



From Disruption to Resilience: Post-COVID-19 Qualitative Look at Karachi Businesses

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Abstract

The lessons that management has learned from the Covid-19 calamity are still being revealed. The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on business resilience is still unfolding. This study explores how Karachi-based companies adapted using a qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews with representatives from eleven diverse organizations revealed both internal and external transformations, encompassing strategic and operational changes. These adaptations demonstrate how businesses can build three-dimensional organizational resilience to navigate unforeseen disruptions. The objective of this study is to showcase the resilience mechanisms and tactics that Karachi-based companies have implemented in response to these changes. The researchers took an inductive stance. Semi-structured interviews were employed to gather data from a sample of eleven organizations spanning different industries, selected based on their potential for profit. The manual examination of the semi-formatted thematic content of the gathered data reveals that the COVID-19 epidemic has caused both internal and external change, with both an operational and a strategic component. Organizational change is a process of the organization adapting to changes in the external and internal environment as well as to a momentary state that is prevalent. This leads to the development of three-dimensional organizational resilience and/or the capture of positive externalities. It is a process by which the organization adjusts to changes in both the internal and external environments, as well as to the current situation. It is an evolution as opposed to a revolution. As far as limitations are concerned, it is based on interviews while future researchers are required to apply triangulation to get a better understanding and draw useful conclusions.

Keywords: COVID-19, Organizational Change, Resilience of Management Systems, Human Resource Development, HR-Practices



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Introduction

The past few decades have ushered in an era of frequent and widespread crises in the globalized business landscape (Boulabiar & Zaiem, 2024). The notion of a stable and predictable business environment has faded, replaced by the need for organizations to continuously learn and adapt. This ongoing tension challenges the traditional view of organizations as static entities with a singular, unchanging purpose. Modern organizations, despite their structured designs, must recognize that individuals within them hold diverse perspectives and goals (Cordelier, 2015). From an evolutionary perspective, organizational survival has become the paramount objective. Managers now require a strong focus on innovation. The need to adapt has sparked the emergence of new human resource (HR) practices, challenged traditional approaches, and prompted HR professionals to question the continued relevance of the term "human resource management" (HRM). The unpredictable nature of COVID-19 rapidly disrupted social and economic systems, yet organizations, despite their structured designs, were able to implement resilience strategies with some success. This highlights the adaptability of organizations. Numerous studies aim to analyze the crisis behaviors adopted by firms, extracting valuable lessons for future situations. Research suggests that proactive and adaptable organizations, those that "chameleonize" or anticipate change, tend to fare better (Sinapin, 2020). Businesses must develop a heightened sense of adaptability to navigate potential crises and seize new opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly triggered organizational transformations. Regardless of size or industry, businesses face demanding and uncertain circumstances (Fezzani & Boulabiar, 2024).

Robbins and DeCenzo (2008) define organizational change as a long-term adjustment made to an organization's environment, structure, technology, or workforce to significantly improve its performance and operations. This change can occur in both stable and dynamic environments (Wail, 1989). Despite a wealth of research on organizational change, a unified perspective or a universally accepted theory remains elusive (De Ven & Poole, 1990, 1995; Barnett & Caroll, 1995; Pettigrew *et al.*, 2001). Scholars like Desreumaux (1998) and Basso (2004) highlight this ongoing debate. Furthermore, numerous change models exist, each with variations in scope, depth, speed, and implementation methods (Grouard & Meston, 1998; Soparnot, 2004). While Lewin's 1958 contribution remains foundational, it doesn't encompass the full spectrum of change approaches. These models can be multidimensional (Pichault, 1993) or one-dimensional (Denis & Champagne, 1990). Soparnot (2004) even raises the question of whether management practices are undergoing an evolution or a revolution in response to the complexities of change. While Demers (1999) argues that change has become an ingrained part of organizational and individual life since the 1990s, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique shock for many businesses. Management research should continue to explore this area, as evidenced by recent publications and calls for contributions (Lerari & Hamdaoui, 2020; Oulih *et al.*, 2021; Bajji & Lalaoui, 2021; Soufyane & Peretti, 2021). Despite these ongoing efforts, a gap remains in our understanding and theorization of the lessons learned from strategic processes and change models adopted by businesses during COVID-19 to build resilience. This is particularly true in the African context, even with the valuable research by Fezzani and Boulabiar (2024), and need to be answered within the context of Karachi. This study aims to contribute to the ongoing research on organizational resilience during COVID-19, with a specific focus on Karachi-based companies. We investigate the strategic processes and change models adopted by these businesses to build resilience against the pandemic's disruptions.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the adaptation and adjustment strategies employed by Karachi-based companies in response to the COVID-19 crisis.
2. To understand the resulting impact of these strategies on human resource (HR) practices within these organizations.

