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Hybrid Models for Remote Work Practices in The Post Pandemic Era: Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract

Remote work has gained greater importance in the past three years globally, with more organisations resorting to hybrid models for remote work practices. Much of the growing interest stems from the imposed movement restrictions by lockdowns, quarantines and self-imposed isolations that remote work has become key actor in re-designing workplaces, technology, human capital management, and work policies. The hybrid models have their own financial implications and legal dimension. The purpose of the paper was to redefine Human Resource Management policies and practices in order to harness productive employee engagement using the hybrid model in the post pandemic era. The paper examined specific policy frameworks that governed work models prior to the pandemic and presented on how organisations and their labour administration systems adapted to prospects and challenges brought by the pandemic. The paper proposed strategic re-engineering and strengthening of labour administration systems to regulate the employer and employee relationships in hybrid models for remote work practices in the post pandemic era. A participatory approach adopted combined presentations by experts and case studies. The paper further presented findings and recommendations on intervention strategies on labour administration systems and human resource management policies that were needed to effectively encompass the hybrid remote work models in the post pandemic era. The paper also recommended on initiatives to be adopted to improve and enhance the hybrid models for remote work practices.

Keywords: Hybrid models, Labour Administration, Human Resources Management, Employee Engagement, Work Policies and Practices.

Introduction

When the coronavirus pandemic erupted, companies had to change (Vyas, 2022; Hossain et al., 2020). Many business-as-usual approaches to serving customers, working with suppliers, and collaborating with colleagues or just getting anything done would have failed. They had to increase the speed of decision making, while improving productivity, using technology and data in new ways, and accelerating the scope and scale of innovation (De Smet et al., 2020; Kane et al., 2001). Real-time collaboration and co-location became more important, and have even extended to the virtual world. The pandemic has seen the large-scale deployment of

fast, agile teams small, focused cross-functional teams working together toward a common set of objectives that are tracked and measured (Babapour Chafi et al., 2021).

Based on the rhythm of the new normal, the working environment expects all to be proactive, prepared, and to be able to work with people closely (Kane et al., 2001). Besides, we are expected more than ever to solve problems and share the knowledge instantly, that is publishing whatever learned, so that others learn and benefit from and avoid repeating the same mistakes (Vyas, 2022). People working in a hybrid model sometimes would be in person with colleagues at work premise, and or sometimes working remotely. This model can unlock significant value, including more satisfied employees and lower real-estate costs. There are other benefits to a hybrid working model, including access to a broader range of talent, greater flexibility, and improved productivity (Babapour Chafi et al., 2021). To achieve these gains, employers need to ensure that the basics are in place to digitally enable remote working and collaboration, while taking care to create working norms that foster social cohesion. They should precisely define the optimal approach for each role and employee segment. That requires understanding when on-site work is better compared with remote interaction or independent work (De Smet et al., 2020).

Because of the pandemic, leadership teams have embraced technology and data, reinventing core processes and adopting new collaboration tools. Technology and people interacting in new ways is at the heart of the new operating model for business and of creating an effective post pandemic organization (De Smet et al., 2020). Therefore, the main purpose of this article is to explore the prospects and challenges of the human resources perspectives on the hybrid models for remote work practices in the post pandemic era of the covid-19. This has been accomplished by adopting a qualitative research design and an analysis of the predetermined themes of the human resource perspectives.

The regulation of work between the employer and employee was predominantly reduced to a contract of work. A contract clearly stipulates the duties and rights of both parties, in which the adoption of hybrid models for remote work has to amend some elements of the contract without changing both the employer and employees' obligations, roles and duties.

Literature Review

The human resource management is very essential for any organization to succeed. It is a strategic approach in which employees are managed that can be more or less a renaming of personnel management. However, in contemporary organizations are usually prescriptively conceived as an interrelated set of activities aimed at systematically enhancing the task performance of employees in a manner commensurate with the strategic aims of senior management. It is formal mechanisms for selection and recruitment, deployment of individuals within organizations, that encompassed the use of tools and techniques from psychology such as aptitude testing, manpower planning formula, and the application of theories of motivation based on assumed human needs and concerns (Collings et al., 2018; Hewett et al., 2018; Hossain et al., 2018).

Human resources have grown to the emphasis of strategic roles in the management process to meet business objective. In this regard, the traditional approaches were grounded on process and content models which was called the Harvard model.

