

Adapting human resources management to global health crises: lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human resource management (HRM) within Saudi Arabia's distinct socio-legal landscape, which is shaped by Islamic cultural norms, stringent labor laws and a diversifying economy. This context necessitates innovative HR strategies during crises.

Design/methodology/approach – Grounded in the resource-based view, this qualitative study employs semi-structured interviews with 18 HR professionals across various sectors. This approach enables an in-depth exploration of HRM practice adaptations during the pandemic, using purposive sampling to ensure the collection of rich and relevant data.

Findings – Significant shifts towards remote work, the digitalization of HR operations and prioritizing employee health and safety were identified. The analysis revealed key themes, including HR policy changes, resilience strategies, encountered challenges, the importance of communication in employee engagement and strategic learnings. These findings highlight the criticality of adaptability, clear communication and digital transformation in effective crisis management.

Originality/value – This research contributes novel insights into the resilience of HRM practices in Saudi Arabia's unique socio-legal environment during health crises. It fills a gap in our understanding of how specific regional contexts influence HRM strategies during emergencies, offering valuable contributions to both theory and practice. The study provides practical guidance for HR professionals and policymakers on crafting effective HRM strategies tailored to organizational needs in crisis conditions, thereby enhancing the field's knowledge on navigating HRM challenges in future health crises.

Keywords Human resource management, COVID-19 pandemic, Adaptive strategies, Saudi Arabia, Learned lessons

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted significant transformations globally, profoundly influencing the field of human resource management (HRM) within organizations. These transformations have critically reshaped work paradigms, employee relations, and talent management strategies (Hiscott *et al.*, 2020; Tan, Song, Deane, & Plummer, 2021). In response to these changes, this study focuses on the HRM field in Saudi Arabia, a context characterized by unique cultural dynamics, specific labor regulations, and the ambitious Vision 2030 initiative (Tlaiss & Al Waqfi, 2022). This setting has engendered specific HRM challenges, such as the rapid shift to remote work, impacting organizational culture and team cohesion

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in a decentralized environment (Aleisa, Beloff, & White, 2022; Sian, Agrizzi, Wright, & Alsalloom, 2020).

The research aims to explore and clarify how HRM in Saudi Arabia has adapted to these pandemic-induced challenges. Saudi Arabia's HRM adaptations are characterized by a fusion of traditional cultural norms and modernizing forces, providing a distinctive viewpoint on managing human resources during a global crisis. Grounded in the resource-based view (RBV) theoretical framework, the study seeks to identify the underlying strategies that have contributed to the resilience of HRM in this specific context (Collins, 2021; Wernerfelt, 1984).

A qualitative methodology was chosen for its ability to capture the complex, culturally embedded HRM practices in Saudi Arabia. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of the strategic adaptations undertaken by HR professionals in response to the pandemic. While centered on the Saudi Arabian experience, the investigation offers broader scholarly and practical implications. The strategies, challenges, and successes identified in this study are pertinent not only to HRM scholars and practitioners within Saudi Arabia but also resonate across diverse geographical and contextual settings. These insights are invaluable for understanding HRM resilience and adaptability in the face of global disruptions, offering guidance for future HRM strategies and practices.

Literature review

The conceptual framework of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) is deeply rooted in the Resource-Based View (RBV), a theory positing that an organization's competitive advantage is derived from its unique human capital assets. Central to this theory, as outlined in Barney's (1991) seminal work, is the notion that human capital is valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN). Recent scholarly contributions, such as those by Collins (2021) and Valaei, Rezaei, Bressolles, and Dent (2022), have further developed and supported this foundational perspective. These developments have broadened the scope of SHRM, integrating contemporary practices and concepts like people analytics and insider econometrics, as evidenced in the works of Zhai, Zhu, and Zhang (2023) and Larsson and Edwards (2022). This integration underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of SHRM, highlighting its relevance and application in diverse organizational contexts. According to Thiollet (2022) and Hasanov *et al.* (2021), this is particularly evident in the distinctive cultural and market dynamics of Saudi Arabia.

The evolution of SHRM from its theoretical underpinnings to practical applications demonstrates its dynamic and adaptive nature. Initially, SHRM theories, which were firmly rooted in the RBV, as Barney (1991) emphasized, concentrated on the strategic role of HRM in fostering organizational competitive advantage (Chadwick & Flinchbaugh, 2021). This perspective has expanded as researchers like Lee (2021) and Baluch and Ridder (2021) have integrated broader models encompassing organizational culture and employee engagement. A significant milestone in SHRM's evolution was Huselid's (1995) introduction of high-performance work systems (HPWS), marking a crucial shift towards aligning HRM practices with strategic goals to enhance organizational performance. This shift highlights the progression of SHRM from a narrow strategic focus to a multifaceted, nuanced understanding of HRM's role in organizational success.

The role of SHRM in crisis management, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has become increasingly significant (Azizi, Atlasi, Ziapour, Abbas, & Naemi, 2021). This period highlighted the need for adaptable HRM strategies in critical areas such as strategic talent management (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021), job redeployment (Johnstone, 2023), and performance system adaptation (Kutieshat & Farmanesh, 2022). Studies by Kutieshat and Farmanesh (2022), as well as Adikaram, Priyankara, and Naotunna (2021), exemplify these strategies, underscoring the adaptability required in HRM practices during such

unprecedented times. Further enriching this perspective, [Butterick and Charlwood \(2021\)](#) critically analyze the impact of HRM practices during the pandemic, particularly their role in exacerbating or mitigating labor market inequalities. Additionally, insights from [Jaziri and Miralam \(2021\)](#) and [Parveen \(2020\)](#) on crisis and disaster risk management in Saudi Arabia provide valuable lessons on structuring effective responses to the pandemic's challenges. [Al-Taweel et al. \(2020\)](#) contribute multidisciplinary academic perspectives on the pandemic, emphasizing the significance of cross-functional knowledge in shaping HRM strategies. Moreover, the study by [Algahtani, Hassan, Alsaif, and Zrieq \(2021\)](#) on the quality of life during the pandemic in Saudi Arabia underscores the crucial role of HRM in adapting to and addressing these complex challenges. Additionally, [Edvardsson and Durst \(2021\)](#) highlight the significance of bespoke HRM strategies tailored to particular crisis situations by highlighting the diversity of HRM responses to various crisis types. This multifaceted approach not only maintained organizational functionality but also navigated the unique challenges of the pandemic, emphasizing the strategic significance of HRM in ensuring organizational resilience and adaptability ([Kim, Lee, & Chung, 2023](#)).

The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed a significant transformation in HRM practices worldwide, notably accelerating the shift towards remote work ([Mello, Erro-Garcés, Dickmann, & Brewster, 2023](#)). This change has redefined organizational dynamics, necessitating a comprehensive redesign of HRM policies and practices to adapt to this new reality. [Soto-Acosta \(2020\)](#) highlights the profound implications of this shift for employee performance management in a remote environment. [Rashid \(2021\)](#) further notes the pivot in HRM from input-based to output-oriented assessment models, prioritizing deliverables over physical presence. Additionally, [Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, and Zimmermann \(2020\)](#) discuss how HR departments adjusted to offer support like counseling services and flexible work schedules as a result of the pandemic, underscoring the significance of employee well-being. These changes illustrate the ongoing evolution and necessary adaptability of HRM strategies in response to global challenges and shifting workforce expectations.

In the regional context, HRM practices in Saudi Arabia have undergone significant changes, shaped by the nation's unique cultural, legal, and economic landscape ([Elbanna, Abdelzaher, & Ramadan, 2020](#); [Tlaiss & Al Waqfi, 2022](#)). According to [Thiollet \(2022\)](#) and [Hasanov et al. \(2021\)](#), the implementation of the Saudization policy, which aims to lower unemployment among Saudi nationals, is an example of a strategic shift in HRM towards prioritizing domestic talent in the workforce. Additionally, the interplay of patriarchal societal structure and Islamic principles in Saudi Arabia influences HRM practices, affecting aspects like gender segregation in workplaces ([Sian et al., 2020](#)). Due to Saudi Arabia's efforts to diversify its economy and the pandemic-induced shift to remote work, this cultural dynamic presents particular difficulties for HR professionals in balancing traditional values with productivity and employee satisfaction ([Asfahani, Alsobahi, & Dahlan, 2023](#)). The COVID-19 pandemic, as discussed by [Jaziri and Miralam \(2021\)](#) and [Parveen \(2020\)](#), has further highlighted the need for flexible and responsive HRM strategies to navigate the crisis, underscoring the effectiveness of disaster and crisis management in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, [Algahtani et al.'s \(2021\)](#) study on the impact of the pandemic on quality of life in Saudi Arabia underscores the crucial role of HRM in adapting to and addressing these complex challenges, reinforcing the need for HR departments to support employee well-being during such unprecedented times.

Methodology

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, centering on semi-structured interviews as the principal method of data collection. This design choice is anchored in the qualitative

approach's inherent strength in unpacking complex social phenomena, particularly in specific, contextualized settings (Américo, Clegg, & Tureta, 2022). In the context of this study, the qualitative design is instrumental in gaining deep insights into the experiences and viewpoints of HR practitioners in Saudi Arabia amidst the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Semi-structured interviews are selected for their unique balance of standardization and flexibility (Nair, 2023). This format ensures that core themes related to HR management during the pandemic are consistently explored across all interviews while also allowing room for participants to share their unique perspectives and experiences. This flexibility is crucial in uncovering the nuanced, context-specific strategies and responses employed by HR professionals during the crisis. Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) highlight the effectiveness of this method in facilitating in-depth discussions that can adapt to the flow of the conversation, thus providing richer data. Robinson (2023) further supports this view, emphasizing that semi-structured interviews are particularly conducive to eliciting detailed and comprehensive responses, aligning perfectly with the objective of this research to delve into the adaptive strategies in HRM during the pandemic.

Moreover, the qualitative approach employed here is meticulously aligned with the study's theoretical underpinning, the RBV of firms (Wernerfelt, 1984). This theoretical framework posits that firms gain a competitive advantage through the effective utilization and management of their resources, including human resources. The qualitative methodology, which places a strong emphasis on in-depth, contextualized insights, is perfectly suited to examining how strategic HR practices change in response to significant external challenges like those the pandemic presents. By employing this methodology, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic ways in which HR practices in Saudi Arabia have adapted, offering valuable contributions to the field of HRM and the broader understanding of organizational resilience and adaptability during times of crisis.

Sample selection

Sampling Technique. The study employed purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method tailored for qualitative research. This approach involves the intentional selection of participants who possess specific knowledge and expertise directly relevant to the study's focus (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). In the context of this research, purposive sampling was pivotal in identifying participants whose experiences and insights would meaningfully contribute to understanding HR practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Campbell *et al.* (2020), this method makes sure the data collected is rich and closely related to the research questions.

Criteria and Recruitment. Participants were meticulously chosen based on their roles as HR professionals in Saudi Arabia, with specific attention given to those actively involved in managing HR processes during the pandemic. This criterion ensured the collection of firsthand experiences related to the adaptation of HR practices in a crisis context. To capture a breadth of industry perspectives, the study included 18 professionals from diverse sectors such as healthcare, education, oil and gas, government, and technology. This diversity was essential to gaining a holistic understanding of HR strategies across various industries. Recruitment was conducted through professional networking platforms and personal industry contacts, a method consistent with established qualitative research practices (Clark, Foster, Sloan, & Bryman, 2021). Potential participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and the nature of the interviews, ensuring informed consent. All participants provided written consent prior to their interviews. Additionally, ethical approval for the study was obtained from the institutional ethical committee.

Data Saturation. Data saturation, a key principle in qualitative research, guided the sampling strategy (Staller, 2021). This principle dictates that sampling should continue until new interviews cease to yield additional significant information. In this study, data saturation was reached after conducting 18 interviews, at which point it was determined that additional interviews would not contribute further meaningful insights to the research questions.

Objective. The sampling strategy was deliberately designed to gather comprehensive and pertinent data. The primary objective was to explore and understand the array of adaptive strategies implemented in HR practices across various industries in Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach ensures that the findings are grounded in diverse, real-world experiences, providing valuable insights into the resilience and adaptability of HR practices under crisis conditions.

Data collection

In line with the qualitative research design of this study, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted as the primary data collection method. The researcher meticulously developed an interview guide beforehand, drawing on the study's objectives and relevant literature (Clark *et al.*, 2021). This guide was carefully crafted to include open-ended questions that probed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on HR practices, the adaptive strategies implemented, the challenges encountered, and the lessons learned during the crisis. Such open-ended questions were essential to allow participants the freedom to express their views in depth, thereby enriching the data with varied perspectives and experiences.

The choice of conducting the interviews in Arabic, the native language of the participants, was deliberate and aimed at ensuring clarity in communication and a deeper understanding of the responses. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, adhering to the recommended duration for in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Katz-Buonincontro, 2022). This duration was optimal for exploring complex topics thoroughly while maintaining participant engagement.

With consent from the participants, each interview was audio-recorded. This measure was crucial to accurately capture the content of the discussions, preserving the authenticity and nuances of the participants' expressions. In addition, the researcher took detailed notes during the interviews, focusing on non-verbal cues and initial impressions. Documenting body language and other non-verbal elements added a critical layer of depth to the data, providing insights beyond verbal responses (Langley & Meziani, 2020).

Post-interview, the researcher transcribed the audio recordings verbatim into Arabic, maintaining the integrity of the data (McMullin, 2023). The researcher, who is fluent in both languages, then translated the Arabic transcripts into English so that a wider audience could access the findings. To mitigate potential translation errors, a back-translation process was employed (Klotz, Swider, & Kwon, 2023), involving the re-translation of the English transcripts into Arabic to ensure consistency and accuracy. Participants were also given the opportunity to review and, if necessary, edit their transcriptions, an integral part of the member-checking process. This step was undertaken to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the data (Motulsky, 2021).

Throughout the study, strict measures were taken to uphold participant confidentiality. Identifiable information was carefully removed from the transcripts, and pseudonyms were used in place of real names. All data, including audio recordings, transcripts, and notes, was securely stored with access restricted to the researcher. Participants were fully informed about their rights, including the right to withdraw their data at any time until the publication of the study. These precautions ensured the research adhered to the highest ethical standards of qualitative research (Pietilä, Nurmi, Halkoaho, & Kyngäs, 2020).

Data analysis

Once the interview data was collected, the researcher utilized thematic analysis to conduct the data analysis. Thematic analysis is a widely used technique for analyzing qualitative data (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021), which entails identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analysis was conducted in phases in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method. Initially, the researcher got familiar with the data by reading and revising the interview transcripts and making initial notes. This phase assured an exhaustive comprehension of the content's depth and scope. The second step consisted of generating initial codes from the collected data. Coding is the process of organizing data into meaningful categories based on their shared characteristics (Deterding & Waters, 2021). In order to code the data, the researcher used a combination of inductive and deductive coding that took into account both the literature and the new themes that emerged from the data. In the third stage, the researcher looked for potential themes among the coded data, grouping relevant codes into proposed themes. This process was done manually, keeping close to the data to prevent losing valuable context (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The fourth stage involved reviewing and refining the themes. This entailed checking the themes against the dataset to ensure they accurately represented the collected data. The researcher also checked for coherence within themes and distinctiveness between themes. The themes were reviewed and refined during the fourth stage. This required comparing the themes to the dataset to ensure that they accurately represented the collected data. Additionally, the researcher examined coherence within themes and distinctiveness between themes. The fifth stage involved defining and naming the themes. The researcher provided an in-depth analysis for each theme, elaborating on which aspects of the data each theme represented. Each theme was provided with a clear definition and a descriptive name.

The final step consisted of reporting the findings in a format that effectively conveys the story of the data and provides an answer to the research question. Relevant participant quotations were selected to exemplify the themes and provide a nuanced account of the data. The entire analytical procedure was iterative, with the researcher continually cycling through the various stages. This analytical strategy, prompted by the researcher's engagement with the data and supported by systematic thematic analysis, ensured that the study's findings were grounded in the data, thereby enhancing the comprehension of the research question.

Results

Following the analysis of the interviews, it was observed that five main themes emerged: (1) impact on HR policies and procedures; (2) adaptive strategies and resilience; (3) challenges and obstacles; (4) employee engagement and productivity; and (5) lessons learned. For a more detailed and succinct presentation of these findings, please refer to [Table 1](#), which comprehensively outlines the main themes and subthemes identified during the analysis of the researcher's interviews with HR professionals in Saudi Arabia (see [Figure 1](#) for a visual schematic of major themes and their interrelatedness with the research questions).

Theme 1: impact on HR policies and procedures

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, all 18 participants from various organizations in Saudi Arabia reported a unanimous need for a rapid transformation in HR policies and procedures to adapt to the unique challenges posed. A predominant change was the swift transition to remote work, with Participant 1 emphasizing its significance as "the most substantial shift," leading to the widespread adoption of online tools for essential functions including recruitment, onboarding, and training, as highlighted by Participant 9. Accompanying this shift was the digitalization of HR processes, as observed by Participant 2,

