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Research Article

Managing Uncertainties in Human Resource Management during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at providing information to help HR practitioners understand the uncertainties caused by COVID-19 by addressing questions on what certainties are faced by HR practitioners in the education sector; what factors are seen as stressors, what characteristics need to be developed, and what solutions are proposed to overcome uncertainties in this pandemic of COVID-19. This qualitative study used a cross-sectional survey design. Electronic questionnaires were employed to collect qualitative data from 40 respondents based on purposive sampling. The study reveals that there are various types of uncertainties faced by HR managers or practitioners, ranging from organization operation to the ability to predict employees' plans and actions. The main stressor during the pandemic is employees' safety perceptions of threats and risk of COVID-19 transmission. Others are the drastic change in the way of work and job insecurity and lack of valid information about COVID-19. Resilience, tolerance, and curiosity are the qualities that need to be developed by HR managers or practitioners. To overcome the uncertainties, HR Managers and practitioners could provide training on technology and competency development as the best strategy to overcome the uncertainties. Optimizing channels of communication, preparing transparency plans, providing facilities to support teleworking management, and arranging of work flexibility policy are alter strategies.

Keywords: COVID-19, HR managers, Stressor, Uncertainty

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a very challenging work environment for a human resource manager. An example of the challenge

mostly found in this pandemic is that the employees used to spend all or most of their time working in an office or company, and now they must quickly adjust their ways of work to a dis-

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tant work environment. They have to drastically change their concrete workplaces to virtual meeting rooms, classes, offices, etc. Without prior notice and with little training, the employees must get ready to work in this new way of work implementing new policies and procedures to have less contact with others. At some points, this challenge can result in important implications that is Person-Environment fit (P-E fit), or the level of compatibility between employees' attributes and their working environmental attributes. Although, P-E fit theory presupposes that individual will be attracted and chosen by companies whose work environment reflects the values, culture, and work features shared similarly with the individuals (Vianen, 2018), the fitness of employees and its working environment organization could be optimized.

Moreover, the pandemic has produced extraordinary uncertainties that affect the mental health of many people throughout the world (World Health Organization, 2020). Ignoring these uncertainties can drain the mental health of employees, during and after this pandemic with its such associated main stressors as 1) safety perception, threats, and risk of transmission; 2) infobesity (information overload and the unknown (ignorance); 3) quarantined and confined at home; 4) stigma and social exclusion; and 5) financial losses and job insecurities (Hamouche, 2020). Even when the pandemic-related risks begin to decrease in some countries and the possibility of vaccines is high, new ways to work remotely will continue to produce a state of uncertainty as the door to global recession is now open. In a state of severe stress and reduced cognitive ability, employees will be in a difficult period to work effectively.

Uncertainties refer to situations where the probability occurrence of certain outcomes cannot be determined beforehand (Certo et al., 2008). This situation might lead to a negative impact on business sustainability and individual employment. Yet, the situation has been a fact happening today that is an HR manager can never articulate whether the occurrence of COVID-19 pandemic lasts for one month or more; and affect the overall operation of the company. This has made a clear difference

between uncertainties and risks which refer to situations in which the potential probability can be statistically determined. Previous studies identified various types of uncertainties based on their sources (environmental, industrial, or company characteristics) or exogenous and endogenous (Certo et al., 2008). However, there is still no agreement on the differences between the uncertainty dimensions, and as a result, these are often used inconsistently or alternately, which in turn can hamper decision-making by HR managers who face uncertainty. Hence, the HR managers must quickly explore the "unknown territory in uncertainty".

Uncertainty arises at two different levels, macro-level and micro-level. When an HR Manager should make decisions in reference to the uncertain systems, processes, social values, the way forward, and outcomes of concern, the uncertainty is at the macro level. Meanwhile, when the HR Manager is in relation to the context of specific decisions and relevant knowledge, data, and models, the uncertainty is at the micro-level (Yoe, 2019). In the COVID-19 pandemic, uncertainties are common at the micro-level. This uncertainty is related to the lack of employee knowledge in anticipating risks due to the uncertainty. This uncertainty has prompted a large number of employees, who have faced pressure from health risks, to be pressured to work from home. Even for managers leading a team remotely for the first time is oftentimes a stressor. This sudden change has exacerbated the challenge to collaborate and lead from a distance, and challenges like this have not been touched in management practices.