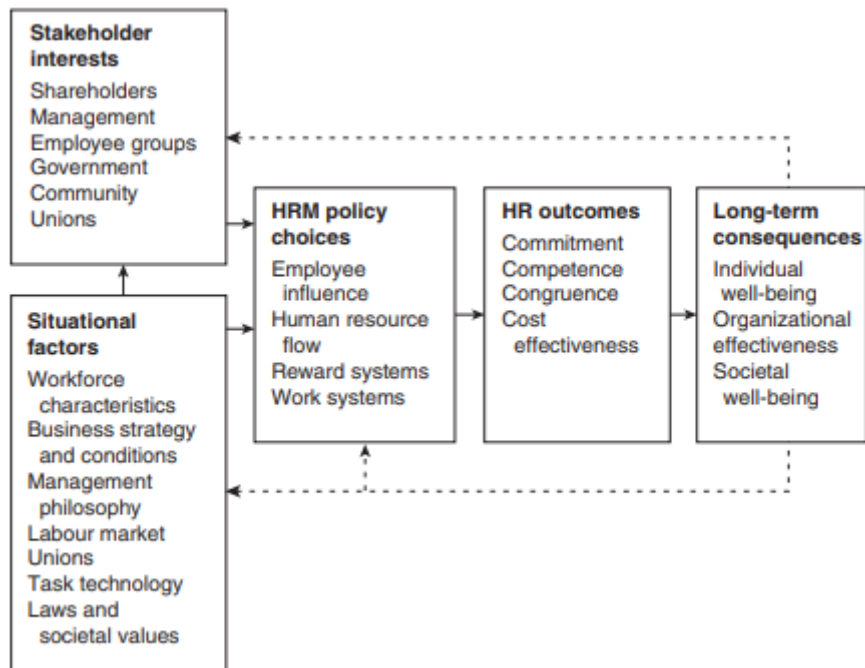


Figure 1: The Harvard model

As a counterpart Fombrun et al. published the Michigan approach which focused more on the functional level of the human resources management that focused on human resource cycle which depended upon selection, appraisal, rewards and development (Collings et al., 2018).

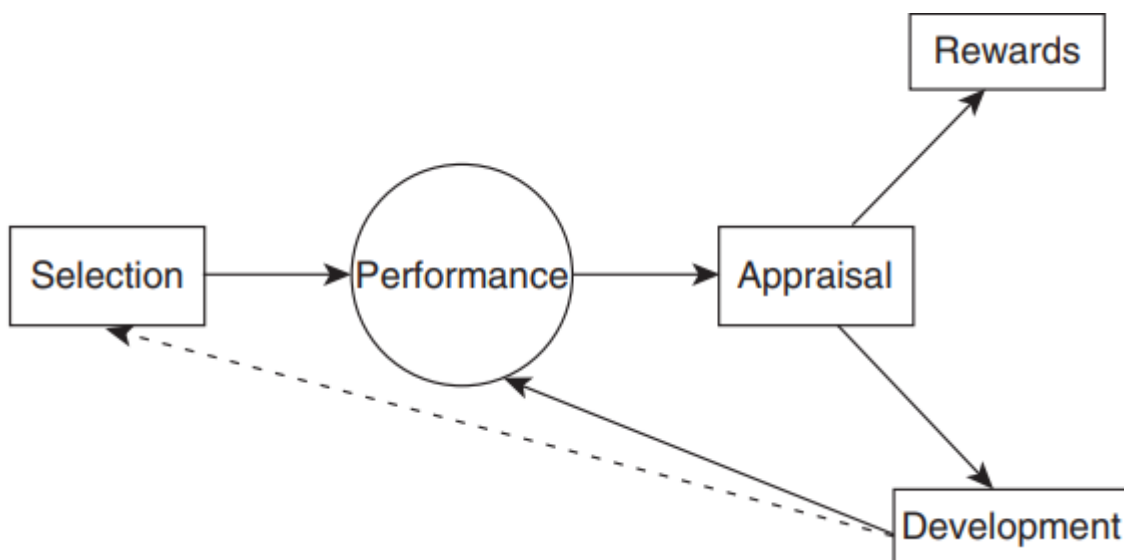


Figure 2: The Michigan approach

Recruitment and Selection

Recruitment and selection contain common elements that focus on the attraction, identification and retention of staff. However, recruitment focuses on the identification and selection of individuals from a pool of applicants external to the organization, whilst selection is focused on internal applicants (Hewett et al., 2018). Recruitment is about the identification and attraction of competent applicants and ends when an application is made. Recruitment and selection offer key opportunities for an organization to alter the type of staff it employs,

but such changes may need to be deliberated in the context of attrition levels and an investigation of precisely who is leaving together with the cause (Vyas, 2022). So whilst an organization might identify the need for distinct and different profiles in its new recruits, such as where technology has advanced and a skill shortage has been identified, the organization also needs to be aware that inducting as well as retaining their new employees (Collings et al., 2018).

