



Human Resource Management Challenges and Research Proposition in ISO 9001:2015 Certified Firms in Kenya Post Covid-19 Disease Outbreak

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Abstract

This study sought to establish the effect of COVID-19 containment strategies on human resource management practices in ISO 9001:2015 certified firms in Kenya. The study adopted descriptive research design in obtaining data from 139 senior management staff. Key findings after analysing 110 responses are that in 93.6% of the firms, the pandemic had affected Human Resource systems, practices and procedures (mean response 3.9). In 70.2% of the firms, the respondents indicated that current human resource policies do not adequately support remote working by employees (Mean response 2.4), while in 70.9% of the firms, offsite working had negatively affected employees' productivity (mean response 3.1). In 72.4% of the firms, the management had provided adequate COVID-19 training to all staff (mean response 3.3), while in 64.5% of the firms, working from home had not enhanced safety and mental wellbeing of employees during lockdowns (mean response 3.3). The findings suggest that ISO 9001:2015 certified firms in Kenya are facing people management challenges during the pandemic, hence non-optimization of the human resource factor. The study concluded that there are outstanding knowledge gaps, though it is evident that the pandemic has affected working practices in ISO 9001:2015 certified firms in Kenya, with implications on economic recovery post COVID-19. The study recommends review of human resource policies except those mandated by law. The policy review should promote safety at workplaces, catering for medical costs, training on executive leadership and skills development to support remote working and psychological wellbeing of employees. Future research opportunities include establishing how work context in remote locations influence employee behaviour and actions. The expected study output upon successful implementation of the given recommendations is enhanced performance of ISO 9001:2015 certified firms in Kenya.

Keywords: COVID-19, Human Resource Management, ISO 9001:2015, Competitiveness.

1. Background Information

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak resulted in governments and regulatory agencies around the world implementing containment measures including social distancing, quarantines and cessation of movement (Harney & Collings, 2021; WHO, 2020; Mwasiaji, Jagongo & Ogutu, 2020). COVID-19 response measures have made it necessary for enterprises including ISO 9001:2015 certified firms to reassess and adopt how work is organized and how jobs are designed (Collings, Nyberg, Wright & McMackin, 2021; Hitt, Arregie & Holmes, 2020). This is because the wellbeing of the human factor, including the combined skill and expertise is a key determinant of organizational productivity, hence a pillar in the creation and sustenance of competitive advantage (Hitt, Arregie & Holmes, 2020; Collings, Mellahi & Cascio, 2019). This implies that effective management of human resources is one of the aspects that require continuous repositioning in line with changes in contextual factors for sustainable competitive advantage (Boxall, Guthrie & Paauwe, 2016; Armstrong, 2012; Liesch *et al.*, 2012). Human resource management (HRM) encompasses the strategic sourcing, training, guiding, directing, motivating, compensating, appraising, rewarding and generally enabling the activities of employees in an enterprise (Boon, Den & Lepak, 2019;

Collings, Mellahi & Cascio, 2019; Armstrong, 2012). Numerous studies have reported that the management of an enterprise mainly revolves around people and capital deployment decisions, though functional departments are of no value without suitable personnel (Harney & Collings, 2021; Hitt, Arregie & Holmes, 2020; Boxall, Guthrie & Paauwe, 2016; Amstrong, 2012; Abiodun, 2011). Financial resources may be important for the success of an enterprise, but money and other non-human assets mean nothing unless effectively managed by suitable personnel (Hitt, Arregie & Holmes, 2020; Armstrong, 2012; Oyer & Schaefer, 2010).

In a study of competitive advantage of sixteen firms, it was reported that at some time or another, the studied enterprises had captured or developed critically needed human resource skills to create sustainable competitive advantage (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Abiodun, 2011). Banjoko *et al.*, (2012) made a similar conclusion by asserting that firms are more likely to take advantage of their market opportunities and develop more effective response strategies if the human resource factor is managed more effectively in tune with contextual factors. The nuclear of this observation is that effective human resource management practices conveys competitive advantage by cutting labour related costs, enlarging access to superior personnel, improving marketing expertise, enhancing problem solving abilities, creativity and innovation, and reducing turnaround time while responding to contextual changes (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; CedarCrestone, 2012). Thus, the successful implementation of organizational strategy and operation decisions relies on effective HRM practices. This realization and the need to remain competitive in the face of COVID-19 challenges, has made it necessary for firms to reassess and update their HR policies that have more than one purpose (Kirby, 2020). For instance, to facilitate acquisition, development, motivation and retention of available talent to meet the requirements of the business in terms of productivity, operational efficiency and quality of products in the market place (Sheppard, 2020; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). An HR policy also allows firms to meet the needs of the individual employees for interest, challenge and need for achievement (Rauch, *et al.*, 2009; Bloom, *et al.*, 2009). Considering that the human resources are the most important asserts in any organization, the challenge before researchers and entrepreneurs is therefore to establish the implications of COVID-19 on Human resource management practices, so that appropriate policies can be formulated based on empirical data sets.

2. Problem Statement

Due to COVID-19 disease outbreak first reported in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China, governments and regulatory agencies around the world implemented containment measures including quarantines and cessation of movement (WHO, 2020; Mwasijaji, Jagongo & Ogutu, 2020). These international response strategies to COVID-19 pandemic made it necessary for firms to enhance digitization and reassess HRM practices including how jobs are designed (Collings, Nyberg, Wright & McMackin, 2021; Singer-Velush, Sherman & Anderson, 2020). The HRM function had to take leadership in managing people to cope with new job demands and to continue working remotely to facilitate continued business operations (Kirby, 2020; Caligiuri, Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke & Zimmermann, 2020). The HRM function also had to deal with increased redundancies and reduction in staff numbers caused by the pandemic lockdown and interruption in global supply chains (Sheppard, 2020; Narayandas, Hebbbar & Liangliang, 2020). Despite the critical role of human resources for any organization, there is inadequate data on HR polices in the context of COVID-19 disease outbreak due to the novel nature of the pandemic (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Akkermans, Richardson & Kraimer, 2020). Inadequacy of data set limits the understanding of key HRM questions exposed after COVID-19 disease outbreak, such as working onsite versus working remotely from home, considering that individuals respond differently to the requirements of remote working and family demands (Harney & Collings, 2021; Collings, Nyberg, Wright & McMackin, 2021). Hence the need for this study to generate data that would be useful in stimulating further research to support the formulation of HR policies to address novel, peoplereleted challenges arising from shifts in working practices in response to COVID-19 containment strategies (Caligiuri, Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke & Zimmermann, 2020).

3. Study Methodology

The study adopted descriptive research design to obtain primary data. The unit of analysis was one hundred and forty-nine ISO 9001:2015 certified firms from a cross various economic sectors in Kenya (KEBS, 2021). ISO 9001:2015 certified firms were identified for this study for two main reason in addition to their critical role towards Kenya's industrialization and the big four agenda. First, ISO 9001:2015 standard can be used by any organization, whether large or small, regardless of its field of activity (KEBS, 2021; Castillo-Peces, Mercado-Idoeta, Prado-Roman & Castillo-Feito, 2017). Second, ISO 9001:2015 certified firms that meet requirements of the standard on a consistent basis have demonstrable ability to provide products and services that satisfy their customers' needs and expectations while also addressing the relevant statutory and regulatory requirements (Anttila & Jussila, 2017; ISO, 2015). Senior management staff responsible for the human resource function were identified as the unit of observation because they were judged to be in a better position to respond to items touching on HR practices in their respective firms.

A Sampling Frame of 149 firms from various sectors and economic activities in Kenya was prepared as per the list obtained from the Kenya Bureau of Standards (KBS, 2021). This was done to ensure inclusion of only legally registered firms. Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table of determining sample size, 108 is the actual number of firms that is required to form a representative sample, out of a population of 149. The applicable formula is: $s = X^2 NP (1 - P) \div d^2 (N - 1) + X^2 2P (1 - P)$, at a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of plus or minus 5%, where:

- s = required sample size.
- X^2 = the table value of chi-square for 1 degree of freedom at the desired confidence level (3.841).
- N = the population size.
- P = the population proportion (assumed to be .50 since this would provide the maximum sample size).
- d = the degree of accuracy expressed as a proportion (.05).

Having determined the required sample size to be 108 firms out of 149, it was judged prudent to include additional enterprises to cover for possible non-responses, so as to increase the reliability of the findings (Mwasiaji, Jagongo & Ogutu, 2020). The residue firms were forty-one (41), though five (5) had already been used during the pilot study. Since the remaining thirty-six (36) were judged not to be too many, it was found wise to include them in the study to act as a buffer zone for possible non-responses. As a result, one hundred and forty-four (144) available firms were included in the study, thus making it unnecessary to establish the sampling fraction. The collected data using a Likert type scale of 1 – 5 for each of the tested item was analyzed using descriptive statistics (Likert, 1932).

4. Literature Review

4.1 Theories Underpinning the Study

Theories on competitive advantage seek to explain key determinants that are necessary in creating and sustaining superior performance, in order to stay ahead of competition (Bingham, Heimeriks, Schijven, Gates, 2015; Porter, 2003). In formulating strategy, firms commonly make an overall assessment of their own competitive advantage via an assessment of the external environment based on the five forces model (Wang 2014; Porter 2003). The five-force model enables organisations to analyse the prevailing industrial contextual factors in a structured way. However, Porter (2003) model assumes a classic perfect and static market structure, which is unlikely to be found in present-day dynamic markets (Leahy and Montagna, 2008; Bingham, Heimeriks, Schijven, Gates, 2015). In addition, some industries are complex with multiple inter-relationships, which make it difficult to comprehend and analyse using the five-force model (Wang 2014). Moreover, Bryson & Stephen (2009) reported that the most important determinants of competitive advantage are firm-specific rather than industry-specific factors. Jara and Escaith (2012) therefore suggested in line with Resource Based View that competitive advantage based on resources and capabilities is more important than just solely based on products and market positioning.

Resource Based View (RBV) model emphasises the resources that organizations have developed to be a driver for competitive advantage (Banjoko *et al.*, 2012; Bryson and Stephen, 2009). According to Powell (2001), the focus of inquiry changed from the structure of the industry, that is, Structure-Conduct-Performance paradigm and the five forces model, to the firm's internal structure, with resources and capabilities (the key elements of the Resource-Based View). Since then, the RBV strategy has emerged as a popular theory of competitiveness (Wang, 2014; Baron & Armstrong, 2009). However, it has been argued that the RBV ignores the nature of market demand and only focuses on internal resources, hence the need for 'fit' as a balancing act between the external and internal determinants (Nwankwo & Gbadamosi, 2010). As elaborated by Wang (2014), most researchers subscribing to the RBV regard knowledge as a generic resource. However, some researchers suggest that knowledge has special characteristics that make it the most important and valuable resource, hence their proposition for the Knowledge-Based view, as another theory of competitiveness (MaCarthy and Greatbanks, 2006). McGrath (2013) concur that knowledge, know-how, intellectual assets and competencies are the main drivers of superior performance in the information age. MaCarthy and Greatbanks (2006) also suggest that knowledge is the most important resource of a firm. Evans (2003) pointed out that material resources decrease when used in the firm, while knowledge assets increase with use. Innovative knowledge gives the firm its competitive position over its rivals. The firm with innovative knowledge is able to introduce innovative products or services, potentially helping it become a market leader (Bigliardi *et al.*, 2011; Bos-brouwers, 2010).

The underlying message from the RBV in line with observations by Armstrong (2012) is that formulating and effective implementation of policies on human resource management is critical to a firm's survival and growth by virtue of improved performance (Brinkmsnn *et al.*, 2010). Thus, to facilitate a successful implementation of a human resource strategy, firms should ensure that the human resource policies contribute to the organization's

competitive position with reference to the changing workforce practices in the context of COVID-19 disease outbreak (Harney & Collings, 2021; Collings, Nyberg, Wright & McMackin, 2021).