Literature Review

Organizational change in times of crisis is not only a necessity for survival but also an opportunity for growth and adaptation. It is a fundamental concept in management practice (Soparnot, 2004). Demers (1999) identifies three distinct eras in how researchers have studied organizational change. The first era, coinciding with World War II, was characterized by growth and adaptation as organizations mobilized for the war effort. This trend continued during the prosperous post-war years, a period of remarkable economic stability and expansion that lasted until the mid-1970s. During this stable environment, change was viewed as progress because it led to advancements in organizational development, growth, and adaptation. The most common changes implemented during this era focused on strategies and structures within organizations (Demers, 1999). The second period, also known as the "economic era" or the "era of the market," marked a shift from growth to survival. This era, triggered by the oil crises of the 1970s and increased global competition in the early 1980s, forced organizations to adapt to economic downturns and new market realities. Change became a matter of necessity, not just progress. Demers (1999) further identifies the contemporary era as a period of "learning and evolution." Globalization, job insecurity, and frequent layoffs characterize this era. Change has become an everyday reality for organizations, a constant process of adaptation and learning to navigate an increasingly complex and dynamic business environment. Innovation thrives in this context, fueled by the ongoing need to adapt and improve.

Organizational change, regardless of the specific approach or model used, is a process of adaptation and adjustment (Bennani & Lekbira, 2020). It's a mechanism for organizations to evolve and learn from new situations, even when their structures are primarily functionalist (designed for efficiency). This aligns with the evolutionary theory of the firm, which emphasizes the importance of adaptation and learning for organizational survival. Organizational change can manifest in various ways (Grouard & Meston, 1998). It can be wide-ranging or limited in scope, rapid or gradual, forceful or voluntary. Stace & Dunphy (1991) differentiate between radical and evolutionary transformations. Radical change is a significant, swift, and global shift that often occurs in response to a real or anticipated crisis. In contrast, evolutionary change occurs more gradually because of ongoing adaptations and experiences within the organization. Desreumaux (1998) offers another perspective by describing two types of change: first-order change, characterized by adaptation to existing structures, and second-order change, which signifies a more fundamental evolution of the organization's core values, beliefs, and structures. The multifaceted nature of organizational change, as discussed above, necessitates a nuanced understanding when examining transformations within companies (Grouard & Meston, 1998; Stace & Dunphy, 1991; Desreumaux, 1998). While achieving consensus on the exact type of change ("radical" vs. something else) might be challenging, this study aims to contribute to a managerial perspective. Our primary goal is to assist organizations in adapting and adjusting to dynamic environments, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific actions taken by organizations in response to the crisis will likely vary in scope and depth, potentially reflecting evolutionary adjustments, revolutionary transformations, or anything in between (Desreumaux, 1998). Therefore, a crucial aspect of this research is identifying the resilience levers and HR practices organizations have implemented during the pandemic. This requires a consistent methodological approach that pinpoints the specific change contexts and asks critical questions about the nature and extent of the transformations that have occurred.

