

Organizational Support to HRM in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis

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Abstract

The paper studies organizational support with respect to Human Resource Management during the COVID-19 pandemic. It examines HRM initiatives regarding changing in jobs, working routine, workplaces, and remote working conditions. The paper analyses how HR managers supported employees during the pandemic and how top-management encouraged employee wellbeing. It also explores whether HRM practice and employee emotions are a strategic focus for companies. Quantitative data for this research was collected with survey from forty-eight organizations located in Georgia. The findings suggest that HRM supported staff with helping them to update their skills for remote working, established flexible working hours, and adopted less strict policies regarding performance management. Additionally, HR managers have been encouraged by the top-management in implementing initiatives concerning employee physical and emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, HRM should be a strategic focus for any organization to lay foundation of employee relationship and organizational culture in order to overcome difficulties and adapt to the changes. The novelty of the research highlights the importance of HRM practice when economies are facing the threat of recession. It contributes to HRM in terms of supporting employees during the pandemic as well as from the top-management perspective to promote HR initiatives, and paves the way for further studies in this field.

Keywords: Coronavirus, employee wellbeing, emotional experience, flexible work, remote working, Georgia

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and accompanying regulations aiming at avoiding the spread of the virus influenced organizations of any size and type, along with employees and managers. The crisis caused alterations in working routines, working places, and employee wellbeing in general. Therefore, support from the human resource managers has played an essential role to help the staff to adapt to the new normal and to contribute in the transition process.

Large companies meet the lockdown policies with more preparation as they had the stocks in place. Issues with transportation and logistics due to the strict regulations have led to the reduction in trade. Besides, demand failure, cancelation of contracts and orders, postponing or cancelation of business trips, and increased prices of inputs as a result, have caused

company income reduction. However, in some cases demand increased after the lockdown for technics, food delivery services, and online shops.

Although the issue of HRM practice and employee experience should be a strategic focus, as employee wellbeing can contribute to a company's success, there is a small amount of research in this regard, especially in the context of Georgia (the country).

Therefore, this research aimed at studying organizational support to HRM with their initiatives during the Covid-19 crisis taking into account alterations in jobs, working routine, and workplaces in Georgia.

The research questions are as follows:

- (a) How have HR managers supported employees during the pandemic?
- (b) Which communication systems including online meetings and online tools were managers used to keep in touch with workers?
- (c) Did top-management support HR managers' initiatives regarding employee wellbeing during the pandemic?
- (d) In which extent HRM practice and employee emotions have been a strategic issue for Georgian organizations?

The rest of the paper is divided into the following parts: First, the overview of the existing literature regarding HRM support activities during the crisis is presented. Second, the secondary data concerning the impact of lockdown on Georgian business is highlighted followed by the description of empirical research method for the primary study. Next, the results of the data analysis are summarized and discussed. Finally, conclusions are made and further research topics are emphasized.

Theoretical Background

The new coronavirus pandemic has caused many challenges to organizations regardless of their form of ownership - for-profits, nonprofits, or governmental. In general, a crisis increases the anxiety, stress, uncertainty among employees and managers, but these effects are intensified by continuous pressure of dismissal or salary cuts (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya, Prouska, & Beauregard, 2019). Crisis can have negative impact on employees' health; demanding work schedule or addressing a crisis can cause burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2008).

Moreover, the economic crisis implies reduction in working hours, changes in workplace and working conditions, increase in workload, less job choices for workers and cut of wages, feeling insecure and worsen wellbeing (Eurofound, 2013). For this reason, a wide range of changes occurred in human resource management as companies adjusted HRM practices to respond to the global economic crisis in 2008 with the aim to improve organizational efficiency (Naudé, Dickie, & Butler, 2012; Johnstone, 2019). Consequently, HRM needs to understand employee feelings and take actions proactively. Employees working from home are lacking informal contacts and consequently reported decreased mental health (Smith, 2020). Managers should show empathy and compassion to the workers, while supporting them with flexibility (Howlett, 2020). Besides, they need to understand each employee's unique situation and respond taking into consideration those unique circumstances (Howlett, 2020).

Although mental health is always important, employee emotions needs to be taken into consideration especially during the crisis. In general, HRM can improve quality of life of the employees, and perceived organizational support can reduce the health harm of work to the employees (Mariappanadar, 2020).

In order to give employees trust, stability and hope during the crisis, continuous interaction is recommended (Fallon, 2020; Adams, 2020). Leaders should provide updates to inform employees about new developments, statistics, or changes in guidelines (Fallon, 2020). The study by Smith (2020) shows that people were willing to communicate with their company at least weekly, whereas about 29 percent of them wanted daily communication (Smith, 2020). The communication system can help employers to ensure that workers are safe on the one hand, and on the other hand, the employees can instantly notify their managers if they need any help (Parsi, 2016).

According to the Crisis Resilient Workforce Model elaborated by Deloitte (2015), communication should be based not only on employees needs, but it is also critical what is communicated and by whom.

Even before the pandemic, many countries were facing to decent work problems, and gaps in working hours, wage, and workplace conditions (Connell, Burgess, & Hannif, 2007). This impacts on the job quality that is an important part of HRM program as it influences both the organization and the economy (Connell, Burgess & Hannif, 2007).

It is also noteworthy that flexibly designed workplaces proved to have positive effect especially to women (Subramaniam et al., 2013).

The research by Coenen and Kok (2014) confirmed that though flexibility in terms of remote working enhances productivity and performance aside from cooperation within different divisions of a company, face-to-face relations still could not be replaced by online contact.

Though flexible workplace design can lead to less conflict between work and life, it requires individual employees' autonomous motivation, which may cause an employee to be engaged in the work additional hours in lieu of enjoying free time activities (Peters & Blomme, 2019). Therefore, HRM should plan the flexible work in such manner that employees have enough time for nonworking activities in order to maintain their physical and mental health.

Furthermore, trainings and personnel development programs are essential also during the crisis. Capability development of employees is considered as a strategic option even during turbulence, and its benefits include the potential to adapt to changes and to contribute in an organization's ability to achieve its goals (Maley, 2019).

HRM contributes hugely during crises and uncertainties because of the several roles it plays in relations with people and work management in tandem with organizational strategic decisions (Zagelmeyer & Gollan, 2012; Gulua, 2020).

Thus, with the intention of improving situation in a company during the pandemic, HRM should constantly communicate with employees. At the same time, HR managers also should be encouraged and supported by top-management in their efforts during the crisis.

Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Georgia

Population of the Republic of Georgia totals 3,7 million people, GDP per capita amounts 4763 USD, unemployment rate equals to 11.6%, and inflation is 5.7% (Geostat, 2020). Although economic growth remains relatively low, Georgia has still achieved notable success and international recognition thanks to the effective reforms over the past years (Mushkudiani & Gechbaia, 2019).

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Georgian government has carried out strict lockdown policy, and hence, total confirmed cases have been only 1568 of which 1279 are recovered, and fatal outcomes constitute 19 people (StopCov.ge, 2020). As a result of lockdown policies and tough regulations, the pandemic impact on Georgian business is serious. Decrease in demand, issues in the supply chain and transportation, a shortage of stocks, and increased costs exerted a negative impact on organizations in Georgia. Consequently, many companies especially in tourism and hospitality sector went bankrupt. Fewer employment opportunities and broad scale layoffs force a large portion of both self-employed and salaried workers into difficult circumstances (Babych, Keshelava, & Mzhavanadze, 2020).

Moreover, decline in domestic consumption causing from policy changes to prevent novel coronavirus from spreading, has been resulting in significant reduction in household consumption, for instance, spending on transportation, electronics, clothing, and services (Babych, et al., 2020). Consequently, some companies have to dismiss employees or grant them unpaid leaves, and others are breaking up. In particular, 59% of micro self-employed enterprises suspended business activities (PwC Georgia, 2020). Furthermore, tourism arrivals and receipts have declined as a result of precautionary behavior and the travel bans whereas Georgian economy has been heavily relied on the tourism sector (Babych, et al., 2020).

66% of Georgian companies experienced financial loss, and business turnover has decreased for the last months in many enterprises (GCCCI, 2020). Consequently, the half of the surveyed companies reduced staff, and 40% of firms in the tourism business fired all their employees (PwC Georgia, 2020). Additionally, 53% of the companies intend to maintain their employees for the next 6 months, but 43% of the employers have reduced the salaries (GCCCI, 2020).