Training and Development

The terms training and development can cover a multitude of activities. In skill development, it should not assume that all training will increase or improve skills. The duration of the training and the extent to which either employee or employers benefit from the process should also be considered (Hewett et al., 2018). The likes of short workshops convey information about a new management initiative and keep workers informed only raise skill levels slightly (Kane et al., 2001). Challenging projects, opportunities to exercise judgment, discretionary space and contacts with informed colleagues all help to develop skills, just as routine work, tightly timed activities, rules for decisions and limited contact with others restrict them. Work based training varies in the extent to which it equips workers with new, valuable skills. Work may assist the learning process but it can also restrict it, confining employees to repetitive and routinized tasks (Collings et al., 2018).

Rewards Management

The employment contract is an indeterminate exchange, whereby a labor power is exchanged for a cash wage. The key to an effective reward system is an understanding of what it is that employees need and expect from the work situation. Traditionally, employers have taken the rational economic man approach, resting on assumptions that labour is exchanged for financial gain, usually in the form of wages or salary (Hewett et al., 2018; Kane et al., 2001). This was an exchange or transactional relationship in which labour was exchanged for payment, a reward extrinsic or independent to the actual work. But money is not the only incentive and modern employment contracts spell out the details not only of wages but other benefits, an important one being job security. While many employees regard wages as an essential, they also regard it as equally important that these wages are secured on a regular basis. In times of economic uncertainty, the protection afforded by job security becomes highly valued (Vyas, 2022). This means that, in times of recession, job seekers will tend to opt for securer jobs, even if this means foregoing some pay; this will make public sector jobs more sought after at such a time. The financial responsibilities of modern living mean that most employees will deem it necessary that there is a long term basis to their ability to provide family support and meeting financial commitments (Collings et al., 2018).

Performance Management

Performance management is a process that enables employees to perform their roles to the best of their abilities with the aim of achieving or exceeding established targets and standards that are directly linked with the organization's objectives (Hewett et al., 2018). Performance management is posited as a strategic management technique that supports the overall business goals of the firm through linking each individual's work goals to the overall mission of the firm. An integrated system where management and employees work together in setting objectives, assessing and reviewing how these are being met and rewarding good performance (Collings et al., 2018).

There are four principal normative concerns of performance management. First, is that it aims to improve performance. Second, it endeavors to develop employees. Third, it seeks to satisfy the expectations of the various organizational stakeholders (Al Qalhati et al., 2020; Javed et al., 2020). Finally, communication and involvement is imperative due to the ideology of arriving at jointly agreed goals and objectives. In other words, performance management seeks management by agreement rather than dictation.

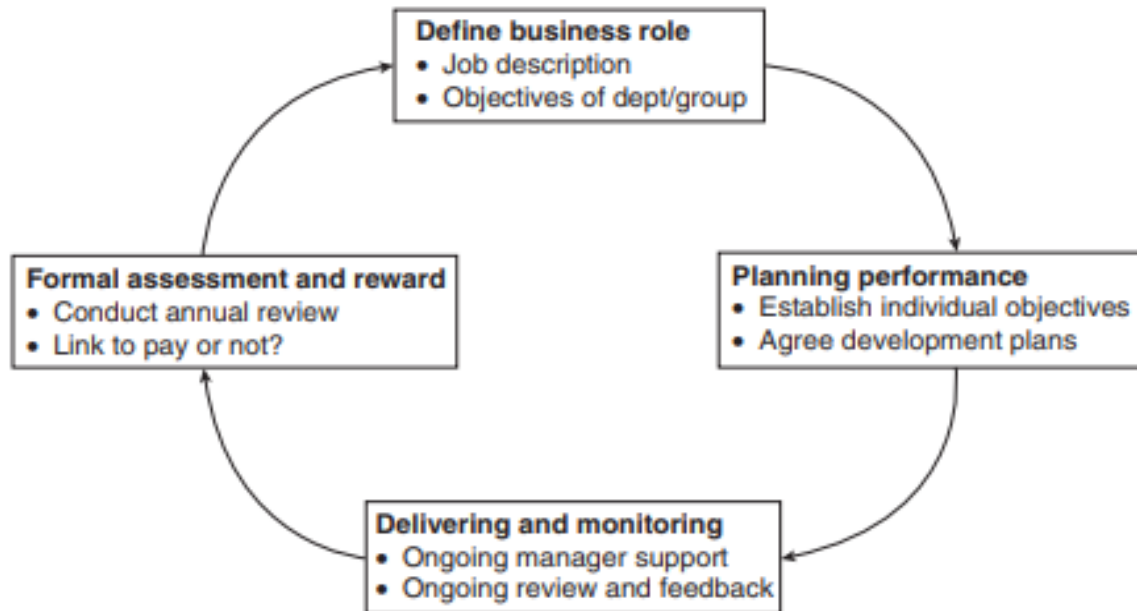


Figure 3: Stages of a typical performance management system.

A body of work has taken place arguing for and against linking appraisals to pay. The main argument for this is that all parties take the process more seriously, while the main argument against is that pay becomes the central issue to the detriment of the developmental aspect of performance management (Hewett et al., 2018). Linking performance to pay is a market-based approach to gaining employee commitment, whilst simultaneously helping 'to align managerial interests with shareholder value and shift downside risk' to the employees (Babapour Chafi et al., 2021; Collings et al., 2018).

Work Premise Versus Remote Work Practices

Working from the work premises has several prospects that include the ability by the employers to have a central control of employees at the same place to manage diversity, work culture, managing and maintaining standards for competitiveness. There is also direct supervision and control of desired targets which helps the employer to instill commitment and innovativeness among employees (Chafi et al., 2021; Hossain et al., 2018). Confidentiality can be easily maintained which brings an environment that build work teams. This is literally opposed to the financial implications of remote working. Remote working poses a greater financial burden on the organization as it tries to invest in equipment that can be used remotely by workers such as laptops and Wi-Fi accessories (Kane et al., 2001). Beside the investment cost, the risk of damage or loss of the company equipment is very high. Working from home involves a lot of disturbances that include family responsibilities, facility related issues, housekeeping activities, and maybe unconducive environment considering other social issues.

However, the remote work approach has some prospects that cannot be overlooked. There is a great financial relief that can result from working at home. This include, reduced office rental cost, reduced utility bills (water and electricity bills) as well as reduced employees transport cost (Kane et al., 2001). In addition to that, the remote working has been found to be critical especially during the implementation of lockdown in the Covid-19 pandemic era. It has allowed so many workers to execute their duties, hold meeting and conferences virtually since there were movement restrictions. As the result, the work from premise approach tend to expand capital investment cost or rental, utility bills, transport cost, canteen facilities and also need some auxiliary workers who do not directly contribute to the main mandate of the organization (Chafi et al., 2021).

Never-the-less, the hybrid model has been since taken as the probable approach during the trying times of the covid-19 pandemic. Some of the jobs were compatible with remote working which include most of the office work, desk research educational professions while others which were not compatible with the remote working practices depended on rotational arrangement to decongest the work premises in order to curb the spread of Covid 19.

The Framework Of The Labour Administration System: International, Governments, Sector/Industrial, Organisational, and Individual employee perspectives

The International Labour Organisation has come up with a Decent Work agenda through its various ILO Conventions and recommendations. Through its various conventions, the ILO gives a legal framework for member countries to adopt and ratify given labour standards. The concept, roles and functions of a labour administration system as defined in ILO Convention No.150 and Recommendation No.158. Labour administration is responsible for all aspects of national labour policy formulation and implementation

System of Labour Administration refers to all public administration bodies responsible for and/or engaged in labour administration whether they are ministerial departments, public agencies, parastatals, regional or local agencies, any other form of decentralized administration, any institutional framework for the coordination of the activities of such bodies for consultation with and participation of employers and workers and their organizations. In broad terms Labour administration focuses on Labour standards, Labour relations, Employment regulation, and Research in labour matters.

