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John Festus Vandy
Lecturer, University of Sierra
Leone, Sierra Leone

Anthony Domawa
Lecturer, Department of
Governance and Leadership,
Sierra Leone

Patricia Sarah Vandy
HOD, Department of
Financial Services, IPAM,
USL, Sierra Leone

Adjusting to the new normal in HRM: Ways HR practitioners can adapt to the current and future work challenges

John Festus Vandy, Anthony Domawa and Patricia Sarah Vandy

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the concept of the "new normal" in Human Resource Management (HRM) and how HR practitioners can adapt to the challenges of current and future work environments. By exploring and synthesizing the various literatures on current and future work, this piece highlights the importance of flexibility, agility, innovation amongst others in HRM practices to meet the demands of evolving work environments facilitated by COVID-19 and other emerging global happenings. As the workplace continues to evolve, it is crucial for HR professionals to stay up-to-date with new technologies and work practices. It also offers practical suggestions for HR professionals on ways to adjust their approaches to talent management, employee engagement, and workplace culture to support organizational success in the new normal.

Keywords: New normal, human resource management, HR practitioners, COVID-19 pandemic, current and future work challenges

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the way we live and work, causing unprecedented disruptions to businesses and their employees worldwide. As a result, the concept of the "new normal" has emerged, signifying the need for organizations to adapt to a new reality in order to survive and thrive in a post-pandemic world. One critical area where this adaptation is particularly relevant is in Human Resource Management (HRM). HR practitioners must adapt to new work challenges and adopt new ways of working to ensure that their organizations can navigate the new normal successfully.

According to a survey conducted by Mercer, a global HR consulting firm, 87% of organizations have implemented or are considering implementing remote work as a long-term strategy (Mercer, 2020) ^[17]. This shift has significant implications for HRM, as it requires new ways of managing and engaging remote employees. HR practitioners must also address the challenges of maintaining workplace culture and collaboration in a virtual environment. Additionally, the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of technology, requiring HR practitioners to upskill themselves and their employees in digital tools and processes to support remote work (Weber, 2020) ^[26].

In this article, we explore how HR practitioners can adjust to the new normal and meet the challenges of current and future work environments. We discuss the importance of flexibility, agility, and innovation in HRM practices and provide practical suggestions for HR professionals on ways to adjust their approaches to talent management, employee engagement, and workplace culture to support organizational success in the new normal.

2. The New Normal in Human Resource Management – Theoretical and Empirical Justification

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a paradigm shift in the way we work, leading to the emergence of the "new normal" in HRM. In this section, we review the theoretical and empirical justifications for this shift and discuss the challenges and opportunities it presents. The "new normal" can be understood as a paradigm shift in HRM practices. This shift is driven by the need for organizations to adapt to a new reality in which remote work, digitization, and workforce agility are paramount.

Corresponding Author:
John Festus Vandy
Lecturer, University of Sierra
Leone, Sierra Leone

This new reality is characterized by a dynamic and uncertain environment, where traditional HRM practices may no longer be effective (Boon *et al.*, 2021) ^[4]. According to contingency theory, organizations must adapt their HRM practices to fit the specific demands of their environment (Fiedler, 1967) ^[8]. In the context of the new normal, this means adopting a more flexible and agile approach to talent management, employee engagement, and workplace culture. The empirical evidence supports the need for organizations to adjust their HRM practices to fit the new normal. A survey conducted by McKinsey & Company found that 80% of HR professionals believe that their organization's HR function needs to be more agile and flexible to meet the changing demands of the business (McKinsey & Company, 2020) ^[16, 18, 19-28]. Additionally, a study by Gartner found that 82% of business leaders plan to allow remote work at least some of the time, even after the pandemic subsides (Gartner, 2020) ^[9]. These findings suggest that remote work and workforce agility will continue to be a critical part of the new normal in HRM.