On the other hand, 56% of the medium (50-249 employees) and 61% of the large (more than 250 employees) enterprises shifted to remote working (PwC Georgia, 2020).

According to the Georgian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, a small number of the Georgian companies (17%) intend to switch their business online and work remotely, but they do not have relevant skills and experience (GCCCI, 2020). In addition, 7% of the companies aim at transition to online business in the future (GCCCI, 2020).

Thus, under the circumstances of the pandemic, the organizational support to human resource management in their efforts to manage people appropriately is vital, notably when remote working and digitalization offer new business opportunities.

Research and Data Analysis Methods

The quantitative research approach was adopted in order to find answers to the research questions. Data was collected in June 2020 by self-administered questionnaires distributed through the Internet in the form of Google survey and through the Email.

The questionnaire for the survey was based on qualitative research results, which involved Expert interview with Georgian HRM experts (Gigauri, 2020).

The questionnaire included various types of questions, namely dichotomous questions, multiple choice questions and multiple response questions, and 5-point Likert type scale format ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree questions. The majority of the questions were closed-ended, and one question was open-ended.

Overall, Human Resource Managers from 150 organizations were invited to participate in the survey, and sample size constitutes 48 managers from companies operating in wide range of sectors such as: (1) Healthcare, AI, IT, telecommunication, insurance, consulting, media, tourism, food and hotel business; (2) Manufacturing, production, construction, Alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages; (3) Bank and financial sector; (4) Transportation, Logistics, distribution, E-commerce; and (4) public sector i.e. governmental agencies.

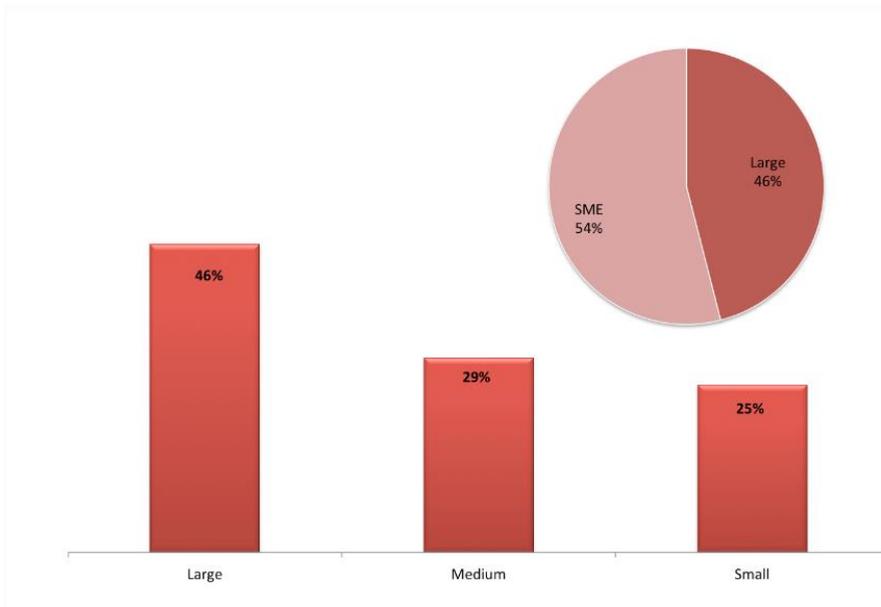
The gathered quantitative data was analyzed through SPSS (2020) and MS Excel with descriptive statistics, frequency analysis, and cross-tabulations. Cronbach's Alpha for the corresponding items is between 0.8 and 0.9 confirming the reliability of the questionnaire.

Research Findings

According to the classification of National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat, 2020), the average annual number of employed exceeds 250 persons in a large enterprise, the number of employed persons in medium-sized companies ranges from 50 to 250, and small enterprises have less than 50 employees.

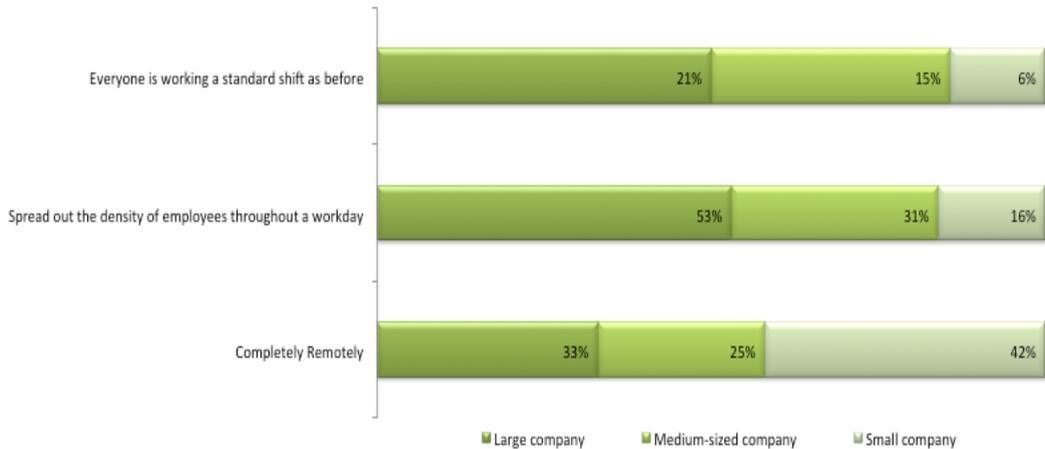
46% of the managers participated in the survey represented large organizations, and 54% are from SMEs (Fig.1).

Figure 1. Organizations by Size



The Covid-19 pandemic and follow-up regulations have caused changeover to online working at all organizations. As a result, companies changed their policy to allow employees to work remotely. The respondents confirm that they worked completely remotely or in shifts during the pandemic (Fig.2).

Figure 2. Working routine during the new coronavirus crisis



In order to support employees to perform their jobs during the pandemic, the organizations in most cases established flexible working hours and allowed work from home. Moreover, the managers were in constant communication (79%) with the employees and treated them with compassion (56%). Besides, 52 percent of the respondents claimed that they helped the employees to upgrade their skills needed for remote working, 21 percent of managers stated that they have implemented less strict policies as well as adapting guidelines in compliance with the remote working schedule. Only 19 percent of the respondents reported temporal salary reduction to retain jobs (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. HR managers supporting initiatives during the Covid-19 crisis

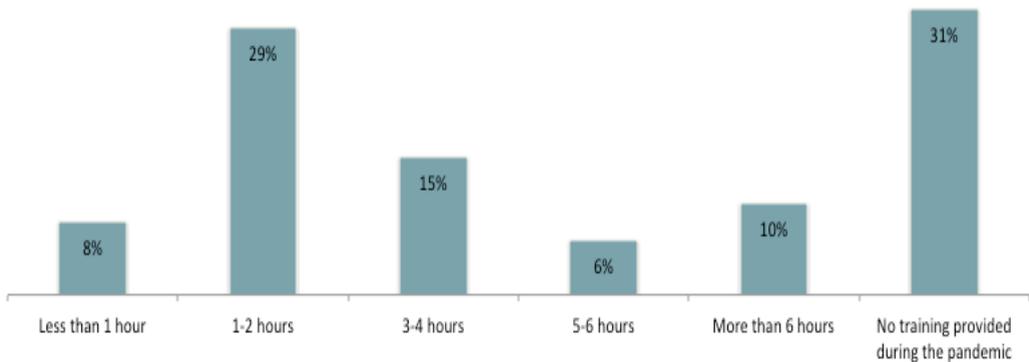


Note: Multiple-response item

The managers participated in the survey answered the open-ended question regarding HRM issues they have been focusing on during the pandemic. The content analysis revealed that the most significant activities have concerned employee health and safety. In addition, HR managers have addressed organizational values and culture, held consultations to inform the staff about the pandemic situation including governmental restrictions and regulations. Besides, recruitment and selection, performance appraisal, change management, and quality management have been questions of great importance to Georgian organizations. Moreover, HR management has concentrated on employee motivation, communication, stress management, time management, and crisis management. According to the respondents, one of the most critical issues during the Covid-19 crisis has been employee retention and payroll coupled with personnel development and trainings counting online coaching.