Main themes	Subthemes
1. Impact on HR Policies and Procedures	1.1 Transition to Remote Work 1.2 Digitalization of HR Processes 1.3 Health and Safety Policies 1.4 Revised Leave Policies 1.5 Flexibility and Employee Support
2. Adaptive Strategies and Resilience	2.1 Technological Adaptation and Digital Transformation 2.2 Enhanced Communication and Employee Engagement 2.3 Resilience Amid Challenges
3. Challenges and Obstacles	3.1 Transition to Remote Work 3.2 Maintaining Employee Engagement and Morale 3.3 Mental Health and Employee Well-being 3.4 Communication Challenges
4. Employee Engagement and Productivity	4.1 Virtual Tools for Engagement 4.2 Productivity in Remote Work 4.3 Work-Life Balance in Remote Work
5. Key Lessons Learned	5.1 Flexibility and Adaptability 5.2 Importance of Communication 5.3 Employee Well-being 5.4 Digital Transformation 5.5 Resilience

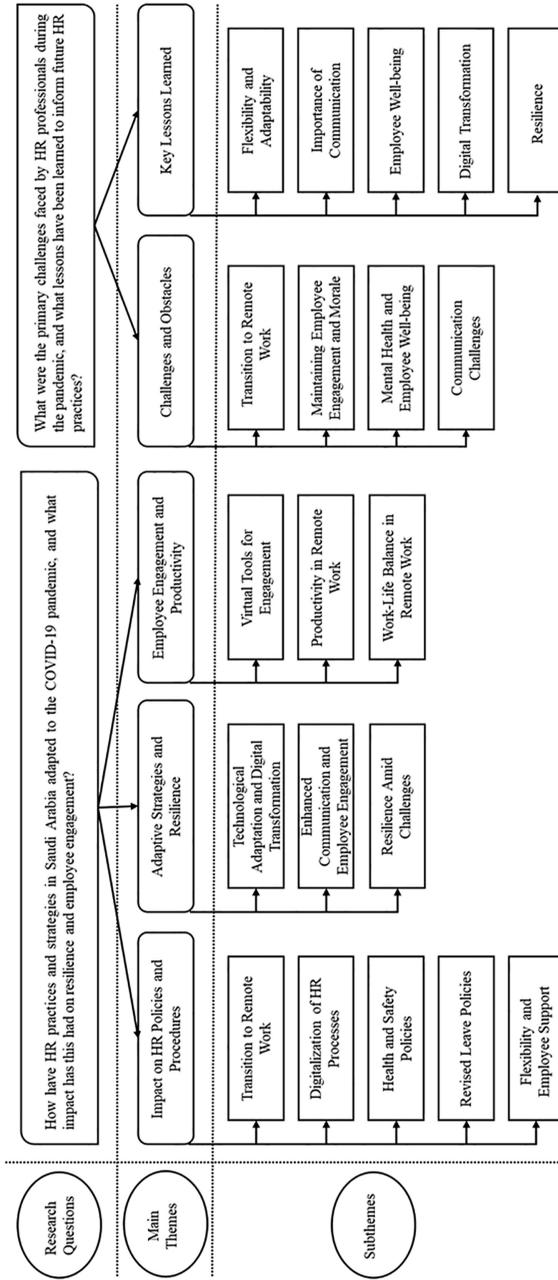
Source(s): Author's own work

Table 1.
Major themes and
subthemes

marking a fast-tracked move towards digital HR platforms, echoed by Participant 7's adoption of digital tools. Health and safety policies also underwent significant revisions, with Participant 4 implementing mental health programs and Participant 8 facilitating testing and isolation protocols for healthcare workers, reflecting a comprehensive approach to employee well-being. Participants 10 and 14 shared that there was a parallel evaluation of leave policies, particularly sick leave, to accommodate quarantine requirements. Furthermore, increased flexibility and support for employees in their working arrangements became crucial, with Participant 3 adjusting policies to support remote work with flexible hours, resonating with Participant 11's emphasis on work-from-home policy flexibility. Collectively, these adaptations underscored the resilience and agility of HR practices within Saudi Arabian organizations, demonstrating a robust response to the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic.

Theme 2: adaptive strategies and resilience

Theme 2, as reflected in the feedback from 18 HR professionals, underscores a range of creative, agile, and responsive strategies employed to navigate the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. A prominent aspect of this theme is the rapid technological adaptation and digital transformation in HR operations. Participant 2 highlighted significant investments in technological infrastructure, while Participant 9 focused on technology solutions for recruitment and training. Participants 6 and 7 noted that this digital shift included bolstering IT support and relying more heavily on digital tools for various HR functions. Participant 3 further elaborated on the expansion of digital infrastructure to manage remote recruitment, training, and performance appraisals. Equally important was enhancing communication and employee engagement, with Participant 4 emphasizing the increased focus on keeping employees informed and engaged through virtual meetings, regular check-ins, and open forums. These measures were crucial in compensating for the



Source(s): Author's own work

Figure 1. Research questions and themes

lack of face-to-face interactions and maintaining morale. Despite challenges like the abrupt shift to remote work, managing layoffs, and handling physical office outbreaks, the participants displayed remarkable resilience. As Participant 13 mentioned, they adopted new digital technologies and overcame challenging tasks like moving to remote work and addressing employee mental health, as Participants 1 and 10 described. Even in the face of layoffs, Participants 4 and 12 spoke about providing support to affected employees while sustaining the morale of the remaining staff. Overall, this theme captures the adaptability and resilience demonstrated by HR professionals in Saudi Arabia, showcasing their agility and commitment to adapting practices, often through technology and enhanced communication, to ensure the ongoing functionality and well-being of their organizations and staff.

Theme 3: challenges and obstacles

The 18 participants' descriptions of theme 3 reflect the numerous challenges faced by HR departments in Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 pandemic. A significant challenge highlighted was the abrupt transition to remote work, with Participant 3 noting the difficulty of "transitioning to remote work on such short notice" and Participant 12 emphasizing the speed of this transition. According to Participant 6, who made reference to the steep learning curve involved in managing health, safety, and future uncertainties, maintaining employee engagement and morale in a crisis was equally difficult. Participant 9 echoed this, noting the difficulty in keeping everyone motivated during uncertain times. Mental health and employee well-being also emerged as prominent concerns, with Participant 2 focusing on addressing employees' mental health amidst the crisis and Participant 10 emphasizing the importance of ensuring staff's mental well-being. Participant 1, who emphasized the need for "clear and constant communication," and Participant 8, who highlighted the difficulties in maintaining clear communication, both mentioned that communication posed another significant challenge. To tackle these challenges, HR departments employed various strategies, including implementing flexible work policies, providing IT support, prioritizing communication, and focusing on mental health support. Participant 5 mentioned addressing challenges by "implementing flexible work policies and prioritizing communication," while Participant 16 highlighted "maintaining open and transparent communication" and providing comprehensive health support as key approaches.

Theme 4: employee engagement and productivity

Theme 4, as identified in the responses of HR professionals, emerged as a crucial focus area during the COVID-19 pandemic. This theme highlights how the sudden shift to remote work influenced employee engagement and productivity, encompassing three interrelated subthemes: the adoption of virtual tools for engagement, the impact of remote work on productivity, and the challenges of work-life balance. Reflecting the adaptation to remote work, HR professionals reported an increased use of virtual tools, as Participant 4 mentioned conducting recruitment and team-building activities online, a sentiment echoed by Participant 18, who highlighted virtual interviews and meetings. Participant 3 reported an initial increase in productivity as a result of shorter commutes and more flexibility, but Participant 4 shared that worries about burnout and blurred work-life boundaries offset this. Several HR professionals highlighted the difficulty of maintaining work-life balance, including Participant 7, who noted both increased productivity and difficulties in achieving balance, and Participant 2, who emphasized the difficulty of managing work-life balance. Participant 12 highlighted the necessity of regular communication, support, and flexibility to help employees maintain this balance and remain productive, showcasing the multifaceted approach required to navigate the new remote work environment effectively.

Theme 5: key lessons learned

Theme 5 encapsulates the critical insights gained by HR professionals in Saudi Arabia from the exceptional challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. A paramount lesson highlighted across the responses was the need for flexibility and adaptability in HRM practices. The pandemic's sudden shift in working conditions underlined the importance of adaptable HR policies, as Participant 1 noted the criticality of flexibility and adaptability, a sentiment echoed by Participant 4, who stressed the need for agility in HR practices for rapid responsiveness. The value of clear, regular, and compassionate communication also emerged as a key lesson essential for maintaining employee trust and engagement. Participant 3's comment on the importance of effective communication and Participant 6's emphasis on open communication during crises both emphasized this. Another crucial insight was to concentrate on employee well-being, particularly mental health along with physical health, as Participant 2 highlighted. Additionally, the emphasis on remote work underscores the need for a robust digital infrastructure, with Participant 2 emphasizing its value and Participant 9 recognizing the necessity for rapid digital adaptation in HR processes. Lastly, resilience was identified as a central theme, with Participant 12 and others noting its importance in navigating pandemic challenges. Collectively, these lessons, encompassing adaptability, clear communication, employee well-being, digital transformation, and resilience, offer valuable guidance for organizations in preparing for future crises and challenges, underscoring the fundamental components of effective HRM in times of crisis.

