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Changes in Human Resources Function in Higher Education Institutions During a Pandemic

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

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by

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MSW, LIU Brooklyn Campus, 2020

MBA, Keller Graduate School of Management at DeVry College of New York, 2011

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

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Abstract

Pandemics have reshaped societies and paved ways for advances in sciences, political systems, technology, medicine, and the economy. However, researchers have not explored how human resources (HR) function changes due to a pandemic in higher education institutions (HEIs) and how managing it contributes to employee performance and employee well-being. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive multiple case study was to explore how HR function changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in different types of HEIs and how managing it contributed to employee performance and employee well-being. The study was grounded in Kotter's eight-step change management model. Data were collected through interviews with eight HR managers who met the participation criteria. Participants provided valuable insights into changes in HR function, strategic responses, and adaptations in response to the pandemic. The thematic analysis revealed key themes, including the strategic role expansion of HR management, an enhanced focus on employee well-being, and adaptability in HR practices. The findings of this study have potential implications for positive social change that include contributions to the field of HR management, serving as a resource for future pandemics and illustrating the benefits of Kotter's conceptual framework in maintaining HR functionality while positively supporting employee performance and well-being.

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Dedication

In humble reverence and heartfelt gratitude, I dedicate this dissertation research to the cherished memories of three remarkable women whose loving spirits influenced my life throughout this academic journey.

My beloved mom was a great inspiration because of her unwavering commitment to being her authentic self. She supported me in her own unique way and taught me the importance of caring for myself and the power of unconditional love, which has become a guiding principle in my life.

My dear aunt Maggie was like a second mom to me. She took me in and loved me like her own child. Her love and care showed me how to be a responsible and loving person.

My aunt Sheila played an irreplaceable role in my life. She was my rock, best friend, strength, and everything. Witnessing her educational journey, regardless of age or life circumstances, inspired me to pursue my higher education journey. My aunt Sheila's example has taught me that it is never too late to learn, grow, and inspire others through the pursuit of knowledge.

In their own unique ways, these three amazing women helped me find the courage and strength to complete this research. I deeply love them all and dedicate this work to their memory. May their spirits continue to guide me as I endeavor to make a meaningful contribution to the world, just as they did in their own extraordinary ways.

Acknowledgments

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to the many individuals who have contributed to the successful completion of my dissertation. Your unwavering support, patience, and tolerance have been instrumental in helping me reach this milestone.

First and foremost, I want to acknowledge my loving husband, who has stood by my side throughout this journey. Your constant encouragement and understanding have been my rock, and I could not have done it without you. To my children and grandchildren, thank you for your patience and for allowing me the time and space to focus on my studies. Your belief in me has been a driving force behind my perseverance.

I also extend my appreciation to my extended family, friends, and even strangers who provided words of encouragement and motivation along the way. Your support has meant the world to me, no matter how big or small.

I sincerely thank my dissertation committee chair and members for their guidance and expertise. Your feedback and commitment to my success have been invaluable, and I am grateful for your trust in me.

To all those who have played a part in this journey, thank you so much for your patience, tolerance, and belief in my abilities. Your contributions have not gone unnoticed, and I am forever grateful for your unwavering support. This accomplishment would not have been possible without each and every one of you.

Table of Contents

<h1 style="text-align:center">List of Tables</h1>

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The recent COVID-19 pandemic impacted traditional higher education institutions (HEIs) to shift employees to working from home and transition face-to-face classes to remote platforms (Cutri et al., 2020; Izumi et al., 2020). While employees transitioned to working remotely and faculty and students moved to virtual classrooms, human resources (HR) professionals faced the reality that all eyes were on them to navigate this unknown territory (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Dirani et al., 2020; Hamouche, 2020; Kaushik, 2020). This study is focused on the impact of COVID-19 on human resources management (HRM) in higher education. Chapter 1 includes a background of the study, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the conceptual framework, the nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, the scope and delimitations of the study, and limitations.

Background

Pandemics are not new; however, the COVID-19 pandemic is the most recent phenomenon that has caused major disruption and change to take place at the college and university level. Kotter's (1996) eight-step change management model guided this study in understanding how and what change took place once school doors were shut and mandatory movement to online classrooms took place. There has been much research on the impact of the pandemic from the teacher and student perspective in HEIs; however, scant research is available that focuses on the role of HRM and how the HR function was impacted or changed to support employee performance and employee well-being in HEIs.

I am also an executive director of administration in higher education, serving as an HR manager. I lived through this phenomenon and witnessed firsthand how the role changed overnight as a response to the closure of schools. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. From that point on, the daily work of an HR manager or HR partner changed. In this research, I explored those changes through a qualitative descriptive multiple-case study approach.

Problem Statement

The situation or issue that prompted me to search the literature is the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2020). Pandemic events, such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), smallpox, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), H1N1/09, and Ebola, have reshaped civilization in social, economic, and political aspects (Huremović, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic impacted traditional HEIs to shift employees to working from home and transition face-to-face classes to remote platforms (Cutri et al., 2020; Izumi et al., 2020). While employees transitioned to working remotely and faculty and students moved to virtual classrooms, the HR professionals faced the reality that all eyes were on them to navigate this unknown territory (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Dirani et al., 2020; Hamouche, 2020; Kaushik, 2020). Previous and current pandemics may have reshaped HR function in HEIs (Bruce & English, 2020a; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Dirani et al., 2020; Hamouche, 2020; Harnett & Kieran, 2020; Kaushik, 2020; Kniffin et al., 2020). These shifts may involve managing change related to employee performance and employee well-being (Bruce & English, 2020a; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Dirani et al.,

2020; Kaushik, 2020). Therefore, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the social problem is HR leaders in higher education were forced to manage change into the "unknown unknowns" (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020, p. 183) while developing sensemaking to help manage risks to employee performance and employee well-being (Kniffin et al., 2020).

Although researchers have investigated this issue, the topic has not been explored through a qualitative lens and through an examination of Kotter's eight-step model. Pandemics have reshaped societies and paved the way for advances in sciences, political systems, technology, medicine, and the economy (Huremović, 2019). The specific problem is that research has not been conducted to explore how the HR function changes due to a pandemic in different types of HEIs and how managing contributes to employee performance and employee well-being.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive multiple case study was to explore how HR function changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic at different types of HEIs and how managing it contributed to employee performance and employee well-being. This study explored how HR function changed through interview questions with members of HRM who worked through the 2020–2021 pandemic at different types of HEIs, such as a 4-year colleges, junior or community colleges, or online colleges or universities. Although COVID-19 is continuing to cause disruption in 2024, this study was focused primarily on the first few days, weeks, and months when the HR department was contacted to shut down schools and move everyone to a virtual environment. Overall, this study aimed to

contribute to the field of HRM as a resource for future pandemics by revealing possible

benefits of Kotter's eight-step framework as a continuity plan for HR practice to manage

emergent changes in HR function while positively supporting employee performance and

employee well-being.

Research Questions

This qualitative research study was guided by the following descriptive, multiple

case study questions regarding how HR function changed due to the COVID-19

pandemic and how managing it contributed to employee performance and employee well-

being:

RQ1: How has HR function changed in HEIs due to a pandemic?

RQ2: How has HR changed as a result of COVID-19 to support employee

performance?

RQ3: How has HR changed as a result of COVID-19 to support employee well-

being?

Conceptual Framework

The theories and/or concepts that ground this study included John P. Kotter's

(1996) eight-step change management conceptual framework. Kotter's (1996) eight-step

framework offered insight into how HR function changed for each step during the

COVID-19 pandemic. The eight steps include "establishing a sense of urgency, creating

the guiding coalition, developing a vision and strategy, communicating the change vision,

empowering broad-based action, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains and

producing more change, and anchoring new approaches in the culture" (Kotter, 1996, p.

21). The logical connections between the framework presented and the nature of my study include Kotter's conceptual framework, which is used extensively for managing organizational changes and changes in HR function to plan, implement, and facilitate change effectively. The conceptual framework offered guidance on organizing and understanding how HR function changed due to the pandemic.

Nature of the Study

To address the research questions, the specific research design included a qualitative descriptive multiple case study. Yin (2012, 2016, 2017) posited a case study is better suited for contemporary events, answering how and why questions within real-life perspectives. A descriptive theory analyzes an event experienced across cases to reveal major similarities (Yin, 2012, 2016, 2017). Multiple case studies are suited for predicting similar results from the individual case study or contrasting results (Yin, 2018). For my research, I wanted to recruit HR managers and or partners from various HEIs to participate in open-ended interviews using Zoom. The types of HEIs included (a) 4-year colleges/universities, (b) junior or community colleges, (c) career colleges, (d) religiously affiliated schools, and (e) online colleges and universities.

Definitions

Human resources management (HRM): An HR practice for managing employees or a people management approach to achieve desired results (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020).

Kotter's eight steps: An eight-step process for creating major change, which consists of establishing a sense of urgency, creating a guiding coalition, developing a vision and strategy, communicating the change vision, empowering broad-based action,

generating short-term wins, consolidating gains and producing more change, and anchoring new approaches in the culture (Kotter, 1996).

Pandemic: A global outbreak of a disease or virus that humans have no immunity against, which spreads quickly from person to person (Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology, n.d.)

Assumptions

I assumed the participants in this study would have lived through a phenomenon in which HR function changed significantly to sustain employee performance and employee well-being during the pandemic. I assumed research participants would be honest and forthright with their responses. I believed HR personnel in various HEIs experienced different changes in HR function by exploring and sharing strategies for future pandemics. I also believed that I would have access to 8–10 subject matter experts to interview.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope and delimitations of this study refer to boundaries. I chose to only include the role of employees in HRM. This laser-focused approach offers rich, thick descriptions of how HR function changed in different types of HEIs. I also chose to only include HR employees of higher education who worked during the 2020–2021 pandemic. Participants had to have been employed no later than fall 2019, so they had at least one traditional semester of experience.

Limitations

Delimitations are boundaries put in place to allow the project to be more manageable; however, limitations are boundaries outside a researcher's control. Patton (2002) wrote:

> It is important to be open and clear about a study's limitations, that is, to anticipate and address criticisms that may be made of a particular sample strategy, especially from people who think that only high-quality samples are random ones. (p. 242)

Patton continued by saying, "the sampling strategy must be selected to fit the purpose of the study" (p. 242). A limitation of this study was that it was not a random sample. Instead, purposive sampling (also referred to as *purposeful sampling*) was used to include the predetermined criterion of having worked in the HR department a minimum of 6 months prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and during the year 2020–2021.

Case study investigations also present limitations in the results as one particular case is untransferable to another setting, making it difficult to replicate (McLeod, 2019). Case studies are also limited in generalizing the results to a broader population (McLeod, 2019). A potential limitation was that HR managers are tired and overworked and may not have been eager to participate in a study while COVID-19 is still a significant factor in their job description. Another potential challenge was ensuring my higher education role as an academic administrator remained distinct from my role as a researcher.

Significance

This study was significant in that first, from a performance point of view, my observations and collection of data revealed how HR in higher education prepared prior to a pandemic, reacted during a pandemic, and planned after the pandemic. Second, the findings reveal a collection of strategies to help other schools plan. Third, from a well-being perspective, the findings of this study help schools remember the support roles within higher education that are often overlooked, such as HR, and how they support them going forward. Lastly, this study demonstrates the value of Kotter's (1996) eight steps of change management framework for managing change in HR in HEIs during a pandemic, which has not yet been shown in the literature. Overall, this study aimed to contribute to the field of HRM as a resource for future pandemics by revealing the benefits of Kotter's eight-step framework as a continuity plan for the HR practice to manage emergent changes in HR function while positively supporting employee performance and employee well-being.

Significance to Practice

The practical significance of this study stems from observing and analyzing change in the HR departments of HEIs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter 2 provides details on pandemics that have occurred for centuries, many of them disrupting workplaces and/or schools. By examining the change that took place during the 2020–2021 school year, business continuity plans can be developed to assist with similar change in the future. In addition to being more prepared for sudden events, these plans can help with managing change related to employee performance and employee well-

being (Bruce & English, 2020a; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Dirani et al., 2020; Kaushik, 2020).

Significance to Theory

Kotter's (1996) renowned eight-step change management model, a staple in organizational change literature, has stood the test of time as a comprehensive guide for navigating transformative processes. Over the decades, the model has been employed as a reliable lens, guide, and framework for numerous studies seeking to decipher and implement successful organizational change. In this study, the model served as an invaluable tool to assess the alignment of sudden and unforeseen changes, such as those triggered by pandemics or severe workplace disruptions, with each of Kotter's well-defined steps. By employing Kotter's model in this context, the research not only contributes to a deeper understanding of the adaptability and applicability of the theory in unpredictable scenarios but also sheds light on the model's continued significance in contemporary organizational change scholarship.

Significance to Social Change

The significance of this study to positive social change is noteworthy as it extends beyond the realm of HRM, offering a valuable resource for addressing future pandemics and other unforeseen challenges. By highlighting the potential advantages of applying Kotter's eight-step framework as a continuity plan within HR practices, the research not only enriches the field but also serves as a strategic guide for organizations aiming to manage emergent changes effectively. In doing so, the study contributes to positive social change by emphasizing the importance of adapting established models to safeguard

employee performance and well-being, thereby fostering a resilient and supportive

workplace environment capable of withstanding disruptions and promoting societal

resilience.

Summary and Transition

This chapter offered a high-level overview of the study, its background, the

problem statement, the research questions, the conceptual framework, and its nature. This

chapter also provides an organized list of definitions along with assumptions,

delimitations, and limitations of the study. The next chapter provides a deeper

understanding of the empirical research related to this project and the theoretical

foundation. The literature review covers the search strategy, HRM, HRM in higher

education, pandemics, and the impact of COVID-19 on employees in higher education.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted traditional HEIs by shifting employees to working from home and transitioning face-to-face classes to remote platforms (Cutri et al., 2020; Izumi et al., 2020). While employees transitioned to working remotely and faculty and students moved to virtual classrooms, the HR professionals faced the reality that all eyes were on them to navigate this unknown territory (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Dirani et al., 2020; Hamouche, 2020; Kaushik, 2020). HR leaders in HEIs were forced to manage change into the "unknown unknowns" (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020, p. 183) while developing sensemaking to help manage risks to employee performance and well-being (Kniffin et al., 2020).

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive multiple case study was to explore how HR function changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in different types of HEIs and how managing it contributes to employee performance and employee well-being. This study explored the experiences of HR managers who worked through the 2020–2021 pandemic navigating changes at their HEIs. Although COVID-19 is continuing to cause disruption in 2024, this study focused primarily on the first few days, weeks, and months when the HR department was contacted to shut down schools and move everyone to a virtual environment.

Oleksiyenko et al. (2023) employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing interviews to comprehensively explore the intricate facets of crisis management within the sphere of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The cadre of

interviewees encompassed various administrative roles, including but not limited to academic registrar, chairperson, chancellor, chief librarian, coordinator, dean of academics, dean, department head, deputy academic registrar, deputy vice chancellor, director of internationalization, director of marketing and communications, director, examination coordinator, principal, program director, system level vice chancellor of integrated services, vice dean, vice rector, and vice chancellor. Oleksiyenko et al. (2023) delineated multifaceted challenges encountered within higher education during the pandemic, encompassing the exigencies of transitioning to remote work, managing academic progress, navigating economic and social upheavals, and grappling with overarching uncertainty. Pertinently, the research highlighted discernible variations in the responsiveness of HEIs to the crisis, with certain entities exhibiting a more expeditious and effective approach than their counterparts.

Oleksiyenko et al. (2023) further delved into the allocation of responsibility for crisis management within these institutions, shedding light on the diverse roles assumed by stakeholders such as administrators, faculty members, and students. Recognizing the nascent status of scholarly inquiry into the domain of campus crisis management in the context of pandemic-affected higher education, Oleksiyenko et al. (2023) advocated for additional research endeavors. As articulated by the authors, "Campus crisis management remains an understudied topic in the context of COVID-affected higher education" (Oleksiyenko et al., 2023, p. 356), emphasizing the need for expanded scholarly exploration in this critical realm. This study answered the call to do more work in the area of crisis management with HEIs.

Ramaditya et al. (2023) also noted that the role of HR is an essential part of survival for HEIs. Their study provided a comprehensive examination of the strategies employed by private universities in Indonesia to navigate the challenges posed by an era of change. Ramaditya et al. shed light on the dynamic landscape within which these institutions operate and offered insights into the various survival strategies implemented to cope with the evolving external and internal environments. The research identifies key typologies of strategies, including efficiency, quality assurance, customer retention, intensive marketing, opening new programs, and mergers/acquisitions. Additionally, Ramaditya et al. delved into HR strategies encompassing career development, reward and compensation, employee welfare, spiritual development, mentoring, reskilling, good university governance, knowledge transfer, government support, collaboration, and staff mobility.

Relating this study to a broader context of change management in HR in higher education provides valuable perspectives on how universities address the complexities of organizational transformation. Change management in higher education involves adapting to shifts in technology, demographics, and societal expectations. The strategies outlined by Ramaditya et al. (2023) offer a nuanced understanding of how private universities in Indonesia respond to external pressures, internal challenges, and the need to enhance HR. The emphasis on career development, reward systems, and employee welfare aligns with the principles of effective change management, emphasizing the importance of engaging and supporting personnel during periods of transition.

Furthermore, Ramaditya et al. (2023) highlighted the critical role of quality assurance, knowledge transfer, and collaboration, emphasizing the need for a strategic approach to change. In higher education, where institutional reputation is closely tied to academic quality, these aspects become crucial elements of change management efforts. The study's insights into mergers and acquisitions as strategies for survival also underscored the broader trend in higher education, where institutions may seek partnerships to bolster resources and capabilities in the face of change.

Ramaditya et al. (2023) acknowledged certain limitations and proposed avenues for future research to deepen the understanding of change management strategies in higher education. The one recommendation for future research that relates to this study is the cross-country comparative study. Because Ramaditya et al. (2023) were focused on a single-country context (Indonesia), future research could extend its scope by conducting research in other countries. Exploring how private universities in different countries implement change management strategies would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of global higher education dynamics. This research serves to extend this field of study and the work done by Ramaditya et al. (2023).

Kniffin et al. (2020) reviewed prior research focused on changes in the workplace, workers, and work practices considering the impact of COVID-19 and identifying issues for future research along with insights to inform solutions. Kniffin et al. (2020) called for exploring the pandemic's impact on employees and actions taken by HR managers to mitigate employee performance and employee well-being, which is the foundation of the current study. Therefore, to understand how HR function changed due to the pandemic,

this chapter covers the literature search strategy, the conceptual framework for the study, and the literature review. The chapter concludes with the summary and transitions to Chapter 3, the research method.

Literature Search Strategy

I conducted this literature review using Walden University Library to access the following databases: ABI/INFORM Collection, Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, Thoreau Multi-Database, ERIC, Education Source, SAGE, ProQuest Central, and Google Scholar. The search was limited to peer-reviewed scholarly journals using keywords and search terms for related articles, which included *human resources, human resource management, HR function, HRM in higher education, higher education, higher education institutions, university responses,* and *academia*. I also used filters by subject to the search terms or keywords. The filters included *COVID-19, coronavirus, outbreak, pandemic, employees, employee performance, employee well-being, employee adjustment, mental health, loneliness,* and *depression*. Words used in the search regarding the conceptual framework included *change management, Kotter's change management theory, Kotter's eight-stage change theory, Kotter's eight-step change model, pandemic, coronavirus, higher education,* and *leadership*. To search the literature on past pandemics, keywords included *pandemics, history of pandemics, influenza, SARS, Ebola virus, impact of pandemics on society, learning from past pandemics, COVID impact on higher educational institution,* and *the role of HR during COVID in higher education*.

Conceptual Framework

In HEIs, the core HRM function involves recruitment and placement, training and development, performance appraisal, compensation and benefits, and employee relations (Chaudhari, 2019; Menon, 2015). The conceptual framework that grounded this study was John P. Kotter's (1996) eight-step change management model. Kotter (1996) described organizational change as a multistep process that creates power and motivation to overcome resistance to change driven by high-quality leadership in his book *Leading Change*. Kotter (1996) posited an eight-step process for creating major change, which consists of establishing a sense of urgency, creating a guiding coalition, developing a vision and strategy, communicating the change vision, empowering broad-based action, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains and producing more change, and anchoring new approaches in the culture. The results of this study based in data collected from HR managers at HEIs offer guidance on organizing and understanding the changes in HR function to plan, implement, and facilitate change effectively in HEIs.

The first step, establishing a sense of urgency, begins with scanning current trends and identifying current crises, potential crises, and opportunities (Kotter, 1996). Once the necessary change is identified, establishing a sense of urgency requires cooperation, initiative, and the willingness of many people to address any sources of complacency to transform the organization (Kotter, 1996). Sources of complacency stem from a lack of a visible crisis or too many visible successes within the organization (Kotter, 1996). The goal of establishing a sense of urgency is to capture people's attention, set ambitious goals, and promote financial losses to help people see the organization's crisis-like nature

(Kotter, 1996). The first step also requires competent middle and lower-level managers to create conditions that support transformation.

Organizational change never happens with one single leader (Kotter, 1996). The second step, creating a guiding coalition with people in a position of power, expertise, credibility, and leadership skills to drive the change, is needed to make change happen (Kotter, 1996). The team members would all have the same objectives, common goals, and commitment to their division of the organization, along with mutual understanding and trust (Kotter, 1996).

The third step, developing a vision and strategy, clarifies the purpose for change and motivates people quickly and efficiently into action in the right direction (Kotter, 1996). The third step is considered an investment step for transforming the organization (Kotter, 1996). Therefore, the fourth step, communicating the change vision, is essential for establishing a clear understanding of the vision, the goals, and the direction for people involved in the transformation (Kotter, 1996).

The purpose of the fifth step, empowering broad-based action, is to remove as many barriers as possible to implement and empower people to effect change (Kotter, 1996). Barriers can include structures, skills, systems, and supervisors resistant to change (Kotter, 1996). Generating short-term wins provides evidence that the transformation efforts are worth it (Kotter, 1996). Step six, short-term wins, helps build momentum, gives the guiding coalition concrete data on the viability of their ideas, and helps eliminate resistance to change (Kotter, 1996). Creating short-term wins also keeps the

urgency rate up to complete tasks (Kotter, 1996). The overall purpose of the first six stages is to build momentum to blast through thick walls in the organization.

The seventh step, consolidating gains and producing more change, will sustain momentum or risk regression to old practice behaviors (Kotter, 1996). Until the eighth step is accomplished, anchoring the new approaches into the organization's culture, producing more change, and clarifying the vision, the change efforts can be stalled or undone (Kotter, 1996). Anchoring new approaches into the organization's culture comes last because alterations of norms come at the end of the transformation process when it becomes apparent the transformation is superior to the old methods (Kotter, 1996).

The current research was conducted to explore how HR function changes due to pandemics in HEIs and how managing it relates to employee performance and well-being. The logical connection between Kotter's conceptual framework, which is used extensively for managing organizational changes, is to offer guidance on organizing and understanding changes in the HR function in response to a pandemic to plan, implement, and facilitate change effectively. Kotter's eight-step model is a popular, widely used change management framework (Appelbaum et al., 2012, 2017). The model is best known for its simplicity and straightforward framework (Borrego & Henderson, 2014; Kang et al., 2020; Pollack & Pollack, 2015; Wentworth et al., 2020). Hackman (2017) described how Kotter's eight-step change model was adapted for reorganizing an academic library environment. The first three steps "came naturally from the department head's approach to management" (p. 15), which managed employee expectations. This

approached worked well because the trust level was high, as Kotter (1996) indicated was needed.

In academia, Kang et al. (2020) studied successful change management guided by Kotter's change model in an engineering department in a research university. The four-year project included an interdisciplinary team of 14 members of administrators and faculty. Kang et al. (2020) found that creating a sense of urgency, forming a shared vision, and guiding a coalition was straightforward as it aligned with the grant-seeking culture of the university. Communication of short-term wins in academia aligned with expectations for tenure and promotion, especially since faculty possess high autonomy. Faculty are engaged when their research is valued by the organization and the students. Changing the culture in higher education settings depends on the stakeholders with high autonomy (faculty). Kang et al. (2020) reported Kotter's steps explained the importance of creating short-term wins for faculty to successfully change the culture of a department in higher education.

In the workplace, Chappell et al. (2016) explored the extent to which health promotion practitioners aligned Kotter's model of leading planned change to workplace health and well-being initiatives. None of the participants reported using a formal organizational development model (Chappell et al., 2016). However, the interviewees reported that communicating the vision, developing the vision, and creating a guiding coalition were natural and necessary components of the change process (Chappell et al., 2016). In addition, they agreed that failure to establish the appropriate sense of urgency can lead to momentum, and failure to consolidate and anchor change within the

organization leaves the change initiatives at the mercy of the forces of inertia (Chappell et al., 2016).

Also, in the workplace, Hee and Shanmugam (2019) addressed the problem HRM faces with recruiting the right talent and retaining them in a digital era. Hee and Shanugam (2019) recommended using Kotter's eight-step framework to design a gamification intervention or a fun element for recruitment, employee engagement, and retention. One major point Hee and Shanugam (2019) posited is that the HR function is normally not part of the change process in organizations despite being the heart of the business, which possesses a unique, differentiating, and important role in accepting change. Hackman (2017), on the other hand, posited one lesson to be learned for departmental transformation is involving HR in the change process in the beginning stages. Since HRM involvement has not been mentioned in the research as part of the guiding coalition in higher education (senior-level often refers to president, deans, chairs, directors, etc.), the current study aimed to explore how the HR function changed in HEIs were forced to shut down in response to a pandemic.

Radwan (2020) proclaimed that change is hard in academia due to employees' resistance to change. Radwan recommended academic leaders be professionally prepared to lead change using Kotter's eight-step change model as a framework (Radwan, 2020). Radwan (2020) utilized the model to change a traditional program to a modern health science program, experienced minimal resistance to change, and ensured long-term success. However, Radwan's analysis followed Kotter's updated accelerated change model, which tends to be more applicable in the world of higher education (Kotter, 2014;

Petersen & Bartel, 2020). Kotter's eight sequential steps model follows a top-down driven initiative, which would face more resistance in higher education that operates with shared governance with faculty (Petersen & Bartel, 2020). The accelerate model suggests once a leader identifies the required change, a core group of people within a networking system would work through the eight steps as a separate entity inside the organization, compared to the hierarchal system change that forces the entire organization through the eight steps (Kotter, 2014; Petersen & Bartel, 2020).

Petersen and Bartel (2020) explored how leaders at a traditional university implemented change that was incongruent with the university's culture and the strategies used to transition to its first fully online program. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, University X experienced difficulties recruiting traditional college students due to is rural location (Petersen & Bartel, 2020). Due to the substantial decline in enrollment, the president, along with other leaders, concluded that offering online opportunities would increase and diversify enrollment (Petersen & Bartel, 2020). University X formed a committee with faculty and mid-level administrators who were passionate about the change and determined to see offering fully online programs regardless of obstacles (Petersen & Bartel, 2020). Establishing the need for change was essential to the process. Champions identified the program that would succeed online based on labor market needs and allowed faculty who prefer the traditional in-person experience to continue (hierarchy system) while the master's online program was initiated withing a network operating system, which did not impact those faculty who were resistant to the change due to fear of online learning devaluing and damaging the reputation of University X

(Petersen & Bartel, 2020). Online education became a success as it slowly began to become part of the organizational culture (Kotter, 1996), and the adjustment added benefits once the COVID-19 pandemic forced universities to offer alternative teaching methods (Petersen & Bartel, 2020).

Altawaty et al. (2021) referred to Kotter's change model, 1st step – create a sense of urgency, as a direct response to the forced shutdown of in-person activities due to the pandemic. The urgency to transition from in-person classes to virtual learning shifted a large responsibility to the faculty to participate, learn, support, and engage students in the online environment, which posed challenges to faculty who formerly resisted online learning. Despite resistance to change and the need to quickly change with limited options available to continue teaching, the resistance to teaching online subsided (Altawaty et al., 2021).