Method

Methodological Elements

We employ a multi-case, multi-sectoral, and qualitative research approach (Savall & Zardet, 2004). This approach allows for in-depth analysis of multiple cases from various sectors, providing a richer understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Additionally, a qualitative approach enables us to capture the nuances and complexities of the organizational changes experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wacheux, 1996). Data collection was conducted using semi-structured, thematic interview guides (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2011). Given the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, a non-probability sampling method with reasoned opportunistic choice was employed to select participants. To enhance the trustworthiness of our findings, we have utilized

participant observations and secondary data triangulation. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data. This method involves identifying, classifying, and interpreting recurring themes within the collected information (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis allows us to identify patterns and variations in how organizations have adapted and implemented HR practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Data analysis was conducted manually using a semi-structured approach (Paille & Mucchielli, 2011). This iterative process involves coding the data, identifying emerging themes, and refining these themes based on the overall data set.

Our thematic analysis utilized an inductive approach, meaning we identified patterns and themes directly from the interview data without imposing pre-conceived theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This allowed us to capture the unique experiences of each organization and avoid making assumptions about their responses. However, thematic analysis also provides a level of consistency across the multiple interviews. Themes were identified as recurring patterns or concepts within the data. These themes functioned as the units of analysis, representing segments of speech identified through a coding process. The coding process itself acted as the explanatory tool, allowing us to develop models that explain the practices and experiences of the organizations we study. This approach facilitates the creation of both descriptive and explanatory models.

To ensure consistency and comprehensiveness, we employed a combination of vertical and horizontal analysis techniques (Blanchet & Gotman, 2001). Vertical analysis involves examining each interview in-depth to understand the participant's unique perspective. Horizontal analysis compares themes across all interviews to identify broader patterns and trends. Following a phenomenological and contextualizing approach as recommended by Creswell (1997), this study aimed to gain a deep understanding of the lived experiences of managers during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they adapted their HR practices within their specific contexts.

Data collection involved conducting thirteen in-person interviews. Eleven interviews met the criteria for response sincerity and dependability, which are crucial for ensuring the quality of the data (Gavar-Perret et al., 2008; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Sample size in qualitative research is often determined by reaching saturation, the point where no new insights emerge from further interviews. In this case, eleven interviews provided sufficient depth and richness of data. The participants were managers from eleven different companies operating in the formal market. These companies represented eight diverse activity sectors, reflecting the variety of industries impacted by the pandemic. The participants originated from Karachi (as detailed in Table, 1). Each company selected one manager to participate in the interview.

Research Design

1. This research falls under the category of "Organizational Behavior."
2. We employ a qualitative, multi-sectoral, and multi-case study approach.
3. Opportunistic reasoned choice sampling, a non-probability sampling method, was used to select participants for semi-structured interviews (Samassekou & Fane, 2022).
4. We focused on recruiting "best fit" participants who were willing and able to provide valuable insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

This Analysis is Guided by Seven Key Areas of Reflection

1. **Organizational Change During Crisis:** We examine how organizations adapt and change in response to crises, specifically the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. **Research Method Justification:** We explore how the chosen research approach (qualitative, multi-sectoral, multi-case study) aligns with the research questions and the characteristics of the participating organizations.
3. **Perceptions of Organizational Change:** We delve into how Karachi-based companies perceive the concept of organizational change and the contexts that trigger such changes.

4. **Resilience of Management Systems:** We analyze the resilience of management systems within these companies during the pandemic.
5. **Human Resource Development:** We investigate the human resource development strategies adopted by the companies.
6. **Management Implications:** We explore the management implications arising from the observed changes and adaptations.
7. **Outcomes:** Finally, we examine the outcomes and impacts of these adaptations on the organizations.

Conduct of the Investigation and Sociological Characteristics of the Cases Studied

The selection process prioritized subject-matter expertise and participant availability. Notably, all participants held supervisory or executive positions, ensuring they possessed firsthand knowledge of the HR practices implemented during the pandemic. Interviews were audio-recorded using a smartphone and then transcribed manually. The average interview duration was 24 minutes.

