



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i10/14825> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i10/14825

Received: 20 August 2022, **Revised:** 16 September 2022, **Accepted:** 29 September 2022

Published Online: 08 October 2022

In-Text Citation: (Mahadi et al., 2022)

To Cite this Article: Mahadi, N., Bakar, A. H. A., Baskaran, S., & Maideen, M. H. (2022). How The Pandemic Has Disrupted and Changed Hiring. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(10), 1331 – 1340.

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Vol. 12, No. 10, 2022, Pg. 1331 – 1340

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



www.hrmars.com

ISSN: 2222-6990

How The Pandemic Has Disrupted and Changed Hiring

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Abstract

The alarming speed of COVID-19 pandemic spreading is not only a global health crisis but also brought severe economic consequences globally, including supply-chain disruptions, temporary shut-down of production facilities etc. As one of the core business functions, the recruitment arm of the Human Resources Department was also severely hit by the effects of the pandemic and creating tremendous uncertainty. No one feels confident about what is coming next, yet everyone needs to make decisions now which will have long-term implications. In addition, to ensure that the organisations remain competitive and to aid the business growth, it is the responsibility of the HR Department to be able to source and recruit the best talent. Many organisations had adopted the global recruitment strategy that offers expatriate packages to attract foreign talents with specific skillsets complement the local talent pool. However, the travel restrictions in place added a level complexity to the application of work passes and entry permits for foreigners for border entries. Some drastic changes happened during that period to ensure business operation keep going as usual. Desperate measures has been taken and replacing the conventional way of doing things. This includes recruitment process in organization as well. Thus, the organisations need to identify the need to redefine the way they attract the best talent in an age of disruption. Therefore, this conceptual paper attempts to provide the understanding on how to achieve that.

Keywords: Hiring, Talent, Human Resources, Pandemic, Competitive

Introduction

Most of businesses could not sustain during the pandemic, forcing them to totally shut down the business. A numbers of company laying off their employees due to financial issues and restructuring especially severely impacted industries such as transportation and tourism. According to data from the Social Security Organization (SOCO), the industrial and service industries experienced sectoral retrenchment rates of 69 percent and 21 percent, respectively, in 2020, outpacing other industries during business operations constraints (Poo, 2021). For instance, during the pre-pandemic era, traditional recruiting methods largely rely on in-person meetings and assessment where the source of potential candidates derived mostly from walk-in and career fairs. However, the imposition of lockdown to ease the spread

of deadly Covid-19 virus forced most businesses to adapt with new ways of working and rapid technological changes to remain afloat. Two years down the road, working from home arrangement and the usage of Zoom, Webex and Hangouts are no longer peculiar in most industries. This emerging trend of technology adoption and remote working have paved the way for the recruiters to conduct interviews and hire candidates from anywhere in the world as the location is no longer being a deal-breaker. This has in turn, increased the job opportunities in technology and healthcare sectors in Malaysia by 43% and 26%, respectively as there is higher demand for areas such as cybersecurity, cloud technology, medical devices and pharmaceuticals (New Straits Time, 2021). Moreover, a number of would-be candidates were probably laid off or furloughed during pandemic causing them emotional scars, financial adversity, and job insecurity. As a result, people are having a second thought on how they view employments. New job seekers look for jobs that provide stability, have compassion, and give hope. Organizations that did not possess these attributes would have a hard time finding workers, this is especially true for organizations that were guilty of laying off people during pandemic. Therefore, this paper put forward some discussions on how the organizations redefine the way they attract the best talent in an age of disruption.

Disruptions Affected the Recruitments

The world of work also has been hit not only by job losses, but also by a reduction in working hours for those who remain employed, as well as a larger drop in the number of job recruitments globally. In addition, major disruption has impacted recruitment by making the process were put into halt due to the economy uncertainty (Cohen, 2021). Many companies has stopped their recruiting activities and make do with the existing resources available. Thus, the disruptions created by the pandemic to the organizations in term of recruitment are discussed in the following section.

