

Shifting Paradigms In Managing Organizational Change: The Evolving Role Of Hr

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Abstract:

In today's global business landscape, organizations often need to make significant changes to stay competitive. This includes changing how they do things and how they work with their employees. HR professionals need to adapt to these changing needs within their organizations. Successful companies are becoming more flexible, quick to adapt, and customer focused. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced multinational enterprises to take various actions to mitigate its impact. Many of these actions involve managing distance, whether at the large-scale international level or within individual firms. This has become a primary focus of recent research. The pandemic has created challenges related to physical distance due to travel restrictions and reduced mobility, as well as new challenges in how employees work together when they can't be in the same location. It has also been shown that having a virtual workforce can have unexpected benefits, which may influence the future way of working. Current HRM research offers valuable insights for dealing with these challenges, but there are still gaps in our knowledge. Key areas of focus include managing uncertainty, supporting international and global work, and managing global talent. This paper discusses the evolving role of HR during the pandemic and strategies for addressing these challenges. Investing in skills for managing change is a smart move for organizations of all sizes, especially in rapidly changing times, as it can lead to significant benefits for their survival and success.

Keywords: human resource management, organizational change, managing diversity, virtual collaboration, global workforce, HR, COVID-19,

Introduction:

Change is an ever-present aspect of the contemporary business landscape, affecting owners, executives, and HR professionals daily. The pace of organizational change has not only been sustained but has, in fact, intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. In today's background characterized by dynamic, unpredictable shifts and heightened competition, the magnitude of change within organizations can be overwhelming. This heightened rate of change has necessitated a thoughtful reevaluation of traditional approaches to recruitment, resource allocation, remote workforce management, and calls for a more profound comprehension of the associated challenges, as well as the development of sustainable solutions. The rapid and unceasing evolution of technology has emerged as a driving force behind the transformations in organizational systems and processes. It is essential to acknowledge that change is an inherent aspect of both organizations and individuals. However, it is also acknowledged that organizational change can generate a complex array of emotions, including anxiety, fear, and resistance among employees. Historically, HR professionals have often been viewed as enforcers of executive management's policies and procedures. The role of HR in steering organizational change is a topic that has been underrepresented in the existing literature. There remains a notable misconception among business executives regarding the precise functions of HR professionals in the context of organizational change. Yet, it is increasingly apparent that the role of HR is undergoing a transformative shift. As organizations strive to maintain competitiveness within the global marketplace, they are compelled to reevaluate their missions, strategies, cultures, processes, systems, practices, technologies, ownership structures, and even core values. This entails a flattening of organizational hierarchies, downsizing, restructuring, and redefining roles across the organizational spectrum. Simultaneously, organizations grapple with the challenge of staying abreast of continuously evolving technologies. The reality that must be acknowledged is that the way organizations handle change has emerged as a

significant determinant of their success or failure and their competitive position. Regrettably, studies tracking various forms of organizational change consistently indicate that a staggering 70% or more of significant organizational changes either fail to attain their intended outcomes, falter entirely, or exacerbate existing issues (Burke, 2008; Doyle, 1992; Miller, 2002; Senge, 1999). The implications of a failure rate of this magnitude in implementing change are profound. Consider the disillusionment, frustration, chaos, squandering of time, human and capital resources, erosion of trust and confidence in leadership, damage to morale, and the burgeoning resistance to change, as well as skepticism towards each successive change initiative. The costs incurred by organizations and their constituents due to mismanagement of change can be substantial.

Objectives of this study:

Historically, HR managers predominantly focused on tasks such as devising staffing strategies, administering specialized training programs, and overseeing annual performance evaluations. However, as the strategic significance of human resources in achieving business success has intensified, HR managers and their departments have assumed a more integral role within organizations. It is essential for HR professionals to possess a deep understanding of the organization's requirements and actively contribute to meeting those demands (Ulrich, 1998). This research endeavor aims to assist HR professionals in recognizing the evolving responsibilities they must undertake in navigating change management, while simultaneously contributing to the augmentation of existing literature in the realms of change management and human resource management.

Role of HR for managing change:

Management encompasses the oversight of various organizational resources, encompassing financial, information, physical, and human resources (Griffin, 2006). The primary responsibility of HR Professionals lies in the effective management of human resources. However, this task becomes notably intricate during periods of organizational change. HR Professionals are expected to take a proactive role in steering change within an organization, aligning their roles with the organization's evolving needs. In today's highly competitive landscape and amidst unprecedented

challenges like the ongoing pandemic, organizations, whether operating locally or globally, must enhance their adaptability, resilience, agility, and customer-centricity to thrive.

