

Pandemic and Bourgeoning Role of HR in Educational Institutions: An Analytical Insight

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ABSTRACT

Despite an ever-growing emphasis on significance of Human Resource Management for an organization for decades now, human resource management has been a peripheral function in Indian educational institutions. This pandemic has uncovered this gigantic lacuna. This paper explores the growing significance of HR in educational institutions. This study is based on a survey of teaching fraternity in Delhi and NCR. The study was carried out on a sample of Faculty teaching in private and public institutions in the region. The findings underscore areas where HR interventions are needed for effective functioning of the institution and fruitful faculty-student collaboration in this drastically changed context. Some of the key finding that emerged pertain to human resource management becoming critical to various aspects of work life left disconcerted by the unprecedented pandemic. These aspects include - Work-Life Balance, Adoption of newer work technologies, social aspects of work-life, Self and Change. Some of the findings are very specific to educational institutions and some apply to workplaces in general. The paper also reviews some of the best practices adopted by the institutions in these challenging times. The paper concludes with some specific recommendations on the subject.

Keywords- HR in the new normal; HRM in education industry, People Management, HR Practices, Pandemic and HR.

Despite an ever-growing emphasis on significance of Human Resource Management for an organization for decades now, human resource management has been a peripheral function in Indian educational institutions. This pandemic has uncovered this gigantic lacuna. This paper explores the growing significance of HR in educational institutions. This study is based on a survey of teaching fraternity in Delhi and NCR. The study was carried out on a sample of Faculty teaching in private and public institutions in the region.

The findings underscore areas where HR interventions are needed for effective functioning of the institution and fruitful faculty-student collaboration in this drastically changed context. Some of the key finding that emerged pertain to human resource management becoming critical to various aspects of work life left disconcerted by the unprecedented pandemic. These aspects include - Work-Life Balance, Adoption of newer work technologies, social aspects of work-life, Self and Change. Some of the

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I. INTRODUCTION

A search for *Human Resource Management in Education Industry in India* yields a rather frugal output in most of the prominent databases. In the private sector, the role has majorly been peripheral and administrative in nature entailing shortlisting of CVs, managing Faculty work hours, ensuring timely salary disbursals etc. At most places the role is clubbed with the administration department of the institution. The irony of the situation is that human resource is at the core of an educational institution's existence and value creation yet it's management remains a peripheral concern. A concerted and dedicated investment in human aspect of an educational institution cannot be overemphasised.

A plausible explanation of non-existence of an evolved HR function in educational institutions is that it's the professionals who constitute the key workforce. Literature on professionalism characterizes a professional as someone with the following traits – specialized knowledge-skill based or abstract, University Training, certification based on competency, code of conduct, commitment to altruistic service and self-regulating professional association. The structural functional take on the professional explains the links amongst these traits. For instance, university education and competency certifications ensure specialized knowledge. A code of conduct, commitment to altruistic services and self-regulating professional associations- all ensure that the professionals do not take advantage of the specialized knowledge that they possess. These characteristics of a professional make professionals much less amenable to be “managed” or “regulated” extrinsically. Thus, given the intrinsically driven and self-regulating nature of the profession a need has not been felt for any extraneous intervention.

However, the pandemic has brought about change of unprecedented scope and magnitude leading to questioning of strongly held

assumptions and shifting of firmly established paradigms. This flux has revealed certain lacunae where the expert human resource intervention might be mandated. This study explores this realm with the help of existing literature and a questionnaire-based survey of Faculty in Delhi and NCR. The key objectives of the study are to shed light on the challenges being faced by the teaching fraternity, delineate the plausible role of HR to deal with these challenges, identify and review best practices across industries in general which can be applied to educational institutions and identify areas that require further research.

