

Human Resources Management Competences for Women Entrepreneurs Post Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Today's women entrepreneur businesses have to be constantly alert and adaptive to unforeseeable occurrences, like external crises, which produce increased uncertainty among their employees and cause instant threats to the business' performance, survival and sustainability. With the recent Covid-19 pandemic, organisations in Zimbabwe unexpectedly had to navigate the unique operating environment and thereby discover innovative solutions to human resource management challenges emanating across many facets of their business processes. This study aims to investigate the Human Resources Management (HRM) competences that can be adopted by Zimbabwean women entrepreneurs post-Covid-19 pandemic to remain resilient and competitive. The study employed a qualitative research approach and conducted in-depth interviews with saturation reached on the 15th interviewee from the retail and service sectors. The study used the subsequent criteria to select the women entrepreneurs who operated registered Harare CBD businesses with a minimum staff complement of 20. Findings indicate that the pandemic made the existing HRM skills obsolete hence the need to upskill to remain relevant in managing their employees. Women entrepreneurs need to upskill their communication, digital and leadership skills so that their businesses remain competitive after the Covid-19 pandemic. The study, therefore, recommends that women entrepreneurs also adopt strategies like numerical and functional flexibility, outsourcing and flexible working hours to mitigate HRM skills inadequacies so that their businesses remain sustained.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, crisis, entrepreneurs, human resources management skills, women entrepreneurs, Zimbabwe,

INTRODUCTION

Today's women entrepreneur businesses have to be constantly alert and adaptive to unforeseeable occurrences, like external crises, which produce increased uncertainty among their employees and cause instant threats to the business' performance, survival and sustainability. The COVID-19 pandemic is regarded as a 'people-based crisis' because it has created many challenges for businesses including business discontinuity, low employee morale, distance working and unemployment (Henry *et al.*, 2016). With the recent Covid-19 pandemic, organisations in Zimbabwe unexpectedly had to navigate the unique operating environment and thereby discover innovative solutions to human resource management challenges emanating across many facets of their business processes. This study aims to investigate the Human Resources Management (HRM) competences or skills that can be adopted by women entrepreneurs post-COVID-19 pandemic to remain resilient and competitive.

Entrepreneurs play a pivotal role in the development of a nation as they contribute to the economy through job - creation and economic growth (Kelley *et al.*, 2010). They are also a support system for their families and dependents, as well as being a source of growing entrepreneurial diversity in different economic contexts (Verheul *et al.*, 2006). However, despite the significant contribution of entrepreneurs in most countries, face several barriers and challenges that impede their survival (Torres-Ortega *et al.*, 2015). The drastic changes to the business environment that were driven by the Covid-19 pandemic posed unprecedented challenges – deepening inequalities, closure of borders, lockdowns, mass job losses and risky workplaces.

Apart from dealing with the challenges arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, women entrepreneurs grapple with substantial human resource management obstacles to business viability that preceded the pandemic skills gaps, labour shortages and a lack of a common language to discuss the challenges confronting them (Saba *et al.*, 2021), as well as lack of experience and knowledge are deficiencies that contribute to business failure. The departure of critical manpower caused by COVID-19 and inadequate HRM skills have compounded the poor performance of their businesses (Newton, 2021). Despite these challenges which exerted pressure on businesses to accelerate the transition to safer and sustainable ways of doing business, women entrepreneurs continued to drive economic growth and innovation in every country including Zimbabwe.

This is why HRM, is specially placed to mitigate the negative impact of Covid-19 on the health and well-being of employees and business continuity in the new setting, (Collins *et al.*, 2021). Dabie *et al.* (2021)'s study argues that HRM provides firms with the internal ability to adapt, adjust and be resilient in the changing business environment through the development of effective HRM policies, skills, and practices that align with the business strategy. With the contribution of women entrepreneurs in mind, and in light of SDG goals 1-no poverty, 2-zero hunger, 5-gender equality, 8-decent work and economic growth and 10- reduced inequalities, it is imperative that opportunities and resources are availed to this population group that has been disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Women entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurs are the backbone of the global economy, with them accounting for 90% of businesses globally and providing 70% of employment worldwide, (Krauss *et al.*, 2020). During COVID-19, around the world, more than 50% of female business owners had shut down, were no longer able to collect outstanding debts, and those who had reopened had run out of stock within a month. Across Africa, Covid-19 has already had a severe negative impact on women-owned businesses. The majority of women-led businesses are at risk of going out of business permanently as a result of the pandemic, (ILO Research, 2020), according to interviews with over 1,300 women entrepreneurs in 30 African nations. 80% of African women entrepreneurs indicated that COVID-19 had a negative impact on their operations and that they had to temporarily halt activities. Of those still fully or partially in operation, 41% severely cut back on working hours, 34% fired their employees, and 8% neither hired nor fired anyone and 25% had to reduce their employees' salaries. In their study, Stephan *et al.*, (2020) found that 61% of the entrepreneurs viewed the substantial decrease in trading activities as undermining their survival. Meanwhile, Meisser (2020) posits that women entrepreneurs are especially threatened by the Covid-19 pandemic as they, typically have access to fewer resources than larger firms. Given the impact of the pandemic, the thousands of jobs and livelihoods that women support were at grave risk.