Discussion

Exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on HRM practices in Saudi Arabia through the RBV theory lens, this study has identified five specific themes, as shown in [Table 1](#). These themes resonate with strategic management literature and reflect unique adaptations within the Saudi context ([González & Macias-Alonso, 2023](#); [Jaziri & Miralam, 2021](#)). The findings provide a nuanced understanding of how internal resources have been optimized during this crisis, enriching the appreciation of the RBV framework in a real-world scenario.

Central to the observations is the rapid shift to remote work, exemplifying strategic adaptation to technology ([Hassounah, Raheel, & Alhefzi, 2020](#)), a critical component of the RBV theory ([Pratono, 2022](#)). This shift underscores the agility of HRM practices in Saudi organizations, where the digitalization of processes represents not just a reactive measure but a strategic realignment with long-term implications ([Almulhim & Al-Saidi, 2023](#)). According to [Webb, McQuaid, and Webster \(2021\)](#), this shift significantly altered recruitment and training methods, introducing virtual platforms and digital competency as pivotal elements. Notably, within the Saudi Arabian context, given the region's burgeoning digital infrastructure ([Alsmadi et al., 2021](#)), this shift speaks volumes about its impact on organizational culture and practice ([Alhodaib & Alanzi, 2021](#)).

Furthermore, the integration of technology and digital transformation by HR professionals in Saudi Arabia highlights a deeper, strategic application of RBV principles ([AlMuhayfith & Shaiti, 2020](#)). This proactive stance in resource management extends beyond mere crisis response, fostering a culture of resilience and embracing technological innovation and digital fluency as core organizational competencies ([Hussain & Papastathopoulos, 2022](#)). This development is particularly significant in the Saudi context, marking a substantial shift toward more modern, tech-driven HRM practices ([Parveen, 2020](#)).

The transition to remote work, despite its challenges, has illuminated the strategic value of adaptability in line with the RBV framework ([Muneeb, Khattak, Wahba, Abdalla, & Ahmad, 2023](#)). A key aspect of this transition has been maintaining employee morale and underscoring the valuation of human resources as strategic priorities within the Saudi

Arabian HRM landscape (Aljumah, 2023). This underscores the rapid reevaluation of traditional business practices in Saudi Arabia to accommodate new ways of working and maintain employee engagement, a critical consideration in times of unprecedented change (Al-Otaibi & Alotaibi, 2023). Moreover, the Saudi Arabian experience in addressing challenges such as burnout and work-life balance provides a unique perspective on the application of HRM practices in fostering employee well-being, particularly in remote settings (Boamah, Hamadi, Havaei, Smith, & Webb, 2022). These challenges necessitated the development of innovative HR strategies for mental health support and flexible work arrangements (Siu, Wang, & Chung, 2023). In line with the RBV's focus on using technology to boost engagement and productivity, this shows how HRM strategies change when there is a global crisis (Szulc, McGregor, & Cakir, 2023).

The pandemic has also offered valuable insights into the strategic management of resources within the RBV framework (El Nemar, El-Chaarani, Dandachi, & Castellano, 2022). The Saudi Arabian experience, with its blend of cultural and economic factors, underscores the critical role of adaptive HRM practices (Asfahani *et al.*, 2023; Elbanna, Obeidat, Younis, & Elsharnouby, 2023). The emphasis on clear communication and compassionate leadership, resonating with the RBV's focus on human resources as strategic assets (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2021), highlights the evolution of HRM practices in response to such a crisis.

This study illuminates not only strategic resource management during a crisis but also concretely contextualizes these strategies within Saudi Arabia's evolving HRM landscape. It underscores the potential for RBV theory's adaptation to diverse cultural and economic contexts, offering insights for future research in global HRM practices.

Theoretical implications

This research significantly advances the field of strategic management by enriching RBV theory with new empirical evidence and perspectives. One of its key contributions is demonstrating how HRM practices enhance organizational adaptability and resilience, especially in dynamic environments like those encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study goes beyond traditional RBV literature, which has often underplayed the role of human capital (Cooke, Xiao, & Chen, 2021), by empirically showcasing the critical importance of employee well-being, engagement, and productivity in maintaining and enhancing performance during crises.