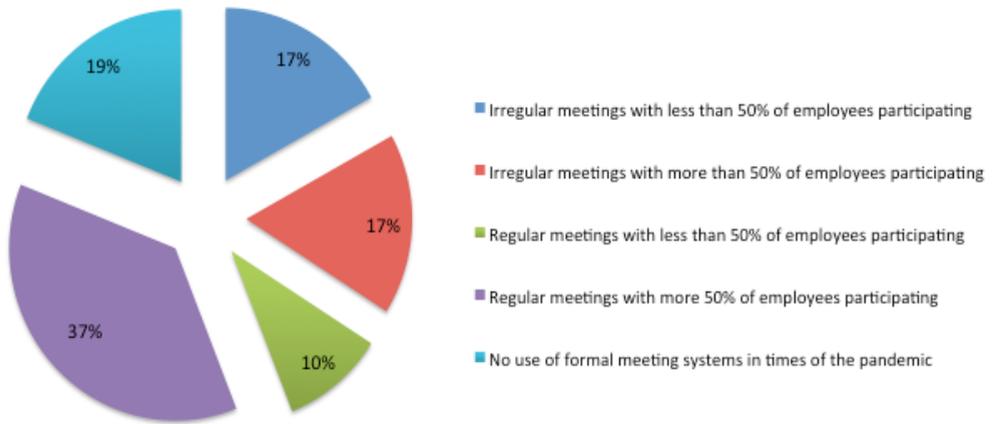
With respect to formal trainings, the majority of the managers (31%) taken part in the survey responded that there was no training provided during the pandemic. Nevertheless, 10 percent of the respondents confirm to have held formal trainings in conjunction with online trainings more than 6 hours per week. In most cases, organizations conducted formal trainings 1 to 2 hours per week during the pandemic, and roughly 16 percent arranged trainings more than 5 hours. On average 15 percent of the respondents conformed that their employees receive 3 to 4 hours formal trainings (comprising online trainings) per week during the Covid-19 crisis (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. Training hours per week during the pandemic



In addition to trainings, formal meetings were also held mostly online through the Internet communication tools. The surveyed managers claimed that regular meetings took place with the attendance more than 50 percent of the employees. 19 percent of the respondents stated that formal meetings were not conducted to inform employees about the organizational situation, strategy, changes, and results (Fig.5). However, at some extent the irregular meetings including online meetings were used to provide information on organizational situation to the staff.

Figure 5. Formal Meetings during the pandemic



Furthermore, communication with employees, managers, and other stakeholders plays a significant role during the crisis. Therefore, in order to maintain regular communication with the employees, the respondents mentioned online communication tools such as Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, organizations have used simultaneously with Phone and Email (Table 1).

Table 1. Communication tools during the pandemic

How did you maintain regular communication with your employees?	
Via Phone and Email	19%
Via Online communication tools (Zoom, Skype, Meet, etc.)	4%
Via Phone, Email and online communication tools	77%

The support from the top-management was vital to the human resource managers in their activities to ensure employees' wellbeing during the lockdown. Concerning the attitude of top-management towards employee wellbeing and HRM practice in the course of the pandemic crisis, the respondents needed to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

Top-management completely supports employees/ HRM.