(i) Change in Hiring Requirements

Most organizations' recruitment needs have changed as a result of the pandemic, however the impact varies by industry. For example, five of the world's top industries, namely travel and tourism, hotels, restaurants, entertainment, conferences, and manufacturing, have seen a decline in recruitment or "hiring freeze" as a result of the global lockdown and isolation policy, which has forced companies in these industries to close or downsize. On the other hand, COVID-19 had shown an increase in demand for services involving industries such as shipping and delivering companies, grocery stores, healthcare, online shopping companies, and online learning companies, which required these companies to hire a large number of additional employees in order to meet the sudden increase in demand for their services. For instance, in the midst of COVID-19 threatening the world in 2020, two American companies, Amazon, an ecommerce and retail site, has hired 175,000 employees (REUTERS, 2020) whereas Instacart, a company that operates a grocery delivery and demand for online products and grocery deliveries spurred by the pandemic.

(ii) Change in Way of Recruiting

When lockdown was implemented to stop the spread of the COVID-19, organizations and businesses that wished to keep hiring had to adjust their recruitment procedure and adapt to new social distancing by shifting towards virtual recruitment. The entire recruitment process was handled online, with firms switching from traditional face-to-face interviews to live video interviews using various internet tools such as *Zoom* and *Interview stream*. Some of the hiring

processes remained the same as before COVID-19 (Mehrota, 2020), with manual advertisements and paper-based recruitment, but the pandemic also aided many companies in innovating and modernising their recruitment processes, with many beginning to use recruitment software that helps organizations optimise the hiring process, from finding and attracting candidates to screening resumes and sending out offer letters.

(iii) Fewer Job Positions Available for a Shorter Duration

Numerous organizations in industries such as airlines, leisure facilities, and construction that have been severely impacted by COVID-19 have already found themselves in the unfortunate position of laying off employees to cut costs that will help them sail through this pandemic uncertain situation (Fisher, 2019). They will eventually be less open to employing new employees, significantly reducing the number of employment openings within its organization. Not only that, but the position also may be offered for a shorter period because the job market during the pandemic is becoming more competitive, and any jobs available on the market are being snatched up within days of being advertised.

(iv) Change in Employment Market

Due to COVID-19, changes in the employment market have occurred due to a quick shift from office to remote work or working from home (WFH). These changes have the potential to completely transform the employment market since organizations which allow WFH will be able to hire employees from all over the world regardless of where they are located (Mustafa, 2020). As a result, these organizations will have a limitless talent pool to choose from. This transition will result in true global competitiveness for all job roles, not just senior and C-level positions.

(v) Organizations Reputation Influences Recruitment

Jobseekers today are more aware about recruiting and selection environments than ever before, and they may quickly access information on how an organization or business responds in these difficult pandemic times. This will make a significant difference because these organizations and businesses serve as a social support system for their employees, and how they manage the entire organization and businesses throughout the pandemic, whether positively or negatively, will influence its ability to attract talent and loyalty from jobseekers, consequently influencing its recruitment outcomes (Cohen, 2021).

(vi) Change in Job Demand

This pandemic has shown that several industries and firms that used to attract top talent in order to keep ahead of the competition and be ready to take risks are now losing talent to more established businesses as individuals with professional backgrounds and even newcomers seek job stability and security, which is a normal demand in uncertain times like COVID-19 (Mehrota, 2020). This can be seen in the fact that individuals are now looking ahead to the future and choose to work for companies that employ cutting-edge technology which has resulted in a shift in job demand toward technology-based industries rather than conventional industries.

Reimagining Recruitment

The latest Covid-19 pandemic has affected not only the livelihood of human beings, but also to the direction of recruitment style and strategies in the foreseeable future. With the

growing numbers of demanding talent market post-pandemic, the Human Resource (HR) is challenged to pursue more proactive recruitment methods instead of staying reactive. Theoretically, the HR recruitment process considers applicant and vacancy characteristics for particular job choice which is generally influenced by personnel policies, recruitment sources and recruiter traits and behaviour (Noe et. Al., 2012). For instance, recruiters are now aggressively leveraging technology such as videoconferencing and Artificial Intelligence (AI) to screen and connect with potential candidates throughout the crisis (Steinberg, 2020). The process of recruitment now is simplified with the adoption of intelligent AI-powered bot to facilitate the monotonous and repetitive resume screening. In fact, research done by Ladders in 2018 explained that manual resume skimming took only 7.4 seconds during regular times. However, the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2021) reported that the unemployment rate in June 2021 has spiked to 4.8% from 4.5% in the previous year, of which 642,900 persons are those actively unemployed. This means recruiters are overwhelmed with a higher volume of resume to filter during the depth of the pandemic, hence shortening the screening time. As such, more HR recruiters choose AI screening tools to not only screen resumes but also rank candidates and assess their likelihood of succeeding in the said position which indeed streamline the recruitment process during this trying times (Heilweil, 2019).

Additionally, most companies are exploring strategic approaches to engage with potential candidates either through webinar, virtual career fair and social media advertisement (Mustafa, 2020). This is supported by the 2019 Job Seeker Nation Survey conducted by Jobvite which revealed an uptick trend on the popularity of online job boards and employer career sites to seek new job opportunities. The online survey also shows that 41% of survey respondents search for jobs on social media platforms. For example, Nestle Malaysia is actively exploring social media career pages on LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram to engage with potential hires while also setting ahead the suitable working environment to fit in the Covid-19 world (Mustafa, 2020). Correspondingly, the investment arm of Malaysia, Khazanah Nasional Berhad provides a digitalised selection process which consists of five stages - online application, phone interview, written test and psychometric assessment administered online, final online interview followed by offer and acceptance (Khazanah, 2021). As HR recruiters had to take a proactive approach to search for new talent during Covid- 19 crisis, virtual career fairs serve as a great platform for organizations to connect with potential hires. For instance, the leading global online talent management channel; Monster, reported a growing online recruitment activity through virtual career fair conducted reaching 53% between November 2020 and November 2021 based on its Malaysia Employment Index database (Monster, 2021). Another disruption in the recruitment practice driven by reaction to the global pandemic is the personnel policies of the hiring company. As posited by Timmes (2021), job seekers regard work-life balance and company culture as important criteria apart from the traditional perks and benefits to influence their decision-making process. Accordingly, findings from the Jobvite survey also confirm that company culture and salary negotiation remains crucial for job seekers to accept an offer. During the pandemic, more companies encouraged employee social sharing as the means to post open positions while sharing their working experience and company culture to their social media connection (Fisher, 2019). Nowadays, the advance of technology has revolutionized the ways people work and change how people are living their day-to-day life. Things that are trendy 5 years ago might not be trendy now, product life cycle is getting shorter and people perception and values are also changing. Thus, any organizations need to adapt, being an adaptable organization will appeal

to the workforce and help organization to adopt advanced technologies to keep up with its surrounding.

Design and Execute Workforce Planning

Generally, most organizations have fixed teams with bundled skills that are formed with the objective of achieving efficiency (Mehrota, 2020), however future ready organization needs more flexibility, which requires teams that can integrate their expertise together. Workforce demands are always changing because of automation and technological advancements along with pandemics like COVID-19. Thus, HR must develop workforces that are prepared for whatever comes their way, with the skills and capabilities to not just face tomorrow's difficulties, but also to capitalise on possibilities and overcome hurdles that have yet to be anticipated. This can be accomplished through thorough workforce planning, which enables organizations to have a flexible network of teams in which employees can work independently while still learning from one another and delivering with speed, as well as provide useful insights into future long-term workforce requirements (Cohen, 2021). HR should focus on the workforce aspect of how organizations can unleash employees' potential by equipping them with the skills and enduring capabilities needed to flex, stretch, and evolve to meet challenges now and in the future by re- evaluating the work being done and ensuring employees are focused on work that creates value for the organization. HR must then decide who or what should do a certain task by building a hybrid workforce that blends human and technological workforces. HR will also need to consider where that work will be done and how it will be done, exploring new ways of working that build on what they've learned and experienced over the course of the pandemic by streamlining and automating processes, eliminating tasks that were previously performed manually, and completely reimagining and redesigning work itself, resulting in much greater value to business.