I employed Kotter's change model as the conceptual framework for several reasons. Most noticeably, Kotter's eight-step model is a popular, widely used change management framework (Appelbaum et al., 2012, 2017). The conceptual framework depicts organizational change as a multistep process (Figure 1) that creates power and motivation to overcome resistance to change driven by high-quality leadership (Kotter, 1996). HR managers are responsible for administering the HR procedures, policies, and programs throughout the organization (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021), along with strategic planning with top executives to secure regulatory compliance (Menon, 2015). They are also responsible for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the people within the organization, having an indirect effect on productivity, commitment, and job

satisfaction (Lussier & Hendon, 2016; Mastoi, 2020; Menon, 2015). The conceptual

framework broadens our understanding of how the HR function may have changed on

each of the steps described by Kotter to stimulate power and motivation to support

employees' well-being and performance for the sustainability of the organization's HEIs

during a pandemic.

Figure 1

Kotter's Eight-Steps of Change

The Eight-Step Process of Creating Major Change

1. Establishing a Sense of Urgency
   - Examining the market and competitive realities
   - Identifying and discussing crises, potential crises, or major opportunities

2. Creating the Guiding Coalition
   - Putting together a group with enough power to lead the change
   - Getting the group to work together like a team

3. Developing a Vision and Strategy
   - Creating a vision to help direct the change effort
   - Developing strategies for achieving that vision

4. Communicating the Change Vision
   - Using every vehicle possible to constantly communicate the new vision and strategies
   - Having the guiding coalition role model the behavior expected of employees

5. Empowering Broad-Based Action
   - Getting rid of obstacles
   - Changing systems or structures that undermine the change vision
   - Encouraging risk taking and nontraditional ideas, activities, and actions

6. Generating Short-Term Wins
   - Planning for visible improvements in performance, or "wins"
   - Creating those wins
   - Visibly recognizing and rewarding people who made the wins possible

7. Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change
   - Using increased credibility to change all systems, structures, and policies that don't fit together and don't fit the transformation vision.
   - Hiring, promoting, and developing people who can implement the change vision
   - Reinvigorating the process with new projects, themes, and change agents

8. Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture
   - Creating better performance through customer- and productivity-oriented behavior, more and better leadership, more effective management
   - Articulating the connections between new behaviors and organizational success
   - Developing means to ensure leadership development and succession

Note. Adapted from *Leading change* by Kotter (1996), Harvard Business Review Press

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

This study explores how the HR function changes due to pandemics in HEIs and how managing it relates to employee performance and well-being. The literature review explores the HR function, which varies across organizations but involves areas in HRM such as employment relations, job design, learning and development, reward management, performance management, employee well-being, talent management, and HR administration. The discussion further explores HRM position levels in HEIs and their core functions in universities. Next, an overview of pandemics, starting from the plague of Athenian in 430 BC through COVID-19, is explored to understand how it reshaped and continues to reshape society. There is an emphasis on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted employees, which is worth considering as it relates to the function of HR in responding to the unprecedented needs of the employees. The literature overview is the reference point for coding and assessing the data collection from the descriptive, multiple case study. The literature review concludes with a summary and conclusion discussion.

Human Resources Management

Back in the 1970s, HR managers, known at the time as personnel managers, were only considered paper pushers or people who maintained organizational records of all employees with no connection with managing the business processes of the organization (Lussier & Hendon, 2016). However, in the mid-1990s, HR managers were viewed as strategic partners with organizations to promote growth through human capital performance (Menon, 2015). HRM and the HR function expanded from record-keeping

to managing employees' well-being, maximizing the return on investment from human capital, and minimizing financial risks to support the growth of organizations (Lussier & Hendon, 2016).

Alzyoud (2018) defined HRM as the science and practice that deals with employment relationships and all the actions, decisions, and issues that are related to these relationships. Armstrong and Taylor (2020) defined HRM as an HR practice for managing employees or a people management approach to achieve desired results. Alzyoud (2018) described HR as a strategic and coherent approach to managing employees, the most valued asset of an organization, to achieve organizational goals and objectives. Armstrong and Taylor (2020) further explained HRM involves all activities associated with managing employee relationships in the firm. The employee relationships or HR include the "knowledge, skills, networks, and energies of people and, underpinning them, their physical and emotional health, intellectual capabilities, personalities, and motivations" (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020, p. 4).

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), HRM, categorized as HR specialists, recruits, screens, interviews, places new hires, handles compensations and benefits, offers training, and oversees employee relations. HRM is responsible for administering the HR procedures, policies, and programs in the organization (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021), along with strategic planning with top executives to secure regulatory compliance (Menon, 2015). HRM assists with hiring the right person (Al-Twal et al., 2019; Ulrich, 2013), job commitment, job satisfaction, and organizational effectiveness (Mastoi, 2020). Armstrong and Taylor (2020) evaluated the impact of HRM

on organizational performance. The outcomes showed a strong relationship between employees' workplace performance and HR practices focused on developing people's skills, collaboration, innovation, cooperation, and synergy in teams (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). HR policies directly influence HR practices, influencing staff behaviors and attitudes, with the intention to enhance performance while adding value to the organization (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). Therefore, the purpose or function of HR in organizations deals primarily with improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the people within the organization, having an indirect effect on productivity, commitment, and job satisfaction (Lussier & Hendon, 2016; Mastoi, 2020; Menon, 2015).

On the contrary, recent literature on HRM shows a shift in HRM roles from the traditional operational function listed above (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023; Jo et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023). Cayrat and Boxall (2023) discussed the transition in the HR function from an operational to a more strategic role influenced by various factors. The pursuit of a more strategic position by HR experts has been thoroughly explored, especially following the introduction of the HRM terminology (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023). The HRM terminology, known as HRM nomenclature, was introduced to the field of HRM prior to the 1980s, and the research on the terminology started the request for a more strategic role by HR (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023). Numerous HR practitioners have endeavored to undergo this shift, employing various tactics such as enhancing their skill sets, improving measurement and analytics in HRM, and transferring or reducing operational responsibilities through devolution, outsourcing, or automation (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023). The degree of success in this transition has been shaped by intricate, multi-faceted

contingencies and by the diverse perceptions and reactions of the stakeholders engaged in HRM (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023).

Lee et al. (2023) examined how socially responsible HRM affects employee job performance, shedding light on a crucial element of strategic HR roles incorporating social responsibility within HR practices. Lee et al. (2023) discussed the strategic impact of HR in cultivating an ethical and socially responsible culture within organizations and how such practices positively impact employee welfare and elevate the organization's reputation and overall performance. Lee et al. (203) research on the indirect impacts of socially responsible HRM, perceived external prestige, and organizational identification highlights the shift in traditional HR operational practices to more influencer, strategic HR practices on how employees perceive and perform in their roles.

Further research by Jo et al. (2023) supports this trend by exploring the relational aspects of HR functions. Jo et al. (2023) research highlighted the advisory and consultative roles of HR, particularly toward internal stakeholders like line managers, employees, and senior management, which showed how the HR functions have transcended administrative duties to positioning themselves as key influencers in the formation and implementation of strategic HRM practices. These practices contributed to enhancing organizational performance and human capital resources, thereby highlighting the strategic importance of HR in contemporary organizations (Jo et al., 2023).

The HR function varies across organizations but involves most of the following areas of HRM: managing diversity, dealing with employment law issues, knowledge management, workforce planning, employment relations, job design, organization design

and development, learning and development, reward management, performance management, employee well-being, talent management, inclusion, health and safety, HR administration (Armstrong & Taylor, 2023) and HR strategic management (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023; Jo et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023).

HRM in Higher Education Institutions

In HEIs, the most common HR position levels range from chief officers, supervisors, seniors, entry/mid-level, and coordinators (Pritchard & Schmidt, 2020). The core HRM function involves HR leadership, equal employment opportunity compliance, recruitment and placement, training and development, performance appraisal, classification, compensations and benefits, and employee relations (Chaudhari, 2019; Menon, 2015; Pritchard & Schmidt, 2020). Szelagowska-Rudzka (2018) stated the HR subsystems in universities include "employment planning, establishing and terminating employment relationships, assessment of employees, their development, motivation, and remuneration" (p. 212). Abu Teir and Zhang's (2016) assessment of the HR function by the College of University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) showed the HR function also includes diversity, equity and inclusion, risk management, information systems and technology, employee leave and holidays, safety and health, and retirement. Overall, Ulrich (2013) defined the role of HR professionals as adding value to the organization. HR professionals deliver value through talent, leadership, and capability. Talent's value is delivered by having the right people with the right skills and commitment to using those skills. Leadership's value is delivered by coaching and developing leaders at whatever level within the organization to make wise choices for the

organization's future. Capability's value, defined as the culture of the organization, is delivered by shaping how organizations work as a system based on what the organization is known for and good at (Ulrich, 2013).

In the realm of HRM within HEIs, the article by Riggio and Newstead (2023) constitutes a significant contribution, shedding light on the critical role of leadership during times of crisis. The traditional conceptualization of leadership in stable and predictable conditions has often overshadowed the imperative role leaders play during periods of uncertainty and upheaval, particularly in educational settings. Riggio and Newstead (2023) challenge this paradigm, asserting that there is no situation where leadership is more pivotal than during crises, which place exceptional strains on organizations and necessitate swift and decisive action.

Riggio and Newstead (2023) emphasized the distinctiveness of crisis leadership, particularly in the face of unforeseen and novel challenges. Notably, the authors stress the importance of flexibility, adaptability, and quick decision-making, qualities indispensable for leaders navigating crises. As crises in higher education become increasingly frequent and complex, exacerbated by global interconnectivity, leaders must grapple with issues ranging from public health crises, exemplified by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, to other multifaceted challenges impacting diverse stakeholders.

Riggio and Newstead (2023) underscored the need for leaders, including those in HRM roles, to possess competencies that extend beyond crisis containment and recovery. Their insights resonate with contemporary changes observed in HR functions in HEIs, as identified in numerous studies. The demand for adaptability, emphasis on employee well-

being, transformative decision-making approaches, and the pivotal role of communication and coordination align with the transformative shifts witnessed in HR practices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the context of HRM in higher education, Riggio and Newstead's (2023) work serves as a theoretical anchor, providing a framework to understand the nuanced dynamics of leadership during crises. The article not only underscores the challenges faced by leaders but also outlines the competencies required to navigate crises successfully. This foundational understanding is crucial for comprehending the broader context within which HR functions in higher education have evolved in response to unforeseen challenges, particularly those posed by the global pandemic. As institutions strive to cultivate resilient HR strategies, Riggio and Newstead's insights offer valuable guidance for academic leaders and HR professionals seeking to navigate the complex landscape of crisis management in higher education.

The article by Ozkan and Pekkolay (2023) discussed the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, particularly formal education, and its implications for HRM. The pandemic has disrupted traditional education methods, such as face-to-face learning, leading to challenges in achieving sufficient efficiency in online and distance learning. In the context of HR, Ozkan and Pekkolay (2023) emphasized the critical role of HRM units in mitigating the economic and psychological impact of the pandemic on all parties involved. The human factor is identified as a valuable component for organizations to achieve their goals, and the HR unit is tasked with minimizing the negative effects of the current situation.

The pandemic has brought about significant changes in work dynamics, with remote work becoming more prevalent. Challenges related to work-family relationships, interpersonal communication, and the physical separation of work and family areas are highlighted. Ozkan and Pekkolay (2023) suggested that effective job designs and definitions addressing these challenges can impact employee motivation and attitudes toward the organization. The role of technology in HR is discussed, particularly in the recruitment process. The use of digital recruitment tools, including telephone interviews and video conferencing, is predicted to become more widespread. Ozkan and Pekkolay (2023) also anticipated an increased emphasis on digitalization in recruitment processes, facilitated by rapid developments in information and communication technologies. Training is acknowledged as a crucial aspect of employee development, with businesses continuing their training efforts despite disruptions to formal education. The pandemic has accelerated the adoption of online learning, e-learning, simulation, and distance learning methods, making training more cost-effective and accessible. Ozkan and Pekkolay (2023) suggested that employees motivated by the stress and uncertainty brought about by the pandemic will prioritize their professional development.

Ozkan and Pekkolay (2023) concluded by highlighting the need for organizations to update their structures and develop new business models to remain competitive post-pandemic. They emphasize that competencies expected from employees may change, and businesses will need to reevaluate their HR structuring accordingly. The impact of the pandemic on global job markets and the necessity for businesses to adapt to change are also discussed. Ozkan and Pekkolay (2023) provided a comprehensive overview of the

challenges and transformations brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in the education sector and their implications for HRM. They underscore the importance of adaptability, technology adoption, and strategic HR planning in navigating the new reality of business life after the pandemic.

Pandemics

Pandemic events, such as HIV, smallpox, SARS, HiNi/09, and Ebola, have historically reshaped human civilization's social, economic, and political aspects by eradicating societies while clearing the way for advances in public health, medicine, and innovations (Huremović, 2019). Pandemic is a word first used to describe the spreading of a disease in a country (Sampath et al., 2021) and is also known as a plague in a biblical context (Baber, 2020; Huremović, 2019; Imran et al., 2021; Sampath et al., 2021). It is currently defined as a global outbreak of a disease or virus that humans have no immunity against, which spreads quickly from person to person (Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology, n.d.). Sampath et al. (2021) posited that the causes of pandemics are often related to the transmission of zoonotic infections. Zoonotic infections, also known as zoonoses, are caused by harmful viruses, fungi, parasites, and bacteria that spread between people and animals (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021e). Zoonotic infections spread through direct and indirect contact, vector-borne, foodborne, and waterborne (CDC, 2021e). Sampath et al. (2021) also suggested that shortages of healthcare workers, unprepared health systems, and antimicrobial resistance or lack of products that kill or slow the spread of harmful viruses are the leading causes of pandemics.

Plague of Athenian

Historically, documented major pandemic outbreaks began back in 430 B.C. with

the plague of Athenian (Huremović, 2019; Imran et al., 2021; Sampath et al., 2021). The

Athenian Plague, originating from Ethiopia and spreading throughout Egypt and Greece

during the Peloponnesian War, killed 25% of the total population, including its leader,

Pericles (Huremović, 2019; Imran et al., 2021; Sampath et al., 2021). It is believed that

the overcrowding in Athens due to the war is one of the contributing factors to the cause

of the plague, though the cause of the disease is unknown (Huremović, 2019; Sampath et

al., 2021). The symptoms of the plaque included a rash covering the body, headaches,

painful stomach cramping, vomiting, coughing up blood, and pink eye (Huremović,

2019; Sampath et al., 2021). Eventually, the infected individual would die in seven to

eight days (Huremović, 2019; Sampath et al., 2021). Huremović (2019) depicted an era

from 430-426 BC when people lost faith in religion and the political system, and

superstition began to rise.

Antonine Plague

In 165 A.D., the outbreak known as the Antonine Plague or Plague of the Galen

occurred in the Roman Empire (Baber, 2020; Huremović, 2019; Imran et al., 2021;

Sampath et al., 2021). The Antonine plague began in Mesopotamia and was transferred

back to the empire by the Roman troops, killing one-third of its population, amounting to

5 million people, including the Roman emperor (Baber, 2020; Huremović, 2019). The

symptoms included bloody diarrhea, fever, pustular skin eruptions, and sometimes

coughing up blood (Baber, 2020; Sampath et al., 2021). The plague caused the decline of

the Roman Empire, modification to religion, the spread of superstition, and a rise in Christianity and Mithraism (Huremović, 2019; Imran et al., 2021). The impact of the Antonine plague also caused alterations in culture and politics due to the severe health, economic, and social crisis and the need to recruit Barbarian troops into the Roman army (Huremović, 2019; Imran et al., 2021).

Plague of Justinian

The Plague of Justinian hit the Mediterranean in 541 BC and claimed the lives of 25-50 million people (Baber, 2020; Imran et al., 2021). The infection was caused by Yersinia pestis, a bacterium transmitted from black rats to humans through bites from infected fleas (Baber, 2020; Barbieri et al., 2020; Sampath et al., 2021). The symptoms included hallucinations, fever, cough, buboes (lymph node) on the groin area or armpits, and vomiting blood (Huremović, 2019; Imran et al., 2021; Sampath et al., 2021). Many individuals who survived had to live with withered thighs and tongues (Huremović, 2019). The Byzantine Empire at the time was significantly impacted by the decrease in economic output, decrease in tax revenue, decrease in their defense system, and severe disruption in trade and the agricultural sector (Baber, 2020; Imran et al., 2021).

The Black Death

The Black Death, which occurred between 1343 and 1353, was a global outbreak across Europe, Asia, and Africa with a death toll of 200 million people, killing 60% of Europe's population (Baber, 2020; Huremović, 2019; Sampath et al., 2021). Doctors first believed the plague was caused by the miasma theory, which is corrupted or bad air (Huremović, 2019; Sampath et al., 2021). Later, it was discovered that the plague was

caused by Yersinia pestis (Baber, 2020; Huremović, 2019; Imran et al., 2021; Sampath et al., 2021) and had three clinical types: (a) the bubonic plague, which is lymph nodes, (b) septicemic plague, which occurs when untreated lymph nodes move into the bloodstream, and (c) pneumonic plague, untreated lymph notes that moved into the lungs (CDC, 2021f; Sampath et al., 2021). The Black Death wiped out entire societies and caused a shortage of workers, increased poverty, and devastation of agriculture, trade, and traveling. Due to the reduction in population, innovation emerged to increase productivity, and peasants became wealthier, creating a middle-class group (Huremović, 2019; Imran et al., 2021). The Black Death also influenced art and literature as it was believed to be the world's end (Huremović, 2019; Imran et al., 2021).

Influenza

Various plagues/pandemics appeared during 1492 - 1885, such as the plague of London and the seven cholera pandemics (Imran et al., 2021; Sampath et al., 2021). Influenza (flu), a contagious virus that affects the nose, throat, and lungs (National Foundation for Infectious Diseases, 2022), was first reported as a pandemic in the 19th century throughout Europe from 1831-1833; it occurred again from 1847-1848 and from 1889-1894 it was known as the Russian Flu (Berche, 2022; Valleron et al., 2008). In more recent years, the mutated strains of the disease contributed to the deadliest pandemic. When comparing the numbers of human deaths, the largest case of casualties was the Spanish flu from 1918-1920, followed by the Asian flu from 1957-1958 (CDC, 2019a; Imran et al., 2021; Sampath et al., 2021), and the Hong Kong flu in 1968 – 1970 (Jester et al., 2020; Sampath et al., 2021). The Spanish flu appeared during World War I,

with a high mortality rate among young and healthy individuals (Huremović, 2019;

Sampath et al., 2021). The flu infected more than 500 million people, killing 25 million

in the first six months and claiming more than 50 million people over the years (Baber,

2020; CDC, n.d.; Huremović, 2019; Imran et al., 2021; Sampath et al., 2021). The

economy shifted with an increase in earnings in health care systems, higher rates of

physical disabilities, increased unemployment rates, lower social-economic status, and

paradoxically, an increased rate in the housing industry (Imran et al., 2021). The flu

remains prevalent today and is discussed further under the topic of Swine flu.

HIV/AIDS

Around the 1920s, the first case of the human immunodeficiency virus, known as

HIV, was reported in Congo as a disease transferred from chimpanzees to humans (CDC,

2021d; Imran et al., 2021). HIV had sporadic cases in the beginning, and between 1970-

1981 reports showed up to 300,000 people were infected by the disease (Imran et al.,

2021). HIV attacks the immune system and can lead to acquired immunodeficiency

syndrome (AIDS) if left untreated (CDC, 2021d). AIDS is a severe stage of HIV, and

infected people usually die within three years (CDC, 2021d). By 2011, 60 million people

were infected by HIV, and over 25 million died from AIDs (Baber, 2020). HIV is a

current incurable virus that can be controlled through antiretroviral treatment that

suppresses the virus from replicating in the body, which allows the immune system to

repair itself (CDC, 2021d). Despite medication available to control HIV and reduce

transfer from person to person, in 2019, there were 1.7 million new cases of infected

people, and the leading cause of death to millions worldwide (CDC, 2020c).

Smallpox

Smallpox, an acute contagious variola virus, also known as VARV, is believed to have existed for at least 3,000 years and caused the death of approximately 500 million people in the 20th century (1901-2000) (WHO, Smallpox; Muhlemann et al.) (Mühlemann et al., 2020; WHO, 2022c). The origin of the disease is unknown (CDC, 2021a) and transferred from person to person (WHO, 2022d). Smallpox symptoms start with flu-like systems consisting of a high fever, body aches, and vomiting (CDC, 2021a; WHO, 2022c). On day four, a rash appears as red spots on the tongue, mouth, and throat (CDC, 2021a). The rash spreads and appears all over the skin within 24 hours, turning into pustule sores, followed by scabs that fall off about three weeks after the rash appears (CDC, 2021a; WHO, 2022c). In 1796, Dr. Edward Jenner created the first vaccine for smallpox (CDC, 2021a; Huremović, 2019). The last cases of smallpox in modern times appeared in the 1970s in South America, Asia, and Africa (CDC, 2021a; Huremović, 2019). On May 8, 1980, the World Health Assembly announced the eradication of smallpox due to their Smallpox Eradication Program from 1967 to 1977, the most significant achievement for international public health (CDC, 2021a; WHO, 2022c).

SARS

Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-CoV), a respiratory disease associated with the coronavirus genus, caused an epidemic from 2002 to 2003 (CDC, 2017; Sampath et al., 2021; WHO, 2022b). SARS-CoV, an airborne virus, spreads from person to person through saliva droplets and surfaces touched by an infected person (WHO, 2022b). However, its intermediate hosts consisted of raccoon dogs, palm civets, and bats

(Sampath et al., 2021). The SARS-CoV epidemic started in China and spread to North America, South America, Europe, Asia, and Canada, with a low death toll of 774 individuals compared to the other major epidemics (CDC, 2017; Huremović, 2019; Sampath et al., 2021). The low death toll was due to the diligence of public health officials to contain the outbreak (Huremović, 2019; Sampath et al., 2021). SARS-CoV was the first virus studied that showed the development of a mental disorder among the affected individuals, their families, healthcare providers, and communities (Huremović, 2019; Sampath et al., 2021). Some of the contributing factors to the development of mental health disorders may have resulted from public health officials enforcing social distancing, isolation, and the wearing of masks, which created social panic (Huremović, 2019; Sampath et al., 2021).

Swine Flu

In 2009, the Swine flu, also known as (H1N1pdm09) influenza virus (CDC, 2019b), started in Mexico in April 2009 and spread to 122 countries within six weeks due to travel and global trade (Huremović, 2019; Sampath et al., 2021). The swine flu, a reprise of the Spanish flu from 1918, is a respiratory disease of pigs (CDC, 2019c) and a virus combined with birds, pigs, and humans, causing disease in humans (Mayo Foundation for Medical Foundation and Research, 2022). The death toll rate ranged from 20,0000 to 500,000, comparatively low to the previous flu outbreak (Huremović, 2019). However, the swine flu has been deemed a pandemic due to the WHO's first global public preparedness and mitigation policy efforts to end the influenza virus (Huremović, 2019; Sampath et al., 2021). The swine flu abated in May of 2010, causing a public

backlash to the WHO preparedness efforts, which caused only a global panic, and allocated billions of dollars to pharmaceutical companies for developing unproven vaccines to work against the virus at the time (Huremović, 2019). Today, the (H1N1pdm09) virus continues to cause illnesses, hospitalization, and death every year and is referred to as a seasonal burden in the United States (CDC, 2019b, p. 1, 2020b). The CDC reported that from 2010 to 2011, about 21 million individuals were infected with the flu (CDC, 2020b). From 2014–2015, 30 million were infected with the flu, with an increase of 45 million from 2017–2018 and a decrease in infection rate to 38 million from 2019-2020 (CDC, 2020b). The death rate, on the other hand, ranged from 37,000 in 2010 to 51,000 in 2014, with another increase in 2017 to 61,000, followed by a significant drop to 22,000 deaths in 2019 (CDC, 2020b).

Ebola Virus Disease

Ebola virus disease (EVD), initially discovered in 1976 in the Democratic Republic of Congo, led to major outbreaks in several African countries between 2014 and 2016 (CDC, 2021b, 2021c). EVD outbreaks were considered endemic versus a pandemic since most infected individuals were in Africa (Huremović, 2019) compared to only eleven reported to be in the United States (CDC, 2020a). EVD is believed to be a zoonotic or animal-borne disease deriving from possibly fruit bats or other nonhuman primates, such as monkeys or apes (CDC, 2021b, 2021c; Huremović, 2019). The virus spreads through direct contact with animal tissues, body fluids, blood, broken skin, mucous, and sexual contact with an infected person (CDC, 2021b). On March 29, 2016, the WHO reported having a total of 28,616 cases of EVD with a death toll of 11,310

(CDC, 2020a). During the endemic, 8% of healthcare workers caring for patients with

EVD contracted the disease and died, which caused a setback in treatment and control of

other viruses such as HIV, measles, malaria, and tuberculosis prevalent in West African

countries (CDC, 2020a). The endemic infected 20% of children under 15, and 30,000

children became orphans (CDC, 2020a). EVD also cost $4.3 billion U.S. dollars, causing

a high decrease in investments and private sector growth (CDC, 2020a). EVD also

impacted the decline in agricultural production and increased restrictions with cross-

broader trading of goods and services (CDC, 2020a). The Ebola virus occasionally

appears, with the last outbreak reported from February 2021 to May 2021, with twelve

confirmed cases and six deaths in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo (WHO,

2022a). The Provincial Department of Health, in partnership with WHO, took swift

action vaccinating 2000 people at high risk and declared on May 3, 2021, that the

outbreak was over (WHO, 2022a).

COVID-19

Coronaviruses (CoVs) are zoonotic viruses with several animal carriers for human

infections, such as camels, mice, pigs, and turkeys (Khan et al., 2021). However, bats are

generally known to spread the virus to humans (Khan et al., 2021). The coronavirus, first

identified in the mid-1960s (CDC, 2021b; Khan et al., 2021), is a multitude of viruses

that causes mild respiratory infections, which first appeared to be a common cold (Khan

et al., 2021), to severe, fatal respiratory infections (He et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2021;

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, 2022). There are four common

coronaviruses with mild respiratory infections: (a) HCoV-229E, (b) HCoV-NL63, (c)

HCoV-OC43, and (d) HCoV-HKU1 (CDC, 2021b; He et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2021). In contrast, there are three lethal coronaviruses starting with (a) the SARS-CoV pandemic appearing in 2002, which was previously discussed; (b) the MERS-CoV outbreak in 2012 with less than 3,000 cases in Saudi Arabia; and (c) the current SARS-CoV-2 pandemic (Carvalho et al., 2021; He et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2021) still prevalent today and the basis of the current research.

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; WHO, 2022e), was discovered in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, as a result of unknown cases of pneumonia in December 2019 (Allam, 2020; Carvalho et al., 2021; Ciotti et al., 2020; dos Santos, 2020; He et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2021; Khanna et al., 2020). Since then, COVID-19 has spread worldwide, and on March 11, 2020, Dr. Tedos Adhanom Ghebreyesusm from the WHO (2020) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. In response to the global pandemic, on March 13, 2020, former U.S. President Donald Trump declared a nationwide state of emergency, which was immediately followed by states enforcing social distancing efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19 by shutting down schools, restaurants, bars, and cruise ships (CDC, 2022). Since death rates were expected to be between 100,000 and 240,000, the CDC also provided new mask-wearing guidelines as social distancing efforts extended until the end of April (CDC, 2022). On April 30, 2020, President Trump set forth an operation to produce a vaccine with the aid of the CDC as quickly as possible, followed by the WHO declaration of the pandemic now being a global health crisis on May 2, 2020 (CDC, 2022). In the meantime, due to the shutdown efforts to stop the spread of the disease, 2.5

million people were out of work, which gravely impacted low-income and minority workers (CDC, 2022). Health alerts announced that SARS-CoV-2 infections are showing up in children (CDC, 2022). The predicted COVID-19 death toll rate surpassed 100,000, and the World Bank anticipated the global economy to hit a worse recession than World War II (CDC, 2022). On June 25, 2020, the CDC announced that people at risk for severe COVID-19 illness not only included older adults but anyone with compromised immune systems, chronic kidney disease, sickle cell disease, type 2 diabetes, obesity, and lung disease/COPD (CDC, 2022).

