

Evolving Expectations of HR Professionals Amid the Covid-19 Pandemic in Sri Lanka

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This study explores the expectations of HR professionals in Sri Lanka in terms of their workplaces during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative research methodology was employed in this study with 16 semi-structured interviews of HR professionals in Sri Lanka. Results reveal that on-premise and hybrid work cultures are much preferred by HR professionals in Sri Lanka. Further, if the work culture transformation remains, their expectations are high regarding concerns in new work practices at the workplace triggered by the pandemic including work-life balance practices, crisis management practices, financial incentives, career progress and Work from Home (WFH) resources.

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Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is currently considered a severe global health problem that poses a significant risk to the health and safety of people, as well as their livelihoods (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Many countries have been brought to a halt as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. To combat the spread of COVID-19, academic institutions and businesses were closed, and residences, towns, and even entire cities were in lockdown (Islam & Islam, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has presented several problems and dilemmas, which were not prominent in many previous crises that businesses have faced in the past. Companies are struggling financially due to a severe drop in product demand and the performance of the firm and investment, which ultimately lead to a

decline in labor demand and to the development of labor surpluses (Adikaram et al., 2021). As a consequence, several well-known companies in a variety of industries are expected to go bankrupt as individuals stay at home and companies grind to a halt (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). According to Gigauri (2020a), 66% of businesses in Georgia country have experienced financial losses, and 76% of businesses there have seen a drop in company turnover in early 2020. However, 53% of firms expect to retain their staff for the following months, while 43% of the employers have reduced salaries and wages. Furthermore, only 15% of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) in Romania expressed confidence in their firms' revenues, procedures, and operations following the first months of the crisis, which is consistent with deteriorating corporate performance in the first quarter of 2020 and the significant negative effect on the global economy (Pinzaru et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic poses an unexpected threat to Asia Pacific economies as well (Roger, 2020). Consequently, the economy of Sri Lanka has also been impacted negatively as a result of the issues raised by the COVID-19 outbreak. In the first three months of 2020, tea export revenue fell to 270.1 million US Dollars (USD). Other agricultural sector revenues, such as those from fruits and vegetable products and coconut manufacturing, were significantly lower in March 2020 than in March 2019. Furthermore, tourism earnings declined from 1,901 USD in 2019 (January to June) to 956 USD in 2020 (January to

June). Consequently, the influence of COVID-19 on all the main revenue-generating industries in the country resulted in a 3.6% drop in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Ishak, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly shaken all organizations, creating a complicated and challenging environment for HR professionals.

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly shaken all organizations, creating a complicated and challenging environment for HR professionals, who must devise innovative solutions to ensure the continuity of their businesses and assist their employees in dealing with this unprecedented crisis (Hamouche, 2021). Moreover, the International Labor Organization (ILO) has labeled it a "labor market shock" as the COVID-19 epidemic has had such a significant influence on HRM (Caligiuri et al., 2020). This proves how rapidly businesses must adjust to constantly changing HR concerns (Rahman et al., 2020). Thus, HRM is a critical component in aiding firms in managing the enormous changes forced on by the COVID-19 epidemic (Gigauri, 2020a).

HRM is the process of recruiting new employees, offering orientation, training and development, determining remuneration and benefits, maintaining legitimate relations with employees and their unions, motivating employees and ensuring employees' health and safety (Sivanandam & Kumar, 2020). During the pandemic, HRM should cope with the

burden that remote working is bringing on their employees as the barriers between work and personal life become increasingly blurred (Gigauri, 2020b). In these situations, the role of HRM has evolved to address the challenges that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic.

These findings point to a new way of working and an opportunity for firms to rethink their human resource strategies. Even after the COVID-19 outbreak has subsided, organizations should look for ways to communicate with current and potential new employees in ways that

allow for more flexibility. According to the above-mentioned facts, we carried out pilot interviews to assess the impact and challenges faced by HR professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic. Six HR professionals employed in Sri Lanka were interviewed by us, including Head of HR, HR Recruiter, HR Manager, Assistant HR Manager, HR Business Partner and Senior HR Executive. Based on the given responses, the most substantial emergent changes in the workplace and the challenging issues of HR professionals regarding the changes in the workplace during the COVID-19 epidemic are demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1 The Emergent Changes in Work Practices and the Most Challenging Issues of HR Professionals

Emergent Changes in Workplace	Most Challenging Issues
Practicing social distancing adapting to WFH concept and following roster basis concept	Work-life balance issues
The transition from physical engagement activities to virtual games and wellbeing sessions	Barriers in communication and technical capabilities
Moving from the conventional recruitment process to online platforms	Adaptation to government and healthcare regulations rapidly
Changing modes of training from physical training programs to webinars and virtual sessions	Lack of proper communication between supervisors and employees and more time spent on training and development due to the rapid change

Source: Constructed by Authors

According to the responses given by respondents, the researchers believe that the COVID-19 epidemic has an effect on traditional HR procedures. Though the subject of HR professionals' expectations from the workplace has been substantially addressed in other countries of the world, there is limited research on the expectations of HR professionals by focusing on the COVID-19 outbreak in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, the study

focuses on exploring the expectations of HR professionals employed in Sri Lanka from their workplace due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings of this study are significant to the HRM field, particularly in terms of the presently existing and the potential well-being of the HRM domain. With the augmented uncertainty in the HRM field due to the COVID-19 pan-

demographic, the outcomes of this study will present new approaches and replacements for dealing with the “new normal”. Furthermore, the study’s implications will aid policymakers in the field of HRM in establishing HR policies by taking into account the expectations of HR professionals from the workplace due to the COVID-19 epidemic. The study contributes to assessing the measurement of organizational transformation that consents employees to productively engage at their workplace. Furthermore, researchers can use this study to establish new research concepts, as well as where research could evolve and comparable research can be conducted in many other countries using the same interview guide.

Literature Review

Changes in the Role of HRM: HRM is a collection of processes that influence employee performance, perception, and behavior at work. Initially, HRM was not regarded as a critical aspect of a business, but today, a business cannot function properly in the absence of an HRM department (Mwaniki & Gathenya, 2015). COVID-19 has thrown mankind a curveball, causing havoc in practically every aspect of life. HR staff has been on the front lines of organizations, immediately informing employees about the company’s response to the pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the HRM department must devise the implementation of innovative techniques to support their company and its employees in tackling the challenges of this unprecedented event (Hamouche, 2021). Amidst the economic downturn, HRM

must strike the right balance between cost-cutting and the development of employees (Gigauri, 2020b). Thus, HR professionals had to cope with layoffs and workforce reductions in order to balance company spending under control during the pandemic.

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On the other hand, HR professionals must rethink how they interact with employees. They should consider the significance of enhancing employee engagement by granting access to up-to-date pandemic knowledge as well as rewarding benefits (Savic, 2020). During the pandemic, one of the major responsibilities of an HR professional is to keep employees informed and to build trustworthy relationships (Lewis, 2020). The HR division can support managers and staff in an advisory function while guiding individuals through the implementation of new normal policies and procedures (Janadari, 2020). Therefore, HR professionals must have the relevant knowledge to aid to navigate this crisis successfully and efficiently to support their employees and keep their organization afloat.

Challenges and Opportunities: The uniqueness and complexity of the COVID-19 reflect a substantial obstacle that may compromise the accomplishment of corporate goals (Hamouche, 2021). It is a challenge for many em-

ployees who are working from home for the first time to set up a workspace as the space in the house might be limited. Therefore, an office may double as a dining area or general use area (International Labor Organization, 2020). A survey conducted by Paychex (2021) with five hundred ninety-eight HR professionals worldwide revealed that measuring employee productivity was the most frequently discovered challenge caused by the epidemic, while another 48 % said that gauging employee productivity was the most commonly discovered challenge caused by the epidemic. Other prevalent difficulties involved workforce mental health, the difficulty to control employee behavior and the overall difficulty of moving teams to operate outside the office. Another 38 % of HR professionals indicated that it was extremely difficult to find new workers during the COVID-19 outbreak, and 35% said it was difficult to interview current or potential recruitment.

As previously mentioned, the work transformations engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic have been associated with a variety of unfavorable consequences and also some favorable consequences since some employees find it more flexible and efficient to work remotely (Khudhair et al., 2020). For example, the pandemic can be considered to be stressful for HR professionals since their work schedules are generally defined, but in this situation, the timeline is not always constrained. In the same study, the author emphasized that employees have more time to spend with their

family members, which they would not have had otherwise, and this leads to the emergence of positivity among the staff (Dayal et al., 2021). Additionally, workplace transitions have also shown that virtual teams with specific goals are more productive and effective (Mangla, 2021). Whilst the focus of HRM currently is on ensuring the health and safety of employees, the lessons learned from other difficulties and processes have shown to be valuable and will continue to be so after the epidemic (Zhong et al., 2021). Therefore, it is vivid that HRM allows businesses and employees to become more resilient to adverse shocks by increasing disaster management skills. In order to improve opportunities and overcome challenges caused by the COVID-19 epidemic, it is necessary to assess the expectations of HR professionals from their workplace.

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Expectations of HR Professionals after the COVID-19 Pandemic: Despite the fact that all employees are affected by some amount of disruption caused by the COVID-19 epidemic, there is a broad range of expectations as we approach the post-COVID-19 world (Bahman & Enzi, 2020). HR professionals have expectations from their workplace in a variety of areas, and work culture holds a significant prominence. Veloso et al. (2020) indicated that the majority of HR professionals in Portuguese organizations intend to

continue teleworking even after the epidemic has subsided. Bahman and Enzi (2020) discovered that when given the option of a hybrid model that incorporates part-time remote work and part-time onsite employment, a large majority of respondents in Kuwait stated that they can efficiently accomplish at least 80 % of their job objectives. Furthermore, according to Parker et al. (2020), only one out of every five employed Americans are likely to WFH all or most of the time. Currently, 71% of those workers work full-time or part-time. Furthermore, when given the opportunity, more than half of those surveyed stated that they would prefer to continue working from home even if the pandemic ceased.

Aside from the expectations regarding the work mode, existing literature also has revealed HR professionals' expectations in other aspects of the work environment. Accordingly, Gigauri (2020a) revealed that employees expect their workplaces to implement a business continuity strategy and develop internal resources, as well as enhance HR competencies to cope with crises. Employees and HR professionals faced enormous hurdles as a result of COVID-19, putting their physical, emotional and financial well-being to the test. Furthermore, new methods of remote working have blurred the distinctions between work and personal life (Poddar, 2020). Due to the epidemic rapidly bringing to light concerns that might threaten employees' health and safety, HR professionals anticipate that work and safety will be the areas requiring the

most modifications. Thus, HR professionals anticipate that organizations would develop health and wellness programs focused on conserving employees' mental well-being and providing measures targeted to each employee's requirements in terms of resources and social assistance (Hamouche, 2021). Despite the ongoing global uncertainties around the COVID-19 epidemic, one result is undeniable, that is HR professionals will have a wider variety of workplace expectations. Conversely, HR professionals have a variety of expectations when it comes to their career lives. Thus, employers will have to cope with several new demands from their workforces. Therefore, policies must be defined as a response to these problems that emerged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, while considering HR professionals' expectations.

Methodology

The objective of the study is to explore the expectations of HR professionals in Sri Lanka from their workplaces during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to address the research problem, an inductive approach was followed, the research paradigm is interpretivism and semi-structured interviews were conducted with HR professionals with more than three years of experience in their current workplace. Due to the inability to identify the exact population, the snowball sampling method was used until a saturation point was reached. The data collection was conducted from May to August 2021 virtually through semi-structured interviews with sixteen HR

professionals in Sri Lanka. The interviews were recorded with the interviewees' permission and later transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data, and seven codes were identified under three major themes.

Data Analysis & Results

Overall, sixteen HR professionals were interviewed from sixteen compa-

nies in Sri Lanka. Among the respondents, the majority of them are working in managerial positions. The respondents' profile presented in Table 2 includes their current workplace experience; ranging between three to nine years and the designation.

Based on the thematic analysis, researchers identified seven codes and developed three main themes as work mode, incentives and adoption arrangements.

Table 2 Respondents' Profile

Respondent	Designation	Industry	Current Workplace Experience
Respondent 01	Senior HR Executive	Manufacturing	4 Years
Respondent 02	HR Coordinator	Fast Moving Consumer Goods	3 Years
Respondent 03	Employee Relation Manager	Information Technology	3 Years
Respondent 04	HR Practitioner	Supply Chain and Logistics	3 Years
Respondent 05	HR Assistant Manager	Information Technology	3 Years
Respondent 06	HR Executive	Healthcare	4 Years
Respondent 07	HR Executive	Supply Chain and Logistics	6 Years
Respondent 08	HR Manager	Manufacturing	6 Years
Respondent 09	HR Executive	Fast Moving Consumer Goods	3 Years
Respondent 10	HR Executive	Banking	3 Years
Respondent 11	HR Assistant Manager	Telecommunication	3 Years
Respondent 12	HR Business Partner	Information Technology	9 Years
Respondent 13	Senior HR Executive	Manufacturing	8 Years
Respondent 14	HR Manager	Food and Beverage	7 Years
Respondent 15	HR Business Partner	Information Technology	8 Years
Respondent 16	Assistant HR Manager	Fast Moving Consumer Goods	7 Years

Source: Constructed by Authors

Table 3 Main Interview Themes and Codes

Themes	Codes
Work Mode	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hybrid work culture On-premises work culture
Incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial benefits Career development WFH resources
Adoption Arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work-life balance practices Crisis management practices

Source: Constructed by Authors

Work Mode

Out of the interviewed HR professionals, many have expectations regarding the work mode. Accordingly, most HR professionals intend to return to the office rather than continue their job in a virtual setting. Even though they were forced to continue working with virtual work environments during the COVID-19 pandemic, they do not prefer to continue it to the post-pandemic world.

“Rather than depending on this online mode, I expect to visit the office”.

Respondent 2

The majority of these participants stated that they intend to return to work since they do not believe they will produce similar results as they achieved before the COVID-19 pandemic. They claimed that prior to the epidemic, they had better work performance when they engaged on-site, but it has declined subsequently after they started working remotely.

They had better work performance when they engaged on-site.

“But I don’t believe we’re getting the same output as before. As a result, I expect a return to the pre-COVID condition, in which we can go to the office and continue our work”.

Respondent 11

It reveals that the virtual work environment has reduced the efficiency of

interviewed HR professionals as a result of the interruptions caused by the COVID-19 epidemic.

According to the study findings, some of the interviewed HR professionals expect to continue their work with a hybrid work model that includes both workplace presence and WFH procedures if the pandemic situation further continues to the future. This is mainly because they believe that physical presence is mandatory in order to effectively perform people-related tasks.

“I propose a hybrid work approach in which our employees experience face-to-face engagement, as well as digital collaboration, should be there if the current pandemic continues to the future”.

Respondent 7

Incentives

In terms of HR professionals’ incentive expectations, the findings show that they anticipate three significant incentives during the COVID-19 pandemic. These include financial benefits, career development, and WFH resources. Out of interviewed HR professionals, most of the HR professionals have expectations regarding incentives. HR professionals in Sri Lanka were required to work long hours and even pay for their Internet access (used for company duties) out of their own pockets under the WFH culture. As a result, the interviewed HR professionals anticipate financial benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Sometimes I have to work more than 8 hours per day, and I have more work responsibilities than before, but I’m getting the same amount of money as it was before, so I would appreciate it if the company could provide us with some more financial rewards”.

Respondent 4

The COVID-19 has had a significant impact on jobs, causing career shocks for employees. According to the findings some HR professionals in Sri Lanka require to develop in their careers. They are unable to gain new skills and are occasionally receiving pay cuts. As a result, many HR professionals anticipate more opportunities to develop in their careers.