On the other hand, the HR managers will understand that when employees are in unfamiliar or uncertain contexts, they experience stress (Anderzén & Arnetz, 1997; Richards, 1996; Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005). To respond to such stress, employees make use of their own ways and react independently to the context (Shaffer et al., 2006). Stress affects the ability of employees to empathize with others, consider alternatives that make sense, remain open-minded, engage in tasks that challenge cognitively, and expand one's experience to learn and grow. As discussed in many literature

studies, when an individual faces a period of stress and anxiety, they have a tendency to seek and find comfort in simple terms but accentuate familiarities such as people, places, and even types of food. This is also the reason why there are various types of communities ranging from those oriented to citizenship status, demographics, and favorite foods. The HR managers will also understand that some people are naturally better than others at managing stress and uncertainty, enabling them to make better decisions and work more effectively (Shaffer et al., 2006). There are several behaviors that can be developed or used as benchmarks in selecting or retaining employees, namely: tolerance for ambiguity, resilience, and curiosity.

Problems related to organizational behavior and human resource management become a major issue for HR managers when they proactively want to answer challenges that will be faced by the organization. In addition, an organization cannot build a professional team that works well without good human resources. Recruiting people, training them, implementing effective performance appraisals, promoting career management, motivating employees, implementing good workplace communication, safety, and working conditions, are among the main functions of human resource management (HRM). This research paper will address four issues arisen during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the uncertainty faced by an HR manager or practitioners. They are 1) what the uncertainty is faced by HR manager; 2) what stressors are mostly experienced by employees; 3) what employees' qualities need to be developed by a manager and; 4) what solutions are the preference of HR Managers to overcome this uncertainty.

Methods

Research Design

The paper reports on the findings of the uncertainty faced by an HR manager or practitioners, stressors mostly experienced by employees; employees' qualities that need to be developed by a manager; and proposed solutions for HR Managers to overcome this uncertainty. Using a cross-sectional survey design, this quali-

tative descriptive research combined quantitative and qualitative data to strengthen the study's findings. Descriptive research is research intended to describe how the world is, asked "what" questions with only one variable (Remler et al., 2015), the uncertainties faced by HR. Descriptive research tries to communicate the uncertainties through the collected data (Taylor et al., 2016).

Research Participants and Gathering Procedure

Research data were collected using an e-questionnaire available at URL <https://forms.gle/V4BXQfikWW9a8ZDy7> sent to 40 respondents selected using purposive sampling. Before the selection and identification and selection of participants, a pre-notification message was used to inform respondents about the electronic questionnaire, the informed consent (confidentiality assurance), and a five-day time limit for the completion time and returns. The brief constructed instrument and pre-notification were the strategies used to increase the response-return rate to a minimum of 50% as a favorable response rate (Creswell, 2012). The proper selection of participants was made through the identification of such personal information as to the length of service in the managerial position, educational background, and current position. Bound with the ethical research consideration, personal information and details given by the participants were treated confidentially. The collected data reveals that all respondents are working in education sectors with a variable length of service as HR managers or practitioners ranging from one year to seven years. Most respondents (52% of respondents) have a master's degree, while others have either doctorate or undergraduate degree.

Research Instruments

A closed-ended questionnaire was used in this research. The researcher collected data at one point in time. Triangulation was employed by asking semi-closed-ended questionnaires to obtain truthful data by condensing the volume of raw information, sifting the trivial from the

significant, identifying significant patterns, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of the data reveal (Patton, 2015).

Data Analysis

A combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches was used in the data analysis. The quantitative data comprised of numbers of responses were analyzed using simple descriptive statistics in the form of a percentage. The qualitative data comprised of open responses were analyzed through data description, data display, and verification. The steps of data analysis were carried out through three concurrent flows of activity: (1) identifying response rate by developing a table for percent of responses to the survey; (2) analyzing data to develop a demographic profile of the sample (analyze questions about personal factors), descriptively analyze the data to identify, calculate and present a table of a general trend for each question on the instrument, analyze data to provide answers to descriptive questions in the study; and (3) write the report presenting the descriptive results (Creswell, 2012).

