and safety of healthcare workers in the current world of work. It specifically focuses on an integrative review conducted in Durban, Republic of South Africa. In terms of design, that study approaches an integrative review conducted on 26 research articles and journals from reputable sources such as Google Scholar and Ebsco-host. The focus of the review was on the impact of human resource management on the well-being of healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 200 results were collected and categorised based on specific inclusion criteria, with a focus on the intersection of HRM, COVID-19, and healthcare workers. The inclusion criteria are premised on the fact that articles that did not directly address how HRM can improve the performance and safety of healthcare workers were excluded. The authors carefully reviewed the abstracts and titles of the articles to ensure they met the inclusion criteria. After removing duplicate entries, 26 articles were identified as relevant to the study and were analysed alongside other pertinent literature. The findings of this study highlight the significant impact of human resource management in effectively addressing challenges related to the healthcare workforce during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The originality of the study is grounded on the significance of HRM as a key stakeholder in workforce operations. Therefore organisational management must acknowledge this role. This is evident in the recommendation of the 6Cs of HRM as a pathway to effectively manage the health and safety of healthcare workers. For Future Research the fact that the study highlights the significance of HRM in organisations during times of crisis, such as a pandemic. It is important to recognise the necessity for further research employing quantitative or mixed methods to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how HRM plays a crucial role in effectively addressing and managing healthcare workers amidst challenging situations.

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## Introduction

Healthcare facilities rely heavily on a strong and secure workforce, but the recent global COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of prioritising the preservation of human lives above all else. It is widely recognised that it is imperative to focus on human resource management (HRM) practices to effectively ensure the well-being and safety of employees within the organisation.

Despite the crucial role of healthcare workers and their unique vulnerabilities, there is a lack of attention to the discourse surrounding their health and safety. This study aims to uncover the role of HRM in promoting the well-being of healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study is focused on an integrative approach conducted in Durban, South Africa. Based on a recent study by Gupta, Dhamija, Patil, & Chaudhari (2021), that evaluates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on healthcare workers it has been determined that the COVID-19 virus presents significant challenges within the healthcare industry. These adverse impacts may include higher rates of illness and death, financial challenges, heightened concerns about both familiar and unfamiliar information, and anxiety stemming from uncertainty about interventions that can impact the surroundings. Furthermore, these challenges have led

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to negative impacts not only on the individuals themselves but also on overall health outcomes, financial stability, and uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of interventions.

## **Literature review**

### **Theoretical and conceptual background**

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in China in December 2019 and rapidly spread globally, was officially declared an epidemic by the World Health Organisation on March 11, 2020. As of August 25, 2020, there have been over 23.3 million confirmed cases and more than 800,000 reported deaths worldwide (Gómez, Mendoza, Ramirez, and Olivas-Luján, 2020). A report jointly published by the World Health Organisation and the International Chamber of Commerce has highlighted the significant impact of COVID-19 on both health and the economy. The government needs to take urgent action to control the spread of the disease. By implementing timely and effective measures, the risk of infection among employees can be minimised in the short term, leading to reduced costs for the economy and businesses in the long run (Nangia and Mohsin, 2020).

### **Empirical review and hypothesis development**

#### **Implications of COVID-19 on Health Workers**

Viewed from a study conducted by Montemurro (2020), titled "The Emotional Impact of COVID-19: From Healthcare Workers to the General Public," the World Health Organisation (WHO) officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in March of the same year, recognising its widespread presence in over 110 countries and regions across the globe. Such pandemics, like the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as other public health emergencies, can cause significant stress and anxiety. Rodríguez and Sánchez (2020) looked at the psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on healthcare workers. The study posits that healthcare professionals are particularly vulnerable to the virus and its psychosocial impact due to their direct involvement in patient care. These dedicated individuals are faced with an urgent and uncertain situation that requires additional HR and materials. However, the shortage of resources in this challenging scenario increases the risk of consequences such as burnout, which healthcare professionals are already predisposed to.

A study by Cheng, Jasinski, Zheng, Wang, Li, Xu, Zhou, Zhang, and Li, (2023) aiming to assess the mental condition and function of resilience among families of frontline medical workers during COVID-19: potential influencing factors and mediating effect a total of 671 families of healthcare personnel participated in an assessment of self-perceived stress levels, resilience, depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms were measured. Using a Multivariate regression model findings indicate that a significant portion of family members of healthcare workers experienced symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) during the COVID-19 pandemic, with rates of 49.0%, 12.2%, and 20.3% respectively. Additional, analysis revealed that family members of doctors and nurses were more likely to report depressive symptoms compared to family members of other healthcare professionals. Furthermore, female healthcare workers exhibited a higher likelihood of experiencing PTSD symptoms compared to male healthcare workers, specifically doctors or nurses. The research also found that psychological well-being played a key role in mediating the relationship between self-perceived stress and symptoms of anxiety.

A study by Smallwood, Pascoe, Karimi, Bismark, and Willis (2021) assessed the occupational disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic and their association with healthcare workers' mental health utilised a national cross-sectional online survey conducted between August 27 and October 23, 2020 to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on occupational disruptions and the mental health of frontline and healthcare workers affiliated with major health organisations, professional associations, universities, government agencies, and national media outlets. The results showed that a significant number of respondents experienced changes to their working conditions due to the pandemic, with 48.5% reporting adjustments to their hours, and a notable portion being redeployed (16.8%) or transitioning to different roles (27.3%). Additionally, nearly one-third (30.8%) reported a decrease in household income during this time. Many participants exhibited symptoms of mental illness, with 62.1% reporting such issues. However, most respondents indicated feeling well supported by their workplaces (68.3%) and found workplace communication to be timely and beneficial (74.4%).

#### **Role of HRM in promoting the occupational health and safety of healthcare workers in the post-COVID-19 pandemic work environment.**

Considering the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, HR managers are encouraged to proactively seek innovative and effective solutions to address employees' concerns and prioritise their health and safety. It is crucial to build trust through well-thought-out HRM strategies, as outlined by De León (2020). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has identified four key pillars related to labour standards during this unprecedented time, which are detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1:** ILO policy framework: four key pillars in tackling the COVID-19 crisis based on international labour standards.

<p><b>Pillar 1 Stimulating the economy and employment.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Active fiscal policy.</li> <li>ii. Accommodative monetary policy.</li> <li>iii. Lending and financial support to specific sectors, including the health sector.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Pillar 2 Supporting enterprises, jobs, and incomes.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Extend social protection to all.</li> <li>ii. Implement employment retention measures.</li> <li>iii. Provide financial/tax and other relief for enterprises</li> </ul>
<p><b>Pillar 3 Protecting workers in the workplace.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Strengthen occupational safety and health measures.</li> <li>ii. Adapt work arrangements (e.g., teleworking)</li> <li>iii. Prevent discrimination and exclusion.</li> <li>iv. Provide health access for all bargaining and labour relations institutions</li> </ul>	<p><b>Pillar 4 Relying on social dialogue for solutions.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Strengthen the capacity and resilience of employers' and workers' organisations.</li> <li>ii. Strengthen the capacity of governments.</li> <li>iii. Strengthen social dialogue,</li> <li>iv. Expand access to paid leave and processes</li> </ul>

**Source:** ILO (2020)

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ILO (2020) policy framework suggested four essential activities that will be critical in addressing labour market challenges. These activities include boosting economic growth and employment, aiding businesses, fostering job opportunities, ensuring financial stability for workers, protecting employees in the workplace, and facilitating open communication for problem-solving. As human resources professionals, it is essential to evolve in response to industry developments and create innovative strategies to efficiently oversee a company's workforce, particularly within the healthcare sector. The post-COVID-19 pandemic era requires a reevaluation of HR practices, with a focus on implementing new approaches to support employees during this time of medical, economic, and social upheaval. In an analysis of existing data and evidence collected in the new phase of the international Cranet research in which Serbia participated. A study by Slavić, Poór, Berber, and Aleksić (2021), analysed the development of HRM in Serbia in the Light of Cranet Research 2021 The data was collected in 2021 and the sample included 106 companies in Serbia. Findings widely accepted that health and safety measures are integral components of HRM. Furthermore, a study titled *International HRM Insights for Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for Future Research and Practice* by Caligiuri et al (2020) further emphasizes the significant role of HRM in addressing the health and safety concerns of employees, especially considering the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, Meri (2020) underscores the importance of promoting employee well-being by aligning job roles with capabilities, providing a degree of control over work, and ensuring necessary support from caring individuals. The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated the shift to remote work for numerous employees, raising additional considerations regarding health and safety. This worldwide crisis has resulted in increased levels of uncertainty, particularly impacting mental health, as highlighted by the World Health Organisation (2020). As referenced in a research by Adesanya, Ogunlusi, Olginni, Eniyewu, & Olowu (2023), a secondary data analysis was conducted using an exploratory research design to investigate the evolving responsibilities of HR managers in post-COVID-19 Nigeria. The study highlighted that the workplace landscape in Nigeria has been significantly altered due to the implementation of lockdown measures as a preventive strategy against the virus. This shift has led to a greater emphasis on remote work, telecommuting, and virtual meetings in place of traditional face-to-face interactions. As a result, HR managers must prioritize the well-being, health, safety, and security of employees while also adapting to technological advancements and enhancing communication strategies. Furthermore, it is advised that HR managers customise their strategies based on individual circumstances rather than implementing a one-size-fits-all approach to stay current and address the obstacles presented by the pandemic. This will help improve understanding of the role of HRM in promoting the occupational health and safety of healthcare professionals in the post-COVID-19 pandemic workplace.

In Kapoor's (2023) study, qualitative research methodology was employed to gather data from human resources managers using semi-structured interviews. The results underscore the importance of HRM in supporting the shift to remote work, monitoring employee well-being, and implementing organisational changes. Human resource management is vital for updating policies and procedures to adhere to health and safety regulations. The study shows that HRM is crucial in guiding companies' responses to crises, emphasizing the role of HR in building resilient organisations and ensuring business continuity during difficult times.

Mahdavi, Atlasi, Ebrahimi, Azimian, and Naemi (2023) analyzed HRM strategies utilised by medical staff amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. and conducted an extensive search on the international Web of Science electronic database, utilising relevant keywords such as HRM and COVID-19. A total of 1,884 articles published between January 1, 2020, and October 22, 2021, were reviewed for analysis, with only a few excluded for further examination. Then, scientometric analysis was carried out on the content of the selected words and the results were presented in tables and conceptual models. Findings from the study identified nine key factors that can be employed for effective HRM management during a pandemic. These factors include culture development, staff analysis, policy development, disease prevention education and utilisation of medical records, patient management, people management, motivation, communication and collaboration, and digital healthcare. The implementation of these strategies can have a positive impact on the well-being of healthcare professionals by reducing burnout, improving productivity, boosting employee satisfaction, and strengthening the medical workforce.

## **Research and Methodology**

This study employed an integrative literature review process to evaluate and analyse the role of HRM in supporting the occupational health and safety of healthcare workers in the post-COVID-19 pandemic workplace. According to Whitemore and Knafl (2005), utilising an integrative literature review process allows for a comprehensive understanding of findings from both empirical and non-experimental research. Hence, implementing this strategy in the study offers benefits as it rigorously analyses secondary sources through a range of methodologies.

### **Data Collection**

Data generated for this study was collected from reputable academic research sources such as Google Scholar, Ebsco-host, and Emerald. Haddaway, Collins, Coughlin, and Kirk's (2015) research highlighted the comprehensive nature of Google Scholar as a search engine that covers a wide range of academic and grey literature. These sources were selected for their thorough coverage and relevance to the subject at hand. This study aims to explore the underlying dynamics of HRM in supporting the health and safety of healthcare workers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 200 results were collected and organised based on pre-established inclusion criteria which focused on HRM, COVID-19, and healthcare workers. Articles that did not pertain to the role of HRM in enhancing the performance and safety of healthcare workers were excluded. The authors carefully reviewed the abstracts and titles of these articles to ensure they met the inclusion criteria. After removing duplicates, 26 articles were identified that met the research criteria. These articles were then analysed alongside relevant literature for this study.

### **Data synthesis and extraction**

In this study, data synthesis and extraction involve a systematic process in which selected studies built around the role of HRM in supporting the health and safety of healthcare workers in the post-COVID-19 work settings were reviewed and key information such as author's name, publication year, title, methods, and findings are extracted. The aim was to ensure that the outcomes align with peer review standards and encompass the full range of available evidence, as recommended by Whitemore and Knaff (2005).

## **Findings and discussions**

Key themes have been identified through the conducted scoping review. In the forthcoming phase of this review, these themes will be thoroughly examined and discussed.

### **Theme: Enhancing the organisational culture and fostering effective collaboration/communication.**

Most of the studies acknowledge that having a comprehensive strategy such as the enhancement of organisational culture and fostering effective collaboration and communication serves as an important support in protecting and supporting the occupational health and safety of healthcare workers in the Post COVID-19 pandemic world of work. Findings from a study by Mahdavi, Atlasi, Ebrahimi, Azimian, and Naemi (2023) postulate that employing efficacious strategies to effectively monitor the well-being of healthcare professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic can have a significant impact on mitigating exhaustion, enhancing productivity and employee contentment, and fortifying the medical workforce. Furthermore, it positively influences patient safety. Tailoring and revamping HRM tactics within the healthcare sector and healthcare organisations in congruence with diverse cultures and contexts necessitate diligent research and investment in imaginative and pioneering concepts. The role of HRM in supporting the occupational health and safety of healthcare workers in the Post COVID-19 pandemic world of work was illuminated by Elsafty and Ragheb (2021) conducted a quantitative study to assess the role of HRM on doctor retention during the COVID-19 pandemic in Egypt. The findings highlighted the significance of incentives, rewards, financial benefits, and non-financial benefits in supporting healthcare workers during this challenging time. Consequently, effective HR practices can contribute significantly to safeguarding key physicians from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Factors such as incentives, and moral and material benefits have proven instrumental in retaining physicians, especially those who have been impacted mentally by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, HR departments should prioritise timely salary disbursement, offering performance-based bonuses, and providing incentives to encourage doctors to deliver their best. The preceding can be viewed through the lens of pillar 2 of the ILO (2020) policy framework which supports enterprises, jobs, and incomes. In addition, these strategies have a favourable effect on patient safety. Adapting and enhancing HRM strategies in healthcare settings and organisations, considering different cultures and environments, requires extensive research and significant investment in creative and innovative ideas.