The new normal

Howe et al., (2020) in a comprehensive paper review paradigm shifts caused by the pandemic. The paper reviews some of the long-term implications of this paradigm shift for the organizations. These include – remote working becoming a norm rather than an exception, Job insecurity and resultant distress, financial pain could be much longer lasting than expected, increased concerns pertaining to employee well-being and a palpable change in attitude towards career and jobs with a general need for reskilling and skill/competency development. In a context where organizations exist as virtual entities, salient leadership, very high-fidelity technology, trust and successful functioning of virtual teams are the organizational aspects which need immediate addressal; enhanced workspace allowance, clear, consistent and timely communication, giving and taking constructive feedback, timely information about the facilities company has to offer, career and developmental opportunities can go a long way in helping individuals deal with the new situation; Encouraging virtual social gatherings could be very helpful. According to an Accenture report, five new truths of human experience emerge as an outcome of covid -19 (Accenture, 2020). Since education industry has Human being as it's core, nothing could be more relevant. First of these is the cost of confidence, this drastic unpleasant occurrence has shaken the mankind to the core. Thereby, negatively impacting confidence in general and making trust all the more difficult and critical to earn. The second is the virtual century i.e., shift to virtual working, consuming and socializing. Third is that every

business/endeavour is now a health business/endeavour i.e., health concerns for self and family paramount. Fourth, cocooning-meaning people restricting themselves to their

today it's the oyster that constitutes my world. Finally, the fifth truth is the change in the way authority is conceived. The role of central authority has gained significance i.e.,

S.no	Items	Percentage of favourable responses	Percentage of Unfavourable responses	Percentage of Neutral responses
1	I feel balance between work and personal life has improved because of work from home format.	37	43	20
2	The current scenario has increased the effectiveness of my communication and meetings with the students and other stakeholders at work.	39	42	19
3	I feel completely equipped to switch to an online and technology-based mode of education.	60	25	15
4	I feel some training in technology-based teaching and education is required for all of us.	85	8	7
5	I feel students can be engaged better during face to face interaction as against virtual interaction.	80	12	8
6	It would be helpful if I could receive some guidance on how to conduct myself online.	50	17	33
7	It would be helpful if my co-workers receive some guidance on how to conduct themselves online	62	16	22
8	I feel safety concerns while interacting online.	69	18	13

homes. If till yesterday world was my oyster, management for institutions. Also, there is growing realization to act and behave in more socially and environmentally responsible ways. There is growing social awareness and pressure towards a more responsible community living. These shifts will now be the themes underlying all human endeavours.

governments for nation and Education set ups will benefit from accepting and acting on this new normal at the earliest.

II. Survey and the Findings

The survey was carried out to capture the pulse of teaching fraternity during this drastically changed context. The purpose was to

corroborate the literature with the ground reality. A survey was administered to a sample of hundred faculty teaching in Delhi and NCR region. The nature of sampling was convenience sampling and the Faculty was sampled from both private and public institutions. Survey comprised both quantitative and qualitative inputs. The latter was a set of eight items to be rated on a five-point Likert scale (**Table-1**) and the former was in the form of an open-ended question asking respondents to specify two key areas where the need for hr interventions was being felt.

Table 1 summarizes the responses to the eight items. The percentage of favourable (37% agree to the statement) and unfavourable responses (43% disagree) to the item on Work-life balance is indicative of a mixed reaction to the blurring of home and work boundaries

with respect to work-life balance (Item-1). The reported improvement in work-life balance is primarily attributable to saving of the commute time and deterioration could be an outcome of work and office boundaries fusing and one interfering with the other. Response to the second item shows a similar trend with 39% reporting increased effectiveness of communication with students and other stakeholders and 42% disagreeing with the same. Though majority (60%) agree and report being equipped to switch to online mode of teaching, 85% express a need for technology-based training and education. Also, 50% of the respondents have reported a need for help vis-à-vis online conduct for self and 62% have reported a need for the same for their colleagues. Majority of the respondents (80%) have expressed that student engagement is much better face to face. Online safety is a concern with 69 % of the respondents.