It is well-acknowledged that any form of organizational change affects employees, often leading to resistance (Lawrence, 1954; Lewin, 1947). Simultaneously, employees' expectations from management are undergoing transformations. These changing expectations from both sides necessitate a redefinition of the roles played by HR Professionals. Their functions extend beyond the confines of traditional frameworks. HR Professionals not only play a pivotal role in managing organizational change but also in cultivating a culture that embraces change (Chew et al., 2006).

It is imperative for HR Professionals to recognize the divergent concerns of employees and management, bridging the gap arising from disparate expectations. While management typically focuses on business expansion, market share augmentation, cost control, and quality enhancement, employees may prioritize job security, salary increments, career advancement, rewards, recognition, and improved working conditions. HR Professionals, through their positive engagement, can serve as mediators, ultimately harmonizing the perspectives of management and employees.

Kurt Lewin's change model (1951) underscores the importance of unfreezing the existing status quo, transitioning to a desired end state, and refreezing the new changes to ensure their permanence. Throughout this change process, HR professionals are instrumental and should actively participate in each phase. In the planning phase, HR professionals should embrace the role of a 'transformational leader,' as advocated by Newstrom & Davis (2002). This involves instigating bold strategic changes aimed at positioning the organization for its future. A critical aspect of this leadership style is articulating a compelling vision and actively promoting it. By doing so, HR professionals encourage employees to transcend their narrow focus on individual tasks or departments and gain a broader perspective. The goal is to foster a culture of learning, transforming both individuals and the organization into entities better prepared to confront unforeseen challenges. This proactive approach is paramount, as it is more advantageous to prepare employees for potential changes in advance rather than during their implementation.

Furthermore, creating a change-oriented culture becomes a prerequisite for sustainable organizational transformation,

underscoring the need for HR professionals to integrate 'change' into the organizational fabric. Adequate time allocation within the planning process is essential, as organizations often underestimate the time required for new initiatives. A general guideline is to double the estimated time, as most individuals, including leadership, tend to need time to transition from old practices to new ones, even for minor changes. HR professionals should acknowledge the inherent resistance to change, regardless of its magnitude, and proactively develop a roadmap tailored to the specific situation, to guide employees through these challenging transitions.

Effective communication emerges as another vital role for today's HR professionals. It serves to eliminate misunderstandings among employees regarding the intended changes. As suggested by Robbins and Judge (2009), communication can also be instrumental in 'selling' the necessity of change. Throughout the implementation process, HR professionals must ensure that all communication channels facilitate information sharing and the accurate absorption of relevant information by all employees, aligning with Hendricks' insights (1989). Furthermore, HR professionals should not underestimate the significance of motivation during times of change. They must step into the role of 'motivators,' recognizing that motivated employees tend to perform more efficiently in serving customers, as emphasized by Walkup (1997).

To facilitate employee acceptance of new projects, regardless of their scale, HR professionals can illustrate what success will look like. Successful change implementation hinges on HR professionals providing an effective roadmap that guides the organization through the transformation process.

The COVID-19 Crisis

The advent of COVID-19 ushered in a profound transformation in the lives of individuals and the functioning of various entities, from cities and economies to countries and entire continents. For managers, the pandemic precipitated a rapid series of decisions, often with limited time for contemplation. These decisions pertained to essential matters such as determining which employees should continue working on-site and who could safely work remotely, as well as devising strategies for transitioning people into digital workspaces while effectively communicating

organizational priorities. A survey conducted by Ernst & Young in 2019, involving 500 board members and CEOs worldwide, found that merely 20% of these executives believed their organizations were adequately prepared to address substantial adverse risks (EY, 2020). However, the onset of the COVID-19 crisis in a matter of months exposed the validity of their apprehensions. The pandemic underscored concerns surrounding vulnerabilities in global supply chains, financial resilience, and, notably, the strategic management of human talent. This crisis has placed immense stress on employees, compounded by health risks, as a vast number of them were thrust into the realm of remote work. Adding to this challenge, many managers found themselves leading remote teams for the first time, exacerbating the difficulties of fostering collaboration and effective leadership from a distance. Through the lens of international human resource management (IHRM), we can reframe the challenges stemming from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic within the existing academic knowledge base. This theoretical framework enables us to gain a clearer understanding of these challenges and provide insights to managers as they navigate the complexities of leading their teams through this crisis. The recent developments have equipped the managers in learning how to comprehend the challenges individuals encounter when placed in diverse work arrangements, including expatriate assignments, virtual international work, global project teams, and extensive international travel (Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen & Bolino, 2012). Following discussion points have emerged:

Discussion A: Managing the Global Uncertainty

The concept of volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments has long been acknowledged (Schoemaker, Heaton, & Teece, 2018; Van Tulder, Verbeke, & Jankowska, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has unveiled pronounced vulnerabilities resulting from widespread global uncertainty. It's crucial to note that uncertainty is more applicable to the prevailing context for a multitude of employees who find themselves working from home for the first time, grappling with job instability and financial insecurity, and deeply concerned about their well-being and that of their loved ones. As recognized in the field of International Human Resource Management (IHRM), the context plays a pivotal role in shaping the efficacy of the existing theories (Brewster, Mayrhofer & Smale, 2016; Cooke, 2018). In this regard, the context

of uncertainty, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, demands our attention (Buckley et al., 2017).

