

The Role of Human Resource Professional in Preventing and Controlling of COVID-19

A. Anton Arulrajah

Senior Lecturer

Department of Management, Faculty of Commerce and Management

Eastern University, Sri Lanka

aantonarulrajah@yahoo.com

Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to explore the role of Professionals of Human Resource Management (HRM) in preventing and controlling of COVID-19 in the workplaces. In order to achieve the objective of the review, a literature review was conducted by using available literature. The finding of this review revealed that the Human Resource Professional (HRP) in the organization can play four main roles, such as informational, resource facilitation, advisory and change agent in preventing and controlling of COVID-19 in the work places. The degree and intensity of performing these roles by HRM departments or HR professionals of the organizations may contribute to reduce and eliminate the 15 types of fears and stress by corona (SBC) identified by Opatha (2020) among the employees of the organizations.

Key Words: Controlling, COVID-19, Human Resource Management, Human Resource Professional, Preventing, Role

Introduction

HRM is a dynamic field or function of organizations. It has to respond the changing needs of the organizations as well as society. The key capital of HRM is human capital. According to Opatha (2009), HRM is mainly focused on efficient and effective application of human resources in order to achieve organizational goals and objectives. The current pandemic situations due to COVID-19 have created many problems for the entire world especially for all organizations (public and private). Organizations have to rethink and reorganize about their operations and work, especially they have to think about how to resume their activities and operations by eliminating all possible threats and fears related with COVID-19. COVID-19 pandemic has created huge challenges for all the functional fields of Business Administration and Organizational Management.

However, HRM has power and energy for embedding sustainability across the organizations (Opatha, 2019). The right management of right people at right time is important for organizational success (Opatha, 2015). HRM is not only responsible for managing employees at work in a normal circumstance but also responsible for managing employees at work in turbulent and crisis times as well. According to Vardarlier (2016), HRM gains even more importance during the crisis period, as it makes up an important dimension of crisis management. HRM plays a central role in achieving organizational sustainability by contributing to three pillars (economic, social and environmental performance) of organizational sustainability (Jabbour and Santos, 2008; Thevanes and Arulrajah, 2017). The HRP in the organization is the head of the department of Human Resources (HR) and he or she may be called as Director of HR, Group HR Manager, or Deputy or General Manager (HR). The HRP is the person in the organization who has been delegated with the main authority of functioning the activities of the department of HR. Human Resource Professionals (HRPs) in organizations formulate and implement various systems or schemes with regard to various aspects of the work of managing people at work.

According to Human Resources Director of US (based on a survey among the HR leaders), the main challenges faced by HRM due to COVID-19 are: (1) business continuity plans (67%), (2) manage flexible work arrangements (64%), (3) manage employee communication (56%), (4) address employee concerns on workplace policies (53%), (5) implementation of preventive measures (43%), and (6) review of current welfare policies (25%) (Syed, 2020).

According to a survey conducted among the Asia-based companies during the period of January 31st to February 6, 2020, 76% indicated that COVID-19 outbreak had left a negative impact on their businesses. Another 80% revealed that they were working on a contingency plan (Syed, 2020).

In this background, a review paper written by Opatha (Senior Professor of HRM) (2020) in the context of Sri Lanka has explored four research questions systematically and found answers for the same by using a comprehensive literature survey. This paper has addressed the questions: (1) What is coronavirus disease? What are its characteristics? (2) Why is it so hazardous? (3) What is its impact on employees? and (4) Who are the employees at greater risks? Mainly, his paper has identified 15 types of fears among the employees due to Coronavirus. He also explored a new type of stress among the employees as the results of 15 types of fears and labeled it as Stress By Corona (SBC). The fifteen types of stress are: (1) fear of getting affected, (2) fear of getting quarantine, (3) fear of getting affected by loved ones, (4) fear of getting stigmatized, (5) fear of getting affected by others, (6) fear of be a cause of spreading, (7) fear of attending the work, (8) fear of getting sanction/s, (9) fear of peer pressure, (10) fear of harsh customer, (11) fear of loss of pursuits of pleasure, (12) fear of losing the job, (13) fear of continuity of business, (14) fear of implementing plans, and (15) fear of formulating new plans. Apart from these original contributions, the author of this paper has identified and put forwarded certain research gaps. The author pointed out that *“future conceptual and empirical research studies are needed to know the role of HRM in the prevention and control of COVID-19, and how organizations have actually encountered this danger. Empirical studies about successful as well as unsuccessful stories will be useful in this regard (Opatha, 2020, p.47)”*.

Hence, in order to fill these research gaps, this paper has addressed the role of professionals of HRM in preventing and controlling of COVID-19 in the work places. Thus, the objective of this paper was to explore the role of professionals of HRM in preventing and controlling of COVID-19 in the workplaces. Results of this review indicate that there are four key roles which have to be played by the HRM Departments or HR professionals of the organizations. Rest of this paper is organised with method, related literature review, discussion and conclusion.

