

Managing Human Resources During a Global Crisis: A Multilevel Perspective

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We develop a multi-level framework for understanding the impact of human resource management (HRM) practices in managing people during a significant global crisis. We provide a critical review of the research on the topic, focusing on papers published in the *British Journal of Management* (BJM). Our review focuses on papers dealing with people management issues during or after a global crisis event. To this end, two BJM special issues and other articles on global crises published were selected for our critical review. Our choice of additional papers reviewed was deliberate. We reviewed papers from several other premier outlets covering diverse geographies. Such an approach allows for delineating critical factors and practices that stand out despite national, cultural, industry and sectoral differences. These papers cover the two major global crises in the last two decades: the Global Financial Crisis and the COVID-19 Pandemic. We conclude with future research directions.

Introduction

Crisis as ‘a time of intense difficulty or danger’ (*noun*, Oxford Dictionary, 2016) comes in many forms: natural (e.g. earthquakes, bushfires, flooding, droughts and severe storms) and human-engineered (e.g. technological, environmental, humanitarian, financial and health). Some have a highly localized impact, yet others have been classified as global in its impacts, such as the 2008 *Global Financial Crisis* or the current *COVID-19 Global Health Pandemic*. The term global crisis invariably implies a contagion effect, though nature and the extent to which it spreads in different regions is influenced by a nation’s regulatory, cultural, social, economic and political factors. The research on global crises and its management tends to fall into three phases: a pre-crisis phase, a crisis phase and post-crisis phase (Coombs and Laufer, 2018).

Further, research suggests that there are differences in the way countries and industries respond to these phases of a crisis (Malik, 2018; Wang

and Laufer, 2020). There is not only diversity in managing the crises; the nature, extent and frequency of global crises have also increased in the last three decades, suggesting the need for organisations to get better in dealing with the diverse types of global crises. For example, between 1720 and 2013, 16 major economic crises have affected people and their livelihoods (Warner, 2013). Interestingly, the incidence and frequency of such crises have only intensified since the 1997–1998 Asian crisis. Since this Asian crisis, we have witnessed many crises in the last two decades, such as the Dot-com bubble crisis (2001), Wall Street crisis (2007–2008), Islandic crisis (2008–2009), Global Financial crisis (2008), Global Recession (2008–2013) and the economic crisis in Eurozone (2010–2013) (Malik, 2013, 2018; Rowley and Bae, 2004; Rowley and Warner, 2004; Smith and Abdullah, 2004; Warner, 2013; Zhu, 2003; Zhu, Warner and Rowley, 2007) followed by the Russian crisis in 2014, Brazilian crisis from 2014 to 2017, Turkish debt crisis in 2018 and now the global COVID-19 health pandemic (2019–present).

Irrespective of the nature of the crisis, humans, communities, for-profit and not-for-profit organizations are faced with different challenges and levels of uncertainty, thereby differently impacting individuals, organizations, industries and national economic and social performance outcomes (Butler *et al.*, 2020; Spies-Butcher, 2020). Invariably, most crises see significant destruction of economic value as well as significant shifts in the distribution of future economic value. The process of economic value destruction and shifting leads to significant structural changes in the way work is organised and how an individual sources their livelihood or how the work is restored and shifted to newer forms. Such a significant impact is also evident in the recent *COVID-19 Global Health Pandemic*, a crisis that has affected all spheres of economic, political and social life. Further, most major global crises such as *COVID-19* have left citizens wondering how they should deal with the current situation.

A crisis of this nature generates emotions of despair and helplessness, even among the healthcare workers who put their lives at the frontline and suffer physiological and psychological issues (Montemurro, 2020; Shaw, 2020). When employees are affected in terms of the changes at work and employment in a global crisis, it is opportune to investigate and synthesise extant knowledge on the nature and extent of responses from leaders and human resource (HR) managers. Specifically, how they have responded to several crises in the last three decades, the knowledge of strategies put in place to mitigate the excesses caused by the crisis on work and employment is invaluable. Therefore, we focus on what leaders and managers have done in managing people during and post a crisis for getting back to normal. While several special issues have been devoted to the Asian and the Global Financial Crises, the research and findings are not integrated or lead to a holistic understanding of what has been done or can be done to manage people in future when new crises – natural or human-engineered – hit us. To this end, given the focus of this journal and the current virtual issue, we review research on recent global crises that have affected a wide range of organisations both globally and locally, thereby impacting work, employees and the workplace. We analyse research on this topic by analysing papers published the *British Journal of Management (BJM)* and other mainstream management journals that have a ‘people management’

focus, as well as other relevant research on this topic. Through our review, we analysed the critical gaps and developed a conceptual framework for understanding how, leaders and managers, including HR managers who have designed and implemented innovative approaches to deal with such crises.

In line with the profound impact global crises have on business, employment and society, *BJM* has devoted two special issues focusing on research dealing with global crises. One special issue was dedicated to the topic of the *Global Financial Crisis* of 2008 (published in 2012), and more recently, one on the *2020 COVID-19 Global Health Pandemic* (published in mid-2020). It is expected that additional articles are likely to be published on the current pandemic in the future. Although there are several articles published by *BJM* that have a focus on global crises, keeping in line with the aim of our paper, we have selected papers that deal with people management issues of managing employees during or post a global crisis event. To this end, from the above two special issues, and other articles on global crises published in *BJM*, we have selected six articles that have a clear focus on people management or HR practices for managing before, during and after a significant global crisis (Chau *et al.*, 2012; Knights and McCabe, 2015; Muurlink, Wilkinson, D. Peetz and Townsend, 2012; Psychogios *et al.*, 2019; Shankar, 2020; Zona, 2012). Further, our choice of papers was deliberate in that we sought to review papers from several countries and regions of the world rather than only focusing on North or South, East or West, and emerging versus developed nations. Such an approach allows for delineating critical factors and practices that stand out despite national, cultural, industry and sectoral differences. Further, these papers cover the two major global crises in the last two decades.