Table 1: Percentage of Faculty responses to Items pertaining to Human Resource Need

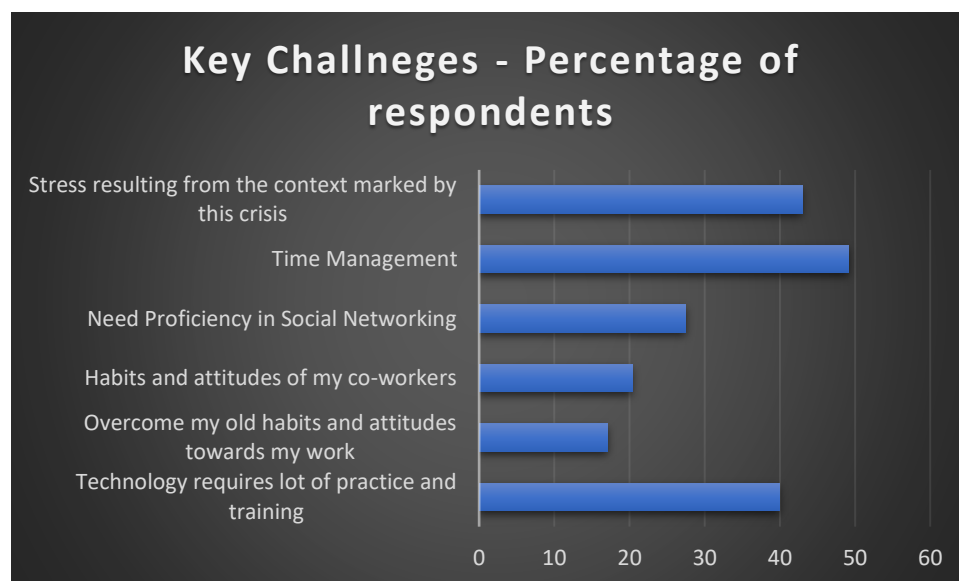


Figure 1: Perceived Key Challenges

Figure 1 summarizes participant response to a more specific question. 43% report experiencing stress resulting from the context. Approximately 50% of the respondent's report time management as a key challenge. Dealing with technology has been reported as a challenge by 40% of the respondents. Need for proficiency in social networking, Habits and attitude of co-workers' and one's own habits

have been reported as a challenge by 27.5%, 20% and 17% of the respondents respectively.

Based on the questionnaire survey and qualitative inputs from the respondents, four themes emerged – Challenges related to work-life balance, Adoption of new work technologies, Social aspects of work and Self and change. **Table 2** summarizes each of these dimensions and corresponding concerns.

S.no	Key Dimensions that emerged	Reported concerns by the Faculty
1	Work-Life Balance-Subjective appraisal of accord between work and non-work activities and life more generally' Borough et al., (2014)	Work pressure, balancing work life and life outside work, working hours need to be adhered to, clear task objectives and expected outcomes to be spelt out.
2	Adoption of new work technologies: Technology adoption is a term that refers to the acceptance, integration, and use of new technology. The process operates in emotional, cognitive and contextual realm. (Straub, 2009)	Social networking, effective methods to deliver and measure outcomes online, how to make learning interactive for e-classes, dealing with technological changes, how to conduct practical sessions online, use of technology for designing modules and incorporating animations, managing student interaction in online mode, student attention and engagement.
3	Social Aspect of Work: Refer to fundamental human needs to be accepted, appreciated and respected by important others.	Fostering positive work relationships, would help reduce stress, roles with-in teams should be clarified and made explicit.
4	Self- Change: Drastic unprecedented contextual change and it's impact on self.	Time management, need scope for personal development, Faculty development, stress management, managing seniors' expectations, Reinventing one's skills, honing research skills,

Table 2: Key Dimensions and corresponding responses that emerged for the qualitative survey

Thus, the survey underscores a growing need for HR interventions along the following fronts- Work-life balance, Adoption of new work technologies, Social aspects of work and Self and Change. The section below identifies some interventions, derived from literature review, prevalent in different industries.