Table 1
Characteristics of the Companies Surveyed

Features	Industries											
	Marine Works	Expertise and consultation	Intermediation	Food	Transportation	Cosmetic	Telecom	Agricultural				
Name of companies	Al-Safwan Marine	Brainchild Communications	Global HRMS	Delta International Recruitment Agency	NESTLE PK	Hobnob Bakery	Tranzum Courier Service (TCS) PVT. LTD	TP Logistics	Bays International (Pvt.) Ltd.	JAZZ	Syngenta	
Place of Origin	UAE	Pakistan	British	Pakistan	France	Pakistan	Pakistan	Pakistan	Pakistan	Netherland	Switzerland	
Year of creation or presence at Karachi	2001	1997	1998	2011	1905	1997	1983	2000	1989	1994	Not Known	
Effective	≤200	≥50	≥50	≥50	≥900	>50	≥1000	>100	>200	>2000	<500	
Main Activities	inspections/repairs, firefighting equipment, lifeboat	Offers marine safety services, including	Offers a comprehensive range of marketing services including advertising, public relations, and branding	Recruitment and On-boarding, Human Capital Development, Performance	Temporary staffing services alongside permanent placements and recruitment for various	Production of beverages, dairy products, nutritional products, cereals and snacks	Specialized in breads, cakes, and pastries.	Freight and transportation of good	Freight and Transportation services	offer a wide range of mobile network services, including prepaid and postpaid plans, internet	Offer a wide variety of products, including creams, lotions, soaps, and fragrances	Offer vegetable seeds for various crops and pesticides protect crops from pests, diseases, and weeds.
Identifiers	Respondent 1	Respondent 8	Respondent 6	Respondent 10	Respondent 9	Respondent 7	Respondent 11	Respondent 4	Respondent 2	Respondent 5	Respondent 3	

Source: Their respective websites

Characteristics of Respondents

All participants hold university degrees (Table, 2), demonstrating their educational qualifications. Their positions within the organizations varied, with three holding supervisory roles and eight executives. In terms of experience, five individuals had held their positions for 1-3 years, another five for 5-8 years, and one for over 10 years. This range of experience provides diverse perspectives on organizational adaptation during the pandemic. Talking about their marital status; 7 were married and 4 were singles. Overall, the selected participants possess the necessary educational background and relevant work experience to provide valuable insights into HR practices and organizational changes implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2

Characteristics of Respondents and Summary of Interview Time

Rep	Degree Level	Job Title	Total Exp.	Exp. in This Post	G	Marital Status	Duration and number of passages	Interview Methods	Interview Location
1	Master	HR	6 years	6 years	M	Bachelor	23 minutes	Face to face	Premises of Al-Safwan Marine
2	PhD	Coordinator (training and communication)	8 month	8 months	F	Married	1 st passage: 1min30 2 nd passage: 4min13 3 rd passage: 24min	Phone	WhatsApp (Mobile App)
3	Bachelor	Supervisor (Electrical)	6 years	6 years	M	Married	1 st passage: 7min 20 2 nd passage: 42min24 Total: 49min	Phone	WhatsApp (Mobile App)
4	MASTER	Manager HR	6 years	2 years	M	Married	25mins	25mins	25mins
5	MASTER	Marketing Manager	5 years	5 years	M	Bachelor	25 mins 45	25 mins 45	25 mins 45
6	MASTER	Store and Purchase Manager	8 years	3 years	M	Married	26mins50	26mins50	26mins50
7	MASTER	General Manager	2 years	2 years	M	Married	26mins	26mins	26mins
8	MBA	Site Manager	4.5 years	3 years	F	Bachelor	29mins09	29mins09	29mins09
9	MASTER	Administrative Officer	11 years	6 years	M	Married	24mins58	24mins58	24mins58
10	PMP Certified	Project Manager	5 years	2 years	M	Bachelor	27mins17	27mins17	27mins17
11	MASTER	Quality Supervisor	13 years	12 years	M	Married	30mins	30mins	30mins

Themes	Theme1: Organizational change in times of crisis
	Theme2: Managing organizational change during a health crisis and its consequences
	Theme3: The effects of organizational change on businesses

Source: Field Investigation

Results and Analysis

Perceptual Dimensions of “Organizational Change” in the COVID-19 Era

To ensure a shared understanding of the research topic, participants' perceptions of "organizational change" were explored. The findings revealed three key interpretations:

- **Environmental Adaptation (30%):** Participants associated organizational change with a company's ability to adapt to internal and external environmental shifts. This aligns with the concept of organizations needing to adjust to changing circumstances for survival.
- **Modification of Practices (30%):** Another 30% of participants viewed change as the modification of practices, routines, and procedures within the organization. This reflects the practical aspects of implementing new approaches in response to changing demands.
- **Rapid Response (40%):** A significant portion (40%) defined change as the capacity to respond quickly to evolving situations. This highlights the importance of agility and responsiveness in today's dynamic business environment.