In addition to the above *BJM* articles, we acknowledge that additional research has been undertaken on the topic in other business and management journals. To this end, we reviewed additional papers from peer-reviewed, scholarly journals that are deemed to be published in high-quality journals A*, A and B ranked as per the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) list or in 2, 3, 4 and 4* as per the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) guide. Thus, in addition to *BJM*, we used the following search algorithms in EBSCO Host’s Business Source Premier Database: *global financial crisis* OR *COVID-19*

and *HRM or Human Resource Management Practices and response to crisis and crisis management and leadership*, publication type: academic journal; document type: peer-reviewed, article; and language: English, for the period 1990–2020. The search initially yielded 437 hits, but after excluding non-management or non-HRM focussed journals, it yielded a final list of 34 papers. As researchers who are interested in developing scholarship on managing people during and after a major global crisis, we further expanded our search further to include additional management and HRM journals that had published thematic collections or sections on the topic, such as the *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *International Journal of Manpower* and *Asia-Pacific Business Review*. Following our review, articles with a significant focus on leadership, HR practices and agentic resources of managers, leaders and individuals were reviewed. Additionally, keeping in with word constraints, articles with overlapping theoretical themes, findings or foci were excluded.

Based on the above, we present a critical literature review (Klein and Potosky, 2019) and in line with Post *et al.* (2020), a thematic analysis of emerging perspectives from research featured in *BJM* and other premier academic outlets, thereby developing an integrated and novel conceptual framework from our analysed themes, underpinning theories and the wide range of managerial responses in dealing with the crisis.

In our review of the papers, we found researchers have tended to focus on multiple levels of analysis, for example national-, industry-, organizational- and individual-level (leader and manager responses and employee outcomes) analysis, at different times, such as from pre-, during- and post-crisis. Thus, here, we present a multilevel and temporal review of research on the topic and identify future areas of research. We also develop a guiding conceptual framework for employees, managers and policy-makers to navigate through people management issues in times of a crisis. Keeping our focus to HRM and management journals, and significantly on articles that have a clear people management focus, we developed our analysis and conceptual framework for scholars to inform their future research agendas on the topic and generate insights for HR practitioners to inform their future people management strategies. The selected articles span different periods and types of crises and extend our understanding of the ap-

proaches leaders and managers have employed in managing people.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Based on the focus of this review to develop a multilevel conceptual framework, we begin by providing an overview of the multi-level influences in managing people in times of major global crises. Next, we progress our review by focusing on global and macro-level influences, followed by meso- (Kim, Wennberg and Croidieu, 2016; Malik, Pereira and Budhwar, 2020; Öberg, Henneberg and Mouzas, 2012) and microlevel influences in managing in times of a global crisis. At each level of the review, we maintain our focus on analysing the role of leaders, and the role of HR practices and organisational capabilities. In doing so, we present how leaders, managers and individuals employed their human agency to develop sustainable HR practices proactively, organizational routines and responses to minimize the excesses caused by various global crises on work and employment in organizations. We conclude with directions for future research and theoretical advances needed for further theory-building efforts on the topic of managing people in times of a crisis.

Multilevel influences in managing a global crisis

The management of global crises typically has four key elements (Coombs, 2015): *preventing*, *preparing*, *responding* and *revising* as firms and societies start to recover from the crisis. In terms of *prevention*, one can have robust governance mechanisms to minimise the likelihood of a crisis unfolding. This aspect of managing during a crisis was evident in some of the preventive asset-management strategies in multinational enterprises (MNCs) during the global financial crisis (Fainshmidt, Nair and Mallon, 2017), or indeed as Zhao, Park and Zhou, 2014 have found, a positive impact of investing in corporate social responsibility activities by MNCs to help minimize the impacts during a global crisis. During a crisis, firms have to implement several changes (*preparing* and *responding*) to minimize the ongoing impacts of the crisis. For example, Ang (2001) noted, rather than engaging in a price war to retain market share, the role of changing an MNC's marketing strategy by investing in Guanxi and offering other value-add services to Asian clients worked well for the

MNC. As Dhanesh and Sriramesh (2018) suggest, by investing in a broad-based socio-, political-, public-relations and economic-framework MNCs can deal with a crisis effectively, as was evidenced in the case of Nestle India. Nestle India responded as most MNCs do, by focusing on their ethnocentric communication approaches, instead of a contextually grounded response to manage the communication crisis faced by the MNC surrounding its 2-minute Noodles.

Managing in times of crisis has an aspect of cultural-embeddedness, as was noted by Li *et al.* (2012) who advanced the need for balancing the *Yin* and *Yan* elements to harmonise the problems in a systematic but dynamic way, wherein by calming the negative influences, we can focus effectively on generating solutions. In a similar vein, Witcher and Chau (2012) through the theoretical lenses of varieties of capitalism highlight the importance of balancing of both the 'inside-out' and 'outside-in' approaches to deal with crises. In terms of *recovering* from a crisis, the literature suggests several policy-level approaches that government and business leaders have to collectively implement to lock-in the learning and revisions to business models to minimise the impact of future crises (Coombs and Laufer, 2018). A multi stakeholder approach for dealing with crisis is suggested by Budhwar and Cumming (2020), as a means for generating sustainable solutions for recovery during the current and ongoing COVID-19 crisis. In line with the above, and drawing on the learnings from a natural crisis – earthquakes – a phenomenon that also occurs in several other countries such as Japan and New Zealand, Nilakant, Rochford and Van Heugten (2013) highlighted several factors critical in managing people post-crisis. They noted the importance of collaboration with key stakeholders – internal and external, learning from such collaboration and system failures, and investing in employee well-being and resilience of senior management teams as critical elements of a recovery plan. Responding to COVID-19, others have called for developing sustainable ways to conduct businesses, both locally and globally, by exploring new business models and redefining what performance means and whether having an excessive performative orientation is a worthy pursuit (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2020). This sentiment is shared by Verbeke (2020), who commented on the disruptions caused by COVID-19 on global supply chains. Verbeke and others (see Caligiuri *et al.*,

2020) note there is a pressing need to rethink aspects of how we conduct international business sustainably, identifying several avenues for future research.