By September 22, 2020, the death toll rate surpassed 200,000, and the outbreak rate continued to increase due to large gatherings during Halloween events reported on November 13, 2020 (CDC, 2022). On December 14, 2020, more than 300,000 people died from the coronavirus, and the first American nurse, Sandra Lindsay, received the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine on national television (CDC, 2022). The Pfizer vaccine was first administered to health care professionals and residents in long-term care facilities for persons 16 years or older to prevent COVID-19 (CDC, 2022). By December 18, 2020, the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine was also issued for persons 18 years or older, and by December 24, 2020, it was estimated that more than 1 million people in the U.S. were vaccinated against COVID-19 (CDC, 2022). However, on January 18, 2021, the death toll rate in the U.S. well surpassed 400,000 due to COVID-19, and worldwide COVID-19 cases surpassed 100 million (CDC, 2022). On February 27, 2021, the FDA approved the Johnson and Johnson one-shot COVID-19 vaccine compared to Pfizer and Moderna, which requires two vaccine shots, as the death toll rate continued to increase

well past 500,000 (CDC, 2022). On March 11, 2021, the new U.S. President, Joseph

Biden, directed the states to make all adults eligible for the vaccine by May 1st, 2021,

while announcing federal vaccine websites to locate vaccine sites to also launch on May

1st, 2021 (CDC, 2022). Fully vaccinated people were permitted to gather indoors without

a mask starting on March 8, 2021. By March 13, 2021, 100 million people in the U.S.

were vaccinated with a minimum of one shot, and by April 21, 2021, 200 million

vaccinations were administered (CDC, 2022).

A new variant of the coronavirus was identified in India. It became the dominant

variant in the U.S., causing a third wave of infections during the summer of 2021,

referred to as the Delta variant (CDC, 2022). In response, the CDC provided

precautionary measures for everyone vaccinated or not to wear a mask while indoors to

decrease the transmission of the Delta variant (CDC, 2022). By October 21, 2021, the

CDC recommended that those 65 years and older, people who have underlying medical

conditions over the age of 16, and people who worked or lived in high-risk settings

receive a booster shot as the COVID-19 vaccines proved to provide higher protection

against the infection (CDC, 2022). Vaccines were made available for children ages 5 to

11 by November 2, 2021, with the Pfizer-BioNTech pediatric vaccine (CDC, 2022). On

November 29, 2021, the CDC recommended that everyone over 18 years old receive a

booster shot six months after they are fully vaccinated with the Pfizer or Moderna

vaccine (CDC, 2022).

The overview of pandemics, starting from the plague of Athenian in 430 B.C. to

the global outbreak of the black death, down through the current 21st century, the third

SARS-CoV-2 virus clearly shows that pandemics are not new to society. Pandemics have historically changed political systems, culture, religion, trade, innovation, medical advances, and societies (Ganguly et al., 2020). The following section reviews the literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employees.

Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Employees

The current COVID-19 pandemic has impacted traditional HEIs to shift employees to working from home quickly and transition face-to-face classes to remote platforms (Cutri et al., 2020; Izumi et al., 2020). Izumi et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative study to understand the key challenges, approaches, and lessons of HEIs in response to COVID-19. The key findings showed that 47% of respondents believed their institutions lacked a permanent or dedicated emergency management office, and 41% said their HEIs lacked a general business continuity plan for an emergency (Izumi et al., 2020). However, significant challenges were changes in teaching mode, such as online lectures and working from home (Izumi et al., 2020). Dean (2020) surveyed 120 employees working from home to assess the challenges of leadership and working from home due to COVID-19 and its effectiveness on employee engagement and productivity. The research confirmed that health is a priority due to the pandemic, social connections are a concern, and too many virtual meetings to simulate human connection could also contribute to mental stress while working from home (Dean, 2020).

The study by Blair et al. (2023) focused on exploring the perceptions of full-time faculty members' perceptions regarding their workplace conditions, benefits, and compensation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative findings highlight

common themes among full-time faculty members, revealing concerns about workplace conditions, technology inadequacies, and a perceived lack of support from higher education administrators. Issues such as the absence of heating in buildings, insufficient technology for effective teaching, and overwhelming work activities contribute to negative perceptions among faculty. Additionally, there are reservations about the newly introduced faculty advocate position, with concerns about representation and workload.

The quantitative analysis in the Blair et al. (2023) study supports the qualitative findings, indicating significant differences between full-time and part-time faculty, including work-family conflict, pay perceptions, compensation opportunities, online teaching experiences, overwhelming work activities, technology provision, travel funding, and satisfaction with the faculty advocate. Full-time faculty report higher work-family conflict, lower pay perceptions, and less satisfaction with various aspects of their professional environment than their part-time counterparts.

Blair et al. (2023) posit that the identified negative workplace perceptions among full-time faculty could have significant consequences, including potential turnover and adverse impacts on mental and physical health. Blair et al. (2023) state that "based on these findings, HEIs and administrators should be alarmed" (p. 11). The authors propose future research directions, emphasizing the need for interventions to mitigate negative outcomes and exploring factors driving these perceptions. One such suggestion is to investigate fairness, reciprocity, skepticism, and trust in the university and higher education administrators. They also suggest that HEIs should address these issues proactively to retain their employees and maintain a competitive edge in the industry.

Anvari et al. (2023) found that COVID-19 "significantly affected the global workforce, presenting unprecedented challenges to managers and practitioners of strategic human resource management" (p. 1). The Anvari et al. (2023) study explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on strategic human resource management (SHRM) practices in higher education, specifically focusing on emotional intelligence (EI), psychological contracts (PC), and affective organizational commitment (AOC). In the context of change management in higher education, the study reveals that organizations are undergoing shifts in the post-COVID-19 environment, necessitating a renegotiation of the PC between SHRM practitioners and their universities.

Anvari et al. (2023) posit that change management in higher education involves adapting SHRM strategies to address challenges posed by the pandemic. SHRM practitioners are recommended to enhance their EI, as it positively influences various practices, including staffing, training, compensation, and performance appraisal. The study emphasizes the importance of maintaining positive relationships, effective communication, and adapting HR practices to align with organizational goals during times of uncertainty and crisis.

Furthermore, their study highlights the role of PC in mediating the relationship between SHRM practices and AOC. Fulfillment of the PC is identified as a key psychological pathway for SHRM practitioners to influence employee attitudes and behaviors positively. In the post-COVID-19 era, the study underscores the need for organizations to foster commitment, a sense of belonging, and employee well-being through adaptive SHRM practices and the renegotiation of the PC. The Anvari et al.

(2023) study provides theoretical and practical insights into change management in higher education, emphasizing the importance of emotional intelligence, effective communication, and strategic HR practices to navigate the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Harnett and Kieran (2020) conducted a national mixed-method study on employee experiences and management perceptions of employee experiences shifting in work practices during COVID-19. Their findings showed employees feeling a sense of disconnect from organizations and experiencing reduced levels of well-being (Harnett & Kieran, 2020). For instance, out of 590 employees, 60.1% of employees feel an increased level of stress; 67% of women felt an increased level of stress compared to 45% of men; 31% of employees feeling quality of life is worse since the onset of COVID-19; 51% of employees reported feeling less connected to their teams; 48% of managers reported that employees are disconnected from the organization, and; 61% of employees are concerned about their safety in returning to the workplace (Harnett & Kieran, 2020). Harnet and Kieran (2020) also reported managers were concerned about adapting HR policies, practices, and other supports to help them lead, support, and manage their teams in the new way of working or having flexible working options, which included fully working from home or a blended (also known as hybrid) approach where an employee works at home part-time and goes into the workplace part-time.

Kaushik (2020) studied the impact of COVID-19 on the workplace, the effectiveness of the Work from Home (WFH) mode of working, and factors affecting WFH for employees. Kaushik's (2020) research showed it is more difficult for women

than men to maintain a balance between work and home responsibilities. On the contrary, Carnevale and Hatak's (2020) research also explored the negative impact of employees' experiences of role conflicts for balancing work-family responsibilities and identified high-risk employees for increased feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Kaushik's (2020) research further showed employees felt disengaged from associates and bosses. Employees lacked community feeling and attachment to the company (Kaushik, 2020). Carnevale and Hatak's (2020) study also showed employee feelings of loneliness and social isolation due to working from home. Kaushik (2020) further explained that employees lacked self-motivation, commitment, and devotion and were proactive, agile, and resilient on behalf of the employees, otherwise leading to unproductivity. Kaushik (2020) noted HR played a pivotal role to bring forth the concept of people-connect, with employee engagement strategies to provide counseling, ask about employee well-being, provide financial assistance, stress management programs, and maintain an emotional bond during and after the pandemic. Dirani et al. (2020) reviewed the new role(s) of HR development based on the ramifications of pandemics. Dirani et al.'s (2020) research highlighted the leadership needs, with HRD support, to maintain constant, healthy communications to mitigate employee stress due to the pandemic, social distancing, and working from home.

Bruce and English (2020) discussed employee mental health is not a new challenge for HR and was a top priority before the pandemic. However, the pandemic forced employees to adapt quickly to new remote technology and cope with social distancing, which current benefit programs may not be able to significantly handle the

level of mental health care employees now require (Bruce & English, 2020). Bruce and English (2020) studied the side effects of social distancing and being forced to work from home due to COVID-19 protective measures, which caused unintended harm to employees' mental health. Their research showed that 74% of these HR leaders believe their current employee assistant programs are ineffective for seeking mental health support as they are not successfully providing whole-person care (Bruce & English, 2020). Hamouche (2020) conducted a meta-analysis on COVID-19's impact on employees' mental health in organizations by drawing on studies on recent epidemics such as SARS and Ebola and evaluated organizational interventions from a HRM perspective, which may mitigate the impact. The identified reports showed a negative impact of COVID-19 on an individual's mental health (Hamouche, 2020). Stressors that drain employees' mental health include the perception of safety, threat, and risk of contagion, infobesity versus the unknown, quarantine and confinement, stigma and social exclusion, and financial loss and job insecurity (Hamouche, 2020).

Kniffin et al. (2020) reviewed prior research focused on changes in the workplace, workers, and work practices considering the impact of COVID-19 and identifying issues for future research along with insights to inform solutions. Kniffin et al. (2020) called for future research on the emergent changes for workers due to social distancing with limited to no social connections, with an informed action by HR managers to acknowledge mental health risks due to the pandemic and implement policies and interventions to support employee well-being. Kniffin et al. (2020) call for exploring the pandemic impact

on employees and actions taken by HR managers to mitigate employee performance and

employees' well-being is the foundation of the current study.

Summary and Conclusions

In the literature section of the research, the literature review search strategy was

discussed, followed by HRM in higher education, the evolution of pandemics, and the

impacts of those pandemics on human life. I also discussed Kotter's eight-steps of change

management as a viable theoretical framework to accompany this study on the urgent

change that took place in HEIs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The next chapter

divulges the methodology proposed for this qualitative, descriptive, multiple-case study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive, multiple case study was to explore how HR function changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in HEIs and how managing it relates to employee performance and well-being. Data were collected through interview questions with HRM who worked through the 2020–2021 pandemic, navigating changes in higher education. This chapter on the research method describes the research design and rationale, my role as the researcher, the methodology, and the issues of trustworthiness.

Research Design and Rationale

Cozby and Bates (2020) explained that when conducting and designing a research investigation, developing the research questions is the first step. A good research question is customized or specific to the research project and includes a broad description of the topic that is answerable by the study itself (Cozby & Bates, 2020). This study's research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How has HR function changed in HEIs due to a pandemic?

RQ2: How has HR changed as a result of COVID-19 to support employee performance?

RQ3: How has HR changed as a result of COVID-19 to support employee well-being?

The research design of this study was qualitative descriptive multiple case study, which is appropriate for exploring how HR function changed through analysis of data

collected through interview questions with participants from different types of HEIs.

There are many options to consider when choosing a research design. The qualitative

approach is often the first option to consider when a new phenomenon has taken place,

such as the COVID-19 pandemic. When little research has been conducted on a specific

topic, qualitative research is the preferred approach (Yin, 2016). The qualitative approach

provides a rich and revealing understanding without any preconceived notions (Patton,

2002; Yin, 2008, 2016). Researchers simply let the findings emerge naturally through

conversation, observations, or other qualitative sources (interviews, documents, pictures,

audiovisual material, reports, etc.; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2008, 2016).

The quantitative approach is more focused than qualitative studies as it relies on a

testable theory and instruments to measure certain dimensions or constructs of a theory

(Arghode, 2012). In a quantitative study, variables are known and empirical research is

used to narrow the scope of the study (Arghode, 2012). Quantitative methods provide

numbers of broad and general points relating to the experience, whereas the qualitative

method offers a depth of the experience with rich and thick descriptions. In this study, I

wanted the opportunity to allow those who worked through this time in history to use

their own words to describe how HR function changed at their HEI.

The mixed-method approach employs both qualitative and quantitative tools

(Lund, 2012). This is helpful when a researcher wants to study a specific variable while

also offering an opportunity for participants to explain their stories (Lund, 2012). This

mixed-methods approach is a viable recommendation for future research and is discussed

in Chapter 5.

In addition to selecting between qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches, I also needed to choose between a non-experimental design, experimental design, or a quasi-experimental design. The general condition between these three options is the level of control or manipulation involved in the study (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2008, 2016). The experimental design calls for a researcher to control or manipulate variables, the non-experimental does not (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2016).

Many organizations have simulated disaster recovery or business continuity exercises to test scenarios that mitigate risk and reduce disruption to the business since the 1970s. Herbane's (2010) research on crisis management, for example, discussed efforts companies took when planning for Y2K as clocks would roll from 1999 to 2000 and it was unknown if that moment in time would cause an interruption or even a failure of systems. The planning sessions and drills that many companies took prepared them for events such as loss of power or natural disaster (Herbane, 2010). Herbane (2010) also listed potential threats organizations can experience, such as accidents, economic recession, floods, information theft, product failure, product tampering, reputation attack, staff illness or death, storms, terrorism, or utility disruption. Now added to that list is a worldwide pandemic that shut the doors of physical buildings almost immediately (Sraders & Lambert, 2020). As companies prepare for such moments, they simulate events in a controlled environment (Herbane, 2010). This is an example of an experimental design and may look like an HEI using a telephone tree, an emergency management calling system, to contact employees and instruct them to report to a different location (University of Houston Campus Safety, n.d.). However, most schools

had likely not anticipated an event of such magnitude as the COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative descriptive multiple case study was conducted to explore how HR function changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in HEIs and how managing it relates to employee performance and well-being.

Several authors have mentioned several types of qualitative research designs. For example, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) discussed six qualitative research approaches: a basic qualitative research design, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and case studies. Yin (2016) detailed 12 types of qualitative research designs or variants: action research, arts-based research, autoethnography, case study, critical theory, discourse analysis, ethnography, ethnomethodology, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, oral history, to phenomenology. Marshall et al. (2022) further mentioned 18 types of research approaches: ethnography, phenomenology, sociolinguistic, grounded theory, case studies, narrative analysis, critical discourse analysis, action research, participatory action research, critical and postcritical ethnography, performance ethnography, arts-informed inquiry, internet/virtual ethnography, feminist research, cultural studies, critical race theory, queer theory, and autoethnography.

The commonly used and discussed qualitative research types are case study, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and phenomenology. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) defined a case study as an exploration and detailed description of a bounded system. The bounded system is the *what*, or the case of the phenomenon to be studied, such as a single person, a unit, a group, an institution, or a policy (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2015). Marshall et al. (2022) described a case as an example of a more significant phenomenon or an intrinsic case. Therefore, a case study explores the interaction between the case and the environment. Yin (2016) posited that the value of the case study approach is that it deals with the selected case in its actual environment or context, especially when the boundaries between the context and the phenomenon are unclear.

Ethnography is a research method in which a researcher studies or observes a particular social or cultural group in the field to better understand it (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, ethnography is both a process of observation and a product when the researcher writes about the observation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Ethnography is an in-depth, close-up observation or investigation of a selected group of people interacting in their environment to understand and produce meaning (Yin,2016). Understanding culture is the underlying concept of ethnography, and the researcher seeks to understand how culture is formed and maintained (Marshall et al., 2022).

Grounded theory is a qualitative study that aims to develop or generate a theory from the data organically (Marshall et al., 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The theory is formed through categorizing relationships or interactions between concepts or a set of interests (Marshall et al., 2022; Yin, 2016). The term *grounded theory* emphasizes that work begins from the ground and builds into a theoretical understanding (Marshall et al., 2022). Narrative inquiries are first-person accounts of experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Researchers use them to explore stories told from the beginning, middle, and end about traditions, life history, handed down experiences, and historical memoirs (Marshall et al., 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Yin (2016) described narrative inquiries as

individuals narrating stories that makes sense of their social situations, history, and anything learned about themselves. Narrative inquiry data can be retrieved from journal records, email messages, autobiographical writing, field notes, or interview transcripts (Marshall et al., 2022).

Phenomenology is a study of people's lived experience or perception of their life-world and social action (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The phenomenological approach seeks to analyze and explore how individuals feel, judge, make sense, describe, talk about with others, and perceive an experience (Marshall et al., 2022). The experiences of the individuals are compared to identify the essence of their unique expressions striving to capturing life as lived (Mashall et al., 2022). Yin (2016) further described phenomenology as a study that removes judgment and makes no assumptions about social structures. Instead, it aims to study everyday experiences of participants and take their meaning from what is to the nature of what is in their reality. Considering the different types of qualitative research designs, a case study is more aligned for investigating the current contemporary phenomenon within its experiences (Yin, 2008, 2012, 2016, 2017).

Role of the Researcher

It is important to identify any potential bias upfront. I work as the director of administration in higher education with 30 years of work experience in higher education. My responsibilities include functioning as the HR manager working in collaboration with the HR partners of the university. My role as a researcher has the potential for bias contingent on experiences of the direct impact of employee performance and employee

well-being changes due to a pandemic in higher education when shifting to working from home. In addition, my responsibility to enforce HR policies and policy changes has the potential for biased views on how HR function changed in response to a pandemic. Patton (2002) explained that bias is unacceptable in any research study and a scholar should do what they can to take steps to mitigate their personal influence through a rigorous research process including establishing written procedures. To approach the field work with an open mind and maximize the accuracy of the findings, I did my best to push personal philosophy aside.

There are several philosophical or political worldviews (also referred to as *paradigms*) that could interfere with a study of this magnitude. For example, positivism assumes a single truth or reality can be measured, reliable, and validated through quantitative research methods (Matta, 2022; Mirhosseini, 2019). Constructivists assume there is no single truth as realities are perceived and experienced by individuals in a group. Therefore, the reality needs to be interpreted to understand the meaning of events through qualitative research methods (Matta, 2022). Pragmatism assumes reality as a continuous renegotiation of interpretation of events to solve problems, changing perspectives and meaning of events through a mix-method research study (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020). Subjectivism considers that all knowledge is based on the individual perspective on what is real through qualitative research methods using autoethnography or semiotics (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Critical worldview assumes that realities are socially constructed and power driven by relations within society through qualitative research, such as ideological reviews or open-ended questionnaires (Kivunja & Kuyini,

2017). My constructivist philosophical worldview assumes HR personnel from various HEIs experienced change differently during the COVID pandemic. Therefore, there is no single reality or truth to what happened or changed in the functioning of HR.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The population in this study is HR personnel in HEIs in the United States. The types of HEIs may include a four-year college/university, junior or community college, career college, religiously affiliated school, and online college and university. In HEIs, the most common HR position levels range from chief officers, supervisors, seniors, entry/mid-level, and coordinators (Pritchard & Schmidt, 2020). The participant selection logic included full-time HR employees at any level who worked a minimum of 6 months prior to the COVID-19 and worked during the 2020–2021 pandemic.

According to Patton (2002), there are no restriction guidelines on the sample size in qualitative inquiry. Patton (2002) elaborated that the minimum number of participants depends on the purpose of the investigation, what resources are available, the timeframe allocated to get it done, credibility and usefulness, and what needs to be known. The study started with a goal of eight to 10 interviews, with a maximum of two interviews from the same school, and I continued collecting data until saturation was met. Patton (2002) also posited the adequacy of the sample size is submitted to peer review, consensual validation, and judgment. Instead, the goal is theoretical saturation or when no new information is being revealed.

The sampling strategy for a qualitative study could include nonprobability or purposive sampling (Cozby & Bates, 2020). Nonprobability sampling means the chance of a person being selected for the study is unknown (Cozby & Bates, 2020). The nonprobability options include convenience sampling, purposive sampling, and quota sampling (Cozby & Bates, 2020). According to Patton (2002), purposeful sampling enables the researcher to select information or rich cases strategically and purposefully. This study is focused on a specific role within higher education—namely, HR professionals. Therefore, purposive sampling (also referred to as purposeful sampling) was used to include the predetermined criterion of having worked in the HR department a minimum of 6 months prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and during the calendar year 2020–2021. Snowball sampling was also an intended recruitment method as it allows a researcher to obtain new contacts from existing participants. Recruitment of the participants included LinkedIn messages to HR professionals in HEIs.

Instrumentation

The data were collected by participants through a structured interview process. The interview questions (see Appendix A) were shared with a panel of subject matter experts for validation. I sent LinkedIn messages to each purposefully selected participant to ask if they would like to participate in the study. The interview took place via Zoom and was recorded. The interviews were transcribed with Zoom's transcription service and each transcription was reviewed for accuracy. Member checking was also used to enhance the robustness of the study. Member checking is used to increase accuracy by sharing the final transcription with participants for precision (Birt et al., 2016).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Participants were recruited through LinkedIn. The LinkedIn message read,

I am conducting a research study on how the HR function changed due to the

COVID-19 pandemic in higher educational institutions and how managing it

relates to employee performance and well-being. Participation will take about 30-

60 minutes of your time. If you are interested in participating through a Zoom

discussion consisting of answering a few questions, please click here for further

instructions. There are no known risks involved in this research.

I conducted the interviews, collected the interview data, and analyzed it. The frequency

of the data collection was based on participants' availability during or after work. The

duration of the interviews was anticipated to be no more than 1 hour each and the time to

collect the data was expected to take 2 to 3 weeks.

Before the interview, participants were provided with the consent form through

email and asked to sign and return before the interview begins. The consent form had a

section with an option for participants to stop the interview at any time during the

interview. I used snowball sampling as a follow-up plan if recruitment was too low.

Patton (2002) explained that snowball sampling is where the researcher obtains new

contacts from existing participants. Member checking was used for the credibility of the

results and debriefing for the participants. The interviews were conducted with Zoom and

were recorded. Zoom offers a transcription service. Once the interviews were transcribed,

I sent the transcription to the participants to make sure they were accurate.

This study aligns with the findings of Moon et al. (2016) where dominant recruitment strategies included purposive and snowball. These two approaches are appropriate for this study because the focal point is on HR management in HEI during the initial change process that took place when COVID-19 shut the doors of colleges and universities across the globe. I planned to gain access to the participants through LinkedIn. This included using a search strategy for HR related chief officers, supervisors, seniors, entry/mid-level, and coordinators in higher education.

Data Analysis Plan

According to Yin (2017), developing a case study analytic strategy is most useful before analyzing the collected data. If the data are collected without a strategy or plan, the researcher may spend months assessing the data with no clear direction (Yin, 2017). The analytic strategy or plan should start with reviewing the case study questions (Yin, 2017). The first question should start small, followed by a careful review of the data for the answer, and then build to larger question(s), repeating the review until the main question(s) are addressed (Yin, 2017). Computer-based tools, such as NVivo, or Atlas.ti can be utilized as an assistant tool for coding, studying the data, and possibly identifying new themes or concepts valuable to the study (Yin, 2017).

Other strategies that could be used as a guide to understanding the data are, (a) using a theoretical proposition used to design the cases study along with the research questions; (b) poring through the data from the ground up, discovering patterns and themes; (c) using a descriptive framework or developing a case description, which skips the first strategy of starting with the research questions; or (d) defining and testing a

plausible rival explanation which is a combination of having a theoretical proposition, working from the ground up and alternative description of the case (Yin, 2017). The selected strategy for the current study was to use the conceptual framework of Kotter's eight-step change model as a guide for understanding the data and analyzing the data from the ground up for a possible alternative description of the data.

Saldana (2021) recommended a data review plan through cycle coding. Saldana (2021) used first cycle coding, second cycle coding, and post coding as a way to progress thematic coding from code to theme. In the first coding cycle, the interview transcripts were read and coded for one word, a phrase, or a full sentence (Saldana, 2021). The first coding cycle also examined grammatical, elemental, affective, literacy and language, exploratory, procedural, and a final profile entitled theming of the data. In the second coding cycle, Saldana (2021) recommended reviewing the text a second time to add code text, plus reviewing codes to look for opportunities to reorganize, condense, or rename the codes. The second coding cycle also requires abstracting, classifying, conceptualizing, integrating, prioritizing, synthesizing, and theory building.

Additionally, (Yin, 2016) offered five analytic phases, including (a) compiling an orderly set of data, (b) disassembling data, (c) reassembling data, (d) interpreting, and (e) concluding, which the researcher may go back and forth between the phases several times (Figure 2). The first phase of data analysis consists of compiling all collected data and field notes into a useful database (Yin, 2016). Compiling the data into a database or an orderly set of data allow me to be refamiliarized with the data, ask how the data are

related to the research questions, and organize the collected data into a consistent format or set of records before the formal analysis of the data begins (Yin, 2016).

Once the data were organized, they needed to be disassembled into codes from selected phrases or dissembled into derived notes taken from direct quotes or paraphrases from the data (Yin, 2016). Afterward, the data were reassembled into broad or narrow patterns (Yin, 2016). The patterns should relate to the concepts and research questions of the current study and how the experiences or events relate or differ from each other (Yin, 2016). The reassembling process is where I expected to play with the data, mixing and matching it until patterns emerge (Yin, 2016). Once the patterns were identified, I interpreted them through an explanation or description of the findings, followed by the concluding phase (Yin, 2016). The concluding phase was intended to capture the significance of the study, detailing the lessons learned, new concepts, or implications for further research (Yin, 2016). The conclusion aims to answer the *so what* question of the study (Yin, 2016).

I analyzed the data with Yin's five-step data analysis process through the lens of Kotter's Eight-Step Change Model. The data analysis plan was to use NVivo as the qualitative data analysis software. NVivo's capability includes importing document files, PDFs, videos and scanned images for organizing, coding, labeling, mapping, and reporting the data with visual presentation options (Dhakal, 2022). This software would enabled me to scientifically analyze the complex phenomena concealed in the unstructured data. However, due to the time constraints for learning the updated NVivo application features, the decision was made to analyze the data manually using Excel.

Figure 2

Qualitative Research Flowchart
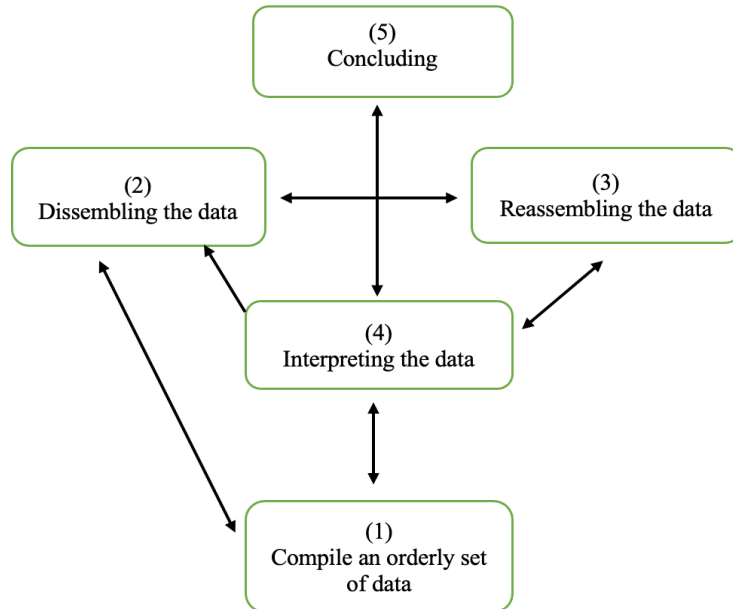
Note: Adapted from *Qualitative Research From Start to Finish*, by Yin, R., Guilford

Press

Issues of Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers seek to understand how people construct their worlds,

understand their experiences, and bring meaning to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell,

2015). I collected and analyzed words into a narrative, story, and process-based data

related to the human experience (Stahl & King, 2020). I strived for trustworthiness or

rigor when reporting the story or findings of the research (Stahl & King, 2020).