Create Employee's Value Proposition

A unique collection of benefits that an employee receives in exchange for the skills, capabilities, and experience they contribute to a company is referred to as an employee value proposition (EVP) (Shukairy, 2021). HR can assist organizations in developing EVPs that explain how their company differs from its competitors, by providing a comprehensive set of offerings that boost employee engagement and bring out the best in employees thereby making the organisation an amazing place to work. When developing an EVP, HR should include the following five main components:

- (i) Financial rewards such as salary and bonuses
- (ii) Employment benefits such as retirement benefits and company sponsored holidays
- (iii) Career Development such as sponsored courses or promotion opportunities
- (iv) Work Environment including positive working environment such as flexible working hours and work and life balance
- (v) Company culture such as understanding the mission, vision, and culture, such as trust and collaboration, as well as positive connections among team members at all levels

HR must examine what the organization now has and what it does not have based on these components. To establish a strong EVP, HR should evaluate what the organization can and cannot offer. This information can be collected through employee surveys conducted on both current and former employees. As a result, HR will be able to develop a strong, clear, unique, and motivating EVP that is aligned with both the employees and the company's expectations (Ndukwe, 2020). The EVP should then be promoted through various internal and external

channels, such as LinkedIn pages, website careers pages, job listings, recruiting videos, and employee referral programmes, allowing the organization to attract and retain top talent.

Discussion and Conclusion

In response to the global economic crisis, organizations are embracing digitalisation to stay competitive and relevant in the industry. Therefore, leaders need to sharpen their technological skills by revamping technology tools such as Microsoft Team, Zoom and Slack for a seamless communication process and better tasks delegation. However, this might cause a gray boundary for a work life balance or even micro- management as it becomes easier to reach out to employees at any time beyond geographical limits.

As the I.R 4.0 is on the rise, organizations can stay resilient by participating in the Go Green initiative to assess employee productivity and designing suitable strategies on a periodic basis that would help organizations to absorb economic shocks while creating a more interactive employee experience. For example, management can use an online internal system called E-Appraisal as an initiative towards digital transformation. This would replace the manual preparation and submission of physical appraisal forms and encourage employment engagement by allowing for effective communication mode. As key strategies of the company should be clearly communicated to the workforce to address any business issues faced by the organization, the E-Appraisal ensures efficient communication among staff (top down). Precisely, employees can stay alert on existing or new strategies executed by higher management and would improve their job performance in terms of work quality, work volume, competency skills, customer service, teamwork, adaptability and resource skills to meet shifting business needs. A copy of the finalized E-appraisal will be stored in the system electronically instead of it being kept into the staff's file. Besides, the E-appraisal system aims to intensify employee engagement by harmonizing employee expectations without micromanaging in order to achieve company goals regardless of economic outlook. This effective collaboration effort allows organizations to maximize business resources and provide comprehensive data for strategic decision-making by just going digital.

Undoubtedly, talents need to be consistently trained to achieve desired competency level. In pivoting towards a sustainable future ready workforce, a learning organization fuelled personal growth and employees competency skill through ongoing learning programs that best work in today's virtual working environment. For instance, organizations can introduce Talent Development Blueprints to provide a holistic and integrated framework where talent can be nurtured and surfaced. This Blueprint constantly anticipates and discovers what the future may be so that organizations can continuously shape and reshape their workforce through proactive talent management (up-skill & re-skill) and leveraging on online learning exchange platforms. By harnessing the concept of "learn-to-earn" staff will be equipped with three essentials spectrum ; Business Essentials, People Essentials and Digital Essentials. Essentially, the Blueprint provides a comprehensive suite of full-fledged courses as the backbone of learning paths crafted to springboard staff competencies and empower them to systematically self-pace their own development. Thus, as the companies operationalise the transformational shifts under the Blueprint, key thrusts should revolve around following areas:

- Accelerating achievement of Specialist certification
- Building required capacity to manage climate-related risk and business potential in line with Environmental, Social & Governance considerations
- Developing higher competencies in the organizations

- Building at par digital relevance to enhance work productivity fostering the fostering the right attitude and mindsets to instil the future-proof spirit

Organizations may be forced to deviate from its recruitment strategy following the imposition of nationwide lockdown during the global health crisis. However, with digital recruitment being the new norm, there is a rising concern on the discriminatory practice towards the recruitment process of workers. Furthermore, the recruitment landscape has completely changed focus to recruit nationally and provide safe and fair talent acquisition once the travel ban is lifted (ILO, 2020). As a part of sourcing strategy, a great support is needed from the stakeholders in terms of incentive's talent referrals to build pipelines for effective hiring. The recruitment team can do differently by encouraging current staff to refer to the "stars" within their professional network considering that in poor business outlook, employed candidates are more intrigued to discuss the role if mutual connection is involved in the initial outreach which indicates that although tough times don't last, a good relationship does.

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