Following the commonly understood stages of managing during a crisis (Coombs, 2015), we now offer a multilevel thematic analysis of the factors that influence and help explain how firms have managed in times of a global crisis. We structure our review and analysis at a global, macro (national), meso (organizational) and micro (individual) level factors. In doing so, we have included research from not just special issues and other relevant articles published by *BJM*, but also include research from other quality, peer-reviewed academic journals that have published on this topic. A summary of the non-*BJM* articles is included in Table 1. Table 2 focuses on select articles from *BJM* that inform this review, whereas, Table 3 focuses on *BJM* articles that are selected for this particular issue.

Globalization intensity and national business system influences

The impact of crises, such as the Global Financial crisis or the COVID-19 crisis, on work and employment, can be viewed from its impact on multiple stakeholders, as well as from a temporal view, wherein a crisis begins as a shock wave moving from one geographical location to another (Stiglitz, 2010), percolating its way through several levels within geography, such as affecting specific industries, firms and certain groups of employees more than others. A country's knowledge, cultural and trade exchange with another country, or what we term as 'globalisation intensity', can impact a system and varies from one national border to another (McDonnell *et al.*, 2013). Once this happens, the extent to which a crisis affects a country depends on the strength (or weakness) of its national policies covering social, economic, political, cultural values such as power-distance and collectivism to name a few, and the key elements of a national business system (Witt and Redding, 2014). The debate on market failures and the ability of countries to deal with crises is also embedded in the discourses on neoliberal ideologies, which focuses on implementing a market-oriented approach by the government and its institutions such that it favours free market, and such an approach has been blamed for several recent

Table 1. Select non-BJM Articles on the topic of HRM in Times of a Global Crisis

Authors (Year)	Article Type	Country Sample	Time Period	Data Sources	Dependent Variable	Key Explanatory Variables	Main Findings/Messages/Learnings
Burgess and Connell (2013)	Review	Asia-Pacific	Post-2008 Financial Crisis	Review	NA	Editorial	Authors suggest that managers avoid short-term, stop-loss approaches to prevent longer-term costs and acknowledge differences in national business systems
Caliguri <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Perspectives Review	Global	2020 COVID-19	Literature review	NA	NA	In the new normal, businesses will need to develop sustainable policies and new business models for managing uncertainty, both locally and globally, as well as there is a need to redefine firm performance.
Carnevale <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Review	Global	2020 COVID-19	Literature review	NA	NA	The current healthcare crisis will increasingly blurring the boundaries of work and life domains and is leading to a disproportionate effect in the life domain. Managers must be sensitive to this new reality and engage with their direct reports in a humane manner
Cooke (2010)	Empirical	China	Post-2008 Financial Crisis	Qualitative	Talent Management outcomes	TM Practices	Overseas MNEs in China managed the crisis by implementing talent management programmes such as investing in human capital and career development whereas local MNEs responded through extrinsic rewards, such as better salary and industry-academia engagement programmes
Cumming, Wood and Zahra (2020)	Essay	USA and UK	Trump era and post-Brexit	Review essay	HR practices	Political and institutional crisis and right-wing populism	Right-wing populism affects insecurity at the workplace for a range of demographic groups. The ongoing shifts to right-wing political ideologies are impacting and putting at risk firm-level HR strategies
Malik (2013)	Case study	India	Post-2008 Financial Crisis	Qualitative	Employee and business	HR practices	The presence of diverse ideologies in managing people resulted in varied impacts for individual and business-level outcomes

Table 1. (Continued)

Authors (Year)	Article Type	Country Sample	Time Period	Data Sources	Dependent Variable	Key Explanatory Variables	Main Findings/Messages/Learnings
Nilakant, Rochford and Van Heugten (2013)	Case study	New Zealand	2011 Christchurch Earthquakes in New Zealand	Interviews	Organisational and employee resilience	HR practices employee engagement and leadership	Authors proposed a framework of adaptive resilience wherein four key factors contribute: collaboration—internal and external; learning from experience; employee engagement and well-being; and leadership—senior and middle level in building adaptive resilience at individual and firm levels.
Schaaper <i>et al.</i> (2011)	Empirical	French and Japanese subsidiaries in China	2005-2007 And 2010	Interviews and surveys	Subsidiary control during and after the crisis	Expatriate managers, training, formalization	The authors found four primary areas of policy change in the pre-GFC period for controlling the MNC's subsidiary operations: through capital infusion, expatriate assignments, human capital investments and diffusion of formal HR best practices. Post-GFC era, while additional capital minimized losses, repatriation of expatriation also helped costs and exploration of nontraditional forms of expatriation.
Zagelmeyer, Heckmann and Kettner (2012)	Empirical	Germany	2008-2010	Survey	Firm-specific policies	Duration and magnitude of crisis, skills, employment type, and firm size	Cost-effective HR choices must also be informed by social, policy, institutional and cultural environments of that country. Influences of labour market institutions, such as works councils, enterprise agreements, regulatory restrictions shape and influences the rules of an employment exchange.

NA: Not Applicable.

Table 2. Relevant BJM Articles included in the review but not in the Special Issue

Authors	Article Type	Country Sample	Time Period	Data Sources	Dependent Variable	Key Explanatory Variables	Main Findings/Messages/Learnings
Budhwar and Cumming (2020)	Editorial	Global outlook	COVID-19 Global Health Pandemic	Review and Special section contributions	NA	NA	Importance of adopting an interdisciplinary approach for addressing the grand challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic with an ever greater need for collaboration and partnerships between key stakeholders
Li <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Viewpoint	China	Post-2008 crisis	Review and perspectives	NA	NA	The Chinese Ying/Yang perspective offers a balanced approach to thinking of how to deal with a crisis, highlighting the need for a systematic, timely and dynamic approach resolving the problems.
Mangena, Tauringana and Chamisa (2012)	Empirical	Zimbabwe	2000-2005	Stock exchange panel data	Firm performance	Board and ownership structure, size	Size of the board was an important determinant of firm performance, but the nature of the environment influenced the negative relationship was noted for share ownership of exec and non-exec. directors
Pangarkar (2007)	Empirical	Singaporean	1995-2000	Quantitative data from 348 alliance types in Singapore	Nature of alliances that may survive	Environmental shocks and partner diversity	Crisis per se does not affect alliances performance and survival rates. The nature of the alliance, e.g. revenue increasing alliances, are more robust than other forms of alliances.
Patel, Thorgren and Wincent (2015)	Empirical	European Union firms	Post-2008 crisis	Survey and archival data	Project performance	Project leaders, harmonious and obsessive passion, environmental dynamism	Findings support the importance of the project leader's passion for dealing affecting project performance in times of high environmental dynamism, suggesting the role of leaders passion for environmental adaptation.

Table 2. (Continued)

Authors	Article Type	Country Sample	Time Period	Data Sources	Dependent Variable	Key Explanatory Variables	Main Findings/Messages/Learnings
Stein (2015)	Case Study	UK	Post-2008	Qualitative	Explaining the crisis	Individual and inter-organizational factors and rivalry	The existence of the twin organization threatens leaders' and managers' sense of existence and identity propels firms into high risk-taking behaviours with potentially disastrous consequences
Verbeke (2020)	Opinion	Global	COVID-19 Global Health Pandemic	Review	NA	NA	The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the global value chains (GVCs) calling for four new areas for research in GVCs in international business.
Witcher and Chau (2012)	Conceptual	Global	Post-2008 crisis	Secondary Review	NA	NA	Examines the variety of capitalism thesis and argues for a combination of both outside-in and inside-out perspectives from strategic management to bring balance in dealing with external crises.
Zwikael and Smyrk (2012)	Empirical	Asia-Pacific	Post-2008 crisis	Members of Asian PMI	Performance	Effective delivery and outcome realization	Based on the findings, the authors develop a system-based conceptual model linking project outcomes with resource and process-based inputs as critical determinants of project success and performance.

Table 3. Selected BJM Special Issue Articles on the Role of HR practices and Leadership for Managing in times of a Global Crisis

Authors (Year)	Article Type	Country Sample	Time Period	Data Sources	Dependent Variable	Key Explanatory Variables	Main Findings/Messages/Learnings
Decramer <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Empirical	Flanders and Netherlands	2009	Survey	Employee performance in academic units	Institutional mechanisms, Management experience, HRM training, HRM presence	Coercive mechanisms were significant predictors of employee performance. Further, the presence of an HRM department and HR practices increases the likelihood of the academic performance of employees.
Muurlink, Wilkinson, D. Peetz and Townsend (2012)	Case study	Australia	2005-2010	Dun and Bradstreet database	Managerial Stress	The formality of management responses, rigidity	The study found that autistic managerial approaches to dealing with performance management issues during a crisis results in additional stress and proposes a coping model for dealing with stressors at work.
Zona (2012)	Empirical	Italy	2008-2009	1000 Italian Manufacturing firms	Change in innovation investment	Financial slack, historical performance, behavioural variation directors and size	Findings suggest that firms can respond to the crisis by increasing investments in innovation, keeping in mind the role several contingency factors may also play.
Knights and McCabe (2015)	Case Study	UK	2008	Qualitative	Future sustainability	Leaders	Our dependence on the ability of leaders to save in times of crisis is misleading.
Psychogios <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Empirical	Greece	Post-2008 Crisis	Survey of Greek SMEs	Individual and organisational OCB (I-OCB andO-OCB)	Adverse working conditions(AWC)	Findings supported an indirect and negative relationship between AWC and OOCB via job satisfaction and positive relationship between AWC and IOCB
Shankar (2020)	Practitioner Reflections	India	COVID-19 Global Health Pandemic	Large Indian IT MNE	Response capability for COVID-19	Leadership, culture, flexibility, IT infrastructure, HR practices, collaboration	Proposes a hybrid version of remote working and creating new symbols and artefacts for a virtual culture, governance structures and skills for managing people during the pandemic.

human-engineered economic and financial crises (Chomsky, 1999; De Bruin, 2015; McChesney, 1999). Others (Cummin *et al.*, 2020) have noted the presence of a right-winged populist approach that has eroded the fabric of employment relations and thus impacting the nature and consequences of HRM in organisations.

In a fascinating study of 23 European nations, Lange (2014) examined the quality of social capital as a predictor of positive employee outcomes such as job satisfaction in times of a crisis. Lange found that countries that had a highly resilient level of social capital, or countries with healthier quality of social capital reported positive levels of employee outcomes and were least affected by the crisis. Several macrolevel factors such as religion and social-cultural support were noted as enablers of such a capital. Further, the greater the globalization intensity and the weaker the policy frameworks and systems of governance, the greater is the likelihood of an adverse impact of a given crisis.

The above pattern was evident in numerous crises, wherein, first, the pandemic spread based on the globalization intensity and then, based on a nation's natural, policy and structural resources, its impact varied. Depending on the diversity of these endowments, the extent of immediate job losses and social isolation varied (Montenovo *et al.*, 2020), which then led to reallocation and redefinition of jobs (Barrero, Bloom and Davis, 2020) and ongoing change and transformation of roles and responsibilities of people to accommodate the challenges posed by the 'new normal' (Baldwin, 2020; Bartsch, Weber M. Büttgen and Huber, 2020). These changes caused an increasing blurring of boundaries between the work and life domains, which led to a range of psychosocial and psychological well-being issues of people at work (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020). Despite the above temporal impacts of such a crisis, several related and attendant issues about where and whom should employees go to, and what and how should the leaders communicate in dealing with the diversity of communication challenges created by the pandemic is a core and somewhat underexplored issue (Sanders *et al.*, 2020). To summarize, at a global and national level, differences in managing the impact of a crisis depends on the globalization intensity of nations and firms as well as the strength and quality of its cultural values and national business systems.

Meso-level influences

In line with earlier meso-level studies, we analyse meso-level influences in this section (Kim, Wennberg and Croidieu, 2016; Malik, Pereira and Budhwar, 2020; Öberg, Henneberg and Mouzas, 2012). Although certain baseline impacts are expected in any major crisis, differences in its impact persist due to the nature of human interventions, organizational policy responses and other endowments, as was evident in the current COVID-19 crisis (Moy *et al.*, 2020). The importance of organizational responses and investments was also noted earlier, during the global financial crises (Burgess and Connell, 2013), and differences in the impact of the global financial crisis were also evident even in firms operating in the same industry (Malik, 2013). These differences in impacts would suggest that there must be specific actions that leaders and managers implemented to deal with crises. To this end, our focus on the meso- and microlevel foundations for HRM and leadership practices are logical. We build on this line of thinking and suggest that the extent to which it affects individual organizations is a function of the strategic and agentic choices exercised by the leaders and managers of firms facing a significant crisis. The differences in performance will be affected by the agility of these firms in terms of how quickly they can adapt and develop new routines and invest in individual, and organizational capabilities (Malik, 2018; Pereira *et al.*, 2020).

Kim, Bae and Yu (2013) study on a post-global financial crisis period, focused adopting on an HR configurational approach by Korean firms, wherein their leaders exercised the appropriate strategic choice, as they transitioned from a control-oriented HR configuration to a high-performance HR configuration. This transition was evidence of exercising strategic choices in dealing with people management issues. This line of thinking was also confirmed by research by Martin and Gollan (2012) in the UK who noted that to overcome issues of societal embeddedness leaders of a firm must exercise the strategic choice to expand their choice menus for managing growth and expectations of a wider group of stakeholders in a business environment affected by the severe financial crisis. In line with these studies, Marchington and Kynighou (2012) also noted changes to a firm's business model could be undertaken even if they are operating in diverse national business systems,

through the use of strong employee involvement and participation programs.

The research on isomorphic pressures imposed by institutions calls for exercising of strategic choice and expanding the leeway and choice menus for leaders (Boon *et al.*, 2009; Oliver, 1991, 1997) as firms tend to fall into deviant choice menus leading to passive or conformist and negative developmental agentic choices (Goodstein, 1994). This was also the case for the study by Decramer *et al.* (2012) who found that in universities changing in a crisis tended to adopt coercive mechanisms as the most efficient way of delivering change through its effectiveness, and longer-term employee buy-in remains questionable. Zhao (2010) also concluded that the coercive institutional approach was an efficient means of stabilizing some of the adverse impacts of the financial crisis in Taiwanese firms. Thus, expanding of strategic choice and degrees of leeway using active developmental human agency allows firms to develop innovative solutions for overcoming isomorphic institutional pressures, which is critical in dealing with the excesses caused by a crisis (Malik, 2018).

Cooke (2010) found that MNCs operating in China exercised strategic choices to their portfolio of HR practices by making adjustments of investing in human capital, rewards, career development and external industry-academia outreach programs. Similarly, Schaaper *et al.* (2011) research on Japanese and French subsidiaries operating in China noted several shifts in the strategic choice menus of MNEs such as capital infusion, human capital investments, transfer of expatriates and adjusting local hiring were some of the critical ways of dealing with people management challenges in a post-crisis era. Investing in financial competencies and literacy of employees and citizens was reinforced by Altman (2012, 2014) as this will allow them to make informed and intelligent strategic choices. In contrast, employing the lens of institutional theory Jaussaud and Liu (2011) found that Chinese firms' adoption of Western MNEs' HR best practices provided them with the legitimacy to deal with the crisis more effectively. Investment in greater levels of training and development was one such critical HR best practice adopted. Waring and Lewer's (2013) account of Australian and Singaporean firms, both operating in highlight market-oriented economies found investment in training and development and redeploying people was a key mechanism for achiev-

ing much-needed workforce flexibility in dealing with the crisis. Investing in dynamic capabilities was highlighted by Nijssen and Paauwe (2012) as a means of renewing its skills and competency bases that will make it agile and nimble to deal with the challenges posed by the global financial crisis. Investment in human capital seems to be a recurring theme in overcoming the new challenges introduced by the financial crises, as was also borne out in a study of UK firms by Felstead (2016)

Zagelmeyer, Heckmann and Kettner (2012) research highlighted the importance of engaging with employment relations institutions and seeking their support and cooperation before any cost-saving policy choices could be exercised in labour management areas. Several critical issues related to the strategies implemented by firms for their managing people and performance during a crisis for sustained growth are explored. These include aspects, such as the multilevel changes to employee and their managers' mindset and the organization's capabilities and policies. Specifically, we note the importance of rebooting an individual's active developmental human agency, especially among in leaders. The need by leaders and managers to actively engage with their largest constituency and key stakeholders – employees and end-users is critical for developing durable solutions. Several critical issues related to the strategies implemented by firms for their managing people and performance during a crisis for sustained growth are explored. These include aspects, such as the multilevel changes to employee and their managers' mindset and the organization's capabilities and policies. The extant research confirms that from an environmental and organisational context, the benefits of deploying people management capabilities far outweigh the costs of developing them.