Result and Discussion

Research data were collected using an e-questionnaire available at <https://forms.gle/V4BXQfikWW9a8ZDy7>. The URL link was sent to 40 respondents consisting of school principals, heads of study programs, and deans of faculty who were selected using purposive sampling. The responses to the e-questionnaire were returned by 31 respondents, generating a score of 0.78 or 78% as the response return rate. The collected data has been condensed into four subsections, displayed and verified in the following discussion:

The Uncertainties faced by HR Managers in Education Sectors during the COVID-19 Pandemic

There are three “top of the list” situations at which the occurrences cannot be determined beforehand, are organization operation; HR Managers/ Practitioners’ ability to plan organization future actions; and employees’ work effectiveness visualized in Figure 1. These are the three uncertainties mostly faced by HR Managers/Practitioners during the pandemic. A traditional sport that is still preserved today.



Figure 1. Uncertainties faced by HR managers and practitioners

Such situations as employees’ productivity, employees’ performance quality, and HR Managers/ Practitioners’ ability to predict employee’s plans and actions were also occurrences beyond the managers/ practitioners’ prediction. These uncertainties bring unexpected effect but significantly influences organizational performance. Yet, uncertainties cannot be perceived as negative because uncertainties can be developed as opportunities or

potential for the development of a company’s business.

In addition, two respondents provided two situations that are considered uncertainties during the pandemic, they are concerned about the number of new students’ enrollment and feelings of insecurity. The first response might be due to the time of the survey conducted i.e., July which has approached the beginning of the new academic year. The researcher classifies

the response into an exogenous factor which is not the focus of this research. While the second response is insecurity towards COVID-19, which is more suitable to be a stressor experienced by employees rather than an undetermined situation faced by the HR managers/practitioners.

Based on the findings, the uncertainties during the pandemic are relevant to situations at which the decisions were made in the specific context and with relevant knowledge. This makes the uncertainties during the pandemic is at the micro-level (Yoe, 2019). Also, the uncertainties during the pandemic can be classified into exogenous and endogenous. Although this research focuses on endogenous uncertainties, yet, there were still some exogenous ones emerging as a response to the open-ended questions. It is implied that the respondents were facing the uncertainties in a larger dimension than those faced by other respondents. There should be more qualitative data to explain this phenomenon in future research. However, these interesting findings are in line with what has been projected by Certo et al. who recommended uncertainties to be identified based on their sources: environmental, industrial, or company characteristics, or, in a simpler way, exogenous and endogenous (Certo et al., 2008). As a matter of fact, these findings are similar to what Yoe proposed that is the classification of uncertainties based on the macro and micro level (Yoe, 2019).

Stressors during the COVID-19 Pandemic

There are several stressors during the pandemic, but the most stressing factor is the employees' safety perceptions and feeling

threatened and transmission risk of COVID-19. This factor is in line with the findings of Stahl and Caligiuri (2005), Anderzén and Arnetz (1997), and Richards (Richards, 1996) that when employees are in unfamiliar or uncertain contexts, they experience stress. The second stressing factor is the drastic change in the way of work. Next, job insecurity and lack of valid information about COVID-19 have become the third stressing factor during the pandemic. The COVID-19 outbreak has had major economic consequences across the globe, and there is no chance that a particular country could stand unaffected (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). The most significant consequence is the cease of business operation resulting in mass layoffs. This consequence has grown employees' feeling of job insecurity. Moreover, the lack of clear information about various levels of risk can cause employees to imagine the worst, which worsens their anxiety. Furthermore, communication barriers, utilizing ICT, infobesity or information overload, financial loss, leading remote work-unit, and self-isolation are other stressing factors experienced by respondents.

All of these findings on the stressors above are in line with what has been proposed by Hamouche (2020). What has been found interesting is that none of the respondents fear the risk of potentially deadly infectious diseases, the developed stereotype of the disease, and the new disease outbreaks. This might be the respondents are not from the health sector as Bai et al. found that health workers are more likely to feel stigmatized and rejected in their environment because of their work in the hospital (Bai et al., 2014). Figure 2 visualizes the stressors during the pandemic.