III. BEST PRACTICES IN HR DURING THE PANDEMIC – A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Constant, Consistent and Credible communication – Human Resource Function plays a critical role here by ensuring robust communication across board. Effective communication in times like these achieve many objectives – two-way information flow reduces uncertainty and resulting stress; conveys expectations and clarifies objectives enabling adoption of newer ways of working; generates trust, reduces insecurity, promotes a sense of “belonging”, thereby catering to the social needs of employees at work and more so at the time of crises. George (2020) emphasizes that the intranet could be of immense significance in the times of crises. This could be leveraged for company news,

employee recognition efforts and important changes to make it easy for everyone to feel informed and connected. Mobile friendly company intranet will help drive more interaction with internal communication. Sanders (2020) stresses that organizational communication is no more at peripheries, it is affecting the company at the core. In his article he cites a survey by Weber Shandwick, a global public relations firm, where this pulse survey found that effective employer communication was fostering greater positivity, confidence and pride in their employees. It was stressed that goodwill generated through this communication was lasting. This approach to communication should be data driven in terms of how it's created, managed and distributed to the employees. This means that what communication should target who in what manner should be informed by the data.

Provision of Developmental Opportunities - Developmental opportunities provided to the employees is a clear communication that the employee is valued by the organization. These are over and above the much-mandated

training required by the employee for the jobs that they do. Developmental opportunities during times like these helps an employee cope with the dilemma that the Self encounters whenever faced with change. In a Gallup study (2020) it was found that companies which invest in employee development are more likely to retain their associates. As per the Gallup study organizations which have made strategic investments in development of their employees on an average report 11% greater profitability and are twice more likely to retain their employees. Theory on self and change emphasises that in times of drastic change “self” becomes the centre of one’s attention as the change requires adjustment/adaptation (Hormuth,1990). Thus, developmental opportunities provided to the employees cater to this “self” and helps an individual cope with the conflict and dilemma that an individual faces.

Employee experience as paramount: Tavis (2020) underscores that in times like these, employee experience is paramount for an organization. This experience impacts all the key areas needing HR interventions identified above – work-life balance, adoption of new technologies, social aspect of work and Self and Change. As per the author this experience is actually a team sport, implying the responsibility for creation of this experience is with- the CEO as she is responsible for the culture, CTO as she makes technology accessible to all employees and the CFO as she shoulders the responsibility of striking that fine balance between taking care of most vulnerable of employees and ensuring the firm’s financial viability. HR plays a vital role in orchestrating this symphony involving financial, technical and cultural aspects of the organization.

Talent and Succession Planning: This is an endeavour whose relevance and centrality to organization’s strategy cannot be over emphasized. This is very intricately related to the provision of developmental opportunities to the employees. Whiting (2020) stresses that in uncertain situations as the existing one, it is important that the organizations identify critical positions and employees from within or without who could replace/cover for the existing employees in these positions. This could go hand in hand with identification of

developmental opportunities for the employees.

Need for an active and innovative HR function: HR in its new role needs to demonstrate a great deal of proactive bearing in relation to employee motivation and employee well-being. This will entail innovative initiatives on HR’s part, taking clues from successful initiatives across industries and organizations. Panday and Pal (2020) in a very insightful paper discuss the ramifications of digital surge during the pandemic and its implications for both theory and practice. As per the authors, work from home, gig economy, gig workers, block chain technologies would characterize the new work space. Consequently, the following organizational aspects become very significant – work allocation, worker motivation, collaboration, aspects like work overload, presenteeism, workplace monitoring and technostress issues. Bussin and Christos (2020) discuss the findings of a survey conducted by Cognizant which predicts the human resource jobs which would thrive post pandemic. Among these jobs following themes were found- Data literacy, fusing technology with people, trust and security, employee well-being, innovation and creation. According to Mani and Mishra (2020), during uncertain times, morale is low, and jobs get threatened as the economy suffers. Human Resource Management can support supervisors by boosting motivation.

