

## **THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE ACHIEVEMENT OF HIGH PERFORMANCE WORK SYSTEMS (HPWS): A CASE OF HARARE CITY COUNCIL, ZIMBABWE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose of the Study:** The COVID - 19 pandemic caused disruptions in most work places worldwide. The purpose of this study was to investigate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the achievement of high performance work systems (HPWS) with specific focus on Harare City Council, Zimbabwe.

**Statement of the Problem:** The research was necessitated by various changes in the work place as occasioned by the COVID -19 pandemic: working from home/ flexible working, virtual meetings, restricted travel, work-life imbalance and reduction of physical teamwork practices to mention but just a few. There was need for empirical evidence on whether such changes negatively or positively affected HPWS.

**Methodology:** The study utilized pragmatic research strategies. Harare City Council had 81 employees who practiced remote working/ working from home. A census approach which included all the 81 non-managerial employees as respondents was used, and these completed questionnaires. The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS. 11 managers were subject to face to face interviews as key informants.

**Result:** Results showed that at Harare City Council as in other organisations, the changes brought about by COVID-19 were implemented in a haste, without planning, without consultations and this negatively affected high performance work systems as employees had to adjust to the new normal without prior training. The implementation of HPWS was not effective due to factors which included lack of adequate resources, lack of emergency preparedness and lack of adequate ICTs. This negatively affected stakeholders who expected efficient service delivery.

**Conclusion:** Lockdowns completely shut off other employees whose nature of work could not be executed remotely such as cleaners, refuse collectors and road maintenance staff. The study recommended that in order to achieve high performance work systems (HPWS) during pandemics, there was need to expand the use of ICTs including automation of such functions as performance management, recruitment, payment of bills, staff development, salaries and disciplinary procedures at Harare City Council.

**Keywords:** *High performance works systems, Covid-19, transformational leadership, working from home, remote working, Zimbabwe*

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## INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus was firstly discovered in December, 2019 in Wuhan Province of China (Gondauro, Mikautadze, & Batiashvili, 2020 in Mwita, 2020). The disease is caused by a virus known as COVID-19 (CO standing for corona, VI standing for virus, D standing for disease, while 19 stands for the year the disease was first discovered - 2019. By the end of January 2020, the disease had been declared a global health emergency by the World Health Organization (Yuen, Ye, Fung, Chan, & Jin, 2020 in Mwita, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic changed people's life styles overnight. Individuals, families, businesses, countries and continents experienced the shock of lockdowns and fear of the unknown. Managers had to make many quick decisions about who should stay at work, who should be moved into the digital space to work from home and who should simply go home and sit. Managers also had to set priorities as to where and how those priorities could best be accomplished and communicated to employees (Caligiuri, Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke and Zimmermann, 2020). The pandemic hard-pressed employees who were already facing stress from the health risk and threat to their own survival and that of their families. Compounding this stressor, many managers were leading remote teams for the first time. This sudden change aggravated the challenges of collaborating and leading from a distance.

Globally, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic to the economies were disturbing. Importation and exportation of goods and services decreased. International trade slowed down and as a result sales volumes in various firms diminished. International and intra-national travel was heavily affected. Concerns related to global supply chain vulnerabilities and financial resilience came to the fore during the pandemic (EY, 2020 as cited in Caligiuri et al., 2020).

When the financial crisis rocked the business world in 2007–2009, boardrooms turned to corporate finance directors. A good corporate finance officer could save a company, a bad one would bury it. The pandemic presented a different challenge; this time to the corporate human resources directors whose duties, skills and foresight became critical right at global level. They had to keep employees hopeful, healthy, safe, maintain their morale and ensure that there is productivity. They had to put in place systems that reduced infections and put employees' lives ahead of profits. The HR directors had to oversee the remote-working experiment and sometimes consider the option of retrenchment or laying off workers with the concurrence of other executives, corporate boards and unions. That was not an easy task (The Economists, 2020 as cited in Caligiuri et al., 2020).

Gigauri (2020) argued that the COVID-19 pandemic disturbed organizations and to stop the spread of the coronavirus, organizations switched to a Work from Home (WFH) model or Remote Connections (RC) at a rate and scale, monitored and controlled by email and video conferencing; these eliminated the concept of employee involvement and team work. Human Resource professionals were more worried about employees' wellbeing during the pandemic, while finance chiefs still expected financial inflows to ensure business continuity. The objective of the study was to investigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the achievement of high performance work systems (HPWS).

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The COVID-19 pandemic affected normal working practices, demanding new ways of managing human capital and Harare City Council was no exception. Under that new normal, high performance work systems (HPWS) came under threat as the primary goal was survival. With lockdown restrictions in place, how could the human resource management functions such as recruitment and selection, on the job training and development, effective communication, motivation of workers and job security be achieved without using short-cuts? There was need for a study which would provide empirical evidence on the effect of Covid-19 pandemic on high performance work systems to help contribute to Covid-19 literature. This was a new phenomenon and there was need to provide answers to the pertinent problem bedevilling the workplace globally with specific focus on the Harare City Council.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

The objective of the study was to investigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the achievement of high performance work systems (HPWS).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **High Performance Work Systems (HPWS)**

According to Naidoo (2002) HPWS are practices that make an impact on the performance of the organization through its people in such areas as high productivity, quality products, good customer service, growth, profits and ultimately the delivery of increased shareholder value. Wixley and Everingham (2002) added that to achieve HPWS, the strategic human resource managers should ensure rigorous recruitment and selection procedures, extensive and relevant training, management development activities, motivation of workers, exemplary behavior by management, good corporate governance, continuous learning environment, use of appropriate leadership styles, incentive pay systems, performance management processes among other strategies. These good practices, which is well applied lead to high performance, are often called high-performance work systems (HPWS).

The notion of high performance work systems originated in the United States of America, gaining traction in the debate over the decline of US manufacturing competitiveness (Boxall, 2012). Additionally, another spur of change in work systems over the last thirty years was the beginning of advanced manufacturing technologies (AMT), which include robotics, computer-aided design (CAD), computer numerical controls (CNC), machine tools, and electronic data interchange (EDI) systems and these all required re-engineered work processes. High Performance Work Systems (HPWS) entail the combination of practices into a bundle and they are an indistinct phenomenon in which three concepts are loosely tied together: performance, systemic effects, and work practices of some kind (Boxall and Macky, 2009 as cited in Boxall, 2012). HPWS are the bedrock of successful organisations. They are what differentiate successful organisations and those that fail.

Caldwell and Floyd (2014) equates HPWS with the human resource management best practices which state that to create competitive advantage, employers must ensure employment security, selective hiring, decentralised decision-making/ self-managed teams, high results based on compensation, training by commitment, reduced status barriers and sharing key information.

### **Effects of COVID-19 on High Performance Work Systems (HPWS)**

COVID-19 resulted in a new dawn at global level. The world of work was first hit by mandatory lockdowns and work from home practices had to be adopted for certain categories of employees. Companies had to digitalise and flexible work arrangements had to be implemented. The following are some of the positive variations to work systems:

### *Work from home/Remote Working*

During the pandemic, employees whose normal day to day duties could be backed by ICTs were deployed to work from home. Benefits associated with working from home/remote working include the following:

- Less commuting time and reduced transport costs,
- More self-government,
- Greater flexibility,
- Better work-life balance in case of working from where there will be family,
- Reduced need for office space,
- Less conflict among employees and
- Higher productivity and motivation.

### *Improvement on Government's responsiveness to change*

Ang (2020) argued that internal collaboration improved while external collaboration got worse during the Covid-19 pandemic because companies had to adapt to changing work environments, while also learning how to collaborate with one another through remote working.

### **Negative variations to work systems brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic**

Employees had to overcome the difficulties brought by the unexpected changes in the workplace as well as in society (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020 as cited in Gigauri, 2020). The global pandemic disrupted business worldwide, for instance:

- Shift to virtual working demanded skills upgrading and training,
- Team work and work groups were disregarded,
- Some businesses closed and suspended operations,
- There was need for stress management skills to cater for employees who had numerous
- Survival issues at home and at work,
- There was need for new safety regulations that put the lives of employees ahead of profits

Some companies' attitudes towards employees became questionable in pursuit of survival. Gigauri (2020) asserts that in case of Georgia, there were three types of cases observed in terms of companies' attitudes towards employees:

- Some companies closed and dismissed all employees,
- Many companies retained employees by sending them on unpaid leaves, and
- There were companies that retained only senior staff on full salaries.

Local authorities, government institutions and other organisations in Zimbabwe are less digitalised and characterised by a lot of manual processing of paper work, poor internet connectivity, power cuts and high bandwidth costs. This negatively affected the working from home arrangement.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Transformational Leadership Theory**

In this fast changing world, transformational leadership becomes more important and is considered a critical success factor (Korejan and Shahbazi, 2016). According to Burns (1978), transformational leadership is a process in which leaders inspire followers to help each other to rise to a higher level of morale and motivation, to promote organisational effectiveness and performance. Korejan & Shahbazi (2016) asserted that transformational leadership refers to leadership which seeks to create ideas and new perspectives including new paths of growth and prosperity for the organization. Consequently, transformational leadership is the ideal form of leadership that organizations needed to have long adopted in order to face the COVID-19 pandemic victoriously. Leaders need to be inspirational, creative and to motivate their followers despite the uncertainties being faced in the business world as a result of the pandemic.

By instilling commitment, passion and loyalty among managers and staff, leaders mobilize organization's members to make fundamental changes in order to be prepared and to gain necessary capabilities for moving in new directions and reaching higher ideal performance peaks (Mirkamali et al, 2014 as cited in Korejan, 2020). The transformational leader continuously looks for potential motives in followers and aims to draw followers' devotion to superior needs and transformation of individual interests into collective interests.

According to Northouse as quoted in Naidoo (2002), a transformational people manager creates HPWS and has the following qualities:

- empowers followers to do what is best for the organization;
- is a strong role model with high values;
- listens to all viewpoints to develop a spirit of cooperation;
- creates a vision, using people in the organization;
- acts as a change agent within the organization by setting an example of how to initiate and implement change and,
- helps the organization by helping others contribute to organizational development.

Transformational leadership theory remains to be an important referral to organizations that wish to achieve high performance work systems (HPWS).

### **Ability, Motivation and Opportunity (AMO) Theory**

According to Kellner, Cafferkey and Townsend (2019), the Ability, Motivation and Opportunity (AMO) theory has been adopted extensively to potentially explain the complex relationship between how people are managed and subsequent performance outcomes. A commonly accepted view is that some combination of an individual's ability (A), motivation (M) and their opportunities (O) can give us a measure of an individual's performance (P) (expressed as  $A+M+O = P$ ). The argument being that application of Human Resource Management best practices which constitutes the HPWS will improve the employee's ability, motivation and proffers opportunities to the employee hence individual and organisational performance are improved.

Hassan et al. (2013) stated that high performance work system, including training, appraisal and empowerment, play a crucial role in enhancing the employee loyalty and financial performance. Application of AMO model in high performance work systems boosts employees' performance by implementing sound and competitive incentive systems to reduce employee turnover and increase productivity, which in turn has a positive effect on corporate financial performance (Zhang and Morris, 2014).

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study was underpinned by the two common research philosophies, Positivism and Interpretivism. The study opted for this mixed research approach also known as pragmatism because the use of the two methods helped the research to take advantage of the benefits and strengths of both philosophies. The study also used the mixed research design to allow for triangulation of the research findings, a thing which helped to achieve validity and reliability. Primary data was collected through questionnaires and face to face interviews.

The Harare City Council is a big employer with 6,348 employees as at 31 December 2021, but most of its jobs are manual and demand physical presence of employees. Jobs such as cleaning, cutting grass, road construction, refuse collection, repairs and maintenance, security as well as driving require workers to be physically present. This study concerned itself with those whose jobs could be carried out using the work from home (WFH) strategy during the Covid -19 pandemic and that gave a target population of 81. Given the size of the target population, a census technique was used for this study in which all the 81 employees became respondents.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The study achieved a response rate of 89% as 72 out of 81 respondents managed to complete and return the questionnaires.

**Reliability Testing**

This section provides a test for the reliability of the data which was collected through using the questionnaire. A scale is considered to be reliable if the Cronbach`s Alpha values are equal to or exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Pallat, 2012).

**Table 1: Reliability Statistics**

Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
.763	20

Findings from statistical analysis of SPSS in the table above reflects the Cronbach's Alpha of 0.763. The Alpha is greater than 0.7 meaning the data collection instrument was reliable.