Discussion B: Management Support

In the current global landscape, the world is grappling with a collective sense of stress and uncertainty. However, the global economy continues to operate, necessitating that employees are ready to step out of their comfort zones to work in different countries and collaborate with individuals from diverse cultures.

It has been well acknowledged that an individual's comfort and adaptability within a specific environment can significantly impact their overall success. Moreover, research has shown that organizational support plays a pivotal role in facilitating the adjustment of individuals in new and unfamiliar environments (Takeuchi, Wang, Marinova, & Yao, 2009). This is particularly relevant for individuals working within global cross-national teams. Such teams often operate across multiple time zones, adhere to flexible schedules, and face expectations of round-the-clock availability, which can lead to various health risks (Lirio, 2017).

Owing to the challenges associated with COVID-19, it is essential to recognize that the specific support required by individuals may vary based on their unique work-life circumstances. Nevertheless, the importance of organizational support remains paramount in mitigating stress and ensuring the well-being of employees (Kraimer, Wayne, & Jaworski, 2001; Shaffer, Harrison, & Gilley, 1999).

To address these challenges effectively, companies should implement support practices aimed at reducing stress levels among their employees. These practices may include conducting webinars on building resilience, offering mindfulness tutorials providing employee assistance programs, and offering virtual counseling services. These stress-mitigating initiatives are particularly valuable for employees engaged in international virtual work, as they are often subjected to additional stressors.

Now, more than ever, human resources managers must take proactive measures to foster cohesion and support their workforce during these challenging times. The right steps towards this shall help employees navigate the complexities of international work and contribute to the success of the organization.

Discussion C: Training & Development

In the context of global teams, that already possess a degree of familiarity, the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportune moment to cultivate cross-cultural team cohesion and validate expectations of reliability, given the ubiquitous presence of health-related stress worldwide. Providing training to support relationship formation would be particularly well-received at this juncture since all team members, regardless of their location, are undergoing a similar stressor. For those team members who have not yet received cross-cultural training in building relationships across borders, any such training, if offered now, would be highly relevant. This is because team members currently share a common challenge in the form of COVID-19, which could make the lessons from such training particularly impactful. Cross-cultural training can help reduce ambiguity related to cross-cultural differences by imparting skills on effective collaboration across diverse cultures, promoting the identification of commonalities with colleagues from different backgrounds, inclusive use of technology, establishment of team-level communication protocols, and more. Employees' desire for professional growth has been observed to be amplified during this period, as it aligns with the fundamental human motivator of competence (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017). While working from home during the pandemic, the lack of professional stimulation has led to increased self-directed knowledge-seeking among individuals, driven by their need to learn, grow, and demonstrate competence. For instance, social media learning platforms have reported a big surge in usage since the onset of stay-at-home orders (Forbes, 2020), which shows the heightened desire for self-directed learning which gives the organizations a valuable opportunity to invest in their employees' skill development. This not only helps in building their talent pool but also boosting employee motivation, resulting in a mutually beneficial outcome.

Discussion D: Flexible work arrangements & virtual collaboration

Arrangements, such as flexible scheduling and working from home, have demonstrated positive impacts on employees' health (e.g., Anderson, Kaplan & Vega, 2015). Promoting healthy work practices, such as adhering to regular working hours and taking breaks, can help employees disengage from work (Adamovic, 2018; Chen & Fulmer, 2018). Effective communication, clear time management and task prioritization can help employees balance

their work and family responsibilities. Flexible work arrangements can accordingly be worked out for long-term health and safety of the employees at work (Chen & Fulmer, 2018).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced many organizations to rely primarily on one form of flexible work arrangement i.e., remote work from home. This sudden and involuntary shift poses new challenges for employees and HR professionals. Gartner (2020) did a survey of 800 global HR executives and found that 88% of organizations had either encouraged or mandated employees to work from home during the pandemic. For globally mobile employees now working from home during the pandemic, the prolonged shift is particularly significant, necessitating a re-negotiation and reorganization of work-family boundaries. Managers should prioritize the protection and management of employee health and safety (Collings, Scullion, & Morley, 2007), to foster positive outcomes such as thriving and engagement in their work.