Also at a meso-level, Mangena, Tauringana and Chamisa (2012) examined performance differences of firms listed on the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange due to their ownership concentration, structure and board size in times of a severe economic and political crisis. The authors explain the positive relationship in performance due to the board size and ownership concentration however there were temporal differences between the extent of executive directors' share ownership in a company pre- and post-political crisis, such that the findings supported a positive relationship before the crisis and a negative relationship in a post-crisis era. Set during the Asian crisis era, Pangarkar's (2007)

study of 348 alliances operating in Singapore during the 1995–2000 period found a contingent relationship between alliance type such that certain types of alliance (e.g. marketing and alliances having a Western nation partner) had a better chance of weathering a crisis than other alliance types.

To summarise the influences at this meso level, our review points to several important themes. First, exercising strategic choices can help firms to expand their degree of leeway and choice in a given institutional environment. Second, this is often a function of the dominant coalition of leaders who can reinforce differentiation in their choices in the form of investments in managerial and organisational resources as well as by exercising their human agency to sustain the strategic choices exercised for reducing or averting the excesses imposed by a crisis.

Microlevel influences

Microlevel influences here refer to influences of individual employees, leaders or managers in responding to various aspects of a crisis. In line with the quality of leadership and the HR practices noted above, Patel, Thorgren and Wincent (2015) survey of European firms in the post global financial crisis period (2008) found that project performance is influenced by the quality of leadership traits, such that a harmonious leadership style and leaders' obsessive passion for managing environmental turbulence saw the firms deal effectively during the crisis period. Also examining project performance and individual agentic resources of managers, Zwikael and Smyrk (2012) examine why, despite several project failures, projects continue to receive funding. They note that overreliance on the commonly understood project performance criteria of time, cost and quality as measures of project success is not a relevant measure of project success. Instead, judgements are needed on how a project is managed, its ownership and investment success. Doing so will bring to the fore the role of a project manager and project owner in determining project success and returning investment success. These authors argue that poor project performance is a crucial reason that can be attributed to the underlying causes of a crisis and there is a need to move away from the traditional project success measures to something more comprehensive as noted above.

Bellmann and Gerner (2012) investigated the role of different parties in an employment agreement and how well they negotiate and concede concessions to manage with the challenges imposed by the financial crisis through their agentic resources reinforces the importance of a collaborative and cooperative approach to a social partnership between work councils and the employer's representatives to save jobs in times of a crisis. Not all individual agentic resources yield favourable outcomes as some behaviours and traits are likely to only create adverse outcomes for the self-serving, narcissistic leaders who display psychopathic tendencies and unethical approaches (Boddy, 2011; De Bruin, 2015).

Building on the importance of leaders, and applying the theoretical lens of psychoanalysis of sibling and twin rivalry (Burlingham, 1949, 1963) to the study organizational dynamics (Brown, 1997; Clancy, Vince and Gabriel, 2012), Stein (2015) examined two pairs of twin firms: Halifax Bank of Scotland and Royal Bank of Scotland and Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac from the US and analysed why do some firms continue to get into difficulty and fail. Set in the context of the 2008 Global Financial crisis period, Stein found that the rivalry between twin firms operating in a business culture that is fuelled by greed and mania are more prone to failure due to the narcissistic behaviours by leaders of such twin organizations. The leaders may feel threatened about their identity due to the existence of rivalry between the twin organisations, which leads them to engage unrealistic and risky decisions to strengthen and consolidate their positions, the result of which often leads to the creation of a crisis. More recently, Dirani *et al.* (2020) identified the following five leadership roles in times of a crisis: a sense maker, technology enabler, someone who can provide emotional stability and employee well-being, innovative communicator and be able to manage the financial health of the organization. The presence and or development of a wide range of agentic resources including negotiation, persuasion and political acumen have been noted in earlier studies on the global financial crises (Malik, 2018; Malik *et al.*, 2019).

Special issue *BJM* papers

Based on our review of the articles featured in *BJM* and elsewhere on the topic of managing the

business in times of a global crisis, we have selected six papers that focus on the impact of people management and leadership practices on managing in times of a global crisis. For example, five of the six articles focus on research managing people following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, and one focuses on the COVID-19 Global Pandemic. The articles are presented in temporal order, starting with papers from 2012 to 2020.

The first of the five articles, by Decramer *et al.* (2012) surveying university employees presents a macro- and meso-level analysis and draws upon the theoretical lens of institutional theory and contextually focused HRM theory. They analysed the impact of three institutional mechanisms and the presence of a supportive HRM function from two low countries as universities dealt with funding and resources constraints imposed by the global financial crisis. The findings suggest that coercive, instead of the mimetic mechanism, was the most significant predictor of employees' academic performance. Further, the presence of complementary HR practices such as training was also associated with the likelihood of a performance management system, which supported academic performance through a performance management framework.

Focusing on a meso-level analysis, Muurlink and colleagues (2012) present case studies of five high-growth firms, or gazelles, from the Australia context, and analyse their response to the threats posed by the financial crisis. They found that most gazelles are small and medium enterprises and have an informal performance and HR systems. Existing research on stress-rigidity-threat linkages suggests that threats often lead to rigidity, which can act both as a driver and the cause of the crisis. As a means of overcoming the threats, the role of managerial and behavioural responses was analysed. The authors found that an autistic managerial response to performance management is sub-optimal, as it results in additional stress for the business. Instead, the firms can do better with a different type of cognitive and evaluative behavioural appraisal as the appropriate response in dealing with the threats posed by the crisis. This line of thinking requires a greater awareness through education and training and is indicative of active and developmental agentic resources that leaders and managers can employ to alleviate their immediate threats.

Zona (2012) surveyed 108 Italian firms to examine the role of financial slack and board of di-

rectors in influencing CEO's proclivity to invest in critical resources for overcoming the downturn. The study focuses on individual-level agentic resources and argues that employees perceive and frame risks differently for a given environmental situation and therefore utilise their slack resources differently for managing risks in times of a financial crisis. The study highlights the importance of individual agency in dealing with the crisis. Specifically, it examines the role board of directors have in changing the behaviours of the CEO, by instituting adequate performance management systems in place. Additionally, the study shows that how CEOs utilise slack resources in conjunction with clear stretch targets for achieving performance was an efficient way of overcoming the risks and managing the crisis.