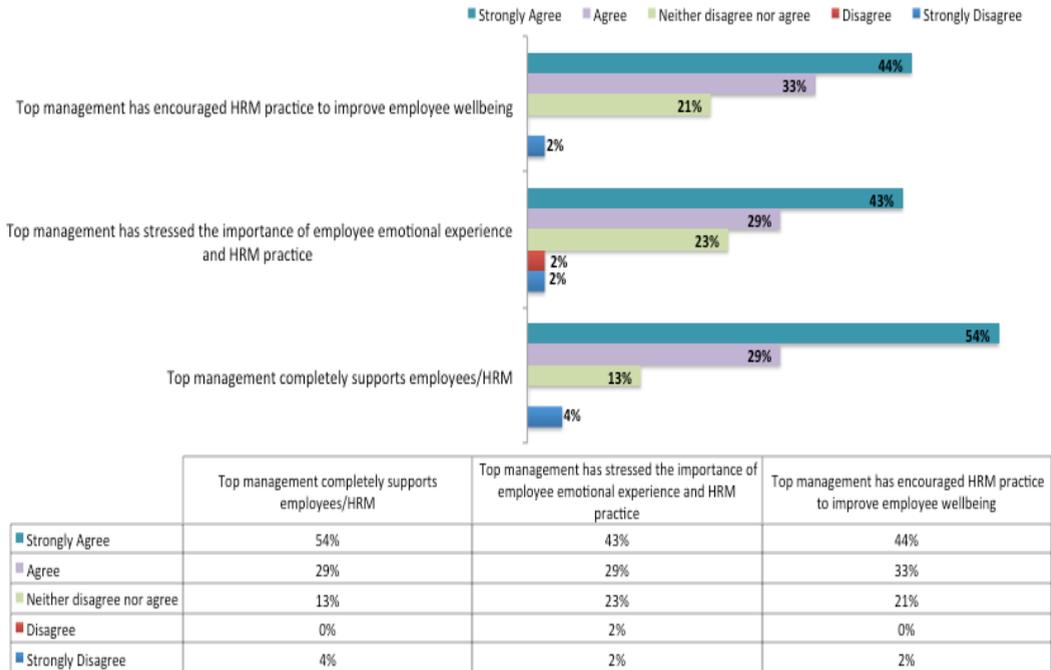
Top-management has stressed the importance of employees' emotional experience and HRM practice.

Top-management has encouraged HRM practice to improve employees' wellbeing.

Items were responded to on a Likert scale of 1-5, where 5= Strongly agree, 4= Agree, 3= Neither disagree nor agree, 2= Disagree, and 1 = Strongly disagree.

According to the responses, the majority of the managers agreed that the top-management of their organizations completely supports employees, understands the importance of employee emotional experience, and encourages HRM practice to improve employees' wellbeing (Fig. 6).

Figure 6. Level of Agreement and Disagreement about the Attitude of Top-management towards Employee Wellbeing during the Pandemic



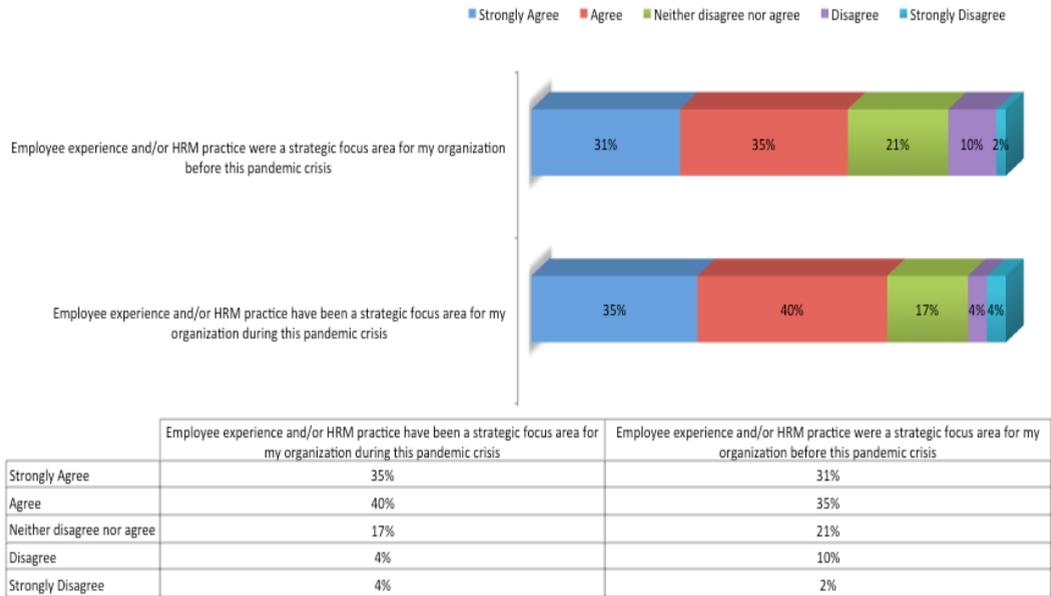
A reliability analysis was carried out on this 5-point Likert scale item. Cronbach's alpha showed acceptable reliability with high internal consistency, $\alpha = 0.93$ (Table 2).

