

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Human Resource Management Practices: A Review of Situations in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Globally, the work practices of organizations are altering due to the COVID-19 pandemic and Bangladesh is no exception. The pandemic is not only directly affecting the profit margins of organizations but also the socio-economic situation of a country like Bangladesh. This paper aims to explore how and to what extent it is affecting the work processes, specifically HR practices, of Bangladeshi organizations. The research paper is a qualitative study based on secondary materials such as journal articles, e-books, and other published materials on the internet. The findings reveal that the roles of HR managers as well as employees are continually changing due to COVID-19. Most of the companies in Bangladesh have embraced the 'New normal' work practice. Consequently, the roles and responsibilities of the HR manager as well as those of the employees are drastically changing. The paper concludes that the changing work culture is increasing demands for tech-savvy employees.

Keywords: COVID-19 • Work from home • New normal • HR managers • Increasing demands for tech-oriented employees • Training

Introduction

In recent times, the most extensively discussed issue in all spheres of life, be they private or public, in Bangladesh has been COVID-19. The effects of the disease are far-reaching, as it is disrupting the private as well as the public lives of its population. Globally, all governments are adopting various measures to cope with the challenges posed by this pandemic and Bangladesh is no exception. The most visible effect of the pandemic, apart from the disease-affected population, is the economic well-being of people in mid- and lower-income groups, as well as daily wage earners [1]. This economic downturn is also affecting the way businesses are done in the country. To maintain the status quo and employees' engagement in the workplace, HR managers and top management are forced to rethink and re-engineer the work culture.

Literature Review

The study is based only on secondary research data and analyses of those data. The discussion and results are based on the qualitative analysis. We have analyzed twelve peer-reviewed journal articles and

related materials available on the internet. Our analyses reveal that most of the research took place mainly on the basis of secondary data.

Thus, based on the findings and conclusions of those secondary sources, this study tries to explore the impacts of COVID-19 on human resource management practices in Bangladesh. Although COVID-19 is a pandemic, for convenience, the study has analyzed only those sources that have specifically addressed the problems and prospects of the organizations operating only in Bangladesh, irrespective of their types as public, private, or MNCs.

Following research questions are being explored

- How does the human resource management department have responded to the challenges of COVID-19 crisis?
- What changes are being made in the employee's roles and responsibilities at the workplace?
- How does the work environment change in order to cope with the New Normal work practices?

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The research is based on two assumptions: One is changing human resource managers' roles to mitigate the challenges of the pandemic, and another is the responses of human resource managers to achieve the overall organizational goal during the pandemic. The scope of the research is limited to organizations currently operating in Bangladesh, and sampling secondary data is convenient sampling.

A bird's eye view of the socio-economic situations of Bangladesh

The population of Bangladesh was 163 million in 2020 and the unemployment rate is 4.15% [2]. 93.94% of the land borders of Bangladesh are surrounded by India [3]. However, compared with India, Bangladesh is not much affected by COVID-19. Until June 2, 2021, Bangladesh had 8,02,305 COVID-19 cases that paint a better picture than its closest neighbor, India [4]. At the beginning of the pandemic, the Bangladesh government imposed an all-out lockdown. This measure arrested the spread of the disease. However, this drastic measure negatively affected almost all the businesses to varying degrees [5]. As a result, productivity rates slowed down, which in turn wiped out the profit margins of most organizations. These situations arose as most of the organizations took strict measures for their own survival, such as terminating many of their employees or retaining their core employees only by paying a reduced salary. Furthermore, organizations formulated COVID-19 workplace guidelines and followed them prudently [6].

Companies have implemented remote working for their employees in certain industries or departments. Nonetheless, the majority of low-level workers or front-line employees required to physically attend the office, such as in garments or banks, do so (Figure 1) [7].

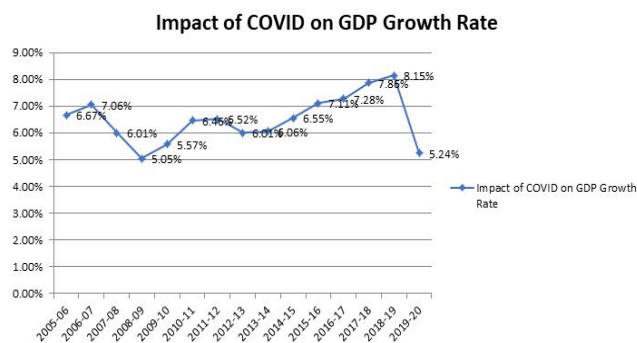


Figure 1. Impact of COVID on GDP rate.

Organizational response to the socio-economic downturns

Given the socio-economic situation of the Bangladeshi population, the government has opted for the New Normal work style. Most public and private sector organizations have adopted a Work from Home (WFH) policy. This measure is overwhelmingly impacting the business strategy as well as the human resource strategy of an organization. Accordingly, organizations are adopting this new work style, i.e., WFH, for their own survival. Hence, human resource managers' roles are becoming more challenging. They now must be more creative and innovative in their HR activities specifically in

recruiting and selecting employees, as they have to accomplish "doing more with less". In addition, organizations are taking drastic measures such as pay cuts, dismissals, or forced leave to reduce overhead costs and production costs [8].