These interpretations demonstrate a general understanding of organizational change encompassing adaptability, adjusting practices, and responding swiftly to new circumstances. Organizational change is a dynamic process through which companies modify their routines to respond to unexpected disruptions and evolving internal and external conditions (Soufyane & Peretti, 2020; Kehel, 2021). This adaptive capability serves a dual function. First, it is a critical tool for crisis management, enabling organizations to withstand and recover from unforeseen challenges (Soufyane & Peretti, 2020; Kehel, 2021). Second, organizational change can be a catalyst for wealth creation, either intentionally or incidentally. This suggests that change, when effectively managed, can foster both stability and growth within an organization.

Contexts of Organizational Change Induced by the COVID-19 Pandemic

Content analysis revealed that the pandemic acted as a universal catalyst for organizational change across various sectors. This global crisis, as emphasized by Pettigrew (1987), created a compelling imperative for change. The pandemic's far-reaching impact on political, health, social, economic, and commercial spheres necessitated organizational adaptations. As exemplified by Tranzum Courier Service (TCS) PVT. LTD.'s Deputy Quality Manager, the crisis disrupted operations, altered consumer behavior and demanded significant organizational transformation. These external pressures, combined with the universal nature of the pandemic, served as primary drivers for change.

"Our company has experienced substantial challenges as a consequence of the crisis. As a key participant in global commerce, we have been adversely affected by limitations placed on user activity, the closure of international borders, and the implementation of lockdown protocols. These factors have collectively disrupted business operations, modified consumer patterns, and necessitated a transformation of corporate practices."

The Internal Context of Organizations Impacted by the Pandemic

The pandemic profoundly affected organizations' internal contexts, notably through a significant decline in turnover. This trend, corroborated by Global HRMS data indicating that over half of surveyed businesses faced post-pandemic challenges, was particularly pronounced in service sectors. For instance, Brainchild Communications experienced a 35% turnover reduction. The company's manager emphasized the crisis's impact on their events, marketing, and communications focus, necessitating operational, workspace, and staffing overhauls. This finding is further supported by the observations of a site manager at Brainchild Communications firm:

"Given our focus on events, marketing, and communications, our company was adversely affected by the crisis. A substantial reduction in business compelled us to undertake a comprehensive review of our operations. As a result, we implemented significant changes to our work methodologies, physical workspace, and staffing structure."

Political Context and Impact:

Government policies played a pivotal role in shaping the business landscape during the pandemic. The declaration of a health crisis significantly impacted companies, particularly those with international operations, as highlighted by Meier (2020). The agri-food sector, exemplified by Hobnob Bakery, experienced substantial challenges. Even previously stable international markets faced unprecedented disruptions. The pandemic revealed a stark contrast in political responses across nations. While some countries, such as the USA, Brazil, and North Korea, opted for different approaches, including avoiding national health disasters or lockdowns, others implemented stringent measures. These varying strategies underscore the significant influence of political decisions on economic outcome

Strategic Preparedness - Forecasting, Adaptability, and the Management of Change

Companies with established proactive monitoring and anticipation practices were better equipped to weather the pandemic's storm. By considering potential environmental fluctuations, these organizations demonstrated a strategic foresight that proved invaluable in mitigating the crisis' impact. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the critical importance of organizational adaptability. Companies were forced to recalibrate managerial policies, focusing on damage control and, ideally, opportunity identification. The maritime sector, exemplified by Al-Safwan Marine, faced significant challenges due to border closures that hindered personnel transportation to offshore platforms. Despite these hurdles, Al-Safwan Marine's international network offered a degree of resilience. This case highlights the pivotal role of strategic planning and adaptability in navigating such crises. The manager at Al-Safwan Marine emphasized the financial implications of a health crisis for businesses operating in the maritime sector, particularly those dependent on personnel transportation. Border closures could lead to operational paralysis, economic hardship, and potential job losses. However, the company's international reach helped to cushion the impact of these challenges.