Method

The main objective of this paper is to explore the role of HRM in preventing and controlling of COVID-19 in an organizational context from the light of existing literature. In order to achieve this objective, the author has reviewed very limited and available literature by applying the desk research strategy methodically and analytically in addition to his logical beliefs, creativity and other evidences.

Literature Review

Role of HR Professional

According to the HRM literature, HR professionals play six different types of roles in an organizational context. These roles are really interrelated and interconnected among themselves. They are: (1) Strategic positioner, (2) Credible activist, (3) Capability builder, (4) Change champion, (5) Human resource innovator and integrator and (6) Technology proponent (Ulrich et al. 2012). In general, these roles diversity shows scope and depth of

HRM functions and contribution of HR managers and professionals to organizational successes. However, there is lack of literature regarding the role of HRM during the crisis period/time like COVID-19. Hence, there is a special need to explore the role of HRM in the context of crisis period or disaster situations. This exploration may be connected with existing roles categories of HRM or may be derived from existing literature. Thus, the next section of the literature review deals with the role of HRM in preventing and controlling of COVID-19.

The Role of HR Professional in Preventing and Controlling of COVID-19

One of the main objectives of HRM is to provide a healthy and safe working environment for all employees. According to Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA), it is a key responsibility of employers as well as HRM. The act/standard stated that each employer must provide a place of employment which is free from recognized hazards that cause or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm (U.S. Department of Labor-OSHA, 2009). COVID-19 is a communicable or contagious disease. This sort of disease is a subset category of transmissible diseases which are transmitted to other persons, either by physical contact with the person suffering from the disease, or by casual contact with their excretions or objects touched by them or any other possible routes.

In an organizational context, HRP should play following roles to prevent and control of COVID-19 in the workplaces.

Informational Role: On behalf of the employer, HRP should provide required (latest and updated) information to the employees in a safe manner. HRM should educate and train employees electronically about the COVID-19. Educating and creating awareness among the employees about COVID-19 is very important. OSHA has developed such guidelines. These guidelines are very specific and help to eradicate coronavirus outbreaks in the workplaces. OSHA guidelines consist of information and tips for dealing with communicable diseases at workplaces. “OSHA’s information on novel coronavirus and the CDC’s information will also be helpful” (Society for Human Resource Management-SHRM, 2020).

Especially, organizations must provide information on how to wash hands properly, informing about this precaution should occur frequently, hanging posters in washrooms and canteen/eating areas. These sorts or precautions and frequent communication help to stop the spread of germs. These initiatives are really depending on the nature of the industry and employees’ closeness to others in the work places. Organizations should provide proper information to the employees about how to handle respirators or masks in the workplace to further hinder the spread of coronavirus through that an infected person coughs or sneezes (Centers for disease Control and Prevention-CDC, 2019). Through electronic modes, HRP can educate and train employees in proper hand hygiene, cough etiquette and social/physical distancing techniques.

Resource Facilitation Role (Providing required Resources to the employees): HRM should provide required resources to the employees or make necessary arrangement to get required resources by the employees to overcome COVID-19 challenges in the work places as well as homes. Providing required number of respirators or masks, gloves, temperature checking equipment (theme meters), tissues, hand sanitizers, disinfectant, convenient places for hand washing, coronavirus free transport facilities, medical support, facilities to conduct expensive medical tests for detecting the virus, facilities to maintain social/physical distancing etc. should be provided by the relevant organization and in this regard HRP should take the initiative and direction.

By providing required resources and facilities to employees only HRM can ensure work places are clean and hygiene. When employee or customer who has COVID-19 coughs or exhales he or she releases droplets of infected fluid. Most of these droplets fall on nearby surfaces and objects such as desks, tables or chairs. People could catch COVID-19 by touching contaminated surfaces or objects and then touching their eyes, nose or face. Therefore, HRM must ensure cleanliness at the work places by regularly wiping the surfaces and objects with disinfectant.

Advisory Role: This is about suggesting the innovative and alternative mechanisms to get work from employees or to manage workforce of the organization in a safe manner. According to Bamber, Bartram, and Stanton (2017), the conversion of organizational forms and modes of employment are creating a need for HR managers/professionals to respond in creative, flexible, agile and innovative ways to maintain relevance and contribute to the organizational goals based on changes.

HRP should think and suggest innovative and alternative policies and practices to the employees as well as managers. HRM can advise the top management or employers to make required changes in existing policies and practices of the organizations to protect the human resources of the organizations. Examples: relaxing attendance and working time policies to motivate sick employees to stay at home. A set of advice is needed on suggesting zoom meeting (to avoid face to face meeting) and telecommuting, encouraging managers to be flexible with teleworking arrangements or flexible work arrangement, implementing split-working arrangements for specific functions and roles, and implementing work-from-home initiatives and issuing travel restrictions to places or paths where the cases of Coronavirus have been reported (Mangalad, 2020; Walden University, 2020).