**Normality Test**

The Shapiro-Wilk test is usually appropriate for small sample sizes (<1000 samples) whilst the Kolmogorov-Smirnov handle sample sizes greater than 1000 samples. The normality test establishes how data is distributed. On a normality test, a p value greater than 0.05 (**p>0.05**) indicates that the data is normally distributed signifying that the sample selected does not differ significantly from the population of the study and Parametric statistical tests can be performed using this data.

**Table 2: Tests of Normality**

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
SHRM	.233	72	.000	.854	72	.000
Work System	.118	72	.200*	.923	72	.020

\*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

From the analysis, the p-values in the Sig. column portrayed that the two variables of the study were below 0.05 ( $p < 0.05$ ). It implies that the data was not normally distributed and the Researcher had to use Non Parametric statistical tests in analyzing the data.

**Table 3: Variations in Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) practices as occasioned by COVID-19**

	Mean	Std. Deviation
COVID-19 resulted in people working remotely, away from normal office environments	3.91	.288
Working from home provides more focused work environments	3.91	.288
Working from home is more convenient and flexible	3.97	.577
Training needs increased during the pandemic	3.68	.878
Employees miss social interactions whilst working from home	3.74	.710
Performance management became complicated during the pandemic	3.79	.410
COVID-19 resulted in business closure and retrenchments	3.50	.663
Valid N (list-wise)		
<b>AVERAGES</b>	<b>3.79</b>	<b>.544</b>

Table 3 shows that respondents agreed that COVID-19 resulted in people working remotely, away from normal office environments. Working from home provided more focused work environments, working from home was more convenient and flexible, training needs increased during the pandemic, employees missed social interactions whilst working from home, performance management became complicated during the pandemic and COVID-19 resulted in business closure and retrenchments. This is justified by the mean responses of 3.91, 3.91, 3.97, 3.68, 3.74, 3.79 and 3.5 respectively. This outcome implies that there were variations in strategic human resource management (SHRM) practices as occasioned by COVID-19. Table 3 above shows that the average mean response was 3.79 which is approximately equal to 4 (agree) with a variation of 0.343 which shows that there was low dispersion of the responses.

**Correlation of Changes in SHRM and Work Systems on Performance**

The correlations computations were done to show the impact of the independent variable and the dependent variable. The analysis was also be used to determine the hypothesis of the study.

**Table 4: Correlation of changes in SHRM and Work Systems on Performance**

		HPWS	SHRM
Spearman's rho	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.533**
	HPWS Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.001
	N	72	72
	Correlation Coefficient	.533**	1.000
	SHRM Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.
	N	72	72

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The table above shows that there was a positive (0.533) strong correlation between SHRM practices and high-performance work systems. The relationship was also significant as justified by  $p(0.001) < 0.05$ .

**Regression Analysis**

The study used the regression analysis to establish the contribution of the factors to the competitive advantage. Regression is a refined addition of correlation analysis used to determine the predictive capability of independent variables to the dependent variable (Pallat, 2012).

**Table 5: Regression Analysis Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.586 <sup>a</sup>	.343	.323	.29306

a. Predictors: (Constant), SHRM

Table 5 shows that the when the dependent variable was regressed against the independent variables, performance was found to be 0.586. The  $R^2$  of 0.315 shows that the HPWS during the Covid-19 pandemic was explained by 34.3%. This implies that the model has a moderately high predictive power to determine the HPWS during Covid-19 pandemic.

**Table 6: Validity of Regression Model (ANOVA)**

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	1.438	1	1.438	16.741	.000 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	2.748	68	.086		
Total	4.186	70			

a. Dependent Variable: HPWS

b. Predictors: (Constant), SHRM

The F Value shows the suitability of the model. In this instance, the F value is 16.741 and p-value of 0.000 shown in the ANOVA result. The table shows that the relationship between the dependent variable (HPWS) and its explanatory variables is statistically significant as the p-value is less than 0.05 [ $F(1, 32) = 16.741, p < .05 (p=0.000)$ ]. The model can be used to predict the HPWS during the Covid-19 pandemic. The outcome was supported by Wixley and Everingham (2002). To achieve HPWS the strategic Human Resource manager should ensure rigorous recruitment and selection procedures, extensive and relevant training and management development activities, motivation of workers, exemplary behaviour by management, good corporate governance, continuous learning environment, use of appropriate leadership styles, incentive pay systems, performance management processes among many other factors.