### **Theme: 6Cs HRM practices**

Dissanayake (2020) examines the management of HR practices as discussed in public or private organisations during an epidemic, crisis, or crisis, stating that regardless of the period pre and post-pandemic human resource management practices can be broadly viewed through a 6Cs approach which includes: (a) Curtailing and payment, (b) Communication, (c) Cooperation and cooperation, (d) Creating leadership, (e) Cleanliness and hygiene, and (f) Creativity. Therefore, it is recommended that HRM practitioners consider utilising the 6 Cs approach to HRM.

### **Theme: workplace risk assessment and management**

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic is a challenge for the national healthcare system in all countries due to its huge cost to many people, especially healthcare workers (HCWs). Taking into consideration the preceding Chirico, Nucera & Magnavita, (2020) state that HRM needs to safeguard healthcare professionals against this COVID-19 virus through the adoption of precautionary measures that ensure their specialised protection, such as prioritising worker healthcare and providing adequate personal protective equipment. In addition, the workplace risk management process refers to the methodology employed by employers to identify incidents and analyse them, assess potential risks of injury or illness, and subsequently establish effective measures to prevent such risks and ensure the well-being of employees. It is essential to establish best practices and guidelines set forth by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA, 2010) and ensure compliance with the requirements of A.S.I.A. compatibility. This involves utilising a thorough approach that includes assessment, tracking, data analysis, and other relevant tasks, as outlined by (Magnavita and Carlson, 2003).

### **Theme: guidance on public health care**

Betancourt-Sánchez, Ochoa-Gelvez, Velásquez-Bernal, Roza-Silva and Quiroga-Vargas (2020) posit that healthcare workers are public servants. Communication, guidance, and education regarding patient care and the use of personal protective equipment are important for healthcare workers to reduce spread. Social distancing, among other work activities, is a standard measure to reduce transmission and regular disinfection of the workplace.

### **Conclusion**

This article offers comprehensive insights into the role of HRM in providing support for the health and safety of healthcare workers amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The research findings reveal that healthcare workers encounter numerous challenges such as symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), yet they continue to deliver exceptional patient care such as emotional support, inclusive collaboration, and seamless coordination of patient care. These findings also shed light on the prevalence of issues such as depression, suicidality, and long-term psychological impact among healthcare professionals, further emphasizing the importance and responsibility of HRM in addressing and assisting with these concerns. Taking into consideration the preceding assertion HRM professionals should explore innovative and efficient HRM strategies to mitigate the challenges faced by healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, the development of the working environment of the healthcare worker, can be viewed through the lens of protecting workers in the workplace as stated in pillar 3 of the ILO framework. Generally, the healthcare environment needs to allow healthcare professionals to be valued, and supported, and have opportunities to develop while providing good control of care. Furthermore, professional development opportunities for healthcare professionals will suffice and help in providing the much-needed knowledge in enhancing well-being and safety. Our research also indicates that improving organisational culture and promoting effective collaboration/communication are essential for a successful healthcare environment. This is based on Pillar 4 of the ILO (2020) policy framework which focuses on social dialogue and solutions that strengthen social dialogue. Therefore, the introduction of an organisational culture that takes into consideration the restructuring of a healthcare team to aligns with the requirements of the service delivery and improving HRM practices that emphasizes the well-being of health care workers will contribute to the health and safety of health care workers. In addition, it is advisable to incorporate 6Cs HRM strategies that include: (a) Curtailing and payment, (b) Communication, (c) Cooperation and cooperation, (d) Creating leadership, (e) Cleanliness and hygiene, and (f) Creativity such can ensure the safety and well-being of healthcare professionals during their work. Furthermore, prioritising the optimisation of public health systems such as strengthening occupational safety and health measures and expanding access to paid leave and process will contribute to enhancing the well-being and safety of healthcare professionals. From the findings, it can be deduced that effective workplace risk assessment management and guidance on public health measures are essential tools that can improve the health and safety of healthcare workers.

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