International Labour Organisation member states upon ratification of various conventions and recommendations by ILO, they domesticate the conventions into their countries' laws through acts of parliament. The Labour standards when enacted into national laws forms the basis of a legal framework which gives policy direction to sectors and organisations' Human Resource policies and practices. In case of Zimbabwe, an Industry or sectorial approach has been adopted through National Employment Councils (NECs) for sectors. These further regulate conditions of employment in their sectors by facilitating social dialogue on specific industry needs. The NECs has a grouping of the same organisations e.g. Agriculture, Mining, and Manufacturing.

In addition to national and sectorial legal frameworks, organisations and companies refines and develops their own human resources policies and practices. The HRM policies includes: Recruitment, Training and Development, Compensation and Rewards, Promotions. Leave,

Retirement etc. Most of these are reduced to individual employee contracts or in collective resolutions. These must be enforceable in law.

Collins Dictionary defines work as spending time and effort doing a task that need to be done or trying to achieve something. Work involves inputs, processes, and output. It is within this context that work is regulated in order to achieve social justice and democracy between the social partners. A contract of employment is an agreement of work between an individual employee and employer. It defines a unit level of employment relationship in an organization and is legal binding. A contract of work comprises of the following elements agreed by the parties: Duration of the contract, Premise of work, reporting structure, nature of duties or responsibilities, working days and hours including breaks, remuneration and rewards, leave, conditions for employment termination, and terminal benefits. Therefore, a strategic human resources concept becomes an integral part and is concerned with managing the organisation's human capital through its policies and practices. It is important to note that an introduction of hybrid models for remote work practices should be strategic in order for organisations to remain competitive and productive.

Research Methodology

Due to its exploratory nature, a qualitative approach was adopted for this study. Qualitative research was also appropriate to examine, at a deep level, the impact of experiences, behavior and individual interactions on business operations (Myers, 2019). In-depth, semi-structured interviews were chosen to explore the HR practices employed by business managers during the Covid 19 pandemic as well as the recovering period (Post pandemic).

A semi-structured approach was used to guide the interviews as it allows key questions to be asked of all respondents, while ensuring the flexibility to follow up on emerging topics and themes and to adapt to participants' perspectives. Six managers were purposively selected from different sectors of the economy in order to gain reliability and diversity of data for robust analysis. The sectors included the health, education, retail, service, distribution and manufacturing sector in Zimbabwe. The data was dedicated to be collected in three days during the last week of August 2022.

Data analysis is the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview recordings and field notes and other material that accumulate to increase the researcher's understanding of them and enable the researcher to present the discoveries to others. The present study made use of thematic analysis to explore the prospects and challenges of the human resources perspectives on the hybrid models for remote work practices in the post pandemic era of the covid-19.

Findings

Human Resource Perspectives

To focus our investigation, we established four functional areas of the human resources from the literature to explore the prospects and challenges of the hybrid model for remote in the post covid-19 pandemic era. An overview of the regulation framework through the labour administration system was made. The results presented the link between perspectives of managers from the health, education, retail, service, distribution and manufacturing sectors

in Zimbabwe and the four functional level that included, recruitment and selection, training and development, reward management as well as performance management.

The disruption that emerged as the advent of Covid-19 ensued, resulted in organizations swiftly decongesting their premise to minimize contact between people (Chafi et al., 2021). The use of technology increased abruptly as organizations tried to cope with the regulation brought in by the pandemic. These included movement restrictions, decongestion of working places, use of sanitizers, protective gloves and face masks to prevent the spread of Covid-19. The use of hybrid model became rampant which resulted in most firms investing in remote working where it was compatible. Remote working was neither cost free nor cost saving. Investment in laptops, tablets and internet accessories was comparably a good budget. However, in the post Covid-19, some have found it difficult to come back to the premise on a full scale. For instances some banks had closed some branches, retrenched employees and resorted to internet banking with few branches open. On the other hand, the pandemic brought in the realization on some organizations that they were able to carry on with business remotely without challenges.

Recruitment and Selection

Regarding recruitment and selection the informants noted that most of the interviews were done online using platforms like Zoom and Google meet among others. The participants from most of the sectors concurred with this assertion as shown by the following responses;

We conducted interviews online to minimize human being to human being contact as well as limiting movement and cost associated with gathering potential candidate at the premise.

We moved swiftly into online recruitment, using social media and other possible platforms to reach out to the potential candidate.

The respondent from the manufacturing sector noted that, their recruitment was mainly done on site. This shows that most of the workers in the manufacturing sectors could not be recruited remotely as there is need to assess the hand on capabilities of the potential workers. This was reported as follows:

We could not rely solely on recruiting online, since we wanted to assess hands on ability onsite.