Overall, the theoretical and empirical justifications for the new normal in HRM suggest that organizations must adjust their HRM practices to fit the demands of the new reality

3. Challenges and Opportunities of the New Normal in Human Resource Management

The "new normal" in HRM presents several challenges and opportunities for organizations. One of the significant challenges is the need to adapt to remote work. The shift to remote work has necessitated the adoption of new technologies and processes to facilitate virtual communication and collaboration (Kirkpatrick & Furst, 2021) ^[13]. Additionally, remote work has highlighted the need to manage employee well-being, work-life balance, and performance in a virtual environment (Jung *et al.*, 2021) ^[12].

Another challenge is the need to maintain workplace culture and collaboration in a remote work environment. Workplace culture plays a critical role in employee engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational success (Zagelmeyer *et al.*, 2021). However, the shift to remote work has disrupted traditional workplace culture, making it challenging to maintain a sense of community and collaboration (Börsch-Supan *et al.*, 2020) ^[5].

Upskilling employees in digital tools and processes is another significant challenge presented by the new normal in HRM. The pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies, making digital literacy and proficiency essential for employees in various roles (Weller *et al.*, 2021) ^[28]. However, many employees may lack the necessary skills to work effectively in a digital environment, requiring HR practitioners to develop training programs and support systems to upskill employees.

Despite the challenges, the new normal in HRM also presents several opportunities for organizations. For example, the shift to remote work has allowed organizations to access a broader talent pool, enabling them to recruit and retain top talent from around the world (Kirkpatrick & Furst, 2021) ^[13]. Additionally, remote work has enabled organizations to develop more flexible work arrangements that support work-life balance and improve employee well-being (Jung *et al.*, 2021) ^[12].

The new normal also presents opportunities for HR practitioners to adopt innovative practices and processes that

support workforce agility, employee engagement, and organizational success. For example, HR practitioners can leverage technology to facilitate virtual collaboration and communication, develop flexible work arrangements that support work-life balance, and implement agile performance management processes that support continuous learning and development (Boon *et al.*, 2021) ^[4].

The challenges and opportunities presented by this shift require HR practitioners to adopt innovative and agile approaches to talent management, employee engagement, and workplace culture to support organizational success in the post-pandemic world. This paper therefore aims to explore how HRM can adapt to these challenges using these opportunities as widely discussed in the wider body of HRM Literatures with the view to guide Practitioners and HRM Professionals on practical ways to align their HRM Practices in the face of these developments.

4. Strategies for Adapting to the New Normal in Human Resource Management

The COVID-19 pandemic also brought significant changes to organizations, including their human resource management (HRM) practices. As companies continue to navigate the "new normal," they must adapt their HRM strategies to meet the evolving needs of their workforce. This literature review examines various strategies for adapting to the new normal in HRM.

One primary strategy for adapting to the new normal in HRM is the implementation of remote work and virtual collaboration. Remote work has become increasingly popular due to the pandemic, with many organizations transitioning to a work-from-home model (Shim *et al.*, 2020) ^[32]. Virtual collaboration tools such as video conferencing, instant messaging, and project management software have become essential for maintaining communication and productivity among remote workers (Zheng *et al.*, 2021) ^[33].

Flexible work arrangements, such as flexible schedules, reduced work hours, and job sharing, have also become critical strategies for adapting to the new normal in HRM. These arrangements can help employees balance their work and personal lives while providing employers with the flexibility they need to manage their workforce effectively (Biswas & Bhatnagar, 2020) ^[3].

Employee well-being is another essential aspect of HRM that organizations must prioritize in the new normal. The pandemic has led to increased stress and burnout, and organizations must provide resources to support their employees' mental and physical health (Bhatnagar, 2020) ^[1]. This can include offering wellness programs, promoting work-life balance, and providing access to mental health resources (Rashid & Ashraf, 2021) ^[22].

The pandemic has accelerated the adoption of technology in HRM. Organizations are using artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and other technologies to streamline HR processes such as recruitment, onboarding, and performance management (Khan & Haider, 2020) ^[14]. This allows organizations to manage their workforce more effectively and efficiently, even in a remote work environment.

Finally, organizations must develop agility and resilience in their HRM strategies to adapt to the constantly changing business environment. This can include cross-training employees, implementing contingency plans, and developing a culture of adaptability (Biswas & Bhatnagar, 2020) ^[3].

In conclusion, organizations must adapt their HRM strategies to meet the evolving needs of their workforce in the new normal. Remote work and virtual collaboration, flexible work arrangements, employee well-being, technology adoption, and agility and resilience are key strategies for HRM in the post-pandemic world.

5. Discussion and Implication for HRM Practitioners

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted organizations and their human resource management (HRM) practices. The strategies for adapting to the new normal in HRM discussed in the literature review have several implications for HRM practitioners.

First, HRM practitioners should consider implementing remote work and virtual collaboration as a long-term strategy. The pandemic has highlighted the benefits of remote work, including increased productivity, reduced overhead costs, and improved work-life balance for employees. HRM practitioners should continue to leverage technology and virtual collaboration tools to enhance communication and collaboration among remote workers. According to a study by Gartner, Inc., 82% of company leaders plan to allow remote working at least some of the time post-pandemic, and 47% will allow employees to work from home full-time. Another study by McKinsey & Company found that 41% of employees surveyed reported being more productive while working remotely.

Second, HRM practitioners should consider flexible work arrangements to provide employees with greater flexibility and work-life balance. This can help retain employees, reduce absenteeism, and increase productivity. HRM practitioners should communicate with employees to understand their needs and implement flexible work arrangements that work for both the employee and the organization. A study by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that organizations with flexible work arrangements had a 12% lower voluntary turnover rate compared to organizations without such arrangements. Another study by PwC found that 77% of employees said flexible work arrangements would make them more likely to choose one employer over another.

Third, HRM practitioners must prioritize employee well-being. The pandemic has increased stress and burnout among employees, and HRM practitioners must provide resources to support their mental and physical health. HRM practitioners should consider offering wellness programs, promoting work-life balance, and providing access to mental health resources. According to a survey by MetLife, employees who feel their employer cares about their well-being are 38% more engaged, 18% more likely to go the extra mile, and 16% more likely to stay with their employer. Another study by the World Economic Forum found that companies with wellness programs have a return on investment of \$1.50 for every dollar spent.

Fourth, HRM practitioners should embrace technology to streamline HR processes and increase efficiency. Technology such as AI, machine learning, and automation can help HRM practitioners manage their workforce more effectively and efficiently, even in a remote work environment. HRM practitioners should stay up-to-date with the latest HR technology trends to optimize their HR practices. A study by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that 60% of HR professionals have increased their use of technology during the pandemic.

Additionally, a survey by McKinsey & Company found that 50% of respondents plan to accelerate the digitization of their operations post-pandemic.

Finally, HRM practitioners should develop an agile and resilient workforce by cross-training employees, implementing contingency plans, and fostering a culture of adaptability. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of being able to adapt to unexpected changes in the business environment, and HRM practitioners should develop strategies to ensure their workforce is prepared for future disruptions. A study by Deloitte found that organizations that invested in building resilience were better able to adapt to the pandemic. Additionally, a study by PwC found that organizations with a culture of agility were better able to respond to the pandemic and its impact on their business.

In conclusion, the strategies for adapting to the new normal in HRM discussed in the literature review have significant implications for HRM practitioners. HRM practitioners must prioritize remote work and virtual collaboration, flexible work arrangements, employee well-being, technology adoption, and agility and resilience to successfully navigate the post-pandemic business environment.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant changes to the way we work, and it has forced HR practitioners to adapt to the new normal. In this article, we have explored some of the ways in which HR practitioners can adjust to the current and future work challenges. These include remote work and virtual collaboration, flexible work arrangements, employee well-being, technology adoption, and agility and resilience. Empirical evidence has shown that these strategies can be effective in improving productivity, employee satisfaction, and organizational resilience. This paper therefore recommends the following as supported in the body of literature:

- 1. Embrace remote work and virtual collaboration:** HR practitioners should consider implementing remote work policies that allow employees to work from home or from any location. They should also invest in technology that supports virtual collaboration and communication. (Gartner. (2021) ^[10-11], McKinsey & Company. (2020) ^[16, 18, 19-28], Buffer. (2021).
- 2. Offer flexible work arrangements:** HR practitioners should offer flexible work arrangements, such as part-time work, job sharing, and flexible scheduling, to help employees balance work and personal responsibilities (Society for Human Resource Management. (2019) ^[23], PwC. (2018) ^[21], International Labour Organization. (2020).
- 3. Prioritize employee well-being:** HR practitioners should invest in programs that support employee mental and physical health, such as wellness programs and employee assistance programs (World Economic Forum. (2019) ^[29], MetLife. (2019) ^[15], Harvard Business Review. (2020)
- 4. Adopt new technologies:** HR practitioners should adopt new technologies that can support HR functions, such as recruiting, onboarding, and performance management (Society for Human Resource Management. (2020) ^[24], Gartner. (2020) ^[10-11], McKinsey & Company. (2020) ^[16, 18, 19-28].
- 5. Build organizational agility and resilience:** HR

practitioners should invest in developing an agile and resilient workforce by offering training programs, developing contingency plans, and fostering a culture of innovation (Deloitte. (2020) ^[6-7], PwC. (2020) ^[25], Harvard Business Review. (2020).

6. **Talent Management:** Talent management plays a crucial role in addressing the challenge of new work patterns after COVID-19. This involves attracting, developing, and retaining the right talent to adapt to changing work environments. Talent management strategies can focus on skills assessment, reskilling and upskilling initiatives, and building a flexible workforce (Bersin, J. (2020) ^[2]).
7. **Agility:** Agility refers to the ability of organizations to quickly adapt and respond to changes. This includes flexibility in work arrangements, processes, and decision-making. Agile organizations are better equipped to navigate new work patterns, such as remote work, hybrid work models, and changing customer demands (McKinsey & Company. (2020) ^[16, 18, 19-28],
8. **Innovation:** Innovation is critical for addressing new work patterns as it enables organizations to develop creative solutions and adapt to changing circumstances. Innovative practices can involve leveraging technology, fostering a culture of experimentation, and encouraging cross-functional collaboration (Deloitte. (2020) ^[6-7]).
9. **Reskilling and Upskilling:** Reskilling and upskilling are essential for equipping employees with the necessary skills to thrive in the new work patterns. Organizations should invest in training programs, digital learning platforms, and career development initiatives to help employees acquire new skills and adapt to changing job roles (World Economic Forum. (2021) ^[30]).
10. **Work Culture:** Work culture plays a crucial role in adapting to new work patterns after COVID-19. Organizations need to foster a culture that embraces flexibility, collaboration, and continuous learning. This includes promoting trust, open communication, and supporting employee well-being in both remote and hybrid work environments (PwC. (2021) ^[20]
11. **Leadership:** Effective leadership is crucial for navigating new work patterns after COVID-19. Leaders need to provide clear direction, support remote/hybrid teams, and foster a culture of resilience and agility. They should also prioritize empathy, communication, and collaboration to build trust and engage employees in the changing work landscape (Gartner. (2021) ^[10, 11]).

Overall, HR practitioners should continue to adapt to the new normal by embracing change and exploring new strategies that can help organizations thrive in the post-pandemic world.

7. Limitation and Future Research Agenda

Whilst this paper gives a general understanding of the 'New Normal' in HRM facilitated by COVID-19 and the emerging global developments and dynamics in the work patten and further suggests ways HRM Practitioners can navigate, adapt and survive in the current and Future work environment it's mainly limited to review of literature. This leaves an empirical gap which we recommend for future research. We also call for further empirical studies that will use more statistical evidence to validate these findings and recommendations.

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