4.2 HRM Practices Post COVID-19

Novel coronavirus (COVID-19) disease outbreak was first reported in December 2019 in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China (WHO, 2020). Subsequently, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention declared a public health emergency in the United States on 31st January 2020 (WHO, 2020; Mwasiaji, Jagongo & Ogutu, 2020). The first and second wave of the COVID-19 witnessed geographical contagion from Asia to other parts of the world (Adonu, Opuni & Dorkenoo, 2020; Harney & Collings, 2021). Due to public health concerns, governments and regulatory agencies globally implemented containment measures with immediate implications on work practices. The leadership in many organizations had to quickly decide on who within the staff establishment could stay on site and who would be let to go home; how and where employees could be moved into digital space to allow remote working (Sheppard, 2020; Akkermans, Richardson & Kraimer, 2020). This resulted in intra-firm distancing imposed upon previously co-located employees (Collings, Nyberg, Wright & McMackin, 2021). This requirement for social distancing by employees came into being despite previous studies having reported the challenges presented by distance with reference to HR functions such as selection, training, support, health and safety (Caligiuri, Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke & Zimmermann, 2020). Remote working from home has also been found to have its own challenges considering that individuals respond differently to the requirements of offsite working and family demands (Harney & Collings, 2021; Collings, Nyberg, Wright & McMackin, 2021). The uncertainty from the COVID-19 health risk itself to work team members was compounded by the need for virtual collaboration as well as leadership from remote locations (Akkermans, Richardson & Kraimer, 2020; Narayandas, Hebbbar & Liangliang, 2020).

Work practices and schedules also changed for persons who were globally mobile employees and thus international business travellers (Akkermans, Richardson & Kraimer, 2020). Their “stay at home grounding and virtual meetings” may mean loss in terms of frequent travel, hotel accommodation and business dinners (Caligiuri, Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke & Zimmermann, 2020). The reported stress attributable to post COVID-19 containment measures had been understood based on previous findings to be caused by the employees finding themselves in novel or uncertain contexts (Collings, Nyberg, Wright & McMackin, 2021; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). In line with these findings, the world health organization reported that COVID-19 pandemic has produced tremendous novelty and uncertainty that is affecting the mental health of many people around the world (WHO, 2020). Another aspect of the post pandemic work processes is the lack of professional stimulation while working from home thus fostering more self-directed knowledge seeking to satisfy the need to learn, grow and demonstrate competence (Caligiuri, Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke & Zimmermann, 2020; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). For instance, Forbes (2020) reported that LinkedIn Learning courses have seen a threefold increase in usage since the implementation of stay-at-home pandemic containment strategy. This therefore means that there are many post covid-19 related HR questions that is still not adequately addresses in extant academic literature. There is therefore need for multidisciplinary research to address the context, processes, and outcomes of work post-pandemic (Caligiuri, Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke & Zimmermann, 2020).

5. Results and Implications

5.1 Characterization of Respondent Firms

One hundred and forty-four (144) ISO 9001 certified firms from a range of economic activities in Kenya were included in this study. The study recorded 79.13% response rate, which means that one hundred and ten (110) senior management staff responsible for human resource function participated in the study. The non-response was probably due to a combination of factors including time constraint on the part of the interviewees, unwillingness to respond to items on the data collection tool. The response rate from the various sectors is as presented in **Table 5.1.1**

S/N	ECONOMIC SECTORS	RESPONSE	%
1	Primary (Forestry, Agriculture, Mining and Quarrying)	26	23.64
2	Secondary (Manufacturing, Processing and Construction)	14	12.73
3	Tertiary (Transport, Commerce, Communication)	18	16.36
4	Quaternary (Universities, accounting, software developers)	37	33.64
5	Quinary (Research, financial and legal consultants)	15	13.64
Total		110	100

Table 5.1.1: Response Rate

As presented in Table 5.1.1, the distribution of the economic sectors were Primary firms at 23.64%, Secondary firms at 12.73%, Tertiary firms at 16.36%, Quaternary at 33.64, while Quinary firms were at 13.64%. The distribution of respondents in Table 5.1.1 assures a well-distributed sample from the various economic activities in the Kenya.

5.2 Responses on Human Resource Policies

As presented in Table 5.2.1, majority of the firms (93.6%) indicated that COVID-19 had affected HR systems, practices and procedures (mean response 3.9). In 70.2% of these firms, the respondents disagreed that Human resource policies adequately support remote working by employees post COVID-19 disease outbreak (Mean response 2.4) and in 70.9% of the firm's managers indicated that remote working has negatively affected employees' effectiveness and productivity (mean response 3.1). In 27.6% of the firms, the respondents disagreed that the organization has provided adequate COVID-19 training to all staff members (mean response 3.3) and that working from home (enhances safety and mental wellbeing of employees post COVID-19 lockdowns (64.5% with mean responses at 3.3).