Also focusing on the individual level, Knights and McCabe (2015) present an in-depth qualitative case study account of a UK building society, challenging some of the received wisdom on leadership and what it can and cannot do in terms of dealing with crises. Critically reflecting and evaluating the dominant discourse that leaders are the 'Masters of the Universe', the authors question such a belief arguing that it can potentially contribute to several adverse effects, including leading to a major crisis. The unquestioned beliefs need re-evaluation by employees and other managers who may have to deal with presumably superior leadership representations.

Examining the relationship between meso-level employment practices, or in this case, adverse working conditions (AWCs) and microlevel behaviours such as organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB, both individual and organizational) of 312 frontline workers operating in times of a severe financial crisis, Psychogios *et al.* (2019) analysed data from employees of 62 Greek small and medium enterprises. The authors found an indirect and negative relationship between AWC and organizational OCB through job satisfaction and a direct positive relationship between AWC and individual OCB. The findings highlight the essential and mediating role of job satisfaction in the relationship between AWC and OCB.

The final paper, an HR practitioner account by Shankar (2020) from a large emerging market MNE, set in the backdrop of the challenges faced by HR practitioners during COVID-19, offers several first-hand mesolevel insights, strategies and responses framed by this sizeable emerging

market IT multinational from India. Managing an organisation employing 240,000 people, spread geographically in 46 countries is a complex and challenging enterprise. Even though 70% of the employees were based in India, and their demographic profile was of engineering graduates with 1–5 years of IT and software development work experience, relocating work and technology infrastructure for nearly 35,000 workers to work from home during a COVID lockdown was a logistical challenge. Given most software development work is carried out in project teams, creating the right mindset through appropriate leadership and motivation was an ongoing challenge for the HR function, mostly as these young 20+ years old graduates were missing the social interaction during breaks and face-to-face meetings. As a way of resolving this, this MNE created a hybrid remote working model where 40–50% of the workforce would work remotely. Building a culture where most people work remotely, what social and relational mechanisms and routines needed to be developed were worked out. Investing in new skills and collaboration tools to make it work was an essential aspect of the change. For leaders, several new agentic resources were considered vital to making a successful transition. These included personal competencies, such as of coping with ambiguity, developing agile response capability, empathy, building trust, allowing flexibility and empowerment as well as staying open to ideas and becoming a lifelong learning leader.

The above review suggests that managing during and after a significant crisis requires effort and collaboration between multiple stakeholders as well as investment by the organization at multiple levels. For example, strong planning and execution skills and decisive action by leaders and managers was an invaluable competency. Further, leaders and managers need to develop skills of flexibility, empathy, ethical decision-making, building trust and empowerment to enable employees to expend their discretionary effort. The research evidence suggests that firms that were able to support employees by investing in specific HR practices, such as training and development, intrinsic rewards and a variety of formalised and informal performance management approaches secured discretionary effort of their staff. At an individual level, promoting job satisfaction, well-being, resilience and developing other creative agentic resources such as self-efficacy, negotiation, open-mindedness, question-

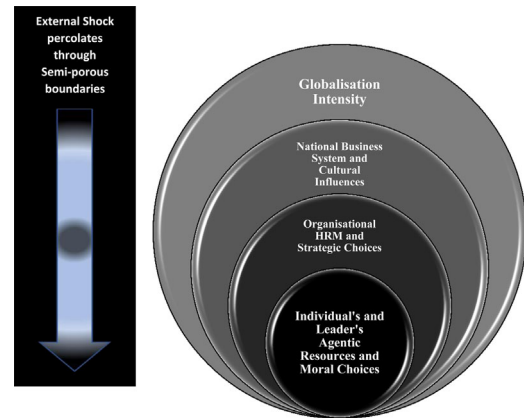


Figure 1. Managing in a Global Crisis: A Multilevel Conceptual Framework [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

ing mindset and persuasion are critical in dealing with significant global crises affecting work and employment. Through the use of a creative and developmental human agency, individuals, leaders can alter the degrees of freedom and expand their strategic choice menus for effectively dealing with the pressures imposed by a significant crisis. We capture this dynamic in the following section, where we develop our multilevel conceptual framework.

Managing in a global crisis: A multilevel conceptual framework

Based on the above, we developed our conceptual framework for analysing multiple levels of impact and how each level has a role to play in minimizing the excesses caused by a crisis. Figure 1 presents our model, noting the multiple levels of influences at play ranging from the extent of a nation or firm's globalization intensity and macro-level factors (Budhwar and Debrah, 2001; Budhwar and Sparrow, 2002) as well as meso- and microlevel contextual factors (Kim, Wennberg and Croidieu, 2016; Malik, Pereira and Budhwar, 2020; Öberg, Henneberg and Mouzas, 2012) in shaping its abilities to deal with a crisis.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Based on our review of the above studies, we summarise the dominant theoretical frameworks that have been employed in studying how

firms manage crises. The nature of theoretical frameworks employed varied with the level of analysis, for example, for global and macro-level frameworks, the frameworks from the varieties of capitalism, neoliberal and right-wing ideologies, national business systems, global value chains and cultural frameworks were most widely employed (Budhwar and Cumming, 2020; Burgess and Connell, 2013; Chomsky, 1999; Cumming, Wood and Zahra, 2020; Li *et al.*, 2012; Stiglitz, 2010; Verbeke, 2020; Witcher and Chau, 2012; Zagelmeyer, Heckmann and Kettner, 2012). At a meso level, the most widely used theoretical frameworks were: institutional theory, strategic choice and agency theory (Bellmann and Gerner, 2012; Boon *et al.*, 2009; Jaussaud and Liu, 2011; Kim, Bae and Yu, 2013; Malik, 2018; Paauwe, 2004), developing a combination of high-performance, flexible and high commitment HRM approaches (Malik, 2013; Marchington and Kynighou, 2012; Waring and Lewer, 2013) that have a stronger focus on human capital formation, competency and career development and employee well-being for building their resilience (Altman, 2012, 2013; Cooke, 2010; Felstead, 2016; Nilakant, Rochford and Van Heugten, 2013; Schaaper *et al.*, 2011). Finally, at the microlevel unit of analysis, much research has tended to focus on leadership styles, attributes and behaviours, ethical and moral values, and the use of agentic resources to lead and negotiate their way out of a crisis or indeed, individual leaders may well lead the firm into a deep crisis due to their narcissistic and psychopathic agentic resources in dealing with the crisis (Boddy, 2011; De Bruin, 2015; Knights and McCabe, 2015; Malik, 2018).