Literature states that the food that is consumed globally is produced mostly by women entrepreneurs and in the Sub-Saharan region, 80% of the food is produced by women. In Zimbabwe, women entrepreneurs contribute a great deal to the economic growth and development of the country, (Mutengezanwa *et al.*, 2014). The women entrepreneurs in Harare are involved in different economic activities. According to the City of Harare database there are 489 registered entrepreneur businesses, (City of Harare, 2020 data). Those in the Harare CBD have various business activities from providing retail services in clothing and footwear, electrical and hardware, foodstuffs, motor spares, catering and well as stationery and secretarial services. According to the National MSME Policy 2020-2024, medium-sized entrepreneur businesses in the retail and motor trade and repair services, tourism, art and craft, fisheries, wholesale trade, commercial agents and allied services, catering, accommodation and other trade and transport sectors have a maximum number of 30 full-time employees. This study focused on the registered women entrepreneurs operating in the Harare CBD in different sectors.

Impact of Covid-19 on Human resource management

Human resource management (HRM) is concerned with how people are employed, managed and developed in organisations (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). HRM deals with people management issues of recruitment and selection, employment relations, training and development, performance management, employee motivation and engagement and reward management among other practices. These functions were impacted greatly by Covid-19, generating significant challenges for businesses suggesting that any change in one HRM function affects other functions (Mondy & Martocolo, 2016). Thus, confronting businesses are unavoidable people

management stressors such as persistent uncertainty, talent losses, employee motivation, a heavy workload, and crippling resource constraints. These stressors deterred natural recovery activities of business entities, (Verheul, 2019). In view of those HRM responsibilities, businesses needed to be innovative, effective and creative in order to manage, motivate and solve Covid-19-induced problems (De Leon, 2020). But success in solving Covid-19 problems is contingent on leveraging a human resource management strategy that is underpinned by appropriate competencies or skills.

According to a study by Adams-Prassl *et al.* (2020), during Covid -19 pandemic, workers who were unable to perform their job duties from home were more likely to lose their jobs. Organisations identified positions that may be completed remotely, those that could be carried out at the actual workplace, and those that required layoffs as a result of the circumstances brought on by the pandemic. Regarding remote work, it appeared that organisations had encountered significant difficulties. Firstly, *et al.* make sure remote workers have the equipment they needed to do their jobs (Aitken-Fox *et al.*, 2020; Hamouche, 2020). In reality, remote working necessitated the availability of technology tools, such as Zoom, Microsoft Remote Desktop, team viewer, and Microsoft Teams (Prasad & Vaidya, 2020), that all organisations could not afford. These technologies help to facilitate communication between employees and supervisors.

Secondly, to guarantee efficient communication, monitoring, support, performance management and an adjustment of remuneration for workers who work from home (Aitken-Fox *et al.*, 2020). Finally, organisations considered the possibility that working remotely made employees feel isolated because there was little opportunity for peer support and one-on-one interaction, all of which can be stressful factors that could harm an employee's mental health (Prasad & Vaidya, 2020). Given the potential for family distractions and the various tasks, they must play when working from home, it can also be mentally taxing for these employees (Prasad & Vaidya, 2020). The rising use of information and communication technology (ICT) might also create the impression of perpetual urgency, possibly raising expectations for employees' ongoing availability.

In this situation, organisations that had financial difficulties as a result of the pandemic downscaled by freezing or reducing all recruitment, or they have laid off their employees (Campello *et al.*, 2020; Giupponi & Landais, 2020). This was done to cut costs and try to maintain their businesses. Employers rarely chose to lay off workers, but in times of crisis like Covid-19, it was unavoidable.

Guiding employees through this process and providing appropriate information was a key difficulty that faced organisation leaders in this situation. It was not simple, though, given the current state of uncertainty. Nobody knew when this pandemic would stop or whether its effects on organisations would be ephemeral or permanent over the world (Bartik *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, businesses that grew throughout the pandemic encountered other problems with staffing. Due to the uncertainties brought on by COVID-19, a number of them decided to opt for more flexible employment practices and subcontracted work, including temporary agency work, freelancers and outsourcing (Spurk & Straub, 2020).

Human resource management and entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship and human resource management as concepts have gained widespread acceptance. Entrepreneurial businesses are impacted by managerial decisions made on the management of their human resources (Madmoli, 2016). Dal Zotto and Gustafsson (2007) claim that entrepreneurs are valuable and rare organisational resources because they depend on the knowledge and skills of human resources, which drives inspiration and fosters creativity. Practices in human resource management are crucial managerial activities that influence the results of entrepreneurship (Morris & Jones, 1993). According to the START (System for Analysis, Research and Training) 2003 poll, more than 45% of entrepreneurs view human resources as one of the three key management areas that must be developed to ensure the success of their businesses. The successful management of a company's human resources can determine and have an impact on the results of that company, including its success or failure, especially for entrepreneurial enterprises (Katz *et al.*, 2000). Entrepreneurial businesses that are unable or unwilling to successfully address HRM-related issues find it difficult to recruit and retain effective employees, are unable to motivate these employees, and generally fail to raise the value of their employees due to the dire sustainability consequences.

The possession and effective utilisation of HRM skills by women entrepreneurs delivers a competitive edge and an ability to overcome the challenges that come their way. Business owners must be able to proficiently perform HR roles such as staffing, performance management, formulation of strategy, human resource planning, