

Human Resource Management in Service of Innovation: Challenges and Practices in SMEs "Small and Medium-sized Enterprises"

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Abstract:

This article explores the complex relationship between human resource management (HRM) and innovation within companies, with a particular focus on the transformations brought about by the COVID-19 health crisis. The pandemic accelerated digitalization and the adoption of remote work, thus transforming HRM practices in an ever-changing environment. Through an in-depth analysis of the crisis's impact on HR practices, the article examines how companies have adapted their HR strategies to foster innovation, particularly in SMEs focused on frugal innovation and those faced with the need to adapt to new work norms. The article offers a reflection on emerging HR practices and highlights the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating digital technologies and innovative approaches to manage human capital.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, Innovation, Remote Work, Digitalization, COVID-19

Jel Classification Codes: H32, L39.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted the global business landscape, forcing companies, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), to rethink their human resource management (HRM) practices to maintain their competitiveness. Among these transformations, accelerated digitalization and the widespread adoption of remote work have emerged as essential responses to ensure business continuity. These changes have not only altered the internal operations of organizations but have also posed new challenges in terms of innovation and performance.

Digitalization of HR processes, notably through the automation of administrative tasks and optimization of talent management, has become a priority for many companies. The use of technologies such as artificial intelligence and process

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automation helps reduce errors, improve operational efficiency, and free up time for higher-value activities. Furthermore, remote work, initially adopted as a temporary measure, has become a permanent fixture, forcing companies to rethink their remote work policies and implement strategies to maintain employee engagement and productivity.

However, these transformations are not without challenges. Managers must now find a balance between in-person and remote work, while ensuring the preservation of company culture and avoiding employee isolation. Additionally, the need to innovate closely with employees and involve them in the process is critical to ensuring a successful transition to these new work modalities.

Thus, this study aims to explore how HRM can act as a catalyst for innovation in SMEs, drawing on lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis. We will examine HR practices that are likely to foster innovation and how innovation, in turn, transforms HR practices, with a focus on digitalization and remote work.

1. The Transformation of HRM in the Post-COVID-19 Era

The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented upheaval in human resource management (HRM), accelerating pre-existing trends while introducing new challenges. SMEs, in particular, were forced to adapt their practices to cope with the challenges of digitalization, remote work, and the need for innovation in management. This chapter examines the main HRM developments in light of these transformations and highlights their impact on business performance.

1.1. The Digitalization of HRM: A Lever for Adaptation and Innovation

The health crisis has strengthened the importance of digitalization within SMEs, speeding up the adoption of technological tools for human resource management. Before the pandemic, digitalization was already seen as a means of efficiency, but its adoption was often hindered by financial and organizational constraints (Baret et al., 2020). With the sanitary restrictions, businesses had to quickly integrate talent management software, online recruitment platforms, and performance evaluation systems based on artificial intelligence (Delery & Roumpi, 2021).

Furthermore, digital transformation has facilitated the implementation of new training and skills development methods. Online learning, through interactive platforms, replaced face-to-face training and allowed employees to acquire skills at their own pace (Bourhis & Mekkaoui, 2021). However, this transition required organizational support to avoid a digital divide among employees and ensure effective use of digital tools.

1.2. Remote Work: Opportunities and Challenges for HRM

Remote work became an essential solution to ensure business continuity during the health crisis. It is now seen as a permanent mode of work in many companies, with mixed effects on human resource management (Baudoin et al., 2022).

On the one hand, remote work promoted better organizational flexibility and greater autonomy for employees. It also helped reduce infrastructure costs and attract talent located outside traditional employment hubs (Mettling, 2020). On the other hand, it

brought challenges in terms of managing working hours, maintaining team cohesion, and preserving corporate culture (Battistelli & Montani, 2021).

To address these challenges, SMEs were forced to adapt their management practices by implementing monitoring and motivation systems suited to remote work. The introduction of regular virtual meetings, the use of collaborative tools, and the establishment of clear objectives are among the measures that helped maintain employee engagement and ensure stable productivity (Dufau et al., 2021).

1.3. Managerial Innovation and the Redesign of HRM Practices

Beyond digitalization and remote work, the pandemic revealed the need for SMEs to innovate in their human resource management practices. The adoption of new work modes led to a redefinition of the role of managers, who now have to combine remote leadership with personalized employee support (Giauque, 2021).

One of the key drivers of managerial innovation has been the implementation of new performance management strategies, based on more qualitative than quantitative criteria. Rather than only measuring attendance or hours worked, companies shifted to evaluations focused on results and individual contributions to value creation (Aubert et al., 2021).