HR Department of the organizations may also implement a policy that requires employees to inform the management when the employee/ other relevant stakeholder (e.g. customer) poses a direct threat to the safety of other people in the organizations. HR Department may implement a special safety mechanism to protect employees who have direct dealing with outsiders such as customers and suppliers.

Understanding the current risk scenarios, developing new/innovative work practices and systematizing proper controls through employee health and safety function of HRM are needed. These initiatives may provide additional protection to the employees as well as customers. Some of these initiatives are drive-through service windows, clear plastic sneeze barriers, proper ventilation, and proper selection, use and disposal of personal protective equipment etc.

Through advisory role HRP can contribute to improve good personal qualities of people (e.g. benevolence, caring others, protecting others, helping others) in the organizations (Opatha, 2010). These qualities are important to handle the crisis situation efficiently and effectively.

Change Agent

Due to COVID-19 many changes are taking place in the organizations and work places. Some are related to work redesign, adding new duties and responsibility with existing jobs, new health and safety measures to be implemented, educating employees, removing fears and stress among the employees, downsizing, imposing new rules and regulations, pandemic planning to work with employees, customers, global and government agencies and other relevant stakeholders. In all these activities and events, HRM should contribute to the organizational management. In this context, HRM plays change agent role effectively and efficiently.

Especially during the COVID-19 period, HR managers and professionals should serve as enablers of change in their organizations. According to Hodgson and Briand (2013), change agent role of HR managers/professionals (members of HR Department) are to see them as “police-like enforcers” of the new rules, regulations and procedures.

A crisis situation demands many changes in the organizations as well as work places. It requires change management as well as crisis management. Crisis management is a process which leads to swift and flexible organizational adaptation to the fast changing conditions of an emergency period (Vardarlier, 2016). The organizations can deal with any crisis more easily with the support of HRM. HRM becomes essential in terms of change management process and practices. HRP has skill and capacity to serve as a ‘change agent’ in the organizations not only to take the organization’s interests into consideration but also its employees’ interests.

Discussion

In pandemic situations, HRP should take a leading role in the organizations specially to protect the human capital of the organization without affecting the operations of the organization or with minimum negative effects. HRM should consider the employees as well as owners/employers within its preview. In pandemic situations like COVID-19 closing organizations also seriously affect the employees as well as their organizations

(owners/employers). Closing down the organizations may lead to job losses (employees will lose their jobs) and organizations become unable to pay salaries and wages to their employees. At the same time, protecting employees' life from COVID-19 is a key priority of all of us.

In an organizational context, HRM should play a key role in protecting workforce of the organizations by playing identified key roles or refocusing its existing roles in the context of COVID-19. According to Opatha (2020), employees are facing 15 types of fears due to COVID-19. They are: (1) fear of getting affected, (2) fear of getting quarantine, (3) fear of getting affected by loved ones, (4) fear of getting stigmatized, (5) fear of getting affected by others, (6) fear of be a cause of spreading, (7) fear of attending the work, (8) fear of getting sanction/s, (9) fear of peer pressure, (10) fear of harsh customer, (11) fear of loss of pursuits of pleasure, (12) fear of losing the job, (13) fear of continuity of business, (14) fear of implementing plans, and (15) fear of formulating new plans.

The ultimate outcomes of these fears create a new type of stress among the employees. Opatha (2020) has labeled this sort of stress as '**Stress by Corona (SBC)**'. In order to remove or eliminate these 15 types of fears identified by Opatha (2020) and to reduce specific type of **Stress by Corona**, HRM should play four key roles (informational, resource facilitation, advisory and change agent) identified through this paper. These roles may play significant contribution in removing or reducing 15 types of fears and the resultant distress called stress by corona.

In today's corona crisis world, HRM should seriously perform above mentioned four key roles than ever before. HR managers should understand these roles and their importance in ensuring health and safety of employees. On the other hand, HR managers should support top management to implement viable, feasible and risk free business continuity plans to ensure the organizational survival and sustainability. For these purposes, HR manager works together with complete commitment to produce innovative solutions for the sake of organizations (Lockwood, 2005).

Conclusion

In pandemic situations like COVID-19, HRM should play the above identified four key roles (informational, resource facilitation, advisory and change agent) in order to protect the human capital of the organizations. The health and safety function of the organization must be focused on total health and safety of employees (THSE). It is about not only within the work place but also outside the workplace. This review paper is based on desk work. Therefore, future theoretical and empirical research works are needed to further explore and confirm the role of HRM in Preventing and Controlling of COVID-19, how organizations are going to mitigate challenges and risk associated with disaster. In this critical situation, HR professionals and leaders should help organizations to manage this crisis. According to the Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (Maslow, 1970), safety is a

second level basic as well as low order need. However, due to COVID-19 safety needs of employees have become very important for all. Thus, HRM must pay more attention to ensuring health and safety needs of employees. In this crisis context, HRM has to contribute significantly in creating, maintaining and enhancing the happiness of employees (Opatha, 2019) in the work places. During this COVID-19 period, the field of HRM cannot be in a state of flux. It should be very strong and supportive to employees as well as top management of the organizations.

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