Trustworthiness answers the question, "Can the findings be trusted?" (Korstjens &

Moser, 2018, p. 121). To create trustworthiness for the current study, I used the four

components relevant to qualitative research: (a) credibility, (b) transferability,

(c) dependability, and (d) confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Moon et al., 2016; Stahl & King, 2020; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

Credibility

Credibility is a quality criterion for presenting the direct meanings collected from the participants or the true value (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Moon et al., 2016; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Credibility is the confidence that the reader and the researcher place in the truth of the research findings drawn from the participants' original data and the correct interpretation of the participants' experiences (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Overall, credibility has to do with the legitimacy of research. The strategies such as triangulation, prolonged engagement, reflexivity, member checks, or peer debriefing can enhance credibility (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Moon et al., 2016; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

Triangulation uses multiple data sources in time (different days and or times), space (varies sites or cross-sites for consistency), and person (different levels from the individual to a family member) (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Moon et al., 2016). Triangulation could also include using multiple researchers for coding the data and various methods for collecting the data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Moon et al., 2016). Prolonged engagement refers to investing time to become familiar with the setting, engaging with the participants, and becoming familiar with recurring instances through observations while observing external influences (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Stahl & King, 2020). During the prolonged engagement or contact with the participants, researchers journal their observations and experiences daily, which may be included in

the research findings as rich descriptive data (Stahl & King, 2020). This practice is

known as reflexivity, another strategy for enhancing creditability (Stahl & King, 2020).

Reflexivity also involves a self-reflection of the researcher to understand their place as a

researcher, their biases, or preconceptions about the study.

Member checks require returning the data/transcripts to the participants to

confirm if it reflects their experiences, considering the researcher may perceive the data

differently than the participant (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Moon et al., 2016). Peer

debriefing consists of sharing the research findings with peers for an additional

perspective on interpreting the data (Moon et al., 2016). For this study, triangulation was

not used because the only data collected was from interview transcripts. However, I did

use the credibility techniques of prolonged engagement, reflexivity, member checks, and

peer debriefing.

Transferability

According to Thomas and Magilvy (2011), transferability is when the results of

qualitative research can be transferred from one group of participants and applied to

another. Korstjens and Moser (2018) stated that transferability occurs when the results of

a qualitative study can be transferred to other contexts or settings, such as the sample

size, interview procedures, demographics, and or inclusion and exclusion criteria,

allowing for other researchers to assess if they can use the research in their settings.

Moon et al. (2016) further described transferability as the phenomenon described in one

study that can also be useful in practice, theory, and future qualitative research studies.

The researcher, therefore, is responsible for providing a dense (Thomas & Magilvy,

2011) or thick (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) description of the research process and participants to show which findings may or may not be relevant to other settings. The findings of this study may be transferable to other HR departments within higher education; however, a general limitation of the study was the generalizability of the results to departments other than HR and industries other than higher education.

Dependability

Patton (2002) defined dependability as an organized process that's systematically followed. Dependability occurs when the researcher provides a decision or audit trail showing each step taken from the beginning of the research project to reporting the findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). An audit trail should include (a) journal notes with reflective thoughts throughout the research process, (b) the purpose of the study, (c) how participants were selected, (d) the length of time for collecting the data, and (e) how the data were collected and analyzed, followed by a discussion of the research findings and techniques used to show credibility (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The suggested strategies to create dependability included peer review of the analysis, preferably by an expert in the research design, or repeating the study to confirm if the results enhance or are similar to the original findings (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Dependability for this study is provided through the rigorous scientific method put in place that follows a systematic process with predefined research questions, a predetermined recruitment process, and an interview protocol that includes recording of the transcripts that enabled me to replicate the interview experience with

each participant. Using Kotter's eight-step framework to guide the study also strengthens the dependability of the study.

Confirmability

A decision or audit trail can also establish confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Patton, 2002). Confirmability minimizes subjectivity or bias and maximizes the accuracy of the reported data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Patton, 2002). The qualitative researcher can acknowledge personal judgment (Patton, 2002) as reflexivity requires self-awareness of preconceptions that may affect the research (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). However, the reporting of the findings need to be grounded in the data or emphasize the empirical findings (Patton, 2002). Therefore, confirmability is established when credibility, transferability, and dependability are achieved (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Defining how trustworthiness of the study unfolded prior to conducting research enabled me to carefully attend to the credibility, transferability, and dependability of the study as each step of the process takes place.

Ethical Procedures

In alignment with Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), this study included ethical considerations. Patton (2002) emphasized the obligation of a researcher to have an ethical framework that respects human rights, values, and desires. Each participant received a written consent form explaining that their participation is voluntary, there was not compensation, and there were anticipated minimal risks to the participant. They were free to withdraw at any time.

The American Psychological Association (APA) Ethics Code of Conduct includes five general principles of (a) beneficence and nonmaleficence, (b) fidelity and responsibility, (c) integrity, (d) justice, and (e) respect for people's rights and dignity. Each of these principles were evaluated for this study and careful attention to detail minimized any risk to human participants. I strived to do no harm. I also respected the dignity and worth of each participant. Participant names and all identifying information were removed from the study to ensure privacy, and confidentiality. Data and study documents were housed on a secured, password-protected computer.

Summary

This chapter provides the recipe for the study focused on HR professionals in higher education. This qualitative study employed descriptive multi-case studies to understand how the HR function changed during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in different types of HEIs and how managing it relates to employee performance and employee well-being. The next chapter divulges the research settings, demographics, data collection and analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and the research study results. The chapter ends with a summary and transition to the final chapter, which includes the discussion of the research findings, conclusion, and recommendations.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive multiple case study was to explore how HR function changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic at different types of HEIs and how managing it contributes to employee performance and employee well-being. I collected data by conducting interviews with HRM who worked through the 2020–2021 pandemic at different types of HEIs, such as a four-year colleges, junior or community colleges, or online colleges or universities. The descriptive multiple case study narrowed the focus to two specific types of educational institutions: four-year colleges/universities and religiously affiliated schools. Although COVID-19 is continuing to cause disruption in 2024, this study focused primarily on the first few days, weeks, and months when the HR department was contacted to shut down schools and move everyone to a virtual environment. My intent was to analyze and interpret meaning from the collected data to contribute to the field of HRM as a resource for future pandemics by revealing possible benefits of Kotter's eight-step framework as a continuity plan for the HR practice to manage emergent changes in HR function while positively supporting employee performance and well-being.

The interviews with eight participants in two types of HEIs during the school year 2020-2021 in HR produced the required data for the study. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How has HR function changed in HEIs due to a pandemic?

RQ2: How has HR changed as a result of COVID-19 to support employee performance?

RQ3: How has HR changed as a result of COVID-19 to support employee well-being?

This chapter comprises the research setting, demographics of the participants and their COVID-related workplace, procedures for collection and analysis of data, and the procedures followed to achieve trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with the study's thematic analysis results, followed by a summary.

Setting

HRM in two different types of HEIs in the United States provided the research setting. The collection of data took place through Zoom interviews. The interviews were conducted in a secluded place. Each participant received a 2-minute qualifier survey and a copy of the IRB-approved informed consent form before scheduling the interview date via email. Qualified participants sent the acknowledged consent through email in the body of the email stating "I consent" before the interview.

The qualified participants were also given the flexibility to schedule their interviews at their convenience regarding the day, time, and location, utilizing a provided Booking calendar link. This approach aimed to facilitate a natural and comfortable setting for the participants during the Zoom interviews, thereby minimizing any potential unintended influence on the research outcomes (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Before each interview, I conducted thorough checks of the digital audio recordings, microphone, and camera settings within the Zoom platform to ensure clarity and reliability. Utilizing

Zoom's built-in recording feature, I captured the entirety of the discussions, which were automatically transcribed and archived within the Zoom account for subsequent analysis.

Demographics

There were 10 people who began the study. However, two of them were not full-time for 6 months prior to the pandemic, and they did not qualify to continue with the study. Consequently, there were eight participants in the study who completed the demographic survey and the qualitative interviews. As shown in Table 1, the majority of the participants were women (87.50%). There were four ethnic groups, including Asian/Pacific Islander (25.00%), Black or African American (37.50%), White/Caucasian (25.00%), and White/Caucasian, Hispanic (12.50%). Half of the participants were above age 54.

Table 1

Demographic Descriptive Statistics

Demographics	N	Percent
Gender		
Female	7	87.50
Male	1	12.50
Ethnicity		
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	25.00
Black or African American	3	37.50
White/Caucasian	2	25.00
White/Caucasian, Hispanic	1	12.50
Age		
25-34	1	12.50
35-44	1	12.50
45-54	2	25.00
Above 54	4	50.00

To narrow the scope of this study, it was necessary to interview HR employees who had worked in a HEI for at least 6 months prior to COVID-19. The majority (87.50%) of the participants interviewed were senior-level team members. Senior-level includes those with the title of HR manager, HR director, chief human resources officer, or vice president of HR. There was one lower-level or entry-level employee. For this study, lower or entry-level HR job titles were identified as staffing coordinator, staffing specialist, HR assistant, HR associate, HR representative, and HR administrator.

The survey provided six options for participants to respond to the type of educational institution where they were employed for the 6 months prior to the 2020–2021 pandemic. The options included 4-year college/university, junior or community college, career college, religiously affiliated school, online college/university, or other. As shown in Table 2, the majority (87.50%) worked at a 4-year college/university. All the participants worked full time, and all the participants were employed for at least 6 months prior to COVID-19. The last two questions were part of the selection criteria for the study.

Table 2

COVID-19 Related Workplace Descriptive Statistics

Demographics	N	Percent
Human resources role		
Lower or entry level	1	12.50
Senior level	7	87.50
Type of educational institution		
4-year college/university	7	87.50
Religiously affiliated	1	12.50
Employment status		
Full-time	8	100.00
Not full-time	0	0.00
Employment tenure prior to COVID-19		
At least 6 months	8	100.00
Less than 6 months	0	0.00

Data Collection

In this descriptive multiple-case study, I gathered data from a total of eight participants. As shown in Table 3, these individuals were drawn from two distinct categories of HEIs: seven from 4-year colleges/universities and one from a religiously affiliated institution. Initially, I employed LinkedIn for recruitment efforts, but due to a lower than anticipated response, I expanded the strategy to include snowball sampling to ensure adequate representation for the study.

The data collection period was extended to 11 weeks, significantly beyond the initially projected 2 to 3 weeks. While I anticipated interviews to last between 30 and 60 minutes, actual durations varied. As shown in Table 3, the time durations ranged from 13.37 to 37.42 minutes per session. I also encountered logistical challenges, especially with managing time zone differences, which led to scheduling confusion, as the interviews were set based on Eastern Standard Time. Upon recognizing this issue, I

promptly rescheduled the missed interviews and provided clear communication regarding

time zone differences for subsequent sessions, ensuring consistency and reliability of the

data collection process.

Table 3

Participants' Types of HEIs Categories and Interview Time Duration

Participants	Types of higher education institutions	Interview duration (minutes)
P1	4-year college/university	15.41
P2	4-year college/university	20.49
P3	4-year college/university	16.19
P4	4-year college/university	30.23
P5	4-year college/university	13.37
P6	4-year college/university	37.42
P7	4-year college/university	25.56
P8	Religiously affiliated	29.48

For the interviews, I used Zoom to conduct and record the sessions, taking

advantage of the platform's automatic transcription feature. To maintain participant

confidentiality, I assigned designations from P1 to P8, avoiding any personal identifiers.

After each session, I downloaded the transcription files, saving them under a systematic

naming convention such as Transcript_P1_[interview date]; Transcript_P2_[interview

date], and so forth.

I undertook a comprehensive review of each transcript, editing out filler sounds

like "mm-hmm" and "uh" and correcting instances of repetitive or misused words. For

any incoherent or incomplete sentences, I revisited the interview recordings to ascertain

the intended statements. I also restructured some areas of the transcript content,

separating interviewer and interviewee responses for clearer readability.

After completing these initial revisions, I initiated the member-checking procedure by emailing participants their respective transcripts for review. Participants were provided with a deadline to submit any corrections or additional insights. If no response was received by this deadline, I proceeded under the assumption that the transcript was accurate. Two of the eight participants responded with suggestions, ensuring the precise reflection of their input in the study. As shown in Table 4, the final transcriptions generated six to 15 pages of data.

Table 4

Transcription Pages for Data Analysis

Participants	Interview duration (minutes)	Final transcription length (pages)
P1	15.41	8
P2	20.49	11
P3	16.19	8
P4	30.23	12
P5	13.37	6
P6	37.42	15
P7	25.56	11
P8	29.48	11

Data Analysis

Yin's five-step data analysis aided in the data analysis of the qualitative study. The data analysis plan was to use NVivo as the qualitative data analysis software. However, due to the time constraints for learning the updated NVivo application features, the decision was made to analyze the data manually following Yin's five-step data analysis plan. According to Yin (2016), the first data analysis phase consists of compiling all collected data and field notes into a useful database. Compiling the data into a

database or an orderly set of data allowed me to be refamiliarized with the data, ask how the data are related to the research questions, and organize the collected data into a consistent format or set of records before the formal analysis of the data began (see Yin, 2016).

I organized and saved the eight clean copies of each of the transcripts for manual coding, distinguishing them by participant identifiers, such as P1, P2, and P3. The initial analysis started with a thorough review of the research questions and an examination of the data for pertinent responses. For example, a statement from P6 regarding RQ2 explained how HR changed as a result of the pandemic to support employee performance:

> If there were performance issues, you know, things were very straightforward, here is your warning, work on this. Now with COVID, what I have seen is there has been more involvement in why some employees are performing poorly or if there is any issues or challenges that they are facing.

The transcripts analysis consisted of three phases. The first involved highlighting keywords and phrases in yellow that resonated with the research questions. Next, I identified process changes, highlighting them in green and emotional or insightful realizations or a-ha moments in red. The final overview was to ensure the highlighted portions accurately reflected answers to the research questions.

Yin (2016) posited that once data are organized, they should be disassembled into codes derived from specific phrases, quotes, or paraphrases. The data are then reassembled into broad or narrow patterns (Yin, 2016). These patterns must align with a

study's research questions and concepts, considering how various experiences or events correspond or contrast with one another (Yin, 2016). Following Yin's methodology, I developed an Excel spreadsheet for manual coding. Three tabs in the spreadsheet were designated for the research questions, labeled Q1, Q2, and Q3. RQ1's initial rows specified the research question, and the first column specified the participant identifiers. Subsequent columns were structured around Kotter's eight-steps, followed by categories such as beliefs, surprising a-ha moments, emotions, and process descriptions. The layout for RQ2 and RQ3 mirrored RQ1 but without referencing Kotter's eight steps. Instead, the layout featured probing questions and similar categories. The reason for this layout was to analyze the data through the lens of Kotter's eight steps and to also analyze the data without the lens of Kotter's eight steps to allow any other theme to naturally emerge.

The systematic management and analysis of data played a pivotal role in the research process. Initially, the highlighted data extracted from the transcripts were meticulously organized and categorized using an Excel spreadsheet, marking the inception of the data management phase. This categorization laid the foundation for a structured approach to thematic analysis. To enhance the analytical process, the coded data within each category were further consolidated into a dedicated Microsoft Word document. This compilation facilitated a more nuanced examination of each category, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the specific content and intricacies of the data, thereby aiding in the identification of overarching themes.

The subsequent presentation of findings is exemplified through Tables 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9. Table 5 showcases the meticulous narrowing and interpretation of data to discern

key themes, underscoring the rigor applied in the analytical phase. In Table 6, the

emerging themes for RQ1 are succinctly presented, providing a focused insight into the

research outcomes. Furthermore, Table 7 delves into the application of Kotter's eight

steps, revealing subthemes that organically surfaced from the data, contributing to a

comprehensive understanding of the study's context.

Tables 8 and 9 extend the analysis to address RQ2 and RQ3, respectively, by

presenting the themes that emerged within these specific research inquiries. This

meticulous organization and presentation of data not only serve to illuminate the study's

findings but also exemplify the rigor and detail applied to unraveling the complexities of

the research questions, ensuring a robust and insightful exploration of the overarching

themes.

Table 5 provides a visual representation of the data analysis process. It illustrates

the process from initial data categorization to the identification of emerging themes in

relation to the research question. This systematic approach not only ensured rigor in the

analysis but also provided a transparent process for me to understand how the themes

emerged from the raw data. In addition, example Excel spreadsheets used for the data

analysis of each research question can be found in Appendix C, Appendix D, Appendix

E, and Appendix F.

Table 5

Narrowing and Interpreting Participants' Data to Identify Themes

Participant	Response	Interpreting the data: Identifying themes	Theme name
RQ1: How has HR function changed in HEIs due to a pandemic?			
P1	I think there was more awareness and acceptance for people juggling multiple things at a time. I think there was definitely more understanding, awareness, and acceptance of families, of other priorities, of health. I think we definitely started to prioritize wellness	Definitely started to prioritize wellness	Prioritization of employee wellness
RQ2: How has HR changed as a result of COVID-19 to support employee performance?			
P6	We hold people accountable just like they did if they were in the office. We reward them just like they did if they were in the office. Granted it looks a little different, but we haven't changed what we do. We've changed how we do it, how we reward, how we recognize, and how we have team meetings, and how we have off-site meetings, for that matter.	We haven't changed what we do I say we just changed how we do it	Remote work and management
RQ3: How has HR changed as a result of COVID-19 to support employee well-being?			
P6	So our benefits. Organization spent a lot of time digging out that information, finding resources. We really had beefed up all of our mental health offerings, whether it be online offerings because you couldn't go to see your psychologist. So how do we do? How in your psychologist wouldn't do remote, so we still have people with problems. So how do we help them. So we have implemented many new programs that are virtual.	Beefed up all our mental health offerings	Shift toward employee well-being and experience enhancement

Furthermore, in the analysis, I did not encounter any discernible discrepant cases. All the participants shared their experiences of how the HR function within their respective HEIs had undergone changes due to the pandemic. However, it is worth noting that there was a slight distinction in the data related to one particular participant. In the

demographic information on the workplace descriptive statistics, I observed that one participant occupied a lower or entry-level role within the HR function. In contrast, the other seven participants held senior-level positions.

While all participants acknowledged changes in the HR function, the nature and extent of these changes may have varied between the lower-level HR role and the senior-level roles. The responsibilities, perspectives, and impacts of the pandemic on HR functions could differ significantly depending on the hierarchical position within the organization. Therefore, this discrepancy in job roles was factored into my analysis to ensure a comprehensive understanding of how these changes in the HR function manifested across different levels of the institution. Although there were no entirely discrepant cases, the variation in job roles among participants was an important aspect to consider when interpreting the data, as it could shed light on potential differences in perspectives related to the transformation of HR functions during the pandemic.

<div align="center">**Evidence of Trustworthiness**</div>

Credibility

In the methodology section of my research, I made an explicit decision not to employ triangulation due to the nature of the data being solely derived from interview transcripts. Despite this, I emphasized the imperative for credibility within the study, committing to strategies including prolonged engagement, reflexivity, member checks, and peer debriefing. However, as the research unfolded, the methods eventually crystallized around member checks, supported by a thorough process of reflexivity, with the data originating exclusively from Zoom interviews.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity was integrated into my credibility approach as I recognized the potential influence of my biases and preconceptions, particularly those formed from expecting task-oriented changes within the HR function based on my previous work experiences (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I engaged in continuous self-reflection to understand my positionality within the research, aiming to identify and mitigate any biases that might inadvertently influence the data collection and analysis processes. Throughout the interviews, I exercised caution to prevent my expectations from influencing the dialogue. I refrained from making leading comments or probing beyond the participants' spontaneous responses, thereby avoiding imposing my perspective on their narratives. My conscious neutrality helped to preserve the participants' authentic voices, enhancing the credibility and authenticity of the data collected.

Member Checks

I integrated member checks as a systematic component of the research process, wherein participants were provided with transcripts of their respective recorded interviews. This approach allowed them to review, amend, or add more detailed information to the transcripts, ensuring their responses were captured accurately and authentically. The utilization of member checking served multiple crucial functions. It enabled participants to verify my interpretations, correct factual errors, and challenge perceived misinterpretations. This direct involvement affirmed the accuracy of the information recorded and allowed respondents to contribute additional insights, thereby enriching the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability

I demonstrated transferability by providing a rich, comprehensive description of the research context, methodology, and participant demographics. This "thick description," as referred to by Korstjens and Moser (2018), was not solely for the purpose of adding detail but to highlight specific circumstances, influences, and dynamics present within this study. By doing so, I aimed to enable other researchers to discern the potential relevance of my findings to their own contexts.

Regarding the application of my research, the findings specifically pertain to HR departments within the higher education sector. However, I recognized that while the insights are highly relevant and transferable within this industry, there are limitations concerning their generalizability beyond it, such as to other departments or entirely different industries. To address this, I ensured that the data and analysis were presented with enough context, depth, and clarity to provide potential transferability. For example, I detailed the interview procedures, the criteria for participant inclusion, and the specific demographic landscape, which provides future researchers with a framework to gauge the compatibility of these findings with their areas of inquiry.

Dependability

Achieving dependability in qualitative research necessitates a systematic and organized process, as outlined by Patton (2002). In the current study, I took several strategic steps to ensure this criterion of trustworthiness was met. First, a comprehensive audit trail was maintained throughout the research. The audit trail documentation included reflective journal entries, capturing key decisions, thoughts, and rationales at

each research phase. It ensured transparency in how the research unfolded, recording how participants were chosen, the duration of data collection, and methods of analysis. This step-by-step record provided a foundation for the study, allowing for potential replication and critical review of the research process.

Next, the purpose of the study was clearly articulated, linking the research questions to the overarching objectives. Having a precise definition of the purpose of the study prevented deviations and kept the study aligned with its intended goals, contributing to its dependability. Also, the research design followed a systematic methodology with predefined research questions guiding the interviews, a strategy that maintained consistency throughout the data collection phase. A strict interview protocol was employed, incorporating recorded transcripts to ensure that all participant interactions were consistent, thereby enhancing the reliability and dependability of the data.

Additionally, incorporating Kotter's eight-step framework added an additional layer of structural integrity to the research process. Kotter's model provided a solid, systematic foundation, ensuring each phase of the study was purposeful and contributed to the subsequent stages of research. This approach not only strengthened the study's dependability by applying a recognized conceptual framework but also allowed for a better understanding of the process of changes within organizational settings. Furthermore, the peer review strategies were contemplated, underscoring the study's commitment to maintaining a high dependability standard.

Confirmability

Confirmability holds a pivotal role in qualitative research by anchoring findings, interpretations, and recommendations firmly in the data rather than being influenced by the researcher's inherent biases or predispositions (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Patton, 2002). To bolster confirmability in the current study, several meticulous measures were implemented. These measures were designed to minimize the potential impact of subjective biases, ensuring that the research outcomes are transparently rooted in the empirical data and enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the study's findings.

Audit Trail and Reflexivity

Following the guidelines of Patton (2002) and Korstjens and Moser (2018), a detailed decision or audit trail was maintained. This comprehensive record captured every research stage, from data collection methods to analysis techniques, ensuring that all research processes were transparent and verified by external parties if needed. The audit trail served as a robust reference point, minimizing personal biases and solidifying the validity of the research findings.

Recognizing that complete objectivity is challenging in qualitative research, I practiced reflexivity, a method wherein I continuously evaluated and acknowledged my preconceptions and potential biases throughout the research journey. By doing so, I ensured that personal judgments were kept separate from empirical findings. As Thomas and Magilvy (2011) outlined, this self-awareness ensured that the data remained pure and was not clouded by my interpretations.

Grounded Findings and Trustworthiness

Throughout the research process, special attention was given to ensure that all findings and interpretations were deeply rooted in the data. Any conclusions drawn were directly traceable to participant responses or observable phenomena, adhering to Patton's (2002) emphasis on empirical findings. Confirmability also does not exist in isolation but is interconnected with other pillars of trustworthiness, namely credibility, transferability, and dependability. The strategies undertaken to establish these three aspects also contributed to confirmability. Since the current study achieved credibility through rigorous data collection and analysis methods, transferability via detailed descriptions, and dependability through a systematic approach, confirmability was consequently strengthened.

Results

Research Question One

Thematic coding, a nuanced process integral to this study's qualitative analysis, unfolds in two distinct levels. At the first level, key words and phrases extracted directly from the transcripts are meticulously identified as initial codes. This phase involves a granular examination of the data to pinpoint specific elements relevant to the research question. Subsequently, at the second level, these initial codes are methodically amalgamated into broader themes through a process known as second level coding. An example of the excel spreadsheet used for coding is available in Appendix C. For RQ1 (How has HR function changed in HEIs due to a pandemic?), the thematic analysis yielded a comprehensive exploration, resulting in the identification of 12 overarching

themes. These themes, encapsulating the multifaceted changes within the HR function, are thoughtfully presented in Table 6, offering a detailed snapshot of the diverse facets uncovered during the research process. This meticulous thematic coding approach not only adds depth to the analysis but also ensures a nuanced understanding of the intricate shifts observed within the HR landscape in higher education during times of crisis.

Table 6

Research Question 1 Themes

	Theme name
1	Prioritization of employee wellness
2	Policy and procedure changes
3	Flexible work arrangements
4	Virtual professional development
5	Data-driven decision making
6	Crisis management and strategic focus
7	Employee engagement and communication
8	Recruitment challenges
9	Financial challenges and resource management
10	Technology adoption and virtual transition
11	Health and safety management
12	Adaption and innovation

As shown in Table 6, the first theme is the prioritization of employee wellness. P1 stated their HR department "definitely started to prioritize wellness." P6 emphasized, "From an employee wellness perspective, we, you know, we provided all kinds of resources … work with employees to help them to help mitigate their fear of COVID-19." P5 stated, "We brought in the university's wellness coordinator and did virtual meditation sessions with staff." The thematic analysis showed the pandemic has led to a

greater emphasis on employee well-being and mental health. HR departments introduced wellness initiatives, such as virtual meditation and training sessions, to support staff.

The second theme was policy and procedure changes. The thematic analysis showed that HR had to quickly adapt to new policies and procedures related to federal laws and COVID compliance. They became responsible for enforcing COVID-related protocols and managing employee compliance, including vaccine requirements. P1 stated,

> So a lot of pressure came on HR. I think at the same time, you're dealing with a lot of new policies and procedures federal laws. And again, everyone was really looking to HR to kind of lead the change in COVID and compliance.

P8, also stated,

> We are HR and we have to constantly be in a position where we're pivoting, right, there are regulations, there's laws, and there's health concerns. We had even with the pandemic, and we still have work to do right, so there's compliance efforts.

The third theme was flexible work arrangements. P2 stated, "We did not have a work-from-home policy." P4 remarked, "Flexible work policy started during the pandemic." P5 discussed how their team "created a remote work policy that that included myself, general counsel, our risk manager because we're talking about people who are going to be at home doing work for us." The thematic analysis showed the pandemic necessitated the implementation of remote work policies. HR played a crucial role in adapting the work environment to be more flexible and finding ways to support employees working remotely.

The fourth theme involved virtual professional development. The analysis revealed with the limitations on in-person events, HR had to transition to virtual professional development opportunities, making training sessions more accessible and cost-effective. P1 stated,

> We didn't have as many opportunities pre pandemic … professional development. You were going somewhere, and it had a large cost. So, being able to offer some of these, you know virtual, whether it was a 1-day session. We began prioritizing professional development through virtual professional development. We did some virtual trainings, kind of, you know our own virtual brown bags, to keep people going.

The fifth theme, data-driven decision making, required HR to become more data-driven, reevaluating roles and functions based on organizational needs. It also included identifying talents and skills to support staff development. P2 elaborated that their department was "becoming more data-driven and just reevaluating the roles and the functions based on organizational needs." P2 also stated, "Bring in that data when we're presenting thoughts and ideas in our vision … helps with push back."

The sixth theme is crisis management and strategic focus. P8 stated, "So I think it was important to have that plan for us to strategically navigate how we were going to implement this new normal in place." P3 stated,

> When operations were discussed or strategic priorities were discussed, HR was not really part of the responsible units and part of the unit leaders who would attend. It significantly shifted … administration focus for HR to a strategic focus

post-pandemic. Post pandemic, you know, it would be unusual not to include HR

for crisis management.

P2 also stated,

We develop our vision and strategies based on our organizational strategic

priorities, so collaboration and innovation … team model. … We're here to solve

problems, to be strategic and have an impact on the organization, and there have

been some tough days reminding them of the universities, strategic planning

goals, and our department strategic planning goals, and how we fit in.