“I believe the pandemic has affected my career growth since I was about to receive a promotion but did not receive it, so I would like if the company could provide new opportunities that can help employees to grow their careers as the pandemic approaches a new normal”.

Respondent 7

Most HR professionals encounter a variety of challenges in implementing WFH due to a lack of work-related resources. Not every HR professional was able to offer themselves favorable working conditions at home in the same way that an office space does. According to the findings of the study, seven out of ten HR professionals in Sri Lanka expect more WFH resources to assist them to work efficiently while also actually managing their personal lives.

“I didn’t have proper work from home facilities, and I was literally working on my dining table, so working for long hours was difficult. So, it would be preferable if the company could provide work equipment or a provident fund to purchase it”.

Respondent 10

Adoption Arrangements

HR professionals expect two substantial adoption arrangements from their workplace such as work-life balance practices and crisis management practices. WFH has grown in importance in the context of the COVID-19 as it is the only way to keep working while reducing virus risk. Thus, HR professionals in Sri Lanka encounter challenges in partitioning their work and personal lives, making it difficult to break away from the pressure of their employment. According to the study findings, some HR professionals expect adoption arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most HR professionals anticipate work-life balance practices because they had difficulty in trying to strike a proper work-life balance during the pandemic.

HR professionals expect two substantial adoption arrangements from their workplace such as work-life balance practices and crisis management practices.

“As an HR professional, I expect to implement proper work-life balance practices for employees. It’s hard to balance

both when we are working at home, and also, we should educate employees on how to balance things”.

Respondent 5

As a result, it is clear that the WFH has had a negative effect on the work-life balance of some HR professionals.

The COVID-19 outbreak has compelled organizations to face unforeseen risks, causing plenty of issues with business functions. Despite the fact that crisis management is an important part of HR professionals’ role, in Sri Lanka, they have not been properly prepared to manage HR in a situation similar to that of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the findings of the study, five out of ten HR professionals expect crisis management practices from their workplace in order to thrive in the business niche.

HR professionals expect crisis management practices from their workplace.

“I think it’s better if we implement crisis management strategies to maintain the business processes and protocols smoothly for every other crisis”.

Respondent 10

It clearly shows that crisis management is even more critical in order to survive and keep business processes running smoothly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion

WFH is a modern and firsthand exposure for many countries, particularly for developing countries such as Sri Lanka (Janadari, 2020). This conclusion could reinforce the study’s finding that the majority of HR professionals in Sri Lanka are inexperienced with the WFH model and related technology. Thus, unfamiliarity with this new work culture led them to encounter many issues and concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Li et al. (2020) also highlighted this by stating that when WFH is not by choice and for workers with less experience with WFH, the transition creates a significant challenge. Prior to the COVID-19 epidemic, most businesses in Sri Lanka had limited experience in remote working, and as such there was no necessity to improve the WFH competencies of HR professionals. As a result, the majority of HR professionals in Sri Lanka find it difficult to react to this change quickly, resulting in a drop in overall performance compared to pre-pandemic levels. Despite the fact that Narayanamurthy and Tortorella (2021) claimed that virtual work is more likely to increase worker productivity during a pandemic, the findings of this study show that the overall productivity of HR professionals that researchers interviewed has decreased since the COVID-19 pandemic, owing to the challenges posed by the virtual work environment. HR experts in Sri Lanka do not expect this work transformation to continue in the future as a consequence of these concerns. Furthermore, if the present COVID-19 pandemic condition persists in the future,

where there are restrictions on completely bringing all employees to the office premises, several HR professionals anticipate a continuation of the hybrid work culture.