The garment industry contributed a major portion to the economy of Bangladesh. The lockdown forced many garment industries to shut down their factories, and consequently, they missed their export deadlines. Since April 2021, about 70,000 garment workers have lost their jobs as the garment industry lost over \$3.5 billion in orders. In addition to that, the demand for garment products on the international market also decreased. Thus, many garment companies went bankrupt, which led to job cuts. The same fate is also suffered by other industries such as agriculture, tourism, hospitality, entertainment, etc. This situation compelled many companies to reduce the number of employees or terminate the employees to decrease their overhead costs.

All these cost-cutting measures are forcing the human resource management department to strive for a balance between maintaining a normal flow of productivity and employee satisfaction. Besides, the HR department also undertakes health and safety measures for its employees, thus trying to protect them from this deadly disease. Moreover, the HR department acts as a converging point between the management and its employees, which in turn sustains positive interactions and upholds organizational values in the current pandemic situation in Bangladesh [9].

To face the challenges of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladeshi organizations are trying to institute changes at the workplace through changing the job roles of their employees and their work culture. HR managers are now acting as change agents and deliberating on policies for instituting ways to establish the 'New Normal' work culture that may help the organizations in the long run in maintaining their status [10].

Results and Discussion

The recent COVID-19 outbreak has affected more or less all types of organizations. Some organizations are struggling to remain in business; on the other hand, some are going out of business. Consequently, unemployment is increasing at an alarming rate in many countries around the world, specifically in Bangladesh. In organizations whose services are essential for daily livelihood, their HR professionals are striving hard to ensure the health and safety of their employees. To throttle the onslaught of the pandemic, many governments have imposed complete lockdown in highly infected areas or cities. Hence, front-line employees such as medical services, financial services, etc. are struggling to provide the services physically, which in turn increases the number of incomplete works. To alleviate this situation, top management and HR managers are modifying the company's work culture by adopting a more flexible approach to work. Non-essential tasks, or those tasks that can be done online, are now allowed to be done from home. Working from home is being addressed as a new normal work practice; nevertheless, this has currently become the normal work practice for most organizations. Accordingly, the roles and responsibilities of the employees are also changing [11].

In this regard, Bangladeshi organizations are no exceptions. They have also introduced the WFH work practice, especially for MNCs, which follow this new work practice meticulously. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about unanticipated changes in the workplace. Each and every organization in Bangladesh is confounded, and the change agents (HR managers) are besieged with a plethora of problems to keep the employees' engagement and motivation high in their assigned tasks. On top of that, the pandemic situation has restricted the employees' physical mobility and interactions with their co-workers, which in turn has slowed down their productivity rates. This one has become the main concern of the employers. Slower productivity means lower profit margins, and all organizations, regardless of their type and size, are afflicted by this one crucial problem: lower profit margins. Under this circumstance, many organizations are paying 80 to 50 percent of the actual salary to their employees, freezing recruitments, and in some cases, as a last resort, terminating mostly lower-level employees [12].

On other fronts, the Bangladesh government has shut down eating places, amusement parks, cinema halls, hotels, tourism spots, and other hospitality industries. These measures have directly affected daily wage earners and low and mid-level employees, which in turn has increased the country's poverty level. Besides, other researchers have claimed that the employees quit their jobs because of the threat of infection, and this is another reason for the high turnover rate among skilled and experienced labor in the industry.

The export-oriented readymade garment industry is one of the main contributors to the economy of Bangladesh. A large number of semi-skilled and unskilled laborers work in this sector, and many other related businesses are directly or indirectly dependent on the garment industry. During the first wave of COVID-19, many garment units were forced to lockdown, and consequently, production was halted continuously for several months. As a result, the garment sector lost its foreign customers because it failed to deliver the order on time. At the same time, the garment workers also did not get their full salaries because of the shortage of liquidity in the garment sector. This creates a temporary setback in Bangladesh's economy. This dismal scenario needed a new strategy to revive the garment sector. The factory owners were forced to create physical health and safety measures for their employees and implement more humanitarian and socio-economically friendly policies. Under this circumstance, the government, keeping in mind the overall poverty situation of marginal groups, must consider implementing more poor-friendly new rules and policies to mitigate the far-reaching socio-economic impacts due to the COVID-19 situation [13].

One of the most visible impacts of COVID-19 in Bangladesh is that the prices of essential food items increased by 5.09%; however, in comparison to the increase in the price of food items, organizations or the government did not increase the salaries of their employees. Rather, in private organizations, salaries were reduced by 20 to 50 percent in some cases. As a precautionary

measure against the pandemic and to avoid higher living costs in Dhaka city, mostly low and mid-income people left the city. All together, these two phenomena heavily affected the organizations. On the one hand, it created a shortage of skilled and experienced employees, and on the other hand, the remaining workers are demanding greater flexibility in their work schedule and assurance of their health and safety at the workplace. Besides, with reduced salaries, it became difficult for the HR department to maintain the pre-pandemic level of employee engagement. Thus, the organizations started facing lower productivity and lower profit margins. For most of the Bangladeshi organizations, it became a vicious cycle of a catch-22 situation [14].