The thematic analysis showed that the HR role expanded during the pandemic, becoming

involved in strategic discussions and crisis management. It became essential for HR to

collaborate with other departments and adapt to changing situations quickly.

The seventh theme, employee engagement and communication, involved HR

maintaining employee engagement despite remote work arrangements, encouraging open

communication, and fostering a sense of connection and community. P4 stated,

Before the pandemic, I did a lot more behind-the-scene work. After the pandemic,

we come up with ways for more employee engagement. Try to create an

environment where people can engage when they're in the office together and

meet virtually.

P5 stated, "Every single possible portal was used to make sure that we were all in

communications." P2 explained they were "developing a strategy... Take a cohesive

approach to getting feedback from our staff… We're currently working on a staff

engagement survey."

Theme eight is recruitment challenges. P8 stated, "The recruitment effort is a little bit more difficult because, since the pandemic, a lot of employers are providing incentives work from home incentives." The analysis showed that the pandemic has impacted recruitment efforts, with a need for creative approaches to attract and retain talent, such as offering remote work options and additional benefits.

The ninth theme is financial challenges and resource management. P4 explained there were "financial challenges. We had staff who were furloughed. We still wanted to be a resource to them. If they had questions, we wanted to make sure they knew who to contact." The thematic analysis showed HR faced financial challenges due to furloughs and layoffs. They had to manage resources efficiently and quantify COVID-related and non-COVID-related work to support staffing requests.

Technology adoption and the virtual transition is the tenth theme. The pandemic accelerated the adoption of virtual tools and technology, requiring HR to facilitate the transition to virtual work and remote communication. P6 stated,

> Because we did have some people that did that or the Internet service that they had didn't meet our minimum technology standards. So we gave them hotspots or some sort of technology booster, or whatever it is that we gave them to ensure that their technology, our technology requirements, were met.

Health and safety management, theme eleven, the analysis revealed HR taking on responsibilities related to public health administration, implementing health protocols, and ensuring employee safety on campus. P3 stated,

Under the guidance of the medical scientists and the research scientists was

critically important because we needed to constantly be aware of and stay on top

of health guidance internationally and nationally.

Adaptation and innovation is the final theme. P3 stated they were "informed

regularly through a feedback loop which begged for more innovation and more

discussions around what else we could possibly do." The thematic analysis showed that

the pandemic forced HR to pivot and find innovative ways to operate and engage with

employees, adapting to the changing circumstances and needs.

Kotter's Eight-Steps Process for Creating Major Change

Establishing a Sense of Urgency

RQ1 thematic analysis was further explored through participants' descriptions of

the changes in the HR function aligned with Kotter's eight- steps for creating major

change. An example of the Excel spreadsheet used for coding is available in Appendix D.

Kotter's first step for creating major change is establishing a sense of urgency. The

participants were asked to describe the sense of urgency they encountered in HR for

higher education during the pandemic. The first subtheme shown in Figure 3, complying

with policies and safety, involved HR complying with policies and safety issues in

response to COVID-19 to comply with federal, state, and university policies while

ensuring employees' safety. P1 said there was an "urgency to definitely comply with

Federal State and university policies while making sure that everyone was safe." The

compliance included monitoring, tracking, and providing COVID tests. P5 stated there

was an "enormous sense of urgency in how to keep our students healthy and safe." It also

involved being alert to staff attendance, alert to the mental health and resources to

support employees' well-being, and considerations of potential mental health issues. P6

stated, "There was a lot of urgency because we had 3,500 employees who were afraid to

come into the office."

Figure 3

Establishing a Sense of Urgency Subthemes

Complying with Policies & Procedures	Emergency Response & Decision Making	Strategic Positioning of HR	Employee Engagement, Recruitment, & Culture

The second subtheme, emergency response and decision-making, depicts another

urgency faced by HR. There was a rapid response team formation to address the

pandemic's impact. P5 detailed, "This was a university-wide effort, held meetings 24/7 at

the beginning, and then every day, then it went to once a week." The meetings were

initially held 24/7 and transitioned to regular intervals. The ongoing meetings were

necessary to adapt and effectively operate amidst the changing circumstances. There was

also an urgency to keep students and employees healthy and safe, involving university-

wide efforts. The university-wide efforts involved leadership, medical experts, HR, and

external health authorities. P5 stated,

> The team included the president as the major part of leadership, our medical
>
> director, the HR team, which included myself and our leave expert because people
>
> were having to take sick leaves, COVID sick leaves, and so forth, students,

student life and enter so. And for a while we included a member of the [state's]

Department of Health.

Additionally, there was timely decision-making to transition employees to remote

work due to safety and productivity concerns. P6 said, "A lot of convincing … decision

to go remote … best interest of our employees." P7 also stated, "Decisions [were also]

made to actually lay off several of our employees." Remote work policies and systems

were reviewed, updated, and adapted for a remote environment. Preparations were made

to ensure a seamless transition, including updating emergency response plans. The

analysis also showed that there were efforts to ensure continuous and efficient university

services during remote operations.

The strategic positioning of HR was the next subtheme that emerged. The analysis

showed how the emphasis on HR's role in crisis management and strategic decision

making was essential. There was an urgency to ensure HR's involvement and influence in

crucial decision-making circles. There was also an urgency in HR's role in understanding

and embodying the philosophy of staying at the table—an acknowledgment of the need to

shift perspectives and methodologies to suit the new reality. P8 stated, "The sense of

urgency was just making sure that all of our systems that we were in a place where we

could operate remotely and make sure that we're servicing the university." P3 said,

has been an accelerated sense of urgency….to have a seat at the table. So we just

need the professionals within the circles of HR to understand the philosophy

around staying at the table.... One is getting the seat one and two is staying there.

Employee engagement, recruitment, and culture is the fourth subtheme that highlights the need to continue to ensure employee engagement despite different schedules and remote work arrangements. P8 stated,

> We pivoted, and we're trying to find that niche, and that that way that works for us in terms of just shifting our perspective and shifting the way in which we do things, and especially shift in a way in which we engage with employees

The analysis showed that participants emphasized the importance of maintaining a strong work culture and connection to the organization. There were intentional efforts to engage staff in the work and culture of the organization, even in remote settings. There was also a reevaluation of recruitment practices due to the pandemic, shifting toward virtual and hybrid approaches. The sense of urgency was to focus on engaging staff and ensuring their well-being, especially with changes in work arrangements. There were challenges in finding the right balance and approach to engage with employees and ensure efficiency.

Creating a Guiding Coalition

Kotter's second step in the change process is creating the guiding coalition. The participants were asked to describe how the team for HR change was put together. The two subthemes identified by the thematic analysis described the strategies and efforts undertaken to collaborative team efforts within the HR function in response to the pandemic and are shown in Figure 4.

Kotter's second step, creating a guiding coalition, emphasizes the importance of assembling a cohesive and influential team to drive organizational change successfully.

In the context of the study, participants were queried about how the HR team managed change, leading to the emergence of two key themes: comprehensive team dynamics and leadership engagement. The first subtheme that emerged for this step was comprehensive team dynamics. The theme of comprehensive team dynamics aligns with Kotter's second step as it underscores the significance of establishing a robust and interconnected team within the HR function. This involves not only bringing together individuals with diverse skills and expertise but also fostering a collaborative environment where team members collectively contribute to and support the change initiative. In the context of creating a guiding coalition, comprehensive team dynamics denote the synergy and collaborative spirit necessary for the HR team to effectively guide and navigate the organization through change.

Similarly, the second subtheme of leadership engagement directly relates to Kotter's second step by emphasizing the pivotal role of leadership within the guiding coalition. Successful change management requires active and committed leadership involvement. This theme delves into how leaders within the HR team engage with the change process, demonstrating how their commitment, vision, and communication efforts contribute to the creation of a strong guiding coalition. Leadership engagement is integral to Kotter's model, as it ensures that the guiding coalition possesses the necessary influence and direction to champion and sustain the change initiative.

In the first subtheme, which focuses on comprehensive team dynamics and leadership engagement, the analysis revealed the formation of a team or coalition. This team included university leadership, medical experts, the HR team, and external

authorities. The inclusion of various team members represented a multidisciplinary approach aimed at addressing various aspects of the pandemic, with recognized roles such as benefits, labor relations, and employee relations. The team members had to juggle multiple responsibilities simultaneously due to the pandemic's impact, emphasizing understanding employee needs amid complex challenges. Additionally, consistent team dynamics were maintained across HR departments, fostering collaboration among specialized teams within HR, including those responsible for benefits, HRIS, talent, and equity compliance. This collaborative effort ensured readiness for remote work and the ability to adapt to unexpected changes. The existing collaborative structures played a crucial role in facilitating an effective crisis response. P3 said, "Those 3-4 portfolios of work for these groups spanned several different layers from executive leaders to senior leaders to first line supervisors to individual contributors." P5 said,

> [The] team included the president as the major part of leadership, our medical director, the HR team, which included myself and our leave expert because people were having to take sick leaves, Covid sick leaves, and so forth, students, student life and enter so. And for a while, we included a member of the [state] Department of Health.

Figure 4

Creating a Guiding Coalition Subthemes

Comprehensive Team Dynamics and Leadership	Committee Formation and Engagement Cross-Functional Collaboration

The second and final subtheme, committee formation and cross-functional collaboration, the analysis showed that in addition to a team or coalition formation, committees were formed with key roles from across the university. The committees and subgroups effectively provided direction to direct reports and team leaders. The team, committees, and cross-functional collaboration encompassed various organizational layers, including executives, directors, and individual contributors and central HR collaboration. The committee formations focused on enhancing employee service through meetings and discussions, which addressed priorities and answered employee questions. These sessions addressed organizational priorities and provided comprehensive responses to employee inquiries. Furthermore, there was a notable shift in the HR function from a transactional focus to a more holistic emphasis on organizational development. This transformation led to the redefinition of HR roles, expanding their scope and reevaluation based on the organization's evolving needs. An emphasis on data-driven decision making was also discussed, contributing to the overall efficacy of committee formation and cross-functional collaboration.

Developing a Vision and Strategy

Kotter's third step in the change process is developing a vision and strategy. The participants were asked to describe how they or the team developed their vision and strategies. The thematic analysis of their responses revealed that participants centered their visions and strategies around several key principles. These included the importance of providing individual support, fostering collaborative decision-making, aligning with leadership priorities, and relying on established strategic plans for effective

implementation. From this analysis, two distinct subthemes emerged, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Developing a Vision and Strategy Subthemes

Vision Execution and Decision Making	Employee Support and Safety

The first subtheme, vision execution and decision-making, highlighted strategies that revolved around establishing collaborative relationships with health authorities and seeking guidance from medical and research experts to inform health-related decisions. The analysis also indicated a strong emphasis on the necessity of staying current with national and international health guidance. Furthermore, strategies were identified to strike a balance between various priorities, including ensuring employee safety, sustaining business operations, and supporting students. P2 stated, "We develop our vision and strategies based on our organizational strategic priorities, so collaboration and innovation." This approach also involved a focus on addressing employee challenges and understanding their potential impact on business results. Ultimately, the analysis revealed that participants were committed to holistic solutions that encompassed the well-being of students, employees, and faculty members.

Additionally, the analysis showed that participants placed a significant emphasis on ongoing conversations and discussions as crucial elements for making well-informed decisions. The strategies they implemented were aligned with the organization's

overarching leadership vision and strategic priorities. Practical implementation measures, such as providing remote work accommodations based on eligibility, considering legal factors, and conducting research to accommodate health concerns, were evident. Moreover, the organization utilized its emergency response plan to navigate the challenges presented by the "new normal." The analysis underscored the significance of having a well-defined strategic plan as a guiding framework for facilitating a seamless adaptation to evolving circumstances. P8 stated, "So I think it was important to have that plan for us to strategically navigate how we were going to implement this new normal in place."

The second subtheme, employee support and safety, strongly emphasized providing employee support and ensuring their safety. This encompassed various measures aimed at adapting to individual needs, such as adjusting schedules to accommodate employees' home-related requirements during the pandemic. Additionally, efforts were made to support staff members who were unable to work remotely by assigning them suitable projects that could be carried out on-site. It was ensured that high-risk staff felt supported and were not compelled to come into the workplace, prioritizing their safety. To guarantee accessibility and support for employees, a system of backups within the HR department was established. The overarching goal was to make every employee feel supported and to address their concerns effectively. Furthermore, the business focus shifted towards prioritizing employees' well-being and safety, which included safely transitioning staff members back to the workplace or facilitating their

shift to remote work. Project-based solutions were developed for non-remote workers to ensure their continued engagement.

Strategies and the vision for providing employee support also appeared to embrace a more collaborative approach to problem solving. This involved the active involvement of diverse perspectives in decision-making processes and encouraging cross-functional contributions to problem-solving efforts. A feedback loop was established to maintain open communication with senior leaders, allowing for the redefinition of strategies as needed to ensure employees' ongoing support and safety. P3 stated, "The initial feedback showed that an initiative wasn't going to work from a brief or initial assessment, we looped feedback to the senior leaders and executive leaders to rethink what another vision could be."

Communicating the Change Vision

Kotter's fourth step in the change process is communicating the change vision. The participants were asked to describe how they or the team communicated the change vision. The thematic analysis highlighted the significance of leadership engagement, transparent communication, and employee involvement to ensure successful implementation and alignment with the change vision. The first subtheme, shown in Figure 6, emerged as leadership engagement and alignment. The analysis revealed that the leadership team engaged in regular meetings to discuss organization-wide priorities and shared the vision for the HR team's role in the broader strategy. They also utilized leadership calls to keep leaders informed. Additionally, there was collaboration with key offices, including frequent interaction with the VP of research and chief health officer for

guidance. This collaboration enabled the alignment of strategies and tactics based on key office discussions, ultimately contributing to the foundation for successful implementation through collective efforts. P3 said,

> Our VP of research and our chief health officer often and frequently spoke in order to make sure guidance could come back to us quickly and informed by their alignment of their offices, and then we could strategize from there.

Figure 6

Communicating the Change Vision Subthemes

Leadership Team Communication	Employee Engagement and Involvement	Communication Tools and Platforms
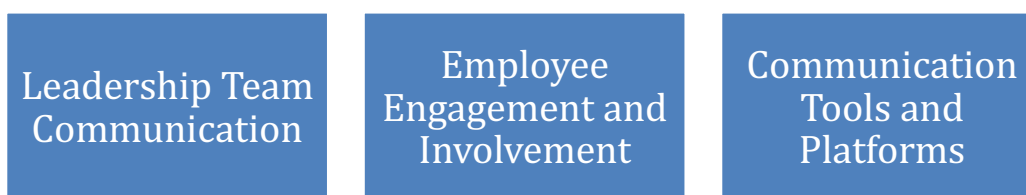
The second subtheme, which is employee engagement and involvement, encompassed various strategies. This included engaging labor partners to assist in disseminating information and involving employees in feedback loops to encourage innovation. P2 stated, "developing a strategy... Take a cohesive approach to getting feedback from our staff engagement survey."

Additionally, regular staff engagement surveys were conducted to gather feedback and input from employees. Employee engagement was also characterized by cross-team collaboration through weekly meetings that addressed changes and fostered cross-functional communication. General HR meetings were held to facilitate information sharing until normalcy is achieved. Furthermore, there was collaboration with various HR colleagues and partners to ensure effective coordination in these efforts. P7 stated,

"Communicating with our labor partners to ensure that they are kept in the loop,... they can actually assist HR and the school in terms of disseminating information to the membership."

The third and final subtheme, which is communication tools and platforms, provided a detailed account of how virtual communication was carried out. Virtual communication tools encompassed the use of Microsoft Teams, Zoom, emails, and chats as primary means of communication. There was a particular emphasis on one-on-one virtual meetings to facilitate personalized communication. All available communication portals were maximized to ensure effective outreach. Participants also stressed the importance of transparent and easily accessible communication during this period. P6 stated, "Very open and transparent with employees... We sent out emails to every employee. We put something on our on our internal website communication pages." This involved maintaining open and transparent communication with employees through regular emails and internal website updates to keep them well-informed. Additionally, managers were assigned the responsibility of directly communicating with their teams to ensure clarity and alignment.

Empowering Broad-Based Action

Kotter's fifth step in the change process is empowering broad-based action. The participants were asked to describe how they or the team removed obstacles. As shown in Figure 7, the thematic analysis revealed the importance of addressing resistance, leveraging data-driven decision making, creating a supportive environment, and effectively communicating during times of change. It also emphasizes the need for

adaptability, quick responses, and fostering a sense of community and engagement among employees.

Figure 7

Empowering Broad-Based Action Subthemes

Overcoming Resistance and Difficult Conversations	Data-Driven Decision Making	Building a Supportive Environment	Adapting Rapidly to Change

The first subtheme, overcoming resistance and difficult conversations, was characterized by various aspects. The analysis revealed that participants were actively addressing employee resistance, particularly in response to workplace changes like vaccine requirements. They faced challenges in dealing with employees who were resistant to these changes and had to engage in difficult conversations regarding compliance with Federal, State, and University vaccination mandates, which were essential to maintain employment. These difficult conversations often involved HR providing supervisor support and collaborative efforts. P1 stated,

> Some employees not really being amenable to changes in the workplace, whether those were vaccine requirements, and having to have those difficult conversations; if you weren't compliant with federal, state, and university vaccination requirements, you could not be employed.

> Challenges were encountered in working with supervisors to help them understand and accommodate employee needs. It was deemed crucial to facilitate

reasonable accommodations for staff who had multiple priorities at home and work. Overall, the necessity for all parties to engage in difficult conversations when necessary was emphasized in addressing resistance and managing challenging situations.

The second subtheme, data-driven decision making, revealed the participants emphasizing the importance of utilizing research and data to overcome obstacles. They described the incorporation of research from the Society of Human Resource Management to support their ideas and vision. Data-driven insights were used to present well-informed proposals and address potential resistance effectively. Furthermore, data-driven decision-making played a crucial role in identifying and overcoming other obstacles and silos, such as those related to resource constraints and cultural divisions. Management-led initiatives were implemented to encourage cross-collaboration and information sharing. Data and a strategic vision were employed as tools to break down silos and promote cooperation among different teams or departments, fostering a more cohesive and integrated approach to problem-solving. P2 stated, "Pulled in research for the society of the human of human resource management; bring in that data when we're presenting thoughts and ideas in our vision…helps with push back." P3 also stated, "Obstacles can be due to a lack of resources...cultural where silos tend to exist; cross collaboration is a management change initiative in that moment to force people to collaborate"

The third subtheme, building a supportive environment, is characterized by participants emphasizing the importance of removing obstacles through an employee-centric approach. They highlighted the need to foster a supportive environment for

employees by redefining HR as a valuable resource rather than a place associated with trouble. Encouraging open communication and approachability for both personal and professional concerns was deemed essential in this context. Furthermore, when discussing the removal of obstacles, participants recognized the need to adapt rapidly to the changing environment. They discussed the challenges of swiftly adjusting to new circumstances, such as the rapid transition to remote work, and the importance of providing the necessary equipment and technology to facilitate this transition. Addressing obstacles required a flexible and proactive approach to ensure a seamless transition for employees. P4 stated,

> Our staff to understand was that we are here for them as a resources. HR normally has a bad reputation that you go to HR when you are in trouble. Staff to felt that they are welcome to come and talk to us about anything….personal or professional

The fourth and final subtheme, addressing impactful decisions and employee concerns, the analysis involved participants discussing the importance of addressing employee impact and communication to overcome obstacles. They highlighted the need to address the concerns of employees who were affected by employment-related decisions and the communication strategies used to keep employees informed during significant changes. Managing employee reactions to changes in employment status was a key focus in this context. Additionally, some participants discussed addressing obstacles related to navigating unemployment challenges. These challenges were often related to employees choosing not to return to work due to subsidized unemployment

benefits. Overcoming these obstacles involved referring to established plans and roadmaps designed to mitigate such issues. Moreover, promoting social interactions and engagement through non-work-related activities was seen as a valuable approach to addressing concerns and fostering a positive work environment.

Generating Short-Term Wins

Kotter's sixth step in the change process is generating short-term wins. The participants were asked to describe how they or the team set short-term goals. The thematic analysis, as shown in Figure 8, showed the organization's strategies for generating short-term wins by focusing on employee engagement, well-being, adaptive goal setting, and an employee-centered approach to goal creation and addressing unforeseen changes brought about by the pandemic. The emphasis on maintaining connection, supporting well-being, and responding to changing circumstances showcases the organization's commitment to its workforce during dynamic and challenging times.

Figure 8

Generating Short-Term Wins Subthemes

Responding to Unforeseen Changes	Employee Engagement and Well-Being Initiatives	Adaptive Goal Setting and Employee-Centric Approach

In the first subtheme, responding to unforeseen changes, the analysis revealed participants describing short-term goals involving unpredictable productivity and employee responses. They mentioned experiencing initial uncertainty and a lack of set goals during the transition to remote work, which led to an unexpected increase in

employee productivity and commitment. To address these challenges, they shifted their focus to immediate operational needs. Additionally, short-term goals included planning for the return to the workplace, establishing phased employee return plans, determining remote and on-site work proportions, and managing communication. They also discussed the implementation of HR projects and organizational communication strategies.

In the second subtheme, employee engagement and well-being initiatives, the analysis showed that participants discussed short-term goals aimed at promoting employee connection. These goals included holding weekly meetings with college-level teams and liaisons, incorporating social time into virtual interactions, conducting virtual training sessions, and organizing brown-bag discussions to maintain engagement. Participants also emphasized the importance of fostering a sense of community by sharing personal interests and activities. Additionally, they discussed goals focused on employee well-being, such as prioritizing staff mental health education, encouraging breaks, promoting physical activity, and discouraging overworking during remote work. They also mentioned creating opportunities for employees to share hobbies and connect through virtual platforms. P6 stated, "What we found was productivity actually went up because employees were thrilled to be home. Reduce our employee complaints by 5 points."

The third subtheme, adaptive goal setting and employee-centric approaches, revolved around structured goal setting and adaptation. The thematic analysis showed that the participants highlighted establishing annual goals using tools like smart sheets to track departmental progress. They also mentioned holding regular meetings to assess and

adapt long-term goals based on changing circumstances and implementing shorter-term goals through weekly meetings to address emerging needs. Furthermore, the participant data indicated that short-term goals were employee-centered, considering both long-term and short-term activities based on employee challenges and needs. The participants emphasized setting goals aligned with supporting employees in a changing work environment and adapting strategies and objectives in response to the evolving nature of the pandemic. P8 stated, "Goals were based on the employee's needs."

Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change

Kotter's seventh step in the change process is consolidating gains and producing more change. The participants were asked to describe how they or the team kept the momentum. The data showed strategies for team resilience, engagement, and well-being, adapting to new work paradigms, navigating complex challenges, and addressing the impact of societal events on employees, also seen in Figure 9. The HR focus on communication, innovation, and personalization demonstrated a comprehensive approach to consolidating gains and effecting further positive change within HEIs.

Figure 9

Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change Subthemes

Fostering Team Resilence and Engagement	Adapting to New Ways of Working	Navigating Change Amind Societal Events

The first subtheme, fostering team resilience and engagement, the analysis revealed HR's efforts to emphasize the team's role in problem-solving and its strategic

impact. HR aimed to refocus and reiterate organizational and departmental goals during

the challenging times. They increased team communication and connection during the

pandemic and addressed burnout by adjusting Zoom meetings and halting administrative

meetings on Fridays. The organization also showed appreciation for employees' efforts

through gifts and celebrations, encouraging creative thinking through the engagement

committee, and providing staff with free time and engaging activities like virtual

sessions. Overall, this subtheme prioritized employees' mental and physical well-being.

In the second subtheme, adapting to new ways of working, the analysis showed

HR collaborated with deans to facilitate effective remote work. They established a remote

work policy with input from various stakeholders and maintained continuous

communication between employees and leadership. HR had to respond to differing rules

between public and private universities and manage unemployment response

requirements and staff reductions. They also ensured compliance, policy implementation,

and audits amid the pandemic. Regular check-ins with employees were conducted to

discuss work challenges and personal well-being, focusing on encouraging self-care and

addressing individual needs. HR recognized external stressors and their impact on

employees' mental state.

The third and final subtheme, navigating change amid societal events, revealed a

need for balancing employee needs and compliance while responding to unique

challenges based on university type and regulations. HR maintained momentum by

understanding employees' needs and reinstatement. They reinforced policies, procedures,

and compliance efforts during the pandemic. Additionally, they focused on maintaining

connection and personalization through regular meetings to discuss work, challenges, and personal well-being. HR ensured that employees took time for self-care while fulfilling their responsibilities and acknowledged and addressed stressors related to societal events and personal losses.

Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture

Kotter's eighth step in the change process is consolidating gains and producing more change. The participants were asked to describe how they or the team made the change stick. The thematic analysis, shown in Figure 10, revealed the HR participants' commitment to adapting, learning, and incorporating new approaches into their culture. By focusing on feedback, professional development, remote work strategies, and staying informed about regulations, the organization anchors its changes within its culture to foster growth and innovation.

Figure 10

Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture Subthemes

Embracing Continuous Improvement and Flexibility	Prioritizing Professional Development and Engagement	Balancing Remote Work and Long-Term Goals	Navigating Regulatory and Legal Landscape

The first subtheme, embracing continuous improvement and flexibility, the analysis identified several key aspects. First, HR continuously uses assessment strategies and feedback loops to refine its approaches. HR's efforts demonstrated that changes are not fixed but can evolve based on feedback. Secondly, there is a clear understanding of

the purpose behind the changes, which has led to the successful launch of labor-intensive projects. Changes were thoughtfully linked to the organization's strategic goals.

The analysis of the second subtheme, prioritizing professional development and engagement, revealed a strong commitment to employee growth and engagement. HR offered virtual professional development opportunities and promoted skill-building and engagement through innovative programs like Step Challenges. Additionally, HR emphasized diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, including hiring a DEI director and encouraging ongoing conversations through series like Compassionate Conversations. Continuous participation in DEI programs and initiatives is actively encouraged. Furthermore, incentives and rewards are thoughtfully provided to motivate employee participation in training and engagement activities, focusing on tangible rewards and recognition for meeting goals.

In the third subtheme, balancing remote work and long-term goals, the analysis revealed the organization's adaptability in response to changing work environments. Policies have been established to enable remote work, taking into account departmental and role-specific needs. The organization successfully navigated the transition to virtual operations during the pandemic while maintaining its long-term goals. It also adapted to new space constraints by subleasing facilities. Additionally, a strong commitment to consistency and accountability is evident, with employees being held accountable for their performance, and their efforts are duly recognized. Clear and consistent communication of changes and regulations helps employees navigate uncertainties.

The fourth and final subtheme, navigating regulatory and legal landscape, the analysis highlighted HR's proactive approach. HR responded promptly to changing regulations, laws, and health concerns, demonstrating a commitment to staying informed and agile. Active participation in webinars and maintaining contact with legal counsel are essential components of this strategy. The sustainability of changes was achieved through a consistent approach to navigating regulatory challenges and ensuring that changes are continually communicated to employees. This approach safeguarded the organization's compliance efforts and the longevity of the changes implemented.

Table 7

Kotter's Eight-Steps With Subthemes

Steps	Subtheme 1	Subtheme 2	Subtheme 3	Subtheme 4
1. Establishing a sense of urgency	Complying with policies and safety	Emergency response and decision making	Strategic positioning of HR	Employee engagement, recruitment, and culture
2. Creating a guiding coalition	Comprehensive team dynamics and leadership	Committee formation and engagement Cross-functional collaboration		
3. Developing a vision and strategy	Vision execution and decision making	Employee support and safety		
4. Communicating the change vision	Leadership team communication	Employee engagement and involvement	Communication tools and platforms	
5. Empowering broad-based action	Overcoming resistance and difficult conversations	Data-driven decision making	Building a supportive environment	Adapting rapidly to change
6. Generating short-term wins	Responding to unforeseen changes	Employee engagement and well-being initiatives	Adaptive goal setting and employee-centric approach	
7. Consolidating gains and producing more change	Fostering team resilience and engagement	Adapting to new ways of working	Navigating change amid societal events	
8. Anchoring new approaches in the culture	Embracing continuous improvement and flexibility	Prioritizing professional development and engagement	Balancing remote work and long-term goals	Navigating regulatory and legal landscape

Research Question 2

RQ2 asked, "How has HR changed as a result of COVID-19 to support employees' performance?" The thematic analysis showed the changes in several themes, including performance evaluation, management approaches, leadership styles, policy adaptations, remote work challenges, learning and development, mental health initiatives, diversity and inclusion, communication shifts, and the impact on hiring and recruitment.