Moreover, employee well-being management became a priority for companies, which strengthened their mental health and psychosocial risk prevention policies. The establishment of listening cells and psychological support systems helped employees cope with heightened stress (Renaud & Morin, 2022).

2. The Impact of Digital Transformation on Talent Management and Skills Development

The rise of digital technologies and the evolving post-COVID world of work have profoundly reshaped talent management and skills development in SMEs. Far from being a mere modernization of HR processes, this transformation has led to a reworking of recruitment, training, and career management practices. This chapter examines how digitalization has reshaped these essential aspects of HR management and analyzes the challenges and opportunities it presents.

2.1. Recruitment and Attractiveness of Talent in the Digital Age

The health crisis accelerated the digitalization of recruitment processes, forcing SMEs to rethink their methods of attracting and selecting talent. Digital tools, such as online recruitment platforms and artificial intelligence (AI), allowed companies to optimize processes and improve efficiency (Strohmeier & Piazza, 2021).

The use of remote interviews and matching algorithms facilitated the identification of profiles that best met the company's needs, while reducing recruitment costs and time (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2021). However, these new practices are not without risks, particularly regarding fairness and algorithmic bias, which can affect decision-making objectivity (Vermeulen & Karanovic, 2022).

Additionally, remote work and the flexibility offered by new technologies have changed candidate expectations. Candidates now prioritize companies that offer hybrid working models and better work-life balance conditions (Baret & Meier, 2022).

2.2. Continuous Learning and Skills Development via Digital Tools

With the rise of digitalization, professional training underwent a profound transformation, marked by the widespread adoption of online learning platforms and remote training modules. Digital learning, supported by AI and immersive technologies like augmented reality, allowed companies to offer personalized learning paths tailored to their employees' specific needs (Bourhis & Mekkaoui, 2021).

This approach fostered faster and more flexible skills development, but it also revealed certain limitations. The lack of social interaction, the need for greater autonomy, and disparities in access to technology pose significant challenges to the effectiveness of digital training (Pichault et al., 2021).

To address these limitations, some companies adopted a mixed strategy, combining online learning with in-person sessions to ensure more engaging and interactive training (Dufau et al., 2021).

2.3. Career Management and Talent Retention in a Digitalized Environment

The post-COVID transformation of the work environment also had a significant impact on career management. Digitalization allowed SMEs to implement talent management tools based on data analytics (People Analytics), enabling them to identify high-potential individuals and optimize career paths (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2022).

However, this transformation has also raised challenges regarding talent retention. The increased flexibility of the labor market, combined with the rise of remote work, has heightened employee turnover, with employees more likely to switch companies based on the opportunities offered (Baudoin et al., 2022).

To address these challenges, SMEs had to rethink their retention strategies, focusing on well-being, engagement, and recognition policies. Implementing mentoring programs, improving work-life quality, and offering more transparent career paths are just a few ways to increase employee motivation and retention (Giauque, 2021).

3. The Digitalization of HR Processes and Its Impact on SME Performance

Digital transformation is not limited to talent management and skills development. It also affects all HR processes, fundamentally changing the way of working, internal organization, and managerial practices. This chapter explores how the digitalization of HR processes influences SME performance by improving efficiency, flexibility, and employee experience, while also presenting challenges related to change management and data security.

3.1. Automation and Optimization of HR Processes

The automation of administrative tasks and HR processes has accelerated dramatically with the emergence of integrated HR software (HRIS) and AI-based tools. These technologies allow SMEs to optimize HR management by reducing the time spent on repetitive tasks and improving data reliability (Pichault & de la Villarmois, 2020).

Automated solutions for recruitment, payroll, and leave management enable better resource allocation and reduce administrative errors (Cappelli, 2021). Additionally, chatbots and virtual assistants facilitate employee interaction by providing quick

responses to common HR questions, freeing up HR managers to focus on more value-added tasks (Lepak et al., 2021).

However, the adoption of these tools raises concerns about employee acceptance and data privacy risks (Meignant, 2022). Employee buy-in and training on these new tools are essential for the success of these transformations.

3.2. Employee Experience and Engagement in a Digitalized Environment

HR digitalization goes beyond process optimization. It also plays a key role in enhancing the employee experience, particularly through engagement platforms and collaborative tools.

Digital solutions promote smoother communication and greater transparency within SMEs (Fallery & Rodhain, 2020). Real-time feedback tools, employee recognition platforms, and digital collaboration spaces help strengthen engagement and employees' sense of belonging (Kiron & Unruh, 2021).