Responses of the employers to the COVID-19 situations

James D suggested that the organizations need to be more proactive in their approaches to combating the COVID-19 pandemic situation. He suggested that virtual work, or WFH, and/or flexible work schedules need to be the norm of the day.

Under the present circumstances, organizations must realize WFH results in two advantages: one is that it increases the job satisfaction of employees, and another is that it improves work-life balance, thus enhancing the quality of life for city workers. However, it may negatively affect the employee's career in the long run, and in some situations, the employee's career progression may slow down or be put on hold because of the lack of daily interactions with co-workers. Moreover, some employees may find it difficult to adapt to new approaches, especially if they are not tech-savvy, and may not perform well because of the long-distance work culture [15].

Hence, COVID the pandemic situation is forcing HR managers to rethink their roles and make adjustments to their work habits to align with the altered situation. And these altered circumstances have created the need for innovative and creative HR policies that will help an organization achieve its strategic goals [16].

The pandemic situation altered the importance of HR managers' roles in organizations. Now they are considered the change agents' of an organization. A unique challenge needs unique responses. Therefore, future HR managers must not only be tech-savvy, but they must also know how to inspire their employees to embrace the new work culture and remain highly engaged in their job and their organization. For this purpose, HR managers must reorient themselves so that they can provide the latest technology-oriented trainings, introduce and monitor flexible job rules, alleviate employee health concerns, develop dynamic human resource strategic directions, enhance their self-awareness, and empower employees to face any other unusual circumstances. To re-orient and re-engineer, HR managers must be included in the business strategy development team and ensure that the HR strategy is aligned with the business strategy that includes pay programs, employee health insurance, physical development, career development, and financial wellbeing to arrest the turnover rate.

The human resources department of the organizations is currently facing two problems: One is that they are increasingly using online to hire new employees, and another is the scarcity of technically sound employees as remote work is becoming common in many organizations. Hence, the demand for technical skills for HR activities is becoming critical. However, in Bangladesh, there is a dearth of technically skilled employees, so there is a huge gap between the demand and supply of tech-savvy employees in the job market. Consequently, retraining of the current employees is becoming essential to reduce the gap between demand and supply of tech-oriented employees.

Responses of employees to work from home

Typically, the employees of the organizations are not accustomed to working from home. As a result, at the beginning of COVID-19, many employees found it difficult to adjust to the new changing situation, and consequently, many employees became confused and started suffering from depression and mental stress. And some of the employees did not take the new way of working seriously, thus completing their assigned tasks half-heartedly. In addition, Women employees in Bangladesh find it difficult to work from home as they need to take care of their families while they stay at home.

After identifying this issue, the HR managers started taking steps to make the employees understand the importance of their work and the differences between work and family. They also needed to address the differences between work and family even though the organizations allowed the employees to stay at home during the lockdown. At this point, the HR managers find challenges in making the employees understand the work-life balance, which becomes difficult to adopt when the employees get permission to work from home. Allowing employees to work from home is called "The hybrid condition," and the HR management needs to continuously communicate with the remote workers in order to motivate them towards work and focus on employee well-being.

It is important for human resource management to keep up-to-date information about the employee's health and the employee's family's health condition. It is because the employee of the organization takes high risks at the time their family member becomes COVID-19 positive. On the other hand, HRM needs to arrange intrinsic rewards for the employees in order to motivate them and take steps to retain them. In addition, HR management needs to update the workplace guidelines by considering COVID-19 in order to develop safety issues and reduce the risk of spreading the disease.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic situation has forced Bangladeshi organizations to adjust their major policies, particularly HR policies. Currently, many organizations allow their employees to telecommute for work. These companies are also aiming to adopt the WFH policy for a longer period of time. Under this changed circumstance, the HR departments of organizations are organizing various types of trainings for reorienting and retraining their existing employees to embrace the new work culture that WFH is the 'New normal', and it will be the norm of the organization for an indefinite period.

From the review of the secondary sources, it has been pointed out that the human resources department of the organization works in order to overcome the pandemic situation and provide an appropriate workforce for the organization. They have been trying to normalize the situation in order to survive. In order to do that, they have developed a strategy for managing fundamental shifts. They are also rethinking how to adopt the new technologies and utilize them in order to develop communication and motivate the employees.

The pandemic crisis in business organizations can be considered the all-pervasive greatest challenge of the 21st century, as this challenge is more or less affecting all: Individuals, families, societies, organizations, and nations as a whole around the world. In order to surmount this mother of all challenges, multiple policies and strategies need to be institutionalized in the organizations in addition to boosting up the existing ones. For their own survival, organizations must take into account that this challenge is not only virulent but also multifarious. It affects an organization both internally and externally. And in order to overcome this unprecedented situation, organizations need to develop new ideas and adopt atypical approaches to minimize the negative outcomes of the pandemic while dealing with their employees.

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