Job advertisements and assessment centers should include the requirement for remote work skills, not just for managers but also for technical staff, attracting and selecting employees who value this aspect of their professional identity (Zimmermann & Ravishankar, 2011). Post-recruitment, formal training in virtual collaboration, encompassing information and communication technology and intercultural knowledge, can enhance employees' virtual work skills (Li, Mobley, & Kelly, 2013; Sit, Mak, & Heill, 2017). Cross-cultural training is essential for those working virtually across borders, facilitating cross-cultural relationship building and team collaboration. On-the-job experiences, including rotational assignments and short-term projects abroad, help members of global virtual teams develop a shared understanding, strengthen social ties, and establish a shared team identity (Zimmermann, 2018).

Establishing clear goals, communication structures, interaction rules, and team member roles is vital for shared understanding (Earley & Peterson, 2004). Virtual communication and teamwork efforts should be included as criteria for employee performance evaluations, recognizing the importance of the virtual work process, not just the outcomes, in rewards and promotions.

Research on virtual collaboration offers insights into measures managers can take to overcome obstacles to virtual work, create a positive work experience, and enhance employee motivation and

commitment. To foster perceived proximity, managers should encourage frequent communication and personal sharing among remote colleagues, utilizing social media to identify personal similarities and build stronger relationships (O'Leary et al., 2014). Senior HR must balance the career aspirations of employees at various locations, creating a 'combined career pyramid' to motivate and commit employees at different sites, helping in breaking down collaboration barriers and alleviating fears related to offshoring. By embracing these insights, managers can enhance their organizations' virtual working capabilities for the future, ultimately leading to more productive, engaged, and thriving employees.

HR as Change Champions

To effectively address the issue of change mismanagement and substantially enhance the success rate of organizational changes, it is proposed that organizations cultivate change champions at various levels, with a particular emphasis on leadership roles. These change champions are individuals, irrespective of their hierarchical position, who possess the competencies necessary for instigating, facilitating, and executing change initiatives. It is important to distinguish change champions from change agents, who are specialists trained in the domain of organizational development and change management.

While it is imperative for every organization, regardless of size, to have access to one or more change agents, the proposition herein is the development of change champions at all echelons within the organization. These champions would be encouraged to advocate for necessary changes, actively participate in various change endeavors when required, and make themselves available to assist others involved in the change process. This uncomplicated approach would entail only minimal time commitment from the routine responsibilities of these change champions, while yielding substantial enhancements in the organization's ability to institute and oversee changes.

It is noteworthy that change champions have historically played an integral role in organizations and have been instrumental in driving successful transformations (Beatty and Gordon, 1991; Maidique, 1980; Schon, 1963). Although this pivotal role may not have previously been formalized or accompanied by specific training, the reality remains that meaningful changes typically require someone to champion them. The term "change champions"

encompasses individuals naturally adept at championing change but, more importantly, denotes individuals within organizations who have received training to fulfill this role. Given that executives and managers are frequently at the forefront of initiating organizational changes, it is recommended that all individuals in these roles be equipped with the requisite training to assume the mantle of change champions.

Conclusion:

Traditionally centered around recruitment, employee onboarding, and workforce administration, HR professionals have been forced to rapidly acclimate to novel realities. In light of the evolving competitive market landscape and the recognition of the imperative role Human Resource Management (HRM) must assume in an organization's success, especially during the times such as pandemic, the responsibilities of Human Resource Managers are undergoing significant transformation. In today's environment, marked by heightened competition and unforeseen health crises, organizations are compelled to enhance their adaptability, resilience, agility, and customer-centricity to thrive. The ongoing pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges, prompting a profound evolution in the HR function. Amidst this shifting landscape, HR professionals are required to undergo a parallel transformation, transitioning into strategic partners and change catalysts. Moreover, they must explore avenues for global, virtual, and flexible collaboration to sustain business operations effectively. Within this pandemic milieu, HR has assumed a central role in crisis management, employee well-being, the facilitation of remote work arrangements, and the enforcement of health and safety protocols. HR has shouldered the critical duty of ensuring the seamless functioning of organizations while simultaneously prioritizing the health and safety of their workforce. Furthermore, HR departments have played a pivotal role in the communication and implementation of evolving pandemic-related policies and procedures, underscoring their dynamic and indispensable contribution to business support during periods of crisis.

Limitations of the paper: Owing to the ongoing COVID-19 scenario, only in-depth literature review of the current situation has been included in this paper and leaves a scope for sector wise or industry wise primary research on the contribution by HR professionals towards managing change in pandemic times, to gain further

evidence and a better understanding of the related concepts.

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