However, digitalization can also lead to feelings of isolation, especially in organizations where remote work has become the norm. It is therefore crucial for SMEs to find a balance between digital flexibility and human interaction to maintain an effective group dynamic (Sultan, 2021).

3.3. Data Security and Regulatory Compliance

With the widespread use of digital tools in HR management, data security has become a top priority for companies. Managing sensitive employee information, such as contracts, payslips, and performance evaluations, requires compliance with applicable regulations, such as the GDPR in Europe (Bouchez, 2022).

SMEs must therefore implement advanced protection systems, such as data encryption, strict access policies, and robust cybersecurity protocols (Peyrat-Guillard et al., 2021). This is especially important because data breaches can harm the company's reputation and result in heavy financial penalties.

4. The Challenges and Limits of Digitalization in Human Resource Management

While the digitalization of human resources (HR) brings productivity gains and enhances employee experience, it also presents numerous challenges for businesses, particularly Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). This chapter explores the main limitations and constraints associated with the digital transformation of HR, including resistance to change, risks linked to excessive automation, and new forms of inequality induced by these technologies.

4.1. Resistance to Change and Adoption of HR Technologies

One of the major challenges in digitalizing HR lies in the reluctance of some employees and managers to adopt new digital tools. Fear of the unknown, lack of digital skills, and attachment to traditional work methods slow down the effective integration of technological innovations (Meignant, 2022). Resistance to change can manifest in various forms, such as reluctance to use HR management software, perceptions of increased surveillance, or fear of losing one's job due to automation (Fallery & Rodhain, 2020). To overcome these obstacles, companies need to invest in appropriate training and provide support to employees during the digital transition (Cappelli, 2021). Furthermore, clear communication about the benefits of new tools is essential to

reassure employees and encourage their engagement in this transformation process (Pichault & de la Villarmois, 2020).

4.2. Risks Linked to Automation and AI in Human Resource Management

The increasing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and algorithms in HR management raises ethical and organizational concerns. While AI can optimize recruitment, training, and performance management processes, it can also introduce discriminatory biases and dehumanize certain strategic decisions (Bouchez, 2022). For example, recruitment algorithms may reproduce and amplify existing biases by selecting profiles based on irrelevant or discriminatory criteria (Lepak et al., 2021). Moreover, the automated performance evaluation of employees, based on behavioral data analysis, can be perceived as intrusive and generate mistrust within teams (Sultan, 2021).

Thus, companies must ensure that these tools are effectively regulated, ensuring they adhere to the principles of fairness, transparency, and respect for privacy (Peyrat-Guillard et al., 2021).

4.3. The Digital Divide and New Forms of Professional Inequality

The acceleration of digitalization in HR highlights a new issue: the digital divide and the inequalities it may create. Not all employees possess the same level of digital skills, and certain categories of workers, such as seniors and those with fewer qualifications, may struggle to adapt to these new technologies (Kiron & Unruh, 2021).

Companies must, therefore, implement inclusive strategies to ensure equitable access to digital tools and prevent digitalization from creating a divide between those who master these technologies and those who are excluded from them (Pichault & de la Villarmois, 2020).

Furthermore, remote work, widely adopted since the Covid-19 pandemic, has exacerbated these inequalities. Some employees have an environment conducive to remote work, while others face more precarious conditions (Meignant, 2022). It is crucial for companies to rethink their flexibility policies in light of these disparities.

5. New Skills and the Role of HR in the Digital Age

Digital transformation is deeply altering the skills required in the labor market. In response to these changes, companies must adapt their human resource management to support their employees in developing new skills and promoting a culture of continuous learning. This chapter explores key skills in the digital era, the strategic role of HR in supporting employees, and the measures put in place to enhance organizational adaptability.

5.1. Key Skills in the Digital Era

The rise of digital technologies demands that workers acquire new technical and behavioral skills. According to Pichault and de la Villarmois (2020), these skills can be classified into three main categories:

1. **Technological Skills:** Mastery of digital tools, integrated management software, and collaborative platforms is now essential. Additionally, understanding issues related to artificial intelligence and automation is crucial (Meignant, 2022).

2. **Analytical Skills:** The ability to process and interpret data is increasingly sought after. HR professionals must be skilled in using data analytics tools to guide strategic decisions (Fallery & Rodhain, 2020).
3. **Behavioral Skills (Soft Skills):** Digitalization has amplified the importance of relational skills, such as adaptability, creativity, and collaboration. These qualities help employees thrive in an ever-changing environment (Lepak et al., 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic has further emphasized these demands, forcing companies to accelerate the acquisition of skills in remote work, change management, and organizational resilience (Cappelli, 2021).