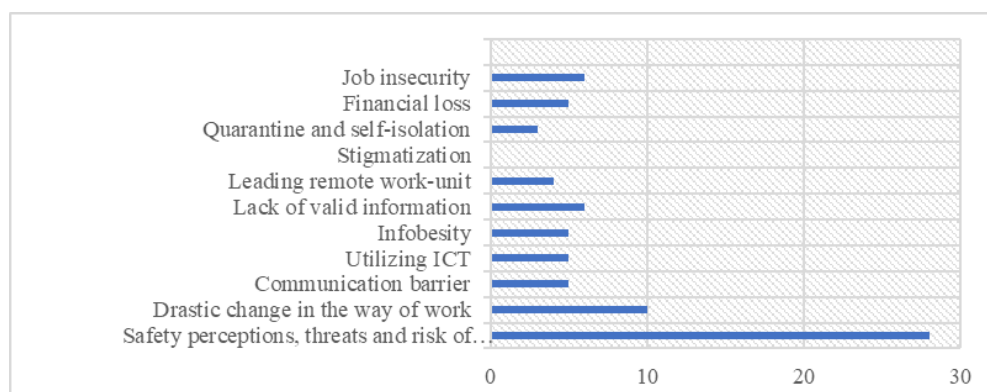


Figure 2. Stressors during the pandemics

The Qualities Need to Be Developed by HR Managers in Facing Uncertainties

Figure 3 visualized responses on employees' qualities that need to be developed by the HR Manager or practitioners. There were three qualities articulated in the questionnaire and an option to provide self-answer. However, there are no other qualities articulated by

respondents. It was found that the quality of being resilient was more articulated than the other two qualities. There are 20 respondents who chose to develop resilience as the quality to be developed during the pandemic. The next qualities are tolerance and curiosity respectively.

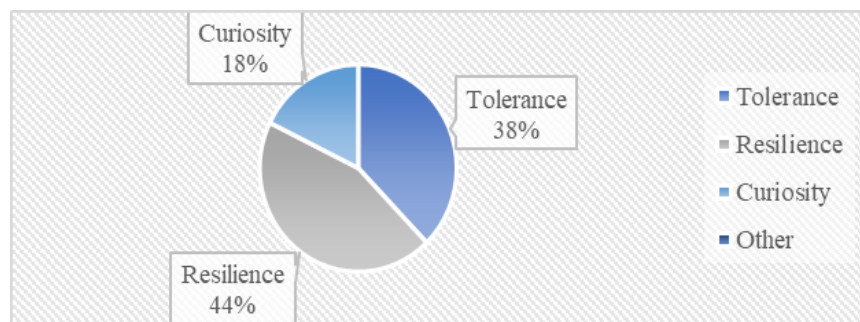


Figure 3. Employees' qualities need to be developed during the pandemic

An HR manager will understand that some people are naturally better than others at managing stress and uncertainty, enabling them to make better decisions and work more effectively. When selecting or retaining employees, there are three qualities that are used as a benchmark and can be developed from the applicants. The qualities are tolerance for ambiguity, resilience, and curiosity (Shaffer et al., 2006).

Reflecting on the uncertainties in the pandemic, employees with resilience can survive new ways to work remotely and take positive values when they are under pressure. It should be highlighted that employees with resilience are in the process of utilizing positive emotions and adaptation to bounce back from negative life events or stress (Kramer, 2012). An employee who can immediately rise after his downturn in an uncertain situation has a large capacity for resilience. The findings generally agree with those obtained in previous studies by Campbell, Sung, and Stein (Campbell et al., 2006) and Hagtvedt, Dossinger, Harrison, and Huang (Hagtvedt et al., 2009) that for most populations, resilience takes over and negative people's reactions are relatively short. Employees with a high level of tolerance of ambiguity

are able to solve problems that cannot be clearly defined, or in this paper are called uncertainties. When these employees are feeling uncertain, it is a reflection that they are in the period of finding the right solution toward a situation (in this case referring to the period of COVID-19 pandemic). Meanwhile, employees with curiosity can naturally adapt better to new situations, develop in situations of anxiety and uncertainty, and become more creative and open-minded. These three qualities are the quality that should be developed during the pandemic.