However online recruitment seemed to have given a financial relief for most sectors and most of them have indicated that they still use it in the post pandemic era. Some of the respondents indicated the prospects of the remote recruitment which was reported as follows;

We can now minimize most of the expenses that we were used to incur when we were doing physical interview.

The reduction in recruitment cost is overwhelmingly surprising.

We can now save time and other resources as we can do the recruitment process faster and cheaper.

We can also see that moving back to physical recruitment can not only drag us back as organization but also cause inconveniences for those who want to attend interviews as they travel long distances to attend the interviews that might not be in favor of them. You can imagine the cost of transport, food and accommodation only to attend an unsuccessful interview.

However, some informants have different opinions over the same issue, which was one of our drive to taking participants from different sectors. Their responses are presented as follows;

We could like the idea of doing the recruitment remotely, but our challenge here is that we need to assess the physical fitness of the workers. There is nothing boring more than selecting a person who is not physically fit for the job because that was done online. Duplication of the process would plunge us into overwhelming expenses.

It is very difficult to assess someone's job fit, personality, and commitment when interviews are done online.

Sometimes people have phobia toward use of technology, so some well performing candidate might be shy to engage online interviews and as well some have cited poor networks in most areas they stay, so holding interviews online would reduce their chance of being selected.

Training and Development

The terms training and development can cover a multitude of activities that improves the workers' skills which result in improved productivity. Some of the respondents were of the view that the hybrid model has greater prospects than challenges even in the post covid-19 pandemic era. To show their support for the inclusion of remote working, here are some responses:

It is faster to hold meetings, workshops and conferences over the internet.

Working remotely can save useful time and resources and it's now difficult for us to leave it as we have realized that in this economic hardship we have this way of saving fuel, accommodation, transport cost among others.

Well, you see this allows large numbers to get the training cheaply and faster.

Due diversity of sectors, so the differing of opinions. Other respondent seemed not to support the remote work practices as biased, ineffective and misleading. Their disapproval is clearly embedded in their responses.

It is difficult to identify the training gaps and training needs if the employee is working remotely.

Sometimes it's a waste of time and money training online. Most of people don't concentrate, they just log in and sleep, but at the end everyone who logged in would be regarded as having completed the training. Therefore, attending physical training shows commitment.

Demonstrations and hands on training is not compatible with remote work practices. The person should be on the ground to acquire skills.

Reward Management

Considering the fact that technology is advancing at a faster rate, the management should cope up to save time and resources which adds to improved productivity, competitiveness, profitability and growth. Therefore, some respondent supported the use of remote work practices as reported below;

Signing contracts is now easier as I can use an electronic signature to approve transactions and salaries will be disbursed at once.

Considering internet banking, and other technologies that necessitate running of payrolls, this can be simply done remotely without using resources unnecessarily.

However, others argued that automating the payrolls and reward systems lead to demotivation of workers as they perceive that cash payment do not bring intrinsic motive for work. Therefore, there are other element to be taken into account that cannot be done remotely.

When the people responsible for contract signing are working remotely, they tend to forget and or become unavailable online to attend to the queries and request if there is need for their attention. But if we know that they work from the office, we can easily visit to make our request.

Performance Management

Performance management is a process that enables employees to perform their roles to the best of their abilities with the aim of achieving or exceeding established targets and standards that are directly linked with the organization's objectives. It is an integrated system where management and employees work together in setting objectives, assessing and reviewing how these are being met and rewarding good performance (Chafi et al., 2021). Therefore, regarding this element, most of the managers were not in favor of the remote working as it is very difficult to track the performance if the workers are working from home.

Look! How do we track the performance of employee working from home? Obviously it's very difficult.

It's difficult for the employee working from home to cope with the objectives of the firm.

Well, there is a lot of cheating when people work from home, they end up hiring others to do what they have been obliged to do. If the job is done well, the credit goes to the person who hasn't done the job.

Employees working from home have diverted concentration and lack innovativeness. They only maintain work roles.

However, others have guts to argue that we have entered a digital era therefore it is a point of no return. In fact, as the management we have to shift into new way of assessing performance that is compatible with the use of technology.

What we want is to see job being done well regardless of the worker being home or in the office.

Some employees better do good job alone at home than in the presents of others, they avoid taking responsibility.

Working at home improves performance through innovative ideas that emerges when someone is working alone.