Table 2. Reliability Statistics: Perception of top-management support towards employee wellbeing

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
0.930	0.932	3

In respect of Strategic human resource management, the majority of the organizations have considered HRM practice being a strategic focus area during the pandemic as it was before the crisis (Fig. 7). 35 percent of the respondents strongly agree and 40 percent agree to the statements that employee experience and /or HRM practice have been a strategic focus for their organization during the pandemic. Whereas, 35 percent agree and 31 percent strongly agree that employee experience and /or HRM practice were strategic orientations for their organizations even before the pandemic.

Figure 7. Strategic Focus on HRM



The 5-point Likert scale questionnaire is reliable with high internal consistency as Cronbach's alpha coefficient amounts to $\alpha = 0.84$ (Table 3).

Table 3. Reliability Statistics: Strategic Focus on HRM

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
0.844	0.844	2

To summarize, the research findings demonstrate the importance of organizational support during crisis in different ways. The organizations attempt to encourage HRM practice emphasizing employee wellbeing.

Discussion and Conclusion

The presented research found out that the working routine changed due to the new coronavirus as organizations enforced the appropriate regulations from the country government to prevent the spread of the virus. Consequently, the majority of Georgian organizations introduced remote working system. However, distance working is completely new to the Georgian environment. On the one side companies need to gain knowledge and experience in this regard to manage remote working effectively. On the other hand, employees need to acquire technological skills to keep productivity during remote working routine.

According to the research results, HR managers took initiatives to support employees escorted by establishing flexible working hours. The majority of Georgian worked from home, which required constant communication from the management and less strict policies regarding

performance management. Besides, HRM supported the staff with helping them to update their skills necessary for remote working.

The research demonstrated that salary reduction temporarily to retain jobs took place only on a small scale in contrast with the tendency emphasized in the literature. This can be explained by the small sample participated in this study as well as by the fact that during the survey salaries were not reduced but in the longer-term such decisions might be taken. The whole implication of the lockdown was not fully acknowledged by the managers to report during the survey. Hence, further research can reveal this issue more accurate.

The most significant supporting activities by HR managers were related to employee health and safety, which was determined by the pandemic. If a worker became infected the whole enterprise might paralyze or even get closed. In addition, HRM focused on implementation of formal restrictions and regulations imposed by the government, and manage stress among employees caused by both the pandemic and the unexpected changes. Moreover, HR managers highlighted organizational values and cultures, motivated employees during the pandemic, and took into account workers viewpoints.

The majority of the organizations either cancelled formal trainings or reduced to 1-2 hours per week. This confirms the less experience in digitalization in Georgia. Companies preferred to postpone planned formal trainings until pandemic is over to conduct them face-to-face instead of online. On the contrary, formal regular meetings have been arranged to inform the staff about current developments. Thus, the most organizations chose to carry out urgent tasks online while postpone others. Yet it should be pointed out that personnel development and training programs must be held during the crisis in order to retain spirit, motivation, and productivity at the high level.

Under the circumstances, communication tools are important part to support employees. As online technologies facilitate the better communications, HR managers need to choose them in accordance with the employee preferences. Next research can determine the preferred online communication tools at the organizations.

It is also noteworthy that the support by the top-management is of utmost importance for both human resource management and employees, especially during the crisis. The research confirmed that HRM have been encouraged by the organization in their initiatives concerning employee physical and emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, HRM should be a strategic focus for any organization to lay foundation of employee relationship and organizational culture in order to overcome difficulties and adapt to the changes.

Thus, HRM is of primary importance to support employees, management and an entire company in a critical time, and hence, contribute to the success of the organization.

Study Limitations and Future Research

The main limitation of this study presents the small size of the sample, which did not allow generalizing the findings. Nevertheless, the research offers values as it can be used as a foundation for further studies.

Future research will show the exact measurements how HRM supports workers in the process of remote working, how employees perceive the support, and which themes are covered by

training sessions. In this vein, communication efforts and employee wellbeing should be closely examined with a larger-scale research of both employees and HR manager.

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