The Proposed Solutions to Overcome Uncertainty in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Figure 4 reveals information about what respondents see as the solutions to the uncertainty they are facing in this Pandemic of COVID-19. Respondents see training on technology and competency development as the most favorable solution to overcome the uncertainty, followed by optimizing communication and transparency, teleworking management, work flexibility policy. Meanwhile, the development of a post-pandemic work plan, prevention of stigma, and social isolation posed the three-low rank suggested by respondents.

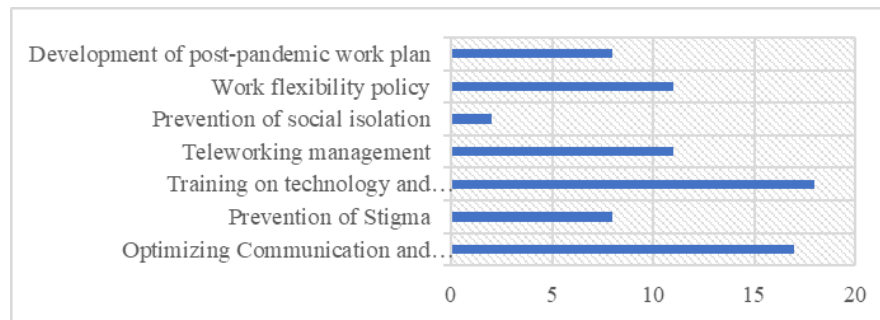


Figure 4. Solutions to overcome uncertainty

Training is also important during and after a pandemic. This helps to educate employees about the behavior needed and their importance in preventing the spread of the virus. They also need to be trained on how they should manage virtual teams, consider the context of teleworking, in order to support their team members. In addition to this, organizations must develop appropriate strategies to support employees during organizational changes to prevent negative teleworking results on employee mental health during COVID-19. Teleworkers also need to be trained in the use of technology to facilitate their work and communication when they are away from their workplaces, which in turn will reduce their stress levels.

To reduce the potential negative impacts of quarantine, social isolation, fear of transmission, and uncertainty in employees, managers must foster a supportive environment at work. In this context, a social support program is necessary. The last strategy is the development of the back-to-work plan. HR managers or practitioners must also develop a return-to-work plan for employees who have been quarantined or are in teleworking mode during COVID-19. By doing so, employee stress levels and the risk of mental health problems can be reduced.

Conclusion

To conclude, uncertainties faced by HRM during the COVID-2019 pandemic is organization operation; HR Managers/ Practitioners' ability to plan organization future actions; and employees' work effectiveness. The pandemic has indeed brought challenges to the whole day-to-day activities of organization operation which might create new core values to schools,

companies, or other operating organizations. For instance, it is found in this research that the most stressing factor for the employees is safety perceptions and feeling threatened, and transmission risk of COVID-19. This has been contrary to what has been believed that factors causing employees' stress are perceived loss of job and security, sitting for long periods of heavy lifting, lack of safety, the complexity of repetitiveness, and lack of autonomy in the job (Botha & Piernaar, 2006). However, the finding confirms that employees' stress is the result of frequent interaction between the employees' personal characteristics and the environment's demand (Halkos & Bousinakis, 2010). An employee with a high level of resilience has now been the potential quality to be a priority in employees' selection to embrace the pandemic which is not only unprecedented but also brings uncertainties to the whole management system.

Companies are not all equipped to deal with this pandemic, in terms of information, resources, and competence. Human resource managers and practitioners need to find smart solutions to maintain operations while ensuring the protection of their employees. This study reveals information that helps HR managers or practitioners understand the uncertainties caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic and potentially appears after the pandemics. The strategies resulting from this study are expected to be able to help human resource managers and practitioners manage uncertainties. The strategies are the provision of training on technology and competency development, optimized channels of communication and transparency plans, facilities to support teleworking management, and arrangement of work flexibility policy.

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