The themes for RQ2 are shown in Table 8. An example of the Excel spreadsheet used for coding is available in Appendix E.

Table 8

Research Question 2 Themes

	Theme name
1	Shift in performance evaluation approach
2	Performance management and engagement
3	Empathetic and authentic leadership
4	Managing performance issues during COVID-19
5	Adapting policies and processes
6	Remote work and management
7	Learning and development
8	Independence and quality of work–life balance
9	Civility, collegiality, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)
10	Mental health and wellness
11	Flexible management and communication
12	Impact on hiring and recruitment

The first theme is the shift in performance evaluation approach. P1 stated, "huge change where we're looking at having a growth mindset." The analysis showed the HR departments have embraced a growth mindset when evaluating employees, focusing on holistic assessments identifying strengths and areas requiring improvement. Additionally, there is a newfound commitment to supporting underperforming employees and fostering conversations around performance improvement. These shifts reflect an evolution in how employee performance is evaluated and managed.

The second theme, performance management and engagement, has also undergone substantial changes. P2 stated, "We have regular focus engagement regarding our performance management process..." The analysis showed HR now places a strong emphasis on regular engagement as a means of facilitating performance management.

Furthermore, performance discussions are closely aligned with organizational values, emphasizing concepts such as work-life balance, integrity, and collaboration. Open communication is encouraged, allowing employees to voice concerns about stress and adjustments, and employees are increasingly involved in discussions about their own performance.

The third theme centers on the rise of empathetic and authentic leadership. The thematic analysis showed the pandemic has spurred a transformation in leadership styles, with a clear shift toward greater empathy and authenticity. P3 explained there was a "rise of empathetic leadership, the rise of authenticity..." This change is considered irreversible, and HR is now responsible for maintaining these positive behavioral shifts in leadership.

The fourth theme, managing performance issues during COVID-19, has also evolved. P4 stated, "If there were performance issues, you know, things were very straightforward..." The analysis showed there had been a departure from straightforward warnings and punitive measures, replaced by a deeper understanding of the challenges employees face. HR was now more involved in understanding the nuances of performance challenges, enabling more effective support mechanisms.

The fifth theme, adapting policies and processes, reflects the analysis revealing the necessity to respond to the unique circumstances created by COVID-19. P5 stated, "What changed is [that] we had to create a lot of new policies..." Organizations have introduced new policies and enhanced the user-friendliness of their websites to

accommodate remote work and address employee relations investigations more efficiently.

The sixth theme, remote work and management, showed HR required a significant adjustment in performance management practices. P6 stated, "We haven't changed what we do... I say we just changed how we do it..." HR has been instrumental in helping managers navigate the challenges of remote performance management, focusing on motivating, developing, and engaging employees working in remote settings.

The seventh theme, learning and development, P6 also stated, "biggest areas in HR...probably the biggest emphasis on learning..." The analysis showed HR has undergone significant changes, with organizations placing a greater emphasis on learning as a cornerstone of HR.

The eighth theme is the shift towards independence and quality of work-life balance. P8 stated, " "They feel as though they have a better quality of life, greater work, life, balance..." The analysis revealed there has been a reduction in micro-management due to remote work, resulting in positive feedback regarding improved work-life balance and overall performance.

The ninth theme, civility, collegiality, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), has been integrated into performance evaluation processes. P1 expressed, "We're adding in areas like civility, collegiality..." The analysis showed civility and collegiality are now factors considered in performance assessments, while HR places a heightened emphasis on taking action to promote and uphold DEI values within the organization.

The tenth theme, mental health and wellness, the analysis revealed HR increasingly focused on supporting employee mental health. P2 stated, "Mental health is a big wellness initiative..." There is a growing concern about the potential impact of COVID-19 on mental health initiatives and the well-being of the workforce.

The eleventh theme, flexible management and communication, the analysis showed that practices have evolved to accommodate the unique challenges posed by the pandemic. P3 stated, "And frankly - how should I say this - be a little bit unapologetic..." HR has embraced more flexible approaches to performance management, taking into account the multifaceted impacts of COVID-19 on employees. Personalized communication with employees has become paramount to understanding their individual and professional challenges.

The twelfth and final theme for research question two is, impact on hiring and recruitment, thematic analysis revealed that as organizations face difficulties hiring and retaining talent due to the "Great Resignation," HR was actively working to help leaders and employees adapt to new ways of working, ensuring a seamless transition to the evolving landscape. P5 explained, "One thing that did change is that as a result of Covid, it has become much more difficult to hire people. That's what they call the great resignation. We're still suffering from the great resignation."

The COVID-19 pandemic has instigated a multitude of changes within HR practices, encompassing performance evaluation, management, leadership, policy adaptation, remote work, learning and development, mental health initiatives, diversity and inclusion, communication, and hiring/recruitment. These thematic shifts collectively

represent HR's dynamic response to support and enhance employee performance during these challenging times.

Research Question Three

Research question three asked, "How has HR changed as a result of COVID-19 to support employees' well-being?" The thematic analysis showed the changes in several themes, including various aspects of HR's role in promoting well-being, adapting to challenges, and shaping the employee experience. As shown in Table 9, there are ten themes for Research Question Three. An example of the excel spreadsheet used for coding is available in Appendix F.

Table 9

Research Question Three Themes

	Theme name
1	Shift toward employee well-being and experience enhancement
2	Mental health and well-being
3	Evolution of wellness initiatives
4	Changes in health and safety protocols
5	Focus on employee health and well-being
6	Employee expectations and support
7	Enhancements in employee assistance programs (EAPs)
8	Adapting benefits and resources
9	Ongoing learning and development
10	Lessons from the pandemic for future well-being initiatives

The first emerging theme is the shift towards employee well-being and experience enhancement. P1 stated, "I think we're looking at the overall employee experience more…What balance and flexibility can we offer to them? What resources are available? What else can we offer in terms of wellness." P6 stated, they "beefed up all of our mental health offerings." P8 also stated, "we had EAP programs…we ramped up those efforts."

The thematic analysis showed HR departments have intensified their commitment to improving the overall employee experience. This shift encompasses exploring elements such as work-life balance, flexibility, and the provision of available resources for employee well-being. Moreover, HR has actively promoted wellness activities and instilled a mindset change among employees through channels like newsletters and educational efforts.

The second theme, mental health and well-being, reflects a noteworthy transformation. P3 stated,

> I think HR's ability to be better resourced around mental health and to have a stronger voice, and it's not just a soft, touchy, feely thing anymore to talk about mental health, to talk about someone's emotional state, and their well-being at work that cannot sustain itself.

The analysis showed HR had gained more significant influence in conversations pertaining to mental health in the workplace, with a heightened recognition of its importance. Efforts have been made to sustain visibility and support for mental health and emotional well-being, underlining HR's role as a catalyst for positive change. The third theme, evolution of wellness initiatives, the analysis showed a transition from conventional wellness programs to more holistic well-being initiatives. P4 stated,

> previously,...HR had a wellness program...were not really doing it like we were not sharing your training, so we were not focusing on all of that. However, due to Covid and what we all went through, we started getting more involved with our wellness team.

These initiatives now encompass mindfulness practices, such as meditation and wellness coaching, and emphasize inclusivity, particularly with regard to gender, in wellness activities and educational sessions.

The fourth theme, changes in hand safety protocols, the analysis showed HR contributing to developing clearer health directives, especially concerning employees who fall ill during the pandemic. P5 explained,

> When they get Covid, we made it very clear that if someone is sick, they should not come to work. Before [COVID], if you had a bad cold, you still came to work. That's pretty much changed in our society.

There has been a noticeable shift in attitude towards employees coming to work when unwell due to COVID-19. The fifth theme, focus on employee health and well-being during COVID-19, underscores the amplified attention HR has directed towards these aspects amid the pandemic. P6 stated,

> As an employer, it's not our responsibility. They help you find child care. But when COVID-19 hit, it still wasn't our responsibility to help them. But employees were reaching out and saying. What am I gonna do with my kids?

HR has actively addressed challenges such as illness, psychological effects, and childcare, demonstrating a commitment to employee well-being. The sixth theme, employee expectations and support, has transformed, with employees increasingly relying on employers for support during crises like COVID-19. P7 stated,

> there were times when, let's say, if an employee needed to take some time to do something with a family member they would make a request instead of taking a

day off. Do you mind if I work remotely, or something like that. If there was a child care issue, you know, typically prior to the to the pandemic, you would just have to take a day off right, I think we were a lot more flexible following the pandemic.

This shift reflects an evolution from limited employer responsibility to more active assistance, especially regarding childcare.

The seventh theme, enhancements in employee assistance programs (EAP), highlights HR's commitment to providing robust support for employee well-being. P8 stated,

> we had EAP resources available. We refer employees to those resources, but we wanted to have like a talk where, you know, employees can speak openly about what they're feeling, and then also share howthe afforded resources an possibly help them.

EAP offerings have expanded and improved, fostering open conversations and making accessible resources available to meet employees' diverse needs. The eighth theme, adapting benefits and resources, the analysis further showed HR's responsiveness to evolving employee needs. Benefit offerings have been adjusted, and HR actively explores various resources to aid employee well-being. P8 explained, "Premiums have skyrocketed, but I can say that there are more robust offerings now for employees, which, inclusive of the EAP and resources to help the individuals."

The ninth theme, ongoing learning and development for employees, the analysis has become integral to HR's approach. Regular educational sessions, workshops, and

specialist-led discussions are now common, offering employees tools and knowledge to support their well-being. P4 stated, in current wellness sessions, we see "people that we have not seen attend, like men don't come to these classes…post pandemic every gender is coming in." The tenth and final theme, Lessons from the Pandemic for Future Well-being Initiatives, emphasizes HR's reflection on the pandemic as a teachable moment. P8 stated,

> teachable moment in that we constantly have to be in a position where we are, you know, strategizing, planning because you just never know what you know the future it may hold, and we have to make sure overall that employees are in a position where they feel valued, where they feel safe, respected. and you know, as an Hr. Professional, this is something that we constantly have to

This includes a commitment to continuous review and adaptation of well-being offerings, with a steadfast aim to maintain a supportive, valued, and safe work environment.

HR's role in supporting employees' well-being has evolved significantly in response to the challenges presented by COVID-19. These thematic shifts encompass a holistic approach to well-being, recognizing the importance of mental health, and enhancing wellness initiatives, among other strategies, all to foster a healthier and more supportive work environment.

Overarching Themes

In the present descriptive multiple case study, I conducted a thematic analysis, identifying and organizing fifty-nine distinct themes across all research questions and

their respective sub-questions. As shown in Table 9, the themes reflect their significance

to specific interview questions. These themes are distributed among three main interview

questions and their subsequent sub-steps. For instance, in response to Interview Question

1, themes such as "Prioritization of Wellness," "Policy and Procedure Changes," and

"Data-Driven Decision-Making" were frequently observed. It is important to note that

several themes within this category are broken down into more sub-steps, reflecting

Kotter's eight-step conceptual framework approach to the analysis. These subdivisions

cover a range from compliance and safety concerns to an emphasis on adaptability and

ongoing improvement.

Additionally, with Interview Question 2, another array of themes emerges,

focusing on aspects like the "Shift in Performance Evaluation Approach" and challenges

in "Remote Work and Management." In contrast, the themes associated with Interview

Question 3 predominantly revolve around the health and well-being of employees, with a

marked emphasis on a paradigm shift towards enhancing employee experiences and

prioritizing their health and wellness. In contrast, Table 10 highlights the frequency

arranged by the top major themes and subthemes that emerged from the thematic analysis

of the eight participants' understanding of how the HR function changed due to a

pandemic in HEIs. The five top major themes and subthemes, with a 75% frequency rate,

are 1) Employee Engagement, Recruitment, and Culture, 2)Vision Execution and

Decision-Making, 3) Responding to Unforeseen Changes, 4) Shift towards Employee

Well-being and Experience Enhancement, and 5) Focus on Employee Health and Well-

Being.

Table 10

Frequency of Themes Arranged by Interview Questions

Theme	Theme description	Interview question	Frequency
1	Prioritization of wellness	1	3
2	Policy and procedure changes	1	4
3	Flexible work arrangements	1	3
4	Virtual professional development	1	3
5	Data-driven decision making	1	5
6	Crisis management and strategic focus	1	2
7	Employee engagement and communication	1	4
8	Recruitment challenges	1	3
9	Financial challenges and resource management	1	3
10	Technology adoption and virtual transition	1	1
11	Health and safety management	1	4
12	Adaption and innovation	1	3
13	Complying with policies and safety	1, Step 1	5
14	Emergency response and decision making	1, Step 1	5
15	Strategic positioning of HR	1, Step 1	2
16	Employee engagement, recruitment, and culture	1, Step 1	6
17	Comprehensive team dynamics and leadership	1, Step 2	4
18	Committee formation and engagement cross-functional collaboration	1, Step 2	5
19	Vision execution and decision making	1, Step 3	6
20	Employee support and safety	1, Step 3	5
21	Leadership team communication	1, Step 4	3
22	Employee engagement and involvement	1, Step 4	4
23	Communication tools and platforms	1, Step 4	5
24	Overcoming resistance and difficult conversations	1, Step 5	2
25	Data-driven decision making	1, Step 5	2
26	Building a supportive environment	1, Step 5	4
27	Adapting rapidly to change	1, Step 5	3
28	Responding to unforeseen changes	1, Step 6	6
29	Employee engagement and well-being initiatives	1, Step 6	1
30	Adaptive goal setting and employee-centric approach	1, Step 6	4
31	Fostering team resilience and engagement	1, Step 7	5
32	Adapting to new ways of working	1, Step 7	3
33	Navigating change amid societal events	1, Step 7	2
34	Embracing continuous Improvement and Flexibility	1, Step 8	3
35	Prioritizing professional development and engagement	1, Step 8	2
36	Balancing remote work and long-term foals	1, Step 8	2
37	Navigating regulatory and legal landscape	1, Step 8	2
38	Shift in performance evaluation approach	2	3
39	Performance management and engagement	2	2
40	Empathetic and authentic leadership	2	2
41	Managing performance issues during COVID-19	2	1
42	Adapting policies and processes	2	3
43	Remote work and management	2	5
44	Learning and development	2	3
45	Independence and quality of work–life balance	2	1
46	Civility, collegiality and diversity, equity, and inclusion	2	4
47	Mental health and wellness	2	4
48	Flexible management and communication	2	2
49	Impact on hiring and recruitment	2	1
50	Shift toward employee well-being and experience enhancement	3	6
51	Mental health and well-being	3	2
52	Evolution of wellness initiatives	3	2
53	Changes in health and safety protocols	3	3
54	Focus on employee health and well-being	3	6
55	Employee expectations and support	3	3
56	Enhancements in employee assistance programs	3	1
57	Adapting benefits and resources	3	2
58	Ongoing learning and development	3	2
59	Lessons from the pandemic for future well-being initiatives	3	2

Table 11

Frequency Arranged by Major Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Theme description	Interview question	Freq.	Percent
16	Employee engagement, recruitment, and culture	1, Step 1	6	75.00
19	Vision execution and decision making	1, Step 3	6	75.00
28	Responding to unforeseen changes	1, Step 6	6	75.00
50	Shift towards employee well-being and experience enhancement	3	6	75.00
54	Focus on employee health and well-being	3	6	75.00
5	Data-driven decision making	1	5	62.50
13	Complying with policies and safety	1, Step 1	5	62.50
14	Emergency response and decision making	1, Step 1	5	62.50
18	Committee formation and engagement cross-functional collaboration	1, Step 2	5	62.50
20	Employee support and safety	1, Step 3	5	62.50
23	Communication tools and platforms	1, Step 4	5	62.50
31	Fostering team resilience and engagement	1, Step 7	5	62.50
43	Remote work and management	2	5	62.50
2	Policy and procedure changes	1	4	50.00
7	Employee engagement and communication	1	4	50.00
11	Health and safety management	1	4	50.00
17	Comprehensive team dynamics and leadership	1, Step 2	4	50.00
22	Employee engagement and involvement	1, Step 4	4	50.00
26	Building a supportive environment	1, Step 5	4	50.00
30	Adaptive goal setting and employee-centric approach	1, Step 6	4	50.00
46	Civility, collegiality, and diversity, equity, and inclusion	2	4	50.00
47	Mental health and wellness	2	4	50.00

Summary

Research question one asked, "How has the HR function changed in HEIs due to a pandemic?" Based on the thematic analysis, twelve themes emerged from assessing how the HR function changed. These themes highlighted an emphasis on employee wellness, with HR departments spearheading initiatives for mental health and well-being. The pandemic crisis necessitated rapid modifications in policies and procedures, ensuring compliance with new federal laws and COVID-specific guidelines. Furthermore, HR departments were instrumental in facilitating flexible work environments, including the

shift to remote setups, and in innovating professional development through virtual platforms. The themes also revealed a transformative approach to decision-making, with a stronger reliance on data to restructure roles, identify necessary skill sets, and support staff development.

Research question two asked, "How has HR changed as a result of COVID-19 to support employees' performance?" The twelve themes encompass comprehensive changes in performance evaluation management, focusing on empathy, authentic leadership, and proactive engagement. Adaptations in policies and processes have been paramount, reflecting the rapid transition to remote work and the need for more efficient employee relations strategies. HR departments have also pivoted towards more flexible communication and management practices, acknowledging the pandemic's multifaceted impacts on the workforce. Furthermore, the crisis has significantly influenced hiring and recruitment strategies, with HR playing a critical role in navigating the complexities of talent acquisition and retention amidst the ongoing "Great Resignation," underscoring the need for adaptability in the evolving professional landscape.

Research question three asked, "How has HR changed as a result of COVID-19 to support employees' well-being?" Ten themes emerged from the themes showing a strategic shift in HR, prioritizing holistic employee experiences and intensified mental health advocacy, moving beyond traditional wellness programs. This approach included innovative health and safety protocols, particularly responsive to pandemic-related challenges, and an expanded commitment to employee health and psychological support amid COVID-19 adversities. Additionally, there was a transformative change in

employee expectations, with a stronger reliance on employer-backed support mechanisms, which prompted enhancements in Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and adaptations in benefits to meet diverse needs. Furthermore, HR has reinforced ongoing learning and development initiatives, offering regular well-being educational sessions and resources.

This chapter included a frequency table of all fifty-nine themes collected from each research question. The central theme (s) identified from Research Question One is "Data-Driven Decision Making," Research Question Two, "Remote Work and Management," and Research Question Three, "Shift towards Employee Well-being and Experience Enhancement" and "Focus on Employee Health and Well-being." The major subthemes that align with Kotter's eight-step conceptual framework are Step 1, "Employee Engagement, Recruitment, and Culture," Complying with Policies and Safety," and "Emergency Response and Decision-making." Step 2, "Committee Formation and Engagement Cross-Functional Collaboration"; Step 3, "Employee Support and Safety" and "Vision Execution and Decision-Making;" Step 4, "Communication Tools and Platforms"; Step 6, "Responding to Unforeseen Changes," and lastly, Step 7, "Fostering Team Resilience and Engagement." It is noteworthy to point out that there was no high frequency for themes related to Step 5 and Step 8 of Kotter's framework. The Chapter 5 discussion discusses my interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, and implications for positive social change, followed by the conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive multiple case study was to explore how HR function changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic at different types of HEIs and how managing it contributes to employee performance and employee well-being. This study explored how HR function changed by collecting data through interview questions with HRM who worked through the 2020–2021 pandemic at different types of HEIs, such as a 4-year college, junior or community college, or online college or university. Although COVID-19 is continuing to cause disruption, this study focused primarily on the first few days, weeks, and months when the HR department was contacted to shut down schools and move everyone to a virtual environment. Overall, this study aimed to contribute to the field of HRM as a resource for future pandemics by revealing possible benefits of Kotter's eight-step framework as a continuity plan for the HR practice to manage emergent changes in HR function while positively supporting employee performance and employee well-being.

To address the research questions, the specific research design included a qualitative descriptive multiple case study. Yin (2012, 2016, 2017) posited a case study is better suited for contemporary events, answering how and why questions within real-life perspectives. A descriptive study analyzes an event experienced across cases to reveal major similarities (Yin, 2012, 2016, 2017). For my research design, I wanted to recruit HR managers or partners from various HEIs to facilitate an open-ended interview using Zoom. The types of HEIs included: (a) 4-year college/university, (b) junior or community

college, (c) career college, (d) religiously affiliated school, and (e) online colleges and universities.

This study is significant in that, first, from a performance point of view, my observations and collection of data revealed how HR in higher education prepared prior to a pandemic, reacted during a pandemic, and planned after the pandemic. Second, the findings also revealed strategies to help other schools plan in the future. Third, from a well-being perspective, the results may help schools remember that support roles in higher education, such as HR, are often overlooked and may provide suggestions for how they can support them going forward. Lastly, this study demonstrates Kotter's eight-steps of change management framework (Kotter, 1996) for managing change in HR in HEIs during a pandemic, which has not yet been shown in the literature. Overall, this study aimed to contribute to the field of HRM as a resource for future pandemics by revealing possible benefits of Kotter's eight-step framework as a continuity plan for the HR practice to manage emergent changes in HR function while positively supporting employee performance and employee well-being.

Interpretation of the Findings

Oleksiyenko et al. (2023) conducted a similar yet distinct study on global crisis management in higher education. The common theme between my study and Oleksiyenko et al.'s (2023) study is that both relate to crisis management in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Oleksiyenko et al. (2023) discussed the responses of universities to the pandemic, considering factors like institutional coupling, size, resources, and mission. The researchers findings offer insights into the agential

codependencies and challenges faced during the crisis. Meanwhile, my study explored the responses of public and private universities to the pandemic, emphasizing differences in institutional dynamics, agency relations, and the impact of varying organizational cultures.

Both studies acknowledge differences in the responses of public and private institutions. Oleksiyenko et al. (2023) highlighted how tight coupling in private universities facilitated quicker crisis management, while my study contrasts the responses of public and private institutions, noting variations in flexibility and decision-making approaches. Both studies emphasize the importance of shared learning among universities and societies to navigate the ongoing challenges effectively. This aligns with the broader theme of knowledge exchange and collaborative approaches to crisis management. Both studies contribute insights into how universities, both public and private, have grappled with the complexities of the crisis, offering valuable lessons for the broader academic community.

The review of the literature highlighted that the function of HRM evolved from basic recordkeeping to strategic partnerships within organizations, focusing on employee well-being, maximizing human capital, and supporting organizational growth (Lussier & Hendon, 2016; Menon, 2015). In HEIs, HRM functions range across various levels, involving leadership, compliance, recruitment, training, appraisal, compensation, employee relations, diversity, and risk management (Chaudhari, 2019; Menon, 2015; Pritchard & Schmidt, 2020). My research findings suggest that, due to the pandemic, HR function evolved from HRM's traditional administrative roles to becoming strategic

partners within HEIs. The research findings showed, as a result of the pandemic, the importance of employee well-being and mental health, extending HRM's traditional functions to encompass a more holistic approach to employee management while adapting and innovating in response to unforeseen circumstances. Lastly, HR function changed in adapting to the unpredictable challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes, reflecting both adaptability and proactive change management, were highlighted through the lens of Kotter's eight-step conceptual framework for managing organizational changes.

A comparison of the findings from my study on the evolution of HR function in HEIs during the COVID-19 pandemic and the insights offered by Riggio and Newstead (2023) provides a comprehensive understanding of the transformative landscape that HRM in HEIs navigated. The literature review, building on the evolution of HRM functions within organizations, sets the stage by outlining the broader context in which HRM in HEIs operates—shifting from administrative roles to strategic partnerships, emphasizing employee well-being, and adapting to changing organizational needs (Lussier & Hendon, 2016; Menon, 2015).

Riggio and Newstead's (2023) research centered on crisis leadership introduces a crucial layer of understanding by highlighting the indispensable role of leadership during unforeseen and novel challenges. This resonates with the specific context of HEIs during the COVID-19 pandemic, where my study uncovered a significant departure from traditional HRM roles toward strategic holistic approaches to employee management. The emphasis on employee well-being, mental health, and the need for proactive change

management aligns seamlessly with the competencies identified by Riggio and Newstead as essential for effective crisis leadership.

In the wake of the pandemic, HR function in HEIs emerged as a dynamic force, exemplifying adaptability and transformative change management. This resonates with the insights provided by Riggio and Newstead (2023), emphasizing the importance of flexibility and quick decision making in times of crisis. The convergence between the literature review and the study findings paints a vivid picture of HRM's evolution in HEIs during the pandemic, underlining the strategic, leadership-driven paradigm that emerged.

Furthermore, the study's alignment with Kotter's eight-step conceptual framework for managing organizational changes provides a structured lens to interpret the multifaceted shifts in HR functions. The focus on employee engagement, compliance with policies, flexible communication, and fostering team resilience, as identified in the study findings, mirrors key steps within Kotter's framework, illustrating how HEIs adapted to the unprecedented challenges brought about by the pandemic under the purview of effective crisis leadership. The synthesis of the literature review, study findings, and insights from Riggio and Newstead (2023) underscores the dynamic evolution of HRM in HEIs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interplay of strategic HRM, crisis leadership competencies, and proactive change management presents a holistic narrative that enriches our understanding of how HEIs navigated the challenges posed by the global crisis.

Strategic Role Expansion in HRM During the Pandemic

Pandemics have historically changed political systems, culture, religion, trade, innovation, medical advances, and societies (Ganguly et al., 2020). The literature revealed that the current COVID-19 pandemic has affected the work environment, leading to rapid shifts to remote working and online platforms, with many HEIs and other organizations facing challenges in emergency management and business continuity (Cutri et al., 2020; Izumi et al., 2020). The studies also revealed that employees working from home have experienced increased stress, feelings of disconnection, and challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities, with women facing greater difficulties in maintaining this balance (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Harnett & Kieran, 2020; Kaushik, 2020). The pandemic has heightened concerns around mental health and well-being, with HRM and leaders needing to adapt and provide support for employees coping with social distancing, remote work, and associated stressors (Bruce & English, 2020; Hamouche, 2020; Kniffin et al., 2020). Additionally, the literature highlights the evolving role of HR in addressing these challenges, highlighting the need for HR to develop more effective strategies and interventions to support employee engagement, mental health, and adaptability in the rapidly changing work environment (Bruce & English, 2020; Dirani et al., 2020; Hamouche, 2020).

The current study confirms that the COVID-19 pandemic has catalyzed profound change in HRM within HEIs to adapt and support employees. Primarily, the HR function was reshaped from being predominantly operational to embracing a more strategic focus, aligning the HR strategies with the HEI goals. This transformative shift was evident

through the high-frequency rates of the major themes and subthemes, ranging from 75%

to 50% (see Table 11). For example, firstly, the themes of employee engagement,

recruitment, and culture; vision execution and decision making; and responding to

unforeseen changes each with a high frequency of 75%, collectively show how HRM

adapted to new operational challenges while also strategically reorienting their focus to

meet the evolving needs of institutions. The cornerstone of this strategic shift increased

HRM's reliance on data-driven decision making, with a high frequency of 62.50%. The

data-driven decision-making process allowed HRM to reevaluate and restructure roles

and functions based on organizational needs, transitioning from intuition-based decisions

to analytical, evidence-based strategies.

Regarding crisis management, the themes complying with policies and safety and

emergency response and decision making, with a high frequency of 62.50%, highlight the

critical role played by HRM. HRM had to quickly develop strategies to manage the

immediate impacts of the pandemic, balancing employee safety with business continuity.

Additionally, the pandemic-induced shift to remote work, in the theme remote work and

management, at the same frequency, further illustrates the adaptive capabilities of HRM

during a crisis. The transition involved logistical arrangements and required HRM to

consider the impact on employee engagement, performance management, and the

institution's culture in a virtual setting. HRM's role in facilitating this transition was

paramount in maintaining operational effectiveness during the pandemic.