**Table 7: Initiatives that ought to be adopted for the achievement of high-performance work systems**

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Management engages in rigorous recruitment and selection.	3.82	.758
Management engages in extensive and relevant training	3.82	.758
The organization engages in management development activities	3.82	.387
Management motivates workers.	3.94	.851
Management leads by example.	3.88	1.094
There are mechanisms for continuous learning and development at the organization	3.85	.958
There are good corporate governance practices in the organization.	3.47	.507
Management uses effective leadership styles,	3.82	.387
The organization uses well-structured incentive pay systems	3.74	.710
The organization uses well-structured performance management system.	4.09	1.083
<b>AVERAGE</b>	<b>3.83</b>	<b>.756</b>

Table 7 shows that management should engage in rigorous recruitment and selection procedures (3.82), extensive and relevant training (3.82), management development activities (3.82), motivation of workers (3.94), leading by example (3.88), presence of mechanisms for continuous learning and development in the organization (3.85), good corporate governance practices in the organization (3.47), use of effective leadership styles (3.82), use of well-structured incentive pay systems and use of well-structured performance management system (4.09). Table 7 above shows that the overall mean score was 3.83 with a standard deviation of 0.756. This shows that respondents agreed to the components under work systems in the table above with a minimal dispersion.

High Performance Work Systems (HPWS) ensure that there is implementation of sound incentive systems (Huang et al., 2016). Sound and competitive rewards retain employees and are motivating.

Interviewees indicated that the other factors which affect performance were bureaucracy, organisational politics and unattractive remuneration. Other interviewees argued that performance in the Harare City Council organisation was being affected by increased work load for those who were physically needed to report for duty such as door to door refuse collection teams.

During face to face interviews it also emerged that managers feel that performance-based pay required a lot of supervision to be done in order to link employee performance to remuneration. Strategic HRM is proactive in nature and implementing it requires effective staff audits in order to successfully achieve the organizational goals. Lack of Information Communication and Technology equipment and bureaucracy were cited as the impediments.

**Table 8: Hypothesis Testing Results**

<b>Hypothesis</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>
H1: The variations in Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) has an effect on the achievement of High-Performance Work Systems (HPWS).	A positive (0.533) and strong correlation between SHRM and high-performance work systems. The relationship was also significant. The hypothesis was therefore accepted.

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The research aimed to analyse the effects of COVID-19 in achieving high performance work systems (HPWS) in strategic human resource management (SHRM) using a case of Harare City Council, Zimbabwe.

The results showed that changes in strategic HR management practices as occasioned by the COVID- 19 pandemic affected the achievement of high performance works systems to a great extent as job security, selective hiring (recruitment), decentralisation of decision-making, high remuneration contingent on performance, training, reduced status differentials and information sharing were all negatively affected by the pandemic.

The study also found that the situational approach to decision-making was most relied upon by managerial staff as a way of managing change. It was clear that there was no consultative approach as management resorted to some form of command style where instructed were relayed top-down. This affected staff morale. Staff were being given directives and in most cases without back-up means or resources to achieve the set targets.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Working from home provided more focused work environments, working from home was more convenient and flexible, training needs increased during the pandemic, employees missed social interactions whilst working from home and performance management became complicated during the pandemic and COVID-19 resulted in business closure and retrenchments.

There was a positive and moderate correlation between performance during the COVID-19 pandemic and SHRM practices. There was also a positive and strong correlation between SHRM and high-performance work systems.

Management should have engaged in extensive and relevant training to acquaint staff to the new normal of working from home.

Other factors which affected performance were bureaucracy, organisational politics and unattractive remuneration.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, changes at Harare City Council could have been implement smoothly through effective communication using all methods possible including social media platforms, emails and video conferencing, e-meetings to mention but just a few as a way to reach out to employees and cause discussion on issues to win the much needed buy-in. Employees should always be trained to work independently to achieve targets so that in case of another outbreak of a pandemic, there is business continuity. Harare City Council and other organisations, should ensure that SHRM Best practices and high performance work systems (HPWS) are always adhered to as standard corporate governance operation procedures.

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