Opinion on item	SD %	D %	NS %	A %	SA %	Mean Response
COVID-19 disease outbreak has affected HR systems, practices and procedures	0	6.4	25	44	26	3.9
Working from home enhances safety and mental wellbeing of employees during COVID-19 lockdowns	23	42	25	9.1	1.8	2.3
Human resource policies adequately support remote working by employees post COVID-19 disease outbreak	22	48	23	15	3.6	2.4
Remote working has negatively affected employee effectiveness and productivity	0	6.4	23	44	27	3.1
The organization has provided adequate COVID-19 training to all the employees	7.6	20	18	53	11	3.3
The reward systems motivate staff to achieve high performance levels while working offsite	14	45	20	16	6.4	2.6
Employees are willing to collaborate with each other in complying with necessary changes to safety measures	4.5	21	20	41	14	3.4
Senior management staff are held accountable for their remote working performance	12	32	39	16	1.8	2.6
First line supervisors are held accountable for their remote working performance	2.7	16	20	43	19	3.6
Non-management workers are held accountable for their remote working performance	0	7.3	14	43	36	4.1

[SD- Strongly disagree; D-Disagree; NS-Not sure; A-Agree; SA-Strongly agree]

Table 5.2.1: Items on HR Management Practices

To establish the level of performance of ISO 9001:2015 certified firms in Kenya in relation to the tested items, a One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted on the mean response on the ten tested items. The study established that there was a significant difference in the firm's level of performance ($F = 3.36$, $df = 12$, $P = 0.001$) tested at 95% confidence interval ($P \leq 0.05$) and the means separated using Tukey test, as presented in Table 5.2.2.

Description	Number of Tested Items	Mean Response Rate	Standard Deviation
HR Management practices	10	3.13	0.73

Table 5.2.2: Mean Responses

5.3 Implications of the Findings

This study revealed that majority of ISO 9001:2015 certified firms across the various economics activities in Kenya have been affected by COVID-19, some negatively while other positively. Those in the finance and insurance subsectors have mainly reported positive impact while some in the manufacturing and hospitality sectors have reported negative impact. Many of the sampled firms have partially moved to remote working due to cessation of movement, though psychological wellbeing of some employees working offsite from home remains an issue of concern. These findings are consistent with others conducted in other national, social, economic and industrial contexts (Adonu, Opuni & Dorkenoo, 2020; Caligiuri, Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke & Zimmermann, 2020; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Collings, Nyberg, Wright & McMackin, 2021; Harney & Collings, 2021). The findings seem to suggest that ISO 9001:2015 certified firms in Kenya are facing people management related challenges in the context of COVID-19 pandemic hence, inability to optimize organizational performance. This has a negative effect on

overall firm performance as it implies internal inefficiencies, ineffectiveness and possible negative bottom line, reduced job opportunities and low contribution to the Kenya's gross domestic product (GDP). The findings therefore portend major impediments to ISO 9001:2015 certified firms attempt to reposition for competitiveness and play their rightful role in economic recovery post COVID-19. These findings also have an implication to Kenya's big four agenda and realization of Vision 2030.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concluded that COVID-19 pandemic has affected working practices with implications on organizational performance and economic recover. It is therefore important to review all HR policies with the exception of those relating to, or mandated by law in ISO 9001:2015 certified firms in Kenya. Such policies should be geared towards promoting safety at workplaces with enforcement of guidelines to reduce the exposure of all workers to the virus, including catering for medical costs; investing in training on executive leadership and skills development to support remote working, psychological wellbeing and team collaboration. For this purpose, ISO 9001:2015 certified firms in Kenya should invest time in benchmarking their HR policies on best practices to enable the recruitment, development, compensation and retention of the right people in the right place to facilitate enhanced performance post COVID-19 pandemic. The expected study output upon successful implementation of the given recommendations is enhanced performance of ISO 9001:2015 certified firms in Kenya for economic recovery post COVID-19 pandemic.

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