HRM's strategic role expansion is also seen in reinforcing leadership and

development. As indicated by the theme comprehensive team dynamics and leadership,

with a high frequency of 50%, the pandemic necessitated a new approach to leadership. HRM played a pivotal role in coaching and developing leaders to manage teams effectively in new remote or hybrid work environments. Lastly, effective communication and maintaining employee engagement became more critical during the pandemic, as seen in the theme employee engagement and communication, also at a high frequency of 50%. With the shift to remote work, HRM had to find new ways to keep employees connected, engaged, and informed. Despite the physical distance, HRM had to rethink communication strategies and employee engagement initiatives. The pandemic also brought new challenges in talent management, particularly in the context of the "Great Resignation." As indicated by the theme fostering team resilience and engagement, at a high frequency of 62.50%, HRM had to develop innovative strategies for talent acquisition and retention, considering the unforeseen expectations and needs of the workforce. This strategic role in talent management is critical for organizational resilience and competitiveness in a post-pandemic world.

Shift in HRM's Approach to Well-Being and Mental Health

The literature review showed how the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a substantial shift in work practices, particularly within higher education, propelling a swift transition to remote work and online learning, which has brought forth significant challenges to employee well-being and mental health (Cutri et al., 2020; Izumi et al., 2020). Blair et al. (2023) and my study both confirm that internal and external factors, such as changes in working conditions and the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, can significantly affect the well-being and perceptions of faculty members in higher

education. The Blair et al. (2023) study specifically noted negative consequences to mental health and well-being, such as burnout, emotional exhaustion, and potential intentional harm to the university due to faculty dissatisfaction. The Blair et al. (2023) study and my study approached the issues from different angles and contexts; however, they share a common theme of the evolving challenges faced by higher education employees and the need for comprehensive research to understand and address these challenges effectively.

The findings from this dissertation offer a comprehensive understanding of the evolving role of the HR function in HEIs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The identified themes align with and complement the observations discussed in the article by Ozkan and Pekkolay (2023). Notably, both sources emphasize the paramount importance of employee well-being and wellness initiatives led by HR. My dissertation highlights a significant emphasis on mental health, while Ozkan and Pekkolay recognize the broader impact of the pandemic on education and HR development activities. The rapid adaptation to remote work, a key theme in this study, resonates with the challenges and benefits of remote work discussed in the article. Additionally, both sources acknowledge the transformation in professional development through virtual platforms and the critical role of HR in this shift. The emphasis on data-driven decision making in my study aligns with the article's recognition of the importance of information processing functions in addressing HR challenges during the pandemic. Themes related to changes in performance evaluation management in my study correspond with the article's emphasis on adapting policies and processes to the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic on the

workforce. Overall, the parallel themes in both sources contribute to a nuanced understanding of the transformative nature of HR practices in higher education amid the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly highlighting employee well-being, remote work adaptation, and innovative approaches in education and professional development.

The literature review revealed there were increased levels of stress and feelings of disconnection among employees, highlighting a gender disparity with women particularly struggling to balance work and home responsibilities and revealing a general decline in quality of life and team connectedness (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Harnett & Kieran, 2020; Kaushik, 2020). Additionally, the literature review indicated a critical need for HR departments to redefine their role, prioritizing mental health support and develop engagement strategies to foster a sense of community and resilience among employees in the face of the pandemic's psychological stressors (Bruce & English, 2020; Dirani et al., 2020; Hamouche, 2020; Kniffin et al., 2020).

The current study confirms the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the HR function toward employees' well-being and mental health within HEIs. The HR function transformed from traditional HR practices to more holistic, employee-centric approaches. The shift is evident in several of the high-frequency themes. For example, themes employee engagement, recruitment, and culture and vision execution and decision making, both occurring with a high frequency of 75%, indicate a strategic realignment of HR practices. These themes suggest that HRM has started prioritizing employee-centric approaches and aligning its decision-making processes to enhance employee well-being. The change in the HR function reflects a conscious effort by HRM to adapt its strategies

and practices in ways more responsive to employees' needs and well-being. For instance, P1's comments on the changes in the performance evaluation approach, highlighting a shift towards a growth mindset, demonstrate this new direction. P1 and P6, HR departments have intensified their focus on improving employee experience and mental health offerings. P2, discussing the emphasis on regular engagement in performance management, aligns with this theme. HRM is now more focused on integrating organizational values, such as work-life balance and integrity, into its decision-making processes. P3 and P4 responses showed that HR departments played a crucial role in transitioning to remote work, ensuring health and safety, and promoting mental health initiatives. This adaptation reflects HR's responsiveness and agility towards the unique challenges posed by the pandemic, with a keen focus on maintaining and enhancing employee well-being in a remote or hybrid work environment.

Another notable aspect of the shift is HRM's response to unforeseen changes and challenges, as highlighted by the theme responding to unforeseen changes, also with a 75% frequency. HRM took a proactive approach to changing its HR function to adapt to the challenges presented by the pandemic, particularly concerning employee well-being. Participant responses illustrate how HRM collaborated with various stakeholders to establish effective remote work policies and adapt to different rules across their university. For example, regular check-ins were instituted to discuss work challenges and personal well-being, focusing on self-care and addressing individual needs.

Alongside this, the themes shift toward employee well-being and experience Enhancement and focus on employee health and well-being, each with a 75% frequency,

directly address the pivot towards mental health and overall employee experience. These themes signify a clear and strong commitment by HRM to prioritize health and well-being in the workplace, demonstrating a significant shift from traditional HR practices towards more holistic and employee-focused approaches. P1 and P6 articulated this shift through their statements about enhancing the overall employee experience and beefing up mental health offerings. P8 mentioned efforts toward ramping up EAPs. P3's statement highlights HR's stronger voice in addressing mental health as a critical aspect of workplace dynamics, moving beyond traditional perceptions to a more integral and accepted component of employee support. These responses demonstrate a change in the HR function towards improving the employee experience, encompassing elements like work-life balance, flexibility, and the provision of resources for well-being.

The analysis also revealed the growing importance of data-driven decision making in HR practices, as indicated by its 62.5% frequency. This theme suggests that HRM increasingly relies on data to guide decisions, especially those related to employee well-being and mental health. Additionally, themes like complying with policies and safety; emergency response and decision making; and employee support and safety further support this shift, highlighting an increased focus on safety, emergency preparedness, and employee support systems. These aspects are crucial for ensuring a safe and supportive work environment promoting employees' well-being and mental health.

The thematic analysis also pointed out the adaptation to remote work scenarios, as reflected in the 'Remote Work and Management' theme, with a frequency of 62.5%. This

theme illustrates how HRM has adapted to the new challenges of managing remote work, focusing on maintaining employee well-being in a virtual environment. Furthermore, the adaptive goal setting and employee-centric approach theme, with a 50% frequency, shows a shift towards setting goals centered around employee needs and well-being. Finally, the mental health and wellness theme, also at 50%, emphasizes the growing importance of mental health initiatives in HRM practices. This theme illustrates HRM's recognition of mental health as an essential aspect of employee well-being and the need for dedicated wellness programs and initiatives in the workplace.

Adaptability and Proactive Change Management: Kotter's Eight-Step Conceptual Framework

In examining the findings of this dissertation alongside those of Ramaditya et al. (2023), several common themes and distinct characteristics emerge. Both studies underscore the significance of data-driven decision making and acknowledge the pivotal role of remote work and management in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, my study provides a more focused lens on the transformation of HR functions within HEIs. It highlights the evolution of HR strategies to prioritize employee wellness, reshape performance evaluation management, and enhance overall well-being initiatives. In contrast, the Ramaditya et al. study offers a broader perspective on organizational resilience, encompassing challenges faced by diverse organizations and the strategies adopted for resilience. Despite this difference in focus, both studies converge on the importance of agile responses to unforeseen changes, effective leadership communication, and a heightened emphasis on employee well-being. Together, these

studies contribute complementary insights into the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic on HR functions and organizational resilience, providing a nuanced understanding of the challenges and adaptive strategies employed in the face of unprecedented circumstances.

The Anvari et al. (2023) study delves into the intricate role of strategic human resource management (SHRM) practitioners within the higher education landscape in Georgia, a country in Europe, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. It extensively examines the repercussions of the crisis on employee compensation, benefits, and performance appraisal strategies. The study advocates for a comprehensive reevaluation and adaptation of these HR practices to address the unique challenges posed by the post-COVID-19 environment. Central to the study's conceptual framework are dimensions such as the employee-organization relationship, psychological contracts, and organizational commitment, shedding light on the evolving dynamics within HEIs. The findings suggest a shifting landscape, necessitating a renegotiation of psychological contracts between SHRM practitioners and universities. Positive correlations between emotional intelligence, SHRM, psychological contracts, and affective organizational commitment further underscore the study's insights.

In contrast, this dissertation focused on the HR role within HEIs in the United States, specifically those that dealt with change management as a result of COVID-19. It delves into the crucial role of leadership in navigating organizational change and emphasizes effective change management strategies to overcome resistance and foster cultural transformation. This study underscores the importance of leadership commitment and clear communication in managing change within the unique context of higher

education. The conceptual framework of this study revolves around change management theories and leadership theories, providing a foundation for understanding the intricacies of implementing and sustaining change initiatives.

The common thread between the Anvari et al. (2023) study and this dissertation lies in their shared emphasis on the transformative nature of challenges within higher education and the need for strategic responses. Both studies recognize the dynamic environment in which HEIs operate and highlight the importance of adapting to external pressures, whether induced by the COVID-19 pandemic or the broader need for change and cultural transformation. While Anvari et al. scrutinizes the specific impacts on HR practices, such as compensation, benefits, and performance appraisal, Parham-Cofield explores the broader spectrum of change management strategies and leadership dynamics.

In showcasing how these studies support one another in furthering the field of study, parallels can be drawn between the challenges outlined in Anvari et al. and the solutions proposed by my study. Anvari et al. underscore the need for a comprehensive reevaluation of HR practices in response to external disruptions. Meanwhile, my dissertation focuses on change management, suggesting that effective leadership and strategic change initiatives are essential components in navigating and responding to such disruptions. In essence, while Anvari et al. diagnose the impact of external factors on HR practices, the findings of this dissertation prescribe a strategic approach to managing change, which indirectly supports the need for adaptive HR strategies in response to external challenges. Together, these studies contribute to a holistic understanding of how

HEIs can navigate change, ensuring the alignment of HR practices with broader organizational goals and the evolving needs of the academic landscape.

The current research analysis highlighted a logical connection between the changes in the HR function due to the pandemic in HEIs and Kotter's eight-step conceptual framework for managing organizational changes. Based on the major themes, high-frequency rates of 75%, HRM in HEIs during the pandemic demonstrated changes in the HR function towards adaptability and proactive change management. In the first step of Kotter's eight-step model, establishing a sense of urgency, HR departments in HEIs were confronted with unprecedented challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This urgency was reflected in the themes complying with policies and safety, emergency response and decision making, and employee engagement, recruitment, and culture.

For instance, as the pandemic unfolded, HR departments immediately needed to comply with evolving federal, state, and university policies, particularly regarding safety. Complying was more than just bureaucratic. It was a matter of ensuring the health and safety of thousands of employees and students. P1 highlighted this urgency, saying there was a need to "definitely comply with federal, state, and university policies while ensuring everyone was safe." The urgency included monitoring, tracking, and providing COVID tests. P5 detailed how the HR department formed a rapid response team, indicating a university-wide effort with meetings held "24/7 at the beginning, and then every day, then it went to once a week." Their actions demonstrate the immediate and intense focus on adapting to the situation, with ongoing meetings necessary to operate amidst changing circumstances effectively.

Additionally, despite remote work arrangements and schedule changes, there was a strong emphasis on maintaining the work culture and employee engagement. P8 mentioned the challenge of finding a new niche in engaging with employees, underlining the importance of maintaining a strong work culture and connection to the organization, even in remote settings. These efforts included reevaluating recruitment practices while shifting towards virtual and hybrid approaches.

In the second step of Kotter's model, creating a guiding coalition, HEIs faced the formidable task of assembling teams to address the multifaceted challenges of the pandemic. The second step was marked by forming diverse, cross-functional committees, crucial for collaborative decision-making and leadership, aligned with the theme, committee formation and engagement cross-functional collaboration. The HR change team, as described by participants, included university leadership, medical experts, the HR team, and external authorities. The various team members represented a multidisciplinary approach, addressing different pandemic aspects, such as benefits, labor relations, and employee relations. The team was responsible for understanding and responding to employee needs amidst the pandemic's complex challenges. Across HR departments, there was also a focus on fostering collaboration among specialized teams responsible for various HR functions, including benefits, HRIS, talent, and equity compliance. P3 highlighted how these groups spanned different organizational layers, from executive leaders to individual contributors. P5 mentioned the team composition, including the President, medical director, HR team, and a New York City Department of Health member, reflecting the depth and breadth of the coalition. Additionally,

committees were formed with key roles from across the university. These committees and subgroups were pivotal in providing direction to direct reports and team leaders. Their work encompassed various organizational layers, including executives, directors, and individual contributors. The committees enhanced employee service, addressed organizational priorities, and provided comprehensive responses to employee inquiries. The committee approach marked a shift in the HR function from a transactional focus to a more holistic emphasis on organizational development.

In the third step of Kotter's model, developing a vision and strategy, HRM in HEIs focused on crafting and executing a vision that prioritized employee support and safety during the pandemic, aligned with themes, vision execution and decision making, and employee support and safety. The third step proved crucial in aligning HR's response with the pandemic's immediate needs. The HR teams established collaborative relationships with health authorities and sought guidance from medical and research experts, which was vital in informing health-related decisions and staying current with national and international health guidance. Strategies were developed to ensure the well-being and safety of employees, including safely transitioning staff back to the workplace or facilitating their shift to remote work. For non-remote workers, project-based solutions were crafted to maintain engagement.

This vision embraced a collaborative approach to problem-solving, involving diverse perspectives and encouraging cross-functional contributions. A feedback loop was established for open communication with senior leaders, allowing for the redefinition of strategies as needed. P2 emphasized the importance of data-driven decision-making in

presenting vision ideas, helping to address resistance. P8 mentioned the necessity of having a plan to navigate the new normal strategically. Before the pandemic, HR was not typically part of operations or strategic priorities discussions. The pandemic led to a significant shift, positioning HR with a strategic focus post-pandemic, essential for crisis management. P2 further stated that their vision and strategies were developed based on the organization's strategic priorities, emphasizing collaboration, innovation, and a problem-solving approach.

In the fourth step of Kotter's model, communicating the change vision, HRM in HEIs employed a variety of communication tools and platforms to effectively disseminate information regarding the changes and new policies brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, aligning with the theme communication tools and platforms. With the onset of the pandemic, face-to-face interactions became limited, necessitating a shift to virtual communication. HR departments utilized Microsoft Teams, Zoom, emails, and chats as the primary means of communication. There was a specific focus on one-on-one virtual meetings to facilitate personalized communication, ensuring that each employee received attention and addressed their concerns. P6 emphasized the importance of being "very open and transparent with employees." Every employee was sent regular emails, and updates were consistently posted on internal website communication pages. The transparency approach ensured that all employees were well informed about the ongoing changes and the institution's response to the pandemic. The goal was to maintain clarity and prevent misinformation or confusion during this tumultuous period. Managers were also given the responsibility of directly communicating with their teams. This

decentralized approach to communication ensured that the message was consistently delivered across different levels of the organization. It also allowed for immediate feedback and clarification where necessary, ensuring that all employees, regardless of their position, understood the changes and how they would be affected.

In the fifth step of Kotter's model, empowering broad-based action, HRM in HEIs worked on overcoming challenges and empowering staff and faculty. However, specific themes were not initially identified in the high-frequency rate of 75%. The data revealed key actions and strategies that were instrumental in this phase. For instance, a primary focus was on overcoming employee resistance, especially in response to significant workplace changes such as vaccine requirements. HR teams encountered challenges with employees resistant to these new mandates and engaged in difficult conversations to ensure compliance with federal, state, and university policies. These conversations were crucial not just for immediate compliance but also for maintaining employment and the overall health and safety of the HEIs. HRM relied heavily on data to inform their decisions during this time. The data approach helped them identify the most effective strategies to support employees and address resistance. Using data-driven insights, HR tailored their actions to meet their workforce's needs and concerns. The HR teams also focused on fostering a supportive environment conducive to change, addressing resistance, and building a sense of community and employee engagement. Such an environment was essential for encouraging adaptability and quick responses to the rapidly evolving pandemic challenges. Additionally, consistent with the previous step, effective communication continued to play a crucial role. Ensuring that changes were

clearly communicated and that employees had avenues to express their concerns or seek

clarification was key to empowering them to adapt to new ways of working, new normal,

and changes in the workplace.

In the sixth step of Kotter's model, generating short-term wins, aligned with the

theme, responding to unforeseen changes, HRM in HEIs demonstrated agility and

responsiveness to the dynamic challenges posed by the pandemic. Step six proved to be

pivotal in maintaining momentum and confidence in the change process. Participants

described facing initial uncertainty and a lack of set goals during this transition.

However, this period of uncertainty unexpectedly led to increased employee productivity

and commitment. To manage these changes, HR shifted its focus to immediate

operational needs, ensuring that the organization continued functioning effectively

despite the sudden shift in working conditions. This adaptability was key in responding to

the pandemic's challenges and maintaining organizational momentum. HRM focused on

maintaining connections and supporting the well-being of employees, which was crucial

in ensuring that the workforce remained engaged and committed during a period of

significant upheaval. By prioritizing employee well-being, HRM fostered a supportive

environment conducive to adapting to the new normal. The commitment to the workforce

showcased the organization's dedication to its employees during challenging times.

Additionally, HRM employed an employee-centered approach to goal creation, adapting

their strategies to meet the evolving needs of their workforce. The employee-centered

approach involved planning for the return to the workplace and establishing phased

employment strategies that considered the safety and preferences of employees. By

focusing on adaptive goal setting, HR was able to address the immediate challenges while also preparing for the future.

In the seventh step of Kotter's model, consolidating gains and producing more change, HRM in HEIs focused on the theme, fostering team resilience and engagement. The seventh step is critical in sustaining long-term change and adapting to the challenges of evolving, known, and unknown pandemic. HRM emphasized the team's role in problem solving and its strategic impact during the pandemic, involving refocusing and reiterating organizational and departmental goals amidst the challenges. There was an intensive effort to increase team communication and connection. For instance, HR addressed burnout by adjusting the frequency of Zoom meetings and halting administrative meetings on Fridays, demonstrating a sensitivity to the new stressors from remote work and the pandemic in general. Adapting to new work paradigms was another critical aspect of this phase. HRM navigated complex challenges, including the impact of societal events on employees. They demonstrated a comprehensive approach by focusing on communication, innovation, and personalization. These efforts involved acknowledging each team member's unique needs and circumstances and adjusting strategies accordingly. The organization showed appreciation for employees' efforts through various means, such as gifts and celebrations, and encouraged creative thinking through engagement committees. These actions were not just symbolic; they played a vital role in maintaining morale and motivation during a period of significant upheaval and change. Providing staff appreciation demonstrated HR's commitment to valuing and supporting their workforce during difficult times.

In the final step eight of Kotter's model, anchoring new approaches in the culture, themes were not identified at a high frequency of 75%. However, the data analysis showed that HRM in HEIs focused on embedding the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic into the organizational culture to ensure the sustainability of these changes and foster long-term adaptation and resilience. The thematic analysis revealed that HR participants were committed to adapting and learning from the pandemic experience. They worked on incorporating new approaches into the institutional culture. New approaches focused on continuous feedback, professional development, remote work strategies, and staying informed about evolving regulations. By doing so, the organization aimed to anchor these changes within its culture, fostering growth and innovation. HR also ensured that employees were supported in adapting to these new practices. The support extended beyond just professional aspects and included taking time for self-care, acknowledging stressors related to societal events and personal losses, and maintaining a connection and personalization through regular meetings to discuss work, challenges, and well-being. Such a supportive environment was critical for making the new approaches more acceptable and integrated into employees' daily routines.

Limitations of the Study

The study did not utilize a random sample; instead, it opted for purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), which included participants who had worked in HR departments for at least 6 months prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021. While fitting the study's purpose, this specific criterion for participant selection limited the sample's randomness and, therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to larger samples

(McLeod, 2019). Additionally, the nature of case study investigations, where results from one specific case cannot be universally applied to other settings, presents a challenge in replicating the findings in different contexts (McLeod, 2019).

Despite no significantly discrepant cases, variations in job roles among participants needed careful consideration in data interpretation, as these could highlight different perspectives on the transformation of HR functions during the pandemic. The study's methodology relied on interview transcripts and did not employ triangulation, which could have provided a more comprehensive view using multiple data sources or perspectives. This decision was based on the nature of the data and the study's focus on maintaining credibility through other strategies like prolonged engagement, reflexivity, member checks, and peer debriefing.

My role in enforcing HR policies and policy changes raised the potential for biased perspectives on how HR functions evolved during the pandemic. Recognizing the inadmissibility of bias in research, efforts were made to minimize personal influence and maintain an open mind. However, different philosophical or political worldviews, such as positivism and constructivism, could potentially affect the study, as they entail different assumptions about truth and reality, influencing the research approach and interpretation of results.

While the study's findings might apply to other HR departments within higher education, there is a limitation regarding their generalizability to departments outside of HR and industries other than higher education. This limitation affects the study's broader

applicability and impacts its dependability, defined as the systematic and organized

research process from inception to reporting

Recommendations

This study proposes a range of future research recommendations in HRM,

especially in the wake of the global pandemic. The following recommendations for future

studies emphasize the need to analyze how pandemic-induced shifts in HR functions have

affected employee performance, satisfaction, and retention, thereby shedding light on

effective HR strategies for improved engagement and productivity. The recommendations

suggest longitudinal research examining the long-term effects of these HR changes on

organizational culture and employee engagement. It also stresses the significance of

evaluating mental health and wellness programs, heightened during the pandemic. The

recommendations advocate for future comparative studies across sectors like higher

education, healthcare, and technology to comprehensively understand HRM's

adaptations, the growing importance of technology, diversity, equity, and inclusion in

HRM, and the need for a global research perspective. Lastly, the recommendations

highlight the crucial roles of HR in fostering organizational resilience and addressing

evolving employee expectations post-pandemic, offering a framework for future research

aimed at deepening our understanding of HRM in a dynamic global work environment.

The relationship between the HR function and employee outcomes is critical for

further research. Future studies could investigate how the changes to the HR function

during the pandemic have affected key employee metrics such as performance, job

satisfaction, and retention. These potential studies could provide empirical evidence on

the effectiveness of various HR strategies, offering insights into best practices for enhancing employee engagement and productivity in challenging times.

The current study provided valuable insights from HRM's immediate responses to the pandemic. However, understanding the long-term impacts of these changes is crucial. Longitudinal studies would be instrumental in tracking the evolution of HR practices over time. The longitudinal research could focus on how pandemic-driven strategies are integrated into standard HR operations and their lasting effects on organizational culture and employee engagement. These studies could also offer a dynamic view of HRM, capturing its ongoing adaptation and resilience in a rapidly changing work environment.

A deeper investigation into the mental and wellness programs is warranted, given the increased emphasis on employee mental health and wellness. Future research could evaluate the effectiveness of mental health initiatives introduced during the pandemic, assessing their impact on employee well-being, job satisfaction, and overall productivity. Future research in this area could also explore best practices for designing and implementing mental health programs in the workplace, including the role of leadership, the importance of a supportive work environment, and the integration of technology in mental health initiatives.

While the current study offers a thorough understanding of HRM in HEIs, extending the research to include various sectors could provide a more holistic view. Comparative studies across industries such as healthcare, technology, manufacturing, and service sectors could highlight specific challenges and innovations in HRM during the

pandemic. The comparative approach could uncover universal principles of effective HR management in crisis situations and the industry's best practices.

The rapid adoption of technology in HR practices, accelerated by the pandemic, opens another critical area for research. Future studies could explore the role of emerging technologies in transforming HRM, focusing on areas such as virtual recruitment, digital training platforms, employee engagement tools, and data analytics in HR decision-making. Additionally, future studies and outcomes could provide insights into the challenges and opportunities presented by technology in HRM, including issues related to digital literacy, cybersecurity, and the digital divide among employees.

Integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in HR practices during and after the pandemic is another crucial area for research. Future studies could examine the effectiveness of DEI strategies implemented by HRM, assessing their impact on organizational culture, employee experiences, and business outcomes. DEI research could provide valuable insights into best practices for fostering an inclusive and equitable workplace, highlighting the role of HR in promoting diversity and addressing systemic inequities.

The pandemic has had a global impact, but HRM's response may vary across cultural and geographical contexts. Therefore, future research could adopt a global perspective, examining how HRM practices have evolved in response to the pandemic in different countries and cultures. A global research perspective could provide a comparative analysis of global HRM strategies, uncover cultural variations in HR practices, and offer insights into global trends in HRM.

Research exploring the role of HR in building organizational resilience during crises like the pandemic would be invaluable. It could include strategies for crisis management, employee support, and business continuity planning. The research could shed light on the strategic role of HR in navigating organizational challenges, maintaining workforce stability, and ensuring business survival during turbulent times.

Finally, it is critical to understand the evolving expectations of employees from their employers in the context of the pandemic and how HR departments are adapting to these new expectations. Research in this area could provide insights into changing workforce dynamics, the psychological contract between employers and employees, and the role of HR in mediating these expectations.

Implications

The study's emphasis on employee well-being and mental health underscores the necessity of continuous support in these areas. HR departments could develop comprehensive wellness programs that include mental health resources, stress management tools, and initiatives promoting work-life balance. These programs can contribute to individual resilience and personal growth, fostering a healthier, more productive workforce. As highlighted in this research, the move towards virtual professional development opens doors for more personalized, flexible learning opportunities. This shift not only aids in professional growth but also enhances individual adaptability in an ever-changing work environment.

As a response to the pandemic, the introduction of flexible work policies offers significant benefits for employees' family lives. HR departments should consider making

these policies a permanent fixture, allowing employees to balance their professional and personal responsibilities better. This balance can lead to improved family dynamics and overall well-being. Additionally, enhancing Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) to encompass family-related support can provide crucial assistance in childcare, eldercare, and mental health, further supporting employees in their family roles.

The study's findings on HR's role in crisis management and strategic planning underscore the importance of HR as a key player in organizational resilience. HR departments should continue developing and refining crisis response strategies and adaptability, ensuring organizational preparedness for future challenges. Adopting and integrating technology in HR practices suggests the need for ongoing investment in technological tools. Investing in technology would support innovative work practices, enhance organizational efficiency, and foster an engaging and inclusive employee experience.

The research highlights the critical role of HR in shaping health and safety protocols, which can influence public health guidelines in broader societal contexts. Policies developed by HR departments in response to the pandemic could serve as models for public health strategies in educational and corporate settings. Additionally, the focus on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives presented in the study could inform broader societal efforts. These findings could guide policy development at the governmental level, promoting inclusivity and equity in workplaces and educational institutions nationwide.

The pandemic has necessitated a shift in research methodologies within HR studies, particularly highlighting remote data collection and analysis effectiveness. Theoretically, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of HRM's adaptability and resilience, offering a novel perspective that could inform future theoretical frameworks in HR studies. Empirically, the findings of this research provide a foundational base for subsequent research, particularly in exploring the sustained impacts of pandemic-induced changes in HR practices.

HR professionals should consider integrating the strategies developed during the pandemic into their regular operations to enhance the HR practice. This integration should particularly focus on areas such as employee well-being, flexible work arrangements, and the effective use of technology. Ongoing training and development for HR professionals in areas like crisis management, mental health support, and managing remote workforces are also recommended. These practices enhance the HR function and contribute to building more resilient, adaptive, and supportive work environments.

Conclusions

The study reveals a significant strategic evolution in the changes in the HR function within HEIs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. HR functions and roles have shifted from traditional administrative functions to strategic partnerships, focusing on employee well-being and mental health, crisis adaptability, and technological integration. This transformation indicates a move towards a more holistic, employee-centric approach, highlighting the importance of HR in shaping organizational culture, enhancing employee engagement, and ensuring workplace well-being.

Key to this evolution is HR's adaptability and proactive change management, as outlined in Kotter's eight-step change management model. HRM rapidly adapted to remote work, crisis management, and continuous employee engagement, shifting from operational tasks to strategic initiatives like leadership development and talent management. This strategic role expansion has positioned HR as pivotal in fostering organizational resilience and adaptability during the pandemic.