We build on the above theoretical foundations for developing our multi-level conceptual framework (Budhwar and Debrah, 2001; Budhwar and Sparrow, 2002). As mentioned earlier, when a global crisis percolates from one geographical boundary to another, first, it is often a function of the globalization intensity of a nation or the firms in a given geography, but it is also a function of the strength of the national business and institutional make-up of each geography, which may allow organizations a more expansive or constrained environment to exercise strategic choices.

Nevertheless, based on the degree of impact from the above and depending on the strength and collaboration between individuals or the dominant coalition of leaders and managers, the strategic choice menus can be expanded and manipulated to

allow space for firms to deal with the excesses imposed by the crisis. Typically, the expanded space provides time and new resources put in place by leaders, HR managers and individuals to develop a bridge for overcoming the challenges and minimizing the impact of a global crisis. This expanded strategic choice menu typically includes investments in human capital, realistic performance management expectations, supportive and trusting leadership style, as well as mobilizing the support from individuals to exercise their discretionary effort to manage the change that is upon them flexibly, as was noted in a study of IT firms from India (Malik, 2018; Malik *et al.*, 2019). The ability of leaders and managers to develop agile and flexible HRM responses is critical for changing the existing HR configurations and investments. Still, some firms will be adversely affected by the crisis due to their organizational and individual inertia, leading to a passive and conformist response. Consequently, these firms succumb to the pressures caused by such external events. Finally, we have identified earlier, several agentic resources of leaders, managers and individuals that will allow them the much-needed leeway and choice to alter the changed business environment. Our review and the multilevel conceptual framework depicts these relationships and interdependencies.

Conclusion and future research directions

Based on our review of pertinent literature examining the topic of managing a global crisis with a special focus on the role of HRM and leadership practices in managing a global crisis was presented. A select number of articles published in *BJM* were also critically reviewed along with the dominant theoretical lenses employed at different levels of analysis. While there is a sizeable body of knowledge on the significant HRM and leadership approaches that are critical in dealing with a significant global crisis that is mostly human-engineered and tends to have an end in sight, the current pandemic is different. The nature of the current COVID-19 pandemic, which appears more natural than a human-engineered crisis, with no apparent end-in-sight, increases the degree of uncertainty that leaders and managers have to comprehend. Nevertheless, there are historical lessons from earlier pandemics and global economic crises that one

can draw upon for managing the crisis. For example, for COVID-19, alongside the new scientific knowledge on preventive measures for minimising the impact for a safer living in the 'new normal' or 'new reality', several other new organisational practices, routines and individual actions, such as providing a COVID-19 safe workplace, encouraging new behaviours of physical distance, testing, remote working, mental health support, improved collaborative social relations at work and staying agile and alert by taking proactive action to contain the spread of the virus. Living with a highly virulent virus is a challenging proposition until an effective vaccine is available. More generally, for other global crises, our conceptual model provides the interactions and interdependencies between the various levels and highlights aspects of investment in specific organisational, HR practices and individual agentic resources to manage during a crisis. We now provide a list of future research directions.

First, in terms of theoretical advances on this topic, especially at a meso and microlevel, in addition to the widely used high-performance and high-commitment HR practices, individual and empowerment-focussed leadership styles, the new reality of COVID-19 calls for reimagining how we conduct our work and business, leveraging technology and building new sensing and fast action capabilities among employees and leaders requires a new psychological contract of knowledge sharing and information dissemination. The theoretical lens of a technologically mediated social exchange (Ma and Brown, 2020) would be relevant for capturing how employees will share and integrate their discretionary specialist knowledge when they are working offsite and are using online platforms and artificial intelligence-enabled applications. The task of motivating employees and leaders to trust new technologies, such as artificial intelligence and online knowledge-sharing platforms for creating an AI-mediated knowledge-sharing exchange (Ma and Brown, 2020) is an area worthy of future investigation. How can interpersonal trust be built in online communities?

Second, for leaders, they need to move away from a command and control mindset to support and engage employees facing social isolation, burnout and developing feelings of exclusion and negative emotions. Leaders and managers need to develop behaviours, so they are seen more as enablers, with maternal instincts of care, listening

and empathy to deal with the psychosocial issues in such emotionally distraught times. To this end, future research must examine the importance of social relations at work, or what has been described as the opportunity or the 'O' in the ability, motivation and opportunity (AMO) framework (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2000).

Third, in terms of methodological opportunities, future research needs to move from a positivist paradigm to include a radical, critical or post-modern paradigm to allow questioning of established ideas for generating novel explanations from a different perspective and line of thinking. Future research must critically question the existing stream of research to generate new knowledge by re-examining the phenomenon through a critical management theorist's toolbox and not just relying on the traditional cross-sectional, positivist designs. Adopting in-depth qualitative longitudinal designs are highly appropriate for tracking the changes and impacts of a significant crisis on work, employment and people management practices.

Fourth, in terms of evidence, most studies present a single country or at most two country studies on the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Future research can compare and contrast the differences between countries that suffered most and had adverse outcomes with those that suffered relatively less in terms of any differences like their national business systems, regulation, governance systems and leadership and management practices.

Finally, future research can examine a broader range of micro-foundational resources of employees, leaders in dealing with the crisis.

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