Therefore, the management should cope with the changing business environment in order to be able to identify well performer and early adapters so that they reward good performance.

Legal Framework Perspective

All of the respondent incurred with that there has not been enough legal framework as guided by the relevant labour administration bodies. The following responses were made:

There is a gap in our laws in covering the hybrid models for remote work.

We changed the contracts of employment to performance contracts since we can't supervise hours of work worked.

We would rather measure performance by achievables. The employee determines time to work from home or to rest.

There is a lot that needs to be done in regulation of hybrid models for remote work practices in the post pandemic era. Very soon we will see cases piling in courts seeking justice between employers and employees' contractual matters.

Therefore, the Labour administration needs to re-engineer and strengthen its systems at all levels to regulate the hybrid models for remote work practices in the post pandemic era.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research show case the prospects and challenges embedded in the human resource perspectives on the hybrid model for remote work practices in the post covid-19 pandemic era. The study was conceptualized around the labour administration system and narrowed down to four functional areas of the human resources management. These are the recruitment and selection, training and development, reward management as well as performance management. Therefore, the researchers analyzed the prospects and challenges perceived in these functional areas using the responses from six managers purposively chosen from different sectors of the economy for diversity and reliability.

Theoretical Contribution

This research study has several theoretical contributions that broadens the literature especially in the context of human resource perspectives. The study implores the prospects and challenges of hybrid model for remote work practices in the post Covid-19 pandemic era focusing on the functional areas of the human resources managers. This will add to the work that is being done by other researchers in the field of human resources concerning the way forward as the businesses are exiting the Covid-19 pandemic which was full of strict regulations. The literature has pointed out that the emergence of the pandemic saw the human resources managers swiftly moving toward the strategies that encourages remote working (Kane et al., 2001). Subsequently, firms were forced to invest in the infrastructure and equipment that is compatible with remote working. Some industries such as manufacturing was not compatible with remote due to processes required, hence the need for the hybrid model (Kane et al., 2001). However, the economies are moving out of the pandemic and organizations are weighing options whilst questioning if the use of remote working would still be necessary or continue with hybrid models for remote work practices. Many researchers are exploring the research question while this study only inclined to the prospects and challenges as organizations exit the pandemic.

Managerial Contribution

The advent of Covid-19 has disrupted the normal ways of personnel management. As the result the hybrid model came into existence which the remote work practices rampantly used where appropriate and compatible (Vyas, 2022). However, the exiting of the pandemic comes with differing opinions on whether organizations need to continue using the hybrid models of remote work practices on human resources perspective. In this study, some of the respondents perceive the prospects while others see it as a challenge that organizations need to move away from. Regarding the recruitment, although some argued that there is need to do away with recruiting online, most of the respondents were in favor of the remote working. This might be so because of its ability to reduce cost, which in turn improve the profitability of firms, streamline unnecessary interview, save resources, time and transport cost. The rewarding processes have found to be working smoothly in the hybrid model with very few draw backs which the managers indicated that they can be easily resolved. Training in the post pandemic should not be virtual, especial in the health sector and other sectors that need hands on practices (Vyas, 2022; Islam, 2020).

Performance management is very difficult to execute virtually. Unless the employees are at the work premise where the management has a central control. Non-the-less, the hybrid models for remote work practices seems to be still working even in the post pandemic era because of its ability to reduce cost. Organizations would like to capitalize on their investment made during the pandemic. However, some sectors and industries are not compatible with remote working but for the fact of saving office space and other resources, the administration and any kind of office can be done remotely (Vyas, 2022).

The legal framework and labour administration systems from international, national, sectorial, organizational and individual levels has to be re-engineered and strengthened to allow smooth and manageable hybrid models work relationships.

Areas of Future Research

As the result of the findings of this study, the researchers are in the view that there is need for an in-depth analysis of cost effectiveness of the hybrid model in remote work practices in the post pandemic era. In addition, future studies should incline to motivation and productivity of workers which should be rather focusing on employee themselves than the management perspectives.

Work from home model cannot be done for all work because of the inputs and processes required. It is important to note that while it is feasible for some employees to work from home, there are some specific professions that requires to work from work premise e.g. Manufacturing using plant machinery, Mining, Medical and other essential services. Therefore, there is need to research on proper employee engagement in hybrid models for remote work practices in the post pandemic era.

Organisations may need to recruit workers beyond borders for remote work. There is need to research on human resources initiatives, policies and practices that can be employed.

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