When looking at HR professionals' expectations regarding incentives during the COVID-19 global pandemic, the findings reveal three major incentives, financial benefits, career development and WFH resources. The majority of interviewed HR professionals expect monetary incentives, and the main reason for this is the inability to afford a home office equipped with a high-end laptop, Internet-connected devices, and other equipment because Sri Lanka is a lower-middle-income country with a GDP per capita of USD 3,682.0 (World Bank, 2021). According to Gigauri (2020a), COVID-19 can have a significant impact on jobs and force staff members to undergo career shocks. According to the study findings, the majority of interviewed HR professionals believe that career and professional development may have taken a back seat during the COVID-19 pandemic era. As a result, they expect companies to take innovative approaches to grow their career. Most HR professionals in Sri Lanka faced a variety of challenges as a result of the adoption of WFH due to the lack of work-related resources. Because they could not afford electronic devices, the majority of interviewed HR professionals were unable to create an appropriate working environment. Furthermore, Sri Lanka has the poorest internet quality, according to Fernando (2021). As a result, now most HR professionals in Sri Lanka face

internet speed, connectivity and interruption issues when working on tasks that require more data, such as video meetings and document transfer over the internet. The majority of HR professionals that researchers interviewed expect better WFH resources to keep the organization running smoothly.

During the COVID-19, HR issues became more important requiring companies to implement new methods and strategies in order to maintain business functions. As a result, HR professionals' expectations concerning adoption arrangements have emerged. According to the study findings, HR professionals anticipate work-life balance practices such as flexibly planning working hours, adjustments in work schedules that allow work and housework responsibilities to be combined and psycho-emotional assistance. Furthermore, many interviewed HR professionals have firsthand experience with the WFH concept. As a result of the pandemic, many families of HR professionals working in Sri Lanka face significant challenges in managing virtual work and staying at home with their children due to the epidemic. AM et al. (2020) have also stated that flexible work adjustments, such as flexible hours, flexible work schedules, or versatile locations, would assist employees to accomplish a better work-life balance. On the other hand, HR professionals had to meet strict deadlines, work for long hours, and deal with unforeseen workflow pressure. As a result, they had a work-life imbalance during the pandemic. Due to this work-life imbalance, HR professionals anticipate work-life balance practices from

HR professionals should be educated in crisis management, with a focus on systematic pre-planning and crisis planning.

their workplace. According to the study findings, HR professionals anticipate crisis management practices such as developing a strategy to safeguard the company's most valuable assets and training on crisis planning. Moreover, the HR professionals that researchers interviewed are not properly prepared for an unexpected situation. They anticipate crisis management practices. Adikaram et al. (2021) also emphasized that HR professionals should be educated in crisis management, with a focus on systematic pre-planning and crisis planning. It is evident that taking these HR professionals' expectations into account is critical for organizations to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and maintain a competitive edge.

Conclusions & Implications

Despite the fact that numerous studies have been conducted on the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the challenges faced by HR professionals in dealing with emerging changes in work environments, less focus has been placed on their expectations from the workplace as a result of the pandemic. As a result, the objective of the study was to explore the workplace expectations of HR professionals employed in Sri Lanka as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic, as well as the opportunities and challenges they experienced throughout the crisis. Ac-

ordingly, semi-structured interviews with HR professionals were conducted. The study utilized the thematic analysis to explore the expectations of HR professionals from their workplace due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

HR professionals working in Sri Lanka expect to continue their work by returning to the workplace in the future, despite the numerous challenges they had with virtual work settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most influential reasons for them to consider the work transformation as an unhealthy change are the challenges encountered during the pandemic due to unfamiliarity with the WFH procedure and related technology, network connectivity issues, and the lack of WFH resources. On the other hand, if the present pandemic condition prevails in the future, several HR professionals anticipate a hybrid work culture rather than a fully WFH work mode along with the financial benefits, career progress, WFH resources, work-life balance practices and crisis management practices from their workplace.

As a preventative measure for future crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses should provide the necessary technical training to strengthen the technical competencies of HR professionals working in Sri Lanka. Further, companies should evaluate their company policies on work procedures to successfully adapt to the changes in work practices, particularly during a crisis as the COVID-19 epidemic. Aside from that, it is advised that businesses create flexible work schedules and offer the basic tools

needed to continue working in the event of an unanticipated future crisis. On the other side, the study's findings can assist HR practitioners to modify HR policies, particularly those dealing with unexpected emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, by taking the expectations of HR professionals into account.

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