The manager at Al-Safwan Marine stated that:

"A declared health crisis typically results in financial losses for businesses. Our company operates in the maritime sector, specifically transporting personnel to offshore oil platforms for clients such as MAERSK, Sapura Energy, and TOPAZ. Border closures, a common response to health crises, would completely halt our operations as no vessels could enter or leave the country. This would force us into economic hardship, necessitating potential layoffs. While our business has been affected by crises, our international reach has helped us mitigate some of the impact."

Focus on Health and Safety

To mitigate the risks posed by the pandemic, every company surveyed adopted new safety protocols. These measures involved modifying work conditions and strengthening hygiene standards to safeguard employees' health and business continuity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrably impacted businesses across various sectors in Karachi, with the service industry experiencing the most significant effects. This impact transcended economic and commercial spheres, extending to managerial, personal, and political aspects, both internally within organizations and externally in the broader environment (Meier, 2020). Given the widespread impact, it becomes crucial to delve deeper into the human resource (HR) management systems implemented during this crisis. A closer examination of the specific action levers and HR practices employed by organizations would provide valuable insights. Such an investigation can shed light on how companies adapted their HR strategies to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic.

The anti-Covid19 Organizational System Developed by Companies in Karachi

The research reveals that, in response to the diverse challenges brought on by COVID-19, organizations implemented HR resilience measures, policies, and practices. Collectively, these elements form an *organizational resilience system*. This system serves as a critical mechanism for companies to adapt and adjust to unforeseen disruptions.

Organizational Resilience Measures: A Two-Dimensional View

This section explores the organizational resilience measures implemented by companies in Karachi, Pakistan. These measures can be classified into two primary categories. First, top management initiatives reflect proactive decisions made by company leadership to ensure business continuity. Surprisingly, companies often perceived as having weak social responsibility records demonstrated robust health, safety, and logistics protocols, challenging preconceived notions about their corporate behavior. Second, government mandates drove the implementation of specific measures, such as staff limitations, redeployments, physical barriers, and controlled internal movement. While compliance was universal, companies also exhibited managerial innovation. For instance, Nestle Pk introduced temperature checks and sanitization stations, while Brainchild Communications prioritized employee awareness campaigns. The interplay between top-down strategies and government regulations on Human Resource Management (HRM) practices warrants further exploration. Understanding how these changes have reshaped the work environment from an HRM perspective, as suggested by Soparnot (2004), is crucial for future research.

HRM Policies and Practices for Organizational Resilience

This section explores the HRM policies and practices mobilized by the companies surveyed to enhance organizational resilience.

a. Organizational Resilience: A New Approach

The concept of organizational resilience is a recent development in management science, emerging in the context of crisis management (Sinapin, 2020; Su, 2021). It equips companies to overcome challenges and adapt their operations (Sinapin, 2020). This concept has gained significant traction in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sinapin, 2020; Su, 2021).

b. An Ecological Approach to Resilience

The study adopts an ecological and ecosystem science approach to resilience, inspired by Darwinian theory and the concept of an organization's evolutionary trajectory. From this perspective, organizational resilience reflects a company's ability to survive environmental fluctuations. Implementing effective HR practices becomes crucial for achieving this resilience.

c. HRM Practices for Resilience

While various taxonomies exist for categorizing HRM practices (strategic areas, HRM lifecycle, issue-based approaches), this study focuses on the approach based on strategic areas. This framework helps distinguish between two types of changes (Watzlawick, 1975):

1. **Order 1 (Corrective Changes):** These adjustments aim to address existing problems.
2. **Order 2 (Meta-Level Changes):** These more fundamental changes target the underlying systems and ideologies of the organization.

The study also differentiates between micro-changes and macro-changes (Mintzberg, et al., 1999). Micro-changes are specific and concrete, while macro-changes are broader and more systemic.