Furthermore, the research provides novel insights into the strategic role of human capital in crisis management. It extends RBV theory by illustrating how resilience, fostered by proactive HR professionals during the pandemic, is not just about survival but also about thriving in adversity. This aspect of the research introduces a new dimension to RBV, viewing resilience as a dynamic capability essential for sustained success in volatile environments.

In addition to its focus on human capital, the study also sheds light on the strategic importance of technological assets. It breaks new ground in RBV literature by presenting technology not merely as a resource but as a critical enabler of organizational adaptability and continuity. The research highlights how investments in digital infrastructure have empowered organizations to respond effectively to unforeseen challenges, offering a fresh understanding of technology's role within the RBV framework.

Practical implications

This research offers vital implications for HR professionals and organizational decision-makers, particularly relevant in the face of challenges similar to the COVID-19 pandemic. The insights provided are pivotal for effective workforce management and maintaining competitive advantage in times of uncertainty.

The pandemic has necessitated a comprehensive digital transition in HRM, encompassing everything from recruitment to performance evaluations (Mer & Viridi, 2023). This shift towards a remote working environment highlights the importance of integrating digital tools across HR functions. However, it is not just about adopting technology; effective communication is also vital. HR professionals must develop transparent communication strategies that leverage virtual platforms for operational purposes and to foster team cohesion and morale (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2020). The literature suggests significant benefits for organizations that invest in robust digital infrastructures, enhancing efficiency and precision in HR processes (Regona, Yigitcanlar, Xia, & Li, 2022).

In tandem with the technological shift, prioritizing employee well-being has emerged as a crucial aspect (Kadir & Broberg, 2020). In times of disruption, providing mental health resources, advocating for work-life balance, and designing flexible work arrangements are key (Azizi *et al.*, 2021). By fostering an empathetic and supportive environment, organizations can enhance the employee experience while simultaneously building inherent resilience. This approach to employee well-being carries with it the broader objective of building organizational resilience (Dhir, Mohapatra, & Srivastava, 2023). HR professionals play a pivotal role in this, tasked with fostering an adaptive culture and encouraging growth-oriented mindsets. Empowering employees to navigate professional challenges is essential, and collaboration with broader organizational leadership is crucial for developing effective crisis response mechanisms (Gillespie, Searle, Gustafsson, & Hailey, 2020). This comprehensive approach ensures that institutions are prepared for future challenges, marrying technological adaptation with a focus on human elements.

Conclusion and future perspectives

This study delved into the transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on HRM practices in Saudi Arabia, uncovering significant shifts in HR policies, adaptive strategies, and resilience among HR professionals. It also highlighted the challenges and lessons that emerged. In comparison with previous studies (Al-Taweel *et al.*, 2020; Algahtani *et al.*, 2021), this study emphasizes the critical role of flexibility, clear communication, employee well-being, digital transformation, and resilience in navigating crises. These findings extend our understanding of how organizations can maintain a competitive edge during turbulent times.

The practical implications of this study are multifaceted. For managers and policymakers, investing in technological infrastructure and supporting remote work emerge as key strategies. Prioritizing employee mental health and fostering a culture of adaptability are also vital. These recommendations align with Lee's (2020) findings on crisis preparedness in HRM, reinforcing the necessity of proactive and employee-centered approaches.

However, the conclusions drawn must be understood within the context of the study's limitations. The qualitative nature and specific geographical focus on Saudi Arabia may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should thus broaden the scope to include various cultural, economic, and social settings. Additionally, with a sample size of 18 HR professionals, the study offers a glimpse rather than a comprehensive overview of the pandemic's impact on HRM. Expanding the sample size and including perspectives from other stakeholders, like employees and organizational leaders, would provide a more holistic view.

A longitudinal approach to future studies is recommended to examine the long-term effects of the pandemic on HRM practices. Such research would contribute significantly to our understanding of the durability and evolution of the adaptive strategies identified in this study. Furthermore, while this study is grounded in RBV theory, exploring alternative theoretical frameworks could yield additional insights into the mechanisms behind effective adaptive strategies.

In conclusion, while this study provides valuable insights for HR professionals and organizations in navigating crises, it also opens up avenues for further research. Its contributions to the literature and its practical implications for stakeholders lie in its detailed examination of the nuanced responses to an unprecedented global crisis, offering a roadmap for future resilience and adaptability in HRM practices.

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