

Rethinking Sustainability in Human Resource Management

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The Special Issue, “Rethinking Sustainability in Human Resource Management”, contains five papers that focus directly or indirectly on the vast effect the COVID-19 pandemic has had on employment, employment relations and in this context human resource management (HRM). At the end of June 2020, lockdowns and closures had, for instance, affected 93% per cent of world’s employees living in countries with some type of workplace closure in place [1]. As a result, unemployment rose sharply, and wage structures changed in many cases. Firms were furthermore affected by reduced productivity, absent workers, disruption in production, lower morale, and anxiety [2].

The relationship between employees and managers changed with distance work, where communications changed to email and video conferencing [3]. All the changes related to COVID-19 did impose great challenges and uncertainty for managers and HR staff [1].

Among healthcare professions, the effect of the pandemic was enormous, leading to stress, burnout and exhaustion, increased infection risks and isolation of patients—in many cases work–life inequalities followed [4,5]. Social isolation followed the pandemic, and seafarers were stuck at sea for some time on cruise ships [6].

At the same time, the growing distance working and lockdowns did reduce traffic a considerable amount, which in turn led to lower pollution [7].

Against this background, this Special Issue invited researchers to rethink Human Resource Management and a particular interest was put on sustainable HRM considering the rapid changes triggered by the pandemic and the consequences on both individuals and organizations. How have recent developments affected creativity, innovation, motivation, social isolation, stress, and work–life balance? Will we see a more sustainable future via homework, online meetings, and less commuting? How will it affect the social aspects of work? How is the relationship between managers and employees affected by recent developments?

The first paper in the Special Issue is written by Edvardsson and Durst and is a systematic review of the literature on human resource management in crisis settings (Contribution 1). The authors analysed 56 papers published in peer-reviewed journals since 2008 and identified four themes: economic crisis and HRM, health crisis and HRM, natural disasters and HRM, and political instability and HRM. One of the contributions of the paper is that sudden life-threatening crisis, such as the COVID pandemic and natural disasters, are met with softer, more humane HR responses, compared to economic crisis.

Sustainable business and corporate social responsibility have received increasing attention in management research in recent years. In their article, Baek and Kim look at how human resources can assist organisations with socially responsible management (Contribution 2). The authors analysed the HR policies and practices of 46 multinational enterprises (MNEs) listed on the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI) World 2018/2019. Their findings resulted in triangular pyramid for socially responsible HR, including eight themes at micro, meso, and macro levels. By doing so they encourage HR community to take steps toward socially responsible management.



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In many countries of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic was met by governments by social distancing and quarantine. Consequently, social relationships changed, and isolation increased. Du and Lee address in their paper workplace loneliness and the need to belong in the COVID area in China via a survey. Their findings indicate that inter-team competitive climates have a negative effect on workplace loneliness and knowledge hoarding, while collaborative climate did reduce loneliness and knowledge hoarding, where the need to belong has a mediating effect (Contribution 3).

Two papers submitted to this Special Issue by scholars from Italy addressed HRM in the banking sector. D'Angelo and colleagues investigated, through focus groups, how HR professionals of an Italian bank perceived growing and increasingly rapid policy of business changes and expansion through acquisitions and mergers. Such changes have characterized the Italian banking sector in recent years and based on that what is the impact on HR roles and their interpretation. Their findings not only underline the need for a multiple level approach in HRM but also the relevance of supervision of HR roles to come closer to a more consistent, sustainable, and conscious approach required today's world (Contribution 4).

Borgia et al., on the other hand, studied the possible effects of technological knowledge risks, i.e., the risk of knowledge digitalization, the risk associated with old technologies, and the risk of cybercrimes, on the work–life balance and job performance of employees of small Italian banks. By focussing on knowledge risks these authors highlight a type of risk that has only recently attracted more attention in management research. The study underlines the relevance of incorporating technological knowledge risks in banks operations to better cope with current and upcoming challenges (Contribution 5).

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