Observed Changes in HRM Practices

The companies surveyed implemented various changes across several HRM domains, including:

1. **Employment Policy:** Adjustments included technical leave, layoffs, paid leave, home-based working, and recruitment practices.
2. **Well-being Policy:** This was a surprising development, considering the perception of an employee-unfriendly work environment. Companies implemented measures to support employee well-being and gender equality through paid leave programs.
3. **Remuneration Policy:** Some companies adjusted salary payment dates, implemented bonus systems, and even increased salaries during the initial stages of the pandemic.
4. **Working Time Policy:** Changes included rotating work schedules and eliminating weekend work.
5. **Health and Safety Policies:** Companies adapted these policies to address the pandemic.
6. **Information and Communication Policies:** Communication strategies were adjusted to keep employees informed.

It is important to note that the observed changes were primarily corrective (Order 1) and micro-changes (Mintzberg, et al., 1999). They addressed specific issues arising from the pandemic rather than fundamentally altering the companies' value systems, ideologies, or broader organizational structures. These unplanned changes were reactive responses to an unforeseen event (Meier, 2020). The unpredictable nature of COVID-19 highlights the need to explore the long-term consequences and managerial implications of these HRM adjustments. Despite their often-negative connotations, disruptive events can serve as catalysts for transformation. Faulkner (2001) proposed that such events can foster innovation and open doors to new markets. These findings align with Anaba & Anaba's (2022) research, which underscores the significance of contextual factors in shaping outcomes.

Positive Outcomes

The study identified several positive outcomes stemming from the implemented changes. Notably, workplace cohesion was strengthened, manifesting in increased employee loyalty, initiative, and autonomy. Furthermore, the new measures significantly enhanced employees' work-life balance. Lastly, the acquisition of new skills and adaptive work practices contributed to increased employability and organizational flexibility, aligning with the findings of Hilmi & Hilmi (2016). This led to a shift in HRM practices, with teleworking and flexible work arrangements becoming commonplace. These changes suggest a more socially responsible corporate stance, although influenced by external pressures.

Discussion

The results support the perspective of Robbins & DeCenzo (2008) by portraying organizational change as an ongoing adaptation to internal and external environmental fluctuations, including unforeseen events like the COVID-19 pandemic. This adaptation process in response to COVID-19 manifested as a three-dimensional form of organizational resilience, potentially capturing positive externalities. It encompassed both first-order (corrective) and second-order (evolutionary) changes, aligning with the work of Desreumaux (1998) and Sinapin (2020). The study aligns with research by Sharma *et al.* (2021), Sheresheva *et al.* (2021), and Le *et al.* (2021) (as cited by Boulabiar & Zaiem, 2024) by demonstrating that the induced changes can be a source of innovation and contribute to organizational resilience. The changes observed encompassed both consensual and imposed elements, reflecting characteristics identified in models proposed by Stace & Dunphy (1991), Grouard & Meston (1998), Bennani & Lekbira (2020), and Kehel (2021).

Like numerous studies on organizational change (Pettigrew, 1987), this research confirms that the sources of change induced by the COVID-19 pandemic were both internal and external (Fezzani & Boulabiar, 2024; Boulabiar & Zaiem, 2024). This finding justifies the initial focus on first-order resilience measures by the companies in Karachi. The study aligns with Soufyane & Peretti (2020) and Hamouche (2021) by demonstrating that organizations implemented HR practices based on various HR policies to adapt to the changes and potentially benefit from their positive externalities. The findings support the notion that models of organizational change induced by COVID-19 are multidimensional (Pichault, 1993), as opposed to uni-dimensional models (Denis & Champagne, 1990). This multidimensionality is likely due to the unique nature of the COVID-19 crisis and the resulting contexts. This reinforces the importance of context, as highlighted by Anaba & Anaba (2022). The results reaffirm the systemic and evolutionary nature of organizations. Further, the study reveals that the impact of the induced changes varied depending on the sector, type of activity, and regional, national, or global reach of the company. Globalized and service-based companies were likely more affected by a global crisis.