Provision of Employee Assistance Programs: Howe et al., (2020), in a very informative paper on paradigm shifts resulting from the Pandemic, prescribe ensuring Employee well-being in the form of employee assistance programs. Assisting employees with psychological and physical well-being is paramount at this juncture. This would mean liaising with mental and physical health institutions.

IV. DISCUSSION

The pandemic has overturned every single aspect of human existence. It has challenged the long-held assumptions and has ubiquitously made mankind confront new realities. Individuals, organizations, institutions and governments are all attempting to act prudently and simultaneously make

sense of what's happening. Work-life constitutes one such significant aspect of human existence and the impact of pandemic has been overwhelming. This paper is an attempt to understand the impact of the pandemic on teaching fraternity. The objective is to underscore the growing relevance of human resource function specifically in educational institutions where HR has so far existed on the peripheries. This has been achieved through a questionnaire-based survey with quantitative as well as qualitative inputs from the respondents. These respondents have been sampled from both public and private institutions of higher education in Delhi and NCR.

The study delineates the idea of new normal, identifies issues and challenges being faced by the fraternity in the given context, categorizes these challenges in four broad areas where human resource efforts could be channelized, reviews academic and industry research on human resource best practices which could be adopted by the educational institutions.

The new normal is characterized by fundamental changes involving – shaken human confidence resulting from the scope and magnitude of this unprecedented change; new world where working, consuming and socializing is becoming increasingly virtual; existence where One's and their loved one's health is taking on centre stage, context where meaning of authority redefined with socially and environmentally responsible action gradually becoming integral to one's repertoire and finally life where an individual's world is becoming increasingly confined to home.

The quantitative and qualitative survey brought to fore the key issues and challenges being faced by the teaching fraternity. Based on the survey, following key themes have emerged where Human Resource Management function could play a key role. These include: Work-Life Balance, Adoption of newer work technologies, social aspects of work-life, Self and Change.

Borough et al., (2014) defined work-life balance as an individual's subjective appraisal of the accord between his/her work and non-work activities and life more generally. The significance of this phenomenon is that its achievement is a key indicator of a robust

symbiotic employee-employer relationship. Its impact is far reaching for both the employee and the employer. For the employee, it determines her well-being and life satisfaction (Hughes and Bozionelos, 2007). For the employer, it results in enhanced productivity and innovation resulting from greater commitment, employee satisfaction and talent retention. Pandemic has caused an immense disturbance on this front for professionals across board. The nature and extent of work demands has changed and so have the nature and magnitude of demands on home front. Striking this balance again would entail a lot of effort on the part of employees and employers. Though a huge chunk of the faculty sampled reported a better work-life balance the difference with respect to the responses was significant amongst Faculty with private institutions (50% gave unfavourable response the item on work-life balance) and those with public (36% gave unfavourable response to item on work-life balance) institutions. Since the study was conducted in a metropolitan city travel time is a major time-consuming part of an individual's routine. The silver lining of the crisis was this cut down on travel time that contributed to this favourable response to perceived work life balance. However, the faculty with private institutions did not report similar improvement in the same owing to reported increased workload and much closer monitoring (through frequent zoom meetings) by the management.

Adoption of Technology: A lot of work has been done in the area of individual adoption of new technology or business processes. Venkatesh (2006) conceptualized adoption of new technology or business process as the extent to which employees/workers faithfully appropriate and use processes as designed and intended by the designers or the management; the extent and frequency with which employees seek and execute work arounds; and the extent and frequency with which employees revert to old business processes. Technology adoption is a complex process that entails addressing cognitive, emotional and contextual issues. The technology acceptance model and its various versions specify numerous factors which impact acceptance of new technologies. These include – individual difference, system characteristics, social

influence and facilitating conditions. Faculty have reported following concerns – adeptness in social networking, effective methods to deliver and measure outcomes online, making learning interactive for e-classes, dealing with technological changes, conducting practical sessions online, use of technology for designing modules and incorporating animations, managing student interaction in online mode, student attention and engagement etc. Role of HR here is to closely listen to these concerns and target interventions to build efficacy as well as expertise. Relevant training, constructive feedback, conducive environment to learn are all within the purview of Human Resources.