5.2. The Strategic Role of HR in Developing Digital Skills

HR departments play a central role in aligning skills with digital demands. This task involves several key levers:

- **Identifying Training Needs:** Assessing skill gaps is vital to anticipate future needs and adapt training plans accordingly (Bouchez, 2022).
- **Implementing Tailored Training Paths:** Companies are increasingly investing in online learning platforms (LMS), microlearning, and virtual reality training (Kiron & Unruh, 2021).
- **Supporting Employee Skill Development:** HR should foster an inclusive approach, ensuring all employees, regardless of their starting skill level, have access to training (Peyrat-Guillard et al., 2021).

Digital mentoring and reverse mentoring (training managers by younger generations) are practices that are growing to facilitate knowledge transfer and the rapid adoption of new technologies (Sultan, 2021).

5.3. Lifelong Learning: An Imperative for Companies

In a context where technologies evolve rapidly, continuous learning has become essential for ensuring companies' competitiveness and employees' employability. Lifelong learning is based on several key pillars:

- **A Culture of Self-Directed Learning:** Companies encourage employees to independently pursue learning through e-learning platforms and online certifications (Pichault & de la Villarmois, 2020).
- **Integrating Learning into Daily Work:** The concept of "learning in the flow of work" allows employees to acquire skills directly in the work environment through video clips or interactive tutorials (Fallery & Rodhain, 2020).
- **Adapting Training Programs to New Work Realities:** Remote and hybrid work models require flexible approaches that combine in-person and online learning (Lepak et al., 2021).

With the rise of artificial intelligence and the automation of certain tasks, companies must also rethink career paths and support the retraining of employees whose jobs are evolving (Meignant, 2022).

6. The Challenges of Managing Diversity and Well-being During a Crisis

6.1. Managing Diversity in the Context of Remote Work and Distance Management

The health crisis led to a rapid transformation of work environments, requiring more flexible and inclusive management of teams. In a context where remote work was imposed, the challenges related to managing diversity became more pronounced. Indeed, diversity in teams is no longer limited to cultural aspects but also includes diversity in digital skills, working conditions, and the personal or family situations of employees.

According to Géry (2023), managing diversity in remote work must now integrate strategies tailored to each employee's specifics. These strategies include adapted communication, continuous training, and project management tools that account for the diverse realities of each individual. Furthermore, conflict management and the promotion of inclusion must take place within a digital framework, with specific tools to maintain team cohesion while respecting each member's particularities.

6.2. Well-being Initiatives in the Workplace During the Health Crisis

Employee well-being took on new significance during the Covid-19 crisis. While remote work offered flexibility, it also posed challenges in terms of maintaining morale and the work-life balance. Companies had to revise their well-being policies to address these issues, with particular attention to the mental health of employees. Recent studies show that employee well-being is now seen as a key factor in organizational performance. Dupont et al. (2024) highlight that the pandemic spurred the emergence of new practices, such as remote psychological consultations, the implementation of stress management programs, and resilience training sessions. These initiatives directly impact team productivity, as well as their engagement and loyalty to the company.

Researchers Perrin et al. (2023) also assert that remote work has impacted the perception of work, leading to increased satisfaction for some but a sense of isolation for others. Therefore, companies must find a balance between flexibility and social support to maintain a positive and inclusive dynamic within teams.

6.3. How the Pandemic Pushed to Rethink Stress and Mental Health Management

The crisis also highlighted the importance of stress management and mental health in the workplace. Faced with the new constraints of remote work and health uncertainties, companies had to reassess their traditional approaches to stress management.

Implementing workplace well-being policies is no longer optional but a necessity to ensure employee performance and engagement. Tanguy and Verdière (2025) report that several companies adopted preventive measures such as remote psychological support programs, online mediation sessions, and initiatives aimed at fostering open communication about mental health issues.

The findings of Lecomte et al. (2023) indicate that the crisis accelerated the transformation of human resources management, with particular emphasis on mental health as an essential component of overall employee well-being. They stress the

role of managers in the early detection of stress signs and the importance of continuous training to support teams.

7. The Digitalization of HR Practices: A Lever for Performance in Times of Crisis

7.1. The Rise of Digital Technologies and Their Impact on Human Resource Management

The digitalization of human resource management (HRM) processes has become a major issue in recent years, especially since the Covid-19 crisis. The pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies within organizations, enabling more agile and responsive management of teams, even remotely.

Talent management platforms, online collaboration tools, HR information systems (HRIS), and remote performance management solutions have transformed HR departments' practices. According to Gérard (2023), digitalization allowed HR departments to maintain continuity in their functions while reducing administrative costs and improving the efficiency of internal processes. Technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and the automation of administrative tasks have facilitated the management of interviews, recruitment, and training, while freeing up time to focus on more strategic aspects of talent management.