The strategies developed by the Karachi companies align with the ecological trend in strategic management, characterized by a simultaneous internal and external selection process (Burgelman, 1991, 1996; Burgelman & Mittman, 1994; Montgomery, 1995; Levinthal & March, 1981). This reflects the "variation, selection, and retention" loop common in population ecology, except the resilience levers and HRM practices did not directly impact company ideology. This aligns with the work of Desreumaux (1998). The crisis appears to have functioned as a catalyst for intelligent organizational reforms that resonate with the business ecosystem (Sinapin, 2020), presenting a window of opportunity for companies in Karachi. Contrary to some authors (Hamouche, 2021; Choflt, *et al.*, 2021; Sarkar & Clegg, 2021; Azizi, *et al.*, 2022), the crisis may not have accelerated the demise of traditional HRM methods. However, it did expose weaknesses (Elwardi & Bekkali, 2021) and underscored the need for sharing, exchange, and interpersonal solidarity (Bajji & Lalaoui, 2021), as evidenced by practices like carpooling and workplace well-being initiatives. These elements were crucial for bouncing back and moving towards new horizons. The study emphasizes the crucial role of multi-skilled staff and responsible social behavior, particularly communication, in successful organizational transformation. This aligns with the conclusions of Autissier & Gril (2020) and Anaba & Anaba (2022).

Conclusions

This study examined how Karachi-based businesses responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Key findings reveal a two-pronged approach: implementing government-mandated safety measures and leveraging HR practices to enhance organizational resilience. These changes aimed not only at survival but also at seizing opportunities arising from the crisis. The study's findings align with the concept of building resilience through HR practices and innovation (Soufyane & Peretti, 2020), enabling companies to balance efficiency and resilience (Sinapin, 2020). Managerially, the study underscores the need for HR agility, emphasizing flexibility and adaptability to capitalize on unforeseen opportunities. Prioritizing work-life balance and viewing human capital as an investment are crucial. A holistic managerial perspective is essential for navigating complex challenges. Scientifically, the study challenges the traditional concept of HRM, suggesting a broader approach to people management. Future research should delve deeper into sector-specific responses and post-pandemic management models to gain a comprehensive understanding of organizational change and resilience. This research contributes to the knowledge base on organizational adaptation during crises, providing valuable insights for managers seeking to navigate an increasingly dynamic business environment. Despite its contributions, the study's limitations, including the sample's heterogeneity and the absence of a sectoral analysis, necessitate further research.

Managerial Implications, Limitations, and Threats to Businesses

These observations suggest a more "civic" nature of companies in Karachi. However, this shift can be attributed to the specific context of the pandemic and the associated economic, commercial, managerial, personal, and political pressures (both internal and external). The study highlights how a global health crisis can act as a powerful driver of organizational change. The study acknowledges that the observed positive changes might be circumstantial, and

specific to the context of the pandemic. Further research may be needed to determine their long-term sustainability. Despite the positive outcomes observed, the study also identifies potential threats associated with the induced changes:

1. **Employee Stress and Frustration:** For 15% of respondents, the changes caused psychosis, stress, and frustration (Table No. 6, p.18). This stemmed from job insecurity due to the pandemic's uncertainty (Azizi, et al., 2020) and weak employee protection in labor contracts (Article 40 allows unilateral dismissal during financial crises).
2. **Readjustment Difficulties:** 5% of respondents reported difficulty adapting to the new working environment.
3. **Job Destruction:** 5% of respondents indicated a loss of jobs due to the implemented changes.
4. **Disrupted Partnerships and Training:** 10% of companies experienced disruptions in partnerships and training programs.

The study emphasizes the divergent, multifaceted, and contingent nature of the consequences (Meier, 2020; Bajji & Lalaoui, 2021). These impacts vary across both employees and companies. For some companies, the changes were beneficial, while for others, they posed challenges. Overall, COVID-19 introduced new obstacles (Su, 2021). The study underscores the importance of organizational efficiency in creating value for stakeholders in the face of such disruptive events. As far as limitations are concerned, it is based on interviews while future researchers are required to apply triangulation to get a better understanding and draw useful conclusions.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that there is no clash of interest.

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