In summary, the study underscores a paradigm shift in HRM in HEIs during the COVID-19 pandemic, characterized by strategic role expansion and a focus on employee well-being and mental health. The findings highlight HR's critical role not only in managing HR but also in contributing to organizational growth and adaptability in challenging times. This transformation underscores the need for HR to continue evolving and adapting to future challenges, maintaining its strategic importance in organizational success.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1) How has the HR function changed in higher educational institutions due to a

pandemic?

    a. Describe the sense of urgency.

    b. Describe how the team for HR change was put together.

    c. Describe how you or the team developed vision and strategies.

    d. Describe how you or the team communicated the change vision.

    e. Describe how you or the team removed obstacles.

    f. Describe how you or the team set of short-term goals.

    g. Describe how you or the team kept the momentum.

    h. Describe how you or the team made the change stick.

2) How has HR changed as a result of COVID-19 to support employee performance?

    a. How was employee performance defined before and after COVID-19?

    b. How did this change evolve?

3) How has HR changed as a result of COVID-19 to support employee wellbeing?

    a. How was employee wellbeing defined before and after COVID-19?

    b. How did this change evolve?

Appendix B: Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study about how the HR function changes due to a pandemic in higher educational institutions. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study seeks 8-10 volunteers who are:

- Worked at least the Fall 2019 semester (1 semester) in the human resource department in higher education prior to the COVID-19 pandemic
- Human resource personnel in a higher educational institution in the United States

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Naterena A. Parham-Cofield, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

Study Purpose:
The purpose of this qualitative descriptive multiple case study is to explore how the HR function changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in different types of higher educational institutions and how managing it contributes to employee's performance and employee's well-being.

Procedures:
This study will involve you completing the following steps:
- take part in a confidential, zoom recorded interview (1 hour)
- review a typed transcript of your interview to make corrections if needed (email option available) (10 minutes)
- speak with the researcher one more time after the interview to hear the researcher's interpretations and share your feedback (this is called member checking and it takes 20-30 minutes, phone option available)

Here are some sample questions:
1. How has the HR function changed in higher educational institutions due to a pandemic?
2. How has HR changed as a result of COVID-19 to support employee performance?
3. How has HR changed as a result of COVID-19 to support employee wellbeing?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Research should only be done with those who freely volunteer. So everyone involved will respect your decision to join or not.

If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
Being in this study could involve some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life such as sharing sensitive information. With the protections in place, this study would pose minimal risk to your wellbeing.

This study offers no direct benefits to individual volunteers. The aim of this study is to benefit society by contributing to the field of human resource management and reveal a collection of strategies to help other schools with future planning for the HR practice to manage emergent changes in the HR function to positively support employee performance and employee wellbeing. Once the analysis is complete, the researcher will share the overall results by emailing you a summary.

Payment:
_None___

Privacy:
The researcher is required to protect your privacy. Your identity will be kept anonymous, within the limits of the law. The researcher will not link your responses to your contact information. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. If the researcher were to share this dataset with another researcher in the future, the dataset would contain no identifiers so this would not involve another round of obtaining informed consent. Data will be kept secure by password protection, data encryption, use of codes in place of names, and discarding names. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions:
You can ask questions of the researcher by sending an email to naterena.parham-cofield@waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant or any negative parts of the study, you can call Walden University's Research Participant Advocate at 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is #02-07-23-0349732. It expires on February 6, 2023.

You might wish to retain this consent form for your records. You may ask the researcher or Walden University for a copy at any time using the contact info above.

Obtaining Your Consent
If you feel you understand the study and wish to volunteer, please indicate your consent by replying to this email with the words "I consent."

Appendix C: RQ#1 Coding Framework

Participants	RQ1: How has the HR function changed…	Interpreting the data: Identifying Themes	Theme Name
P1	I think there was more awareness and acceptance for people juggling multiple things at a time. I think there was definitely more understanding, awareness and acceptance of you know families of other priorities of health. I think we definitely started to prioritize wellness	definitely started to prioritize wellness	Prioritization of Employee Wellness
P8	For the most part we are strategic, but a little bit more strategic in in our efforts of scanning. You know the environment, scanning the regulations, and just tapping into our resources, which are, you know, the human resources are our our faculty, our staff, our even our students, right and overall, just making sure that it's an environment that is conducive to learning to.	More strategic in our efforts of scanning	Policy and Procedure Changes
P4	To be sure, our staff was doing well and they had all the resources that they needed. Flexible work policy started during pandemic. We have staff who were working full remote and some working hybrid. This was a change for staff as they were away from work location and their co-workers. We planned different activities to keep our staff engaged so they were not over working themselves	Flexible work policy started during the pandemic.	Flexible Work Arrangements
P1	We didn't have as many opportunities pre pandemic...professional development. You were going somewhere, and it had a large cost. So, being able to offer some of these, you know virtual, whether it was a one day session. We began prioritizing professional development through virtual professional development. We did some virtual trainings, kind of, you know our own virtual brown bags, to keep people going.	prioritizing professional development through virtual professional development	Virtual Professional Development

P2	We've also redefined the scope of positions and focused more on data and how we manage. And HR data regarding the cost of recruitment and retention. things like that. So, becoming more data-driven and just reevaluating the roles and the functions based on organizational needs....	more data, data cost of recruitment, data-driven	Data-Driven Decision-Making
P3	When operations were discussed or strategic priorities were discussed, HR was not really part of the responsible units and part of the unit leaders who would attend. It significantly shifted...administration focus for HR to a strategic focus post-pandemic. Post pandemic, you know, it would be unusual not to include HR for crisis management.	Strategic focus post-pandemic, include HR for crisis management	Crisis Management and Strategic Focus
P5	We use Teams. So we had our own team. We were all using the chat and emails and our cell phones. Every single possible portal was used to make sure that we were all in communication The Deans and I were in constant communication with the faculty.	Every single possible portal was used to make sure that we were all in communication; constant communication with the faculty.	Employee Engagement and Communication
P8	Now, in terms of recruitment, we have to be very creative with our process in terms of finding talent and retaining talent. The recruitment effort is a little bit more difficult because, since the pandemic, many employers have been providing incentives, such as work from home incentives. A hybrid approach to working with the University also offers, but with that, since many individuals have left their employment, are sort of seeking employees that provide that work-life balance aspect, or, you know, pretty much just want to do things, you know, on your own, become entrepreneurs.	The recruitment effort is a little bit more difficult…but with that, since many individuals have left their employment, …seeking work-life balance...become entrepreneurs.	Recruitment Challenges
P4	One of the thing pandemic brought was financial challenges. We had staff who were furloughed. We still wanted to be a resources to them. If they had questions we wanted to make sure they knew who to contact. Majority of the time, you know we were in the meeting, we just had to kind of make sure we took a priority and answer questions that are coming from our staff. If we didn't know the answer we were reaching out to our	financial challenges, HR resource for questions	Financial Challenges and Resource Management

	central HR. and also, like you know, working with our central Hr.		
P6	We transitioned them to go online or go virtually so. If they didn't have laptops, we gave them laptops, we gave them lots of time to figure out how to make the technology work or by people or our it. People gave them tons of support to help them get online and figure out how to get online we our classes....Because we did have some people that did that or the Internet service that they had didn't meet our minimum technology standards. So we gave them hotspots or some sort of technology booster, or whatever it is that we gave them to ensure that their technology, our technology requirements, were met.	transition them to go online; gave hotspots or technology boosters, support to get people online	Technology Adoption and Virtual Transition
P3	I should share that the framework of these 4 portfolio groups, distinct and yet related in some way, and related work under the guidance of the medical scientists and the research scientists was critically important because we needed to constantly be aware of and stay on top of health guidance internationally and nationally	work under the guidance of medical...health guidance	Health and Safety Management
P3	Everyone was willing to ensure that the foundation and the framework would be successful. So with the need of our individual contributors in mind, the need was there that they would have to be informed regularly of whatever it was, strategy or tactic, and that regular feedback loop begged more innovation and more discussions around what else we could possibly do. And let's go back and assess to see if what we're doing is working well.	individual contributors in mind, regular feedback loop, innovation, discussions, see if what we're doing is working well.	Adaption and Innovation

Appendix D: RQ #1 (Subthemes) Kotter's Eight-Step Coding Framework

Establishing a Sense of Urgency
"urgency to definitely comply with Federal State and university policies while making sure that everyone was safe."
"definitely had to stay on top of our Covid tracking"
like in December, January. What have you? I looked at our emergency response plan
lot of convincing... decision to go remote ...best interest of our employees,
we left that Friday afternoon that Friday night. We were already. We were on phone calls regarding the next course of action that was going to be taken by by the University
by the next day, the Saturday there was a decision made to actually lay off several of our our employees
employees healthy and safe?
enormous sense of urgency in how do we keep our students healthy and safe?
ensuring that...people are engaged with the work in the culture of the organization…despite different schedules
has been an accelerated sense of urgency….to have a seat at the table
held meetings, I mean. It was 24, 7 at the beginning, and then, you know. Then every day, then it went to once a week.
how we engage our staff.
If someone does not show up to work we get very alert now.
March fifth we had to close down, so there was a sense of urgency, and making sure that it was a seamless transition.
mental health issues we want to make sure they are aware of the resources
One is getting the seat one and two is staying there.
pivoted, and we're trying to find that niche, and that that way that works for us in terms of just shifting our perspective and shifting the way in which we do things, and especially shift in a way in which we engage with employees
probably at least 2 weeks prior to going remote
reevaluate our recruitment practices…more virtual recruitment…remote or hybrid
so funny enough when the Covid hit
So we just need the professionals within the circles of Hr .to understand the philosophy around staying at the table.
staff's well-being became very important
team included the President as the major part of leadership, our medical director, the Hr team, which included myself and our leave expert because people were having to take sick leaves, Covid sick leaves, and so forth, students, student life and enter so. And for a while we included a member of the New York City Department of Health.

the urgency with regard to servicing the University was great, but I would say that you know overall it. It was i'm not going to say it was seamless, but it was more seamless than I could have imagined,
there was a lot of urgency, because we had 3,500 employees who we're afraid to come into the office.
there was a very, very big sense of urgency, as well as trying to come to consensus with our leaders as to what we were going to do. People still thought. Well, we need to have a skeleton crew in. And what if you know, the productivity is going to go down if we if we send everybody home.
this was a a university-wide effort
updated our information...what can we do Remotely what we, you know, what can we, what we have to do in person
want to make sure out staff is safe.
we constantly kept it updated...just in case we can't come on campus
we had to make the decision.
We pulled together a team
we talked about if there were any challenges, and i'm going to say like all of Hr. We were ready to roll, and we were. We were good
would say the sense of urgency was just making sure that all of our systems that we were in a place where we could operate remotely and make sure that we're servicing the University

Creating a Guiding Coalition
we were prepared, and we had a plan already. I think that that helped us to not, you know, probably be as impacted as others were.
we just had to come together and shift our focus...in the past was more transactional...shift toward more organizational development
We have benefits. We have Hris. We have talent, management, and equity compliance. We have Hr Recruitment services. So we've had all of these separate teams that work collaboratively which creates the Hr.
Those 3-4 portfolios of work for these groups spanned several different layers from executive leaders to senior leaders to first line supervisors to individual contributors.
team included the President as the major part of leadership, our medical director, the Hr team, which included myself and our leave expert because people were having to take sick leaves, Covid sick leaves, and so forth, students, student life and enter so. And for a while we included a member of the New York City Department of Health.
several roles that people had
redefining roles and making the roles have a broader scope

really wasn't a change with the team dynamics, because, you know, we have the teams in place
priority and answer questions that are coming from our staff.
lot of meetings that we had to figure out how we can serve our employees better.
I was a part of that group first, and then I had 2 other groups that I consistently met with, so that my direct reports my leaders on my team would get easy, quick direction.
committee that was formed of key roles across the university,
Central Hr...departmental. Hr:...our director.
becoming more data driven and just reevaluating the roles and the functions based on organizational needs.
a little bit of the difficulty...change remotely
we just had to make sure that we were in a place
there were multiple things happen at the same time which impacted the team.
the labor relations and the employee relations...being on phone calls with our labor partners to notify them as to the actions that they were taking, to ensure that we were still compliant with the Cba,
benefits, person who now has to begin to process of impact individuals's health benefits
at the same time you still have to understand that the employees have their families, that they have to deal with

Developing a Vision and Strategy
basically notifying staff based on who was eligible, for to work remotely
Nothing would have been organized to that degree but that map, that strategic plan, that emergency response, strategic plan that was in place helped us to navigate and fall in in line, and I'm going to use this term again seamlessly
really just conversation, just talking things out, talking things through saying this is what we're gonna do talk about it come all the way around to a different decision. Talk about it some more. Come all the way around to the original decision. So it's just a lot of conversation, because everybody needed to be comfortable or as comfortable as they could be with the decisions that we were making going forward.
staff members who were considered high risk and we made sure they didn't feel obligated to come into work
those were a lot of things that happened that required a lot of research.
"create a system of backups"
"make sure that everyone felt like they were supported"
"make sure that we always had somebody who was accessible"

"point People looking at different areas, you know whether it was, let's change our recruitment, or the University wants to digitize this."
"So everyone just sort of pitches in when they need to."
"Sometimes it wasn't possible."
"started with checking in with everyone...everyone's individual schedule was going to change, based on their needs at home."
because we have a vision already in place. Make sure that we respond to clients in less than 24 h.
concerns about whether or not that person would be able to return to the workplace, or, more importantly, travel
continued virtual meetings and all the in person meetings were cancelled.
create a team of people who did contact tracing.
created regulations that we had to suddenly comply with
engage with you. Know the university community and to meet the needs,
hire external temporary people to do the same. And then for a while we asked for volunteers around the University, because at the beginning there were a lot of people who were getting sick and we were doing a lot of contact tracing.
initial feedback showed that an initiative wasn't going to work from a brief or initial assessment, we looped feedback to the senior leaders and executive leaders to rethink what another vision could be
it was more about talking to them about from an Hr. Perspective about employees and the people in their heads versus the business, the business, the business results.
n cases where a person requested a remote accommodation evaluating that that those accommodations, and making the determinations, whether or not based on the policy that person qualified for an a a reasonable accommodation under Ada because as you can recall. During that time there were several individuals based on their their health status
not only were we dealing with the people side of it. We were dealing with the business side of it
our priority was our employees and always is...staff safety was our biggest thing.
our viewpoint was, let's talk about employees, and if you solve the employee problem solve meaning a lowercase as if you solve the employee problem, then it will take care of how well the business does. And then how will ww talk to the students
pandemic got little better, and we were able to bring we started working on how can we safely bring them back
refer to our emergency response plan,
So at the executive senior level where I was included very quickly, we were able to accelerate decisions, because we have these other groups working in tandem to execute.

So I think it was important to have that plan for us to strategically navigate how we were going to implement this new normal in place
Speaking with with with our our legal teams at at at the school
staff who couldn't work remotely...We worked with her managers and with their help found project that these staff members could do from home.
The strategies that were in place,
under the guidance of the medical scientists and the research scientists was critically important because we needed to constantly be aware of and stay on top of health guidance internationally and nationally.
various Hr units had this plan
very close touch with the Department of Health.
wanted to also be an environmental one to retain our top talent.
We develop our vision and strategies based on our organizational strategic priorities, so collaboration and innovation
we did need to provide that kind of supplemental information for our leadership,
We did survey a lot of companies. and what we found was they were all in the same position that we were. They didn't know what they were going to do
we kind of had a three-legged stool. We had to deal with the employees the business and then faculty.
we met frequently
we took the queue from leadership at the time and then it was our job to execute whatever that vision is
we worked on was looking at the space in our department.
what about our students and how are we going to help our students?

Communicating the Change Vision
chat and emails and our cell phones.
informed regularly of whatever it was, strategy or tactic, and that regular feedback loop begged more innovation and more discussions around what else we could possibly do...let's go back and assess to see if what we're doing is working well.
kept telling them that we had leadership calls as part of our quarterly and monthly leadership calls people with the leaders would still say. We understand we're working through it

lot of one-one virtual meetings.
our VP of Research and our chief health officer often and frequently spoke in order to make sure guidance could come back to us quickly and informed by their alignment of their offices, and then we could strategize from there.
teams via teams.
very open and transparent with employees
virtual communications.
we kept them informed,
able to talk to them about our vision for the Hr team
communicating with our our labor partners to ensure that they are kept in the loop,... they can actually assist Hr and the school in terms of disseminating information to the membership
constantly in communication with the chief with our various Hr colleagues and partners.
developing a strategy... Take a cohesive approach to getting feedback from our staff..staff engagement survey
Every manager was responsible for reaching out to each of their employees.
Every single possible portal was used to make sure that we were all in communications.
Everyone was willing to ensure that the foundation and the framework would be successful.
had a General Hr. Meeting as well, weekly, just until we were in a place where we could just function normally
meet with the leadership team every week, and so. as we are talking about organization-wide priorities.
Microsoft teams, Zoom, and emails to communicate with our staff.
So it was weekly meetings that we had to address all of the change
they were always on emails. They were on zoom, or they were on other forms of of your chats.
use my positioning as a leader to put forth ideas and thoughts and vision...Hr: Vision for our teams.
we communicated that to with our leadership team
We got managers together.
We sent out emails to every employee. We put something on our on our internal website communication pages.
We use Teams

Empowering Broad-based Action
because we did have some people that did that or the Internet service that they had didn't meet our minimum technology standards. So we gave them hotspots or some sort of technology booster, or whatever it is that we gave them to ensure that their technology, our technology requirements, were met
gave the employees kind of a kind of a break meaning. Our requirements are that there were no outside noises that the student can hear when you're on the phone to the student they hear you, and that's it.
looking to see what it is that we do, looking to see what it is that we needed to men to change so that we can exist in this remote environment.
One challenge...initial phase when it came to the unemployment.
" if you weren't compliant with Federal State and University vaccination requirements, you could not be employed."
"some employees not really being amenable to changes in the workplace, whether those were vaccine requirements, and having to have those difficult conversations,"
"we all sort of had to be ready to have those difficult conversations"
a lot of conversations with managers on helping them manage the transition not only themselves because they are, you know, people themselves but, as I mentioned earlier, how to manage your people, that you no longer see every single day,
a lot of our employees when it was time for them to return to work, chose not to return, because they they they were receiving in some cases more money from unemployment than they were from working at school
also to i'm gonna say, we also implemented like a Hr like coffee. It it's not an hour. It was coffee, 15 min.
bring in that data when we're presenting thoughts and ideas in our vision…helps with push back
cross collaboration is a management change initiative in that moment to force people to collaborate
cultural where silos tend to exist
definitely challenges working with supervisors to help them better understand the needs, especially if staff...staff employees that we're juggling multiple priorities at home and at work and making sure that there were reasonable accommodations "
dispatched as many laptops as we had available.
Fed the Federal Government had actually subsidized. You know the unemployment benefits
for us to just engage...coffee period of time, which was 15 min, and we would we're gonna coffee and just talk and talk about anything but work.
Hr. normally has a bad reputation that you go to HR when you are in trouble.
obstacles can be due to a lack of resources
Our staff to understand was that we are here for them as a resources

pulled in research for society of the human of Human Resource management.
so many employees impacted by decisions regarding, you know their their employment status
staff to felt that they are welcome to come and talk to us about anything….personal or professional
taught the faculty how to teach remotely.
That's the way in which we just try to discuss matters that weren't like work base
the way in which the obstacles were removed was again just referring to that that road map. Right? That that plan
there were lots of obstacles, but I want to say we just barrel through them and made it happen
they needed a new headset. We got them a headset whatever that they needed we gave them to.
we didn't find that many at that time, because people just felt that as long as I'm still employed right, you know, I'm just gonna go ahead with it.
We gave employees a little bit of leniency that as everybody got got used to it,
we had to close the school, and for a place that was had never been remote or had never really had any remote learning. We just we just did.
we have to collaborate and share information, even though you may not want to share right away
We have to communicate.
we made sure that every employee that had a desktopgot a laptop and a monitor...2 or 3 monitors
We turned on a dime and did it just it just instantly.
we wanted people to have the same setup at home as they had in the office because we kind of instinctually new
we would take that time to socialize, and we were doing that weekly just to connect.
whatever was the issue that had to happen. We just sort of barreled through.
when you communicated with those employees

Appendix E: RQ #2 Coding Framework

Participants	RQ2: How has HR changed…support employee's performance?	Interpreting the data: Identifying Themes	Theme Name
P1	If we're talking specifically within higher ed. From what I saw at my university, it was really about the job description. The tasks. Are you performing the tasks? I've seen a huge change where we're looking at having a growth mindset for the way we evaluate employees, and a more well-rounded approach, for example. Now, when we evaluate you know we're looking at. Not only are you doing the job. but what other ways have you been able to take it to the next level, or what? What strengths are we not utilizing right now? We never asked those questions in the past	huge change where we're looking at having a growth mindset	Shift in Performance Evaluation Approach
P2	We have regular focus engagement regarding our performance management process, and those are tied to our staff values. So some of our staff values are balanced, and integrity and collaboration. So for example, balance, we make sure that you know people are able to comfortably speak up if they're, you know, stressed, or, you know, need an adjustment to their workloads.	we have regular focus engagement regarding our performance management process	Performance Management and Engagement
P3	I think, for you know, looking through a performance lens, I think Hr. Is more, and is invited more into conversations around performance. I definitely think the rise of empathetic leadership, the rise of authenticity, ,and authentic leadership the rise of that, as a result of Covid, has transformed performance in an irreversible way. I think that employees now can feel managed by someone who sees them, which makes a big difference for underrepresented members of our communities who have a sense of friendship and a way of talking, that that goes beyond the transaction of work	rise of empathetic leadership, the rise of authenticity	Empathetic and Authentic Leadership

P4	If there were performance issues, you know, things were very straightforward, straight and manager. It was like, okay, here is your warning work on this. Now with Covid, what I have seen is that there has been more involvement in the 'Why'. for some employees performing poorly, or if there is any issues or challenges that they are facing. We are trying to do our best to help our employees succeed.	If there were performance issues, you know, things were very straightforward	Managing Performance Issues During COVID-19
P5	I'd like to think that before Covid we were trying to support employees abilities to do their work. It's just that they were doing it here on campus as opposed to a hybrid or remote. I guess what changed is. We had to create a lot of new policies. We had to make our website more a little more user friendly...	what changed is. We had to create a lot of new policies	Adapting Policies and Processes
P6	We hold people accountable just like they did if they were in the office, we reward them just like they did if they were in the office. Granted it looks a little different, but we haven't changed what we do. We've changed how we do it, how we reward, how we recognize and how we have team meetings, and how we have off-site meetings, for that matter.	we haven't changed what we do... I say we just changed how we do it	Remote Work and Management
P6	I think the two biggest areas in HR...and probably the biggest emphasis on learning, because also not only new hire training, but we had other kinds of training that people came into the conference room, and at all. We had 2,000 people on the site and for a leadership development course in effective communications. You went to conference room, one on one. Well. but now, what you do? How do you break people into virtual chat rooms so we can practice	biggest areas in hr. With that, and probably the biggest emphasis on learning	Learning and Development
P8	The way in which we engage is definitely different, but we find it to be impactful because a lot of the feedback that we've gotten back from employees is that you know they. They feel as though they have a better quality of life, greater work, life, balance, and also just the latitude to perform, and not this isn't across the board right, but the latitude perform independently; whereas in the office some employees, you know, would state that their managers, their supervisors, or what happy, were constantly on them.	They feel as though they have a better quality of life, greater work, life, balance	Independence and Quality of Work-Life Balance

P1	We're adding in areas like civility, collegiality. You know, these are really important areas. Not only can you do the job, but are you able to be respectful, you know? Are you able to collaborate with others to do you uphold the values that we have as an institution that maybe we always had. But again, I do think that the emergence of DEI not only just to say that we check the box that we put the message out there. But are we actually taking action, an accountability to uphold that message until, to make sure, we're hiring the right employees that we're empowering the right employees. So those are some areas that I've seen.	We're adding in areas like civility, collegiality	Civility, Collegiality, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)
P2	Some of our staff recently have taken mental health First Aid course. To try to help staff who are mental health is a is a a big wellness initiative that's happening in our organization and at the institution so ensuring that we are, we are equipped with skills to address any sort of mental health needs or support.	mental health is a is a a big wellness initiative	Mental Health and Wellness
P3	and we continue further into it, whether management and employees will revert to behaviors that existed prior to the pandemic and that's really on us to steward the change and maintain it. And frankly - how should I say this - be a little bit unapologetic about the courage that it takes for managers to continue to endorse new initiatives that emerged because of the Covid and not backsliding-- like flexible work. I think there's got to be some courage that is existent and needs to be sustained for performance to be viewed and managed differently.	And frankly - how should I say this - be a little bit unapologetic	Flexible Management and Communication
P5	I can say, I can tell you that one thing that did change is that as a result of Covid, or since Covid, or after Covid. I don't know which is the right terminology it. It has become much more difficult to hire people. The what they call the great resignation. We're still suffering from the great resignation.	one thing that did change is that as a result of Covid.	Impact on Hiring and Recruitment

Appendix F: RQ #3 Coding Framework

Participants	RQ3: How has HR changed…support employee's well-being?	Interpreting the data: Identifying Themes	Theme Name
P6	So our you know our benefits. Organization spent a lot of time digging out that information, finding resources. We really had beefed up all of our mental health offerings, whether it be online offerings because you couldn't go to see your psychologist. So how do we do? How in your psychologist wouldn't do remote, so we still have people with problems. So how do we help them. So we they. We have implemented many new programs that are virtual	beefed up all of our mental health offerings	Shift towards Employee Well-being and Experience Enhancement
P3	dramatically! I mean mental health and well-being. I think HR's ability to be better resourced around mental health and to have a stronger voice, and it's not just a soft, touchy, feely thing anymore to talk about mental health, to talk about someone's emotional state, and their well-being at work that cannot sustain itself.	dramatically! I mean mental health and well-being	Mental Health and Well-being
P4	previously,...HR had a wellness program...were not really doing it like we were not sharing your training, so we were not focusing on all of that. However, due to Covid and what we all went through, we started getting more involved with our wellness team and bringing in their coaches and to see, like, you know, to meditation like we have a coordinator who is an expert of meditation. So we started doing more sessions, so that she would bring our specialists. She would bring in different topics, which one to help staff.	we started getting more involved with our wellness team and bringing in their coaches	Evolution of Wellness Initiatives
P5	I think there's a much bigger focus now on employee health. When they get Covid, we made it very clear that if someone is sick, they should not come to work. Before [COVID], if you had a bad cold, you still came to work. That's pretty much changed in our society.	there's a much bigger focus now on employee health. we made it very clear that if someone is sick, they should not come to work.	Changes in Health and Safety Protocols

P6	Well, being a lot more focused on employees' well-being because employees are asking their companies to help them more and more, and they're expecting their companies to help them more and more to deal with everything that is Covid related- either if you know illness, the psychological effects. What do I do with my kids all day? All of those kind of things. They're looking for their employers to help them much, much, much more than they ever have before. As an employer, it's not our responsibility to help them find child care. But when COVID-19 hit, it still wasn't our responsibility to help them. But employees were reaching out and saying. What am I gonna do with my kids?	either if you know illness, the psychological effects. What do I do with my kids all day? But employees were reaching out	Focus on Employee Health and Well-Being
P7	there were times when, let's say, if an employee needed to take some time to do something with a family member they would make a request instead of taking a day off. Do you mind if I work remotely, or something like that. If there was a child care issue, you know, typically prior to the to the pandemic, you would just have to take a day off right, I think we were a lot more flexible following the pandemic.	employee needed to take some time to do something with a family member typically prior to the to the pandemic, you would just have to take a day off right	Employee Expectations and Support
P8	we had EAP resources available. We refer employees to those resources, but we wanted to have like a talk where, you know, employees can speak openly about what they're feeling, and then also share howthe afforded resources an possibly help them.	EAP resources available.	Enhancements in Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)
P8	Premiums have skyrocketed, but I can say that there are more robust offerings now for employees, which, inclusive of the EAP and resources to help the individuals	premiums skyrocketed, more robust offerings	Adapting Benefits and Resources
P4	people that we have not seen attend, like men don't come to these classes…post pandemic every gender is coming in.	post pandemic, every gender is coming	Ongoing Learning and Development
P8	teachable moment in that we constantly have to be in a position where we are, you know, strategizing, planning because you never know what you know the future it may hold, and we have to make sure overall that employees are in a position where they feel valued, where they feel safe, respected. and you know, as an Hr. Professional, this is something that we constantly have to	teachable moment in that we constantly have to be in a position where we are…strategizing planning	Lessons from the Pandemic for Future Well-being Initiatives