7.2. The Transformation of Recruitment and Talent Management Processes

The health crisis had a profound impact on recruitment and talent management, with a shift towards remote recruitment practices. Digital recruitment tools, such as virtual interviews and online application management platforms, have now become the norm in many companies. According to Lemoine et al. (2024), this transition has expanded the talent pool internationally, but it has also raised new challenges regarding diversity management and the integration of new remote employees.

Companies had to adjust their recruitment processes to account for the lack of physical interactions, thus favoring a more skills- and experience-based approach, while reducing biases related to face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, digital technologies have enabled the development of new performance tracking and management tools, improving managers' ability to lead remote teams while ensuring the continuity of performance evaluations. Frédéric and Marchand (2025) explain that digitalization allows for better tracking of employees' progress through real-time feedback tools, fostering more responsive and personalized management.

7.3. The Integration of Digital Tools for More Agile and Inclusive HR Management

Another essential aspect of digitalizing HR during a crisis is the creation of a more agile and inclusive work environment. Digital tools enable companies to better meet the specific needs of their employees, whether it involves flexible working hours, telecommuting options, or online performance management.

According to Dumont and Charbonnier (2024), the adoption of digital technologies in HR management has made HR processes more transparent and accessible, facilitating communication and collaboration between teams. This has strengthened the sense of inclusion, particularly for remote employees or those from diverse backgrounds. The digitalization of HR practices has thus provided a new approach to managing diversity by enabling companies to better understand and manage

employees' varied expectations, while offering them greater autonomy in managing their careers and professional goals.

Conclusion

At the end of this analysis, it is clear that human resource management (HRM) has undergone significant transformations, particularly in the context of the Covid-19 health crisis. The seven chapters of this book have highlighted several major changes in HR practices, driven by the need to respond to a constantly changing environment.

The Impact of Covid-19 on HRM

The pandemic revealed the vulnerabilities of traditional HR systems. It forced companies to quickly adopt digital practices, such as remote work and collaborative tools, which allowed them to maintain business continuity while safeguarding employees' health. The first chapter highlighted this immediate transformation and how the crisis acted as a catalyst for the digitalization of HR processes, enabling many organizations to adapt quickly.

The Rise of Remote Work and Digital Tools

Through Chapters 2 to 4, we observed the growing importance of remote work and digital communication technologies as essential solutions in a context of social distancing. Companies responded by implementing flexible solutions that ensured effective talent management despite the physical separation of teams. This evolution also led to a structural reorganization within companies, integrating more flexibility and resilience into HR practices.

Digitalization and Its Effects on Recruitment and Talent Management Processes

Chapters 5 and 6 highlighted the profound impact of digitalization on recruitment and talent management processes. By replacing traditional practices with digital tools like remote interviews and online application management platforms, HR departments not only expanded their geographic reach but also facilitated a more inclusive approach to talent management. The pandemic also intensified the focus on skills rather than mere physical presence, making processes more equitable.

Agility and Inclusivity in Team Management

Digitalization allowed companies to develop more agile and inclusive HR practices. Through Chapters 6 and 7, it was demonstrated that digital tools enable companies to better meet the specific needs of employees, while ensuring a flexible and adapted work environment. The Covid-19 crisis reinforced this dynamic, pushing organizations to rethink their approach to diversity and inclusion, especially regarding remote employees and those from diverse backgrounds.

The Role of Digitalization as a Lever for Performance

Finally, as indicated in the last sections, digitalization played a key role in improving the performance of HR departments. By automating many administrative tasks and optimizing talent management, digital technologies enabled HR to focus on more strategic missions, such as skills development and performance management. Furthermore, the increased use of HR information systems (HRIS) facilitated data-driven decision-making, contributing to the overall performance of the organization.

Synthesis

In summary, the health crisis acted as a catalyst for the digital transformation of human resource management practices. The adoption of digital technologies not only facilitated the management of remote employees but also enabled the continuity of

crucial HR processes that contribute to business performance. While digitalization in HR appears to be a necessity in an increasingly complex and uncertain world of work, it also presents challenges, particularly in terms of equity, remote talent management, and cybersecurity.

Future research should explore how these digital transformations can be sustainably and inclusively integrated into companies' HR strategies, while considering the specificities of each organization. By exploring new avenues such as artificial intelligence and big data analytics, HR departments will play a central role in building agile and resilient organizations capable of addressing future challenges.

NB: "Artificial intelligence was used for the translation of the text from French to English."

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