Social Aspects of Work-Life: A lot of literature supports the idea that teleworking does impact teamwork negatively. Callentine (1995) reported that about 90% of her virtual office sample responded that communication with co teleworkers was less effective than the communication in the traditional office environment. In a qualitative study, Weiner and Hill (1995) found that the virtual office negatively influenced communication and peer interaction with co-teleworkers and tele managers. Ramsower (1985) found that full-time telecommuters engaged in less upward, downward, and horizontal work communications with co-workers and supervisors. Hill and Weiner (1998) carried out a study both quantitative and qualitative in nature, one of the objectives of the study was to explore the impact of teleworking on teamwork. The qualitative findings indicated a very strong negative impact on the teamwork, people reported aspects like camaraderie, mentoring, co-worker networking, spirit de corps were compromised in teleworking. However, this finding was not corroborated by the quantitative part of the analysis. Further research could explore role played by a mediating variable such as the managerial or the leadership styles predominant in the team. In this study Faculty reported the following - fostering positive work relationships would help reduce stress, roles with-in teams should be clarified and made explicit for a more effective functioning.

Self and Change: Self has been described as a part of ecological system seen as a conjunction of other people, environments and objects. In

the face of changes in the social and physical environment, the self as figure stands out in an unfamiliar ground. Thus, self becomes centre of attention. In this heightened attention state, processes related to self-concept are triggered such as change or maintenance whichever the context or the environment demands based on the evaluation of the self-concept. Faculty in the study have indicated developmental needs which are beyond immediate technology related training needs. This was reflected in the following responses to the question on two key interventions that they would want - need for time management, need scope for personal development, opportunities for Faculty development, stress management, skills in managing seniors' expectations, Reinventing one's skills, honing research skills etc. HR initiatives targeted at catering to "self" would be impactful. For example, developmental assignments, constructive feedback, acknowledgement of jobs done well etc.

This analysis is followed by a review of literature to explore effective human resource practices in the pandemic. The literature reveals; provision of developmental opportunities, effective communication, talent/succession planning, employee assistance, interventions targeting employee motivation, collaboration, trust etc. Employee experience should become the key concern of Human Resource Management and this will entail orchestrating right culture, financial viability of the firm and keeping pace with technological overhaul.

V. FURTHER RESEARCH IN THE AREA

1. What factors could facilitate technology adoption amongst Faculty in educational institutions. These factors could pertain to – individual differences, context/culture of the institution, characteristic of technology.
2. The four areas of potential intervention delineated in this research need to be explored further for the extent to which they are interrelated and interdependent. This would enable much more potent and far-reaching interventions.
3. The study does indicate role played by some mediating variables. For instance, Hill et al., (1998) found that work from home and its impact on work-life balance could be mediated by say availability of work space at home. Non

availability of work space at home could have immensely negative impact on work-life balance in work from home situation. Once these factors are explored commensurate interventions can be made to mitigate the challenges thrown open by this natural adversity.

4. The study should further be extended to explore demographic differences.

5. Research could also be carried out to explore the difference in employee experience in public and private work spaces.

VI. LIMITATIONS

1. Study was conducted in a metropolitan. Thus, work and life related variables could be very different in comparison to a tier two city.

2. This is a preliminary study categorizing the key interventions in four groups. However, these four categories could be very intricately interrelated. Thus, these need to be explored further for these interrelations and common underlying themes.

VII. CONCLUSION

The study identifies four key areas to be targeted for HR interventions in relation to teaching fraternity in educational institutions. It reveals a growing need for an active and prominent HR in educational institutions to deal with challenges being faced during the pandemic. Based on a review of both academic and industry literature, it is recommended that best practices be adopted from different organizations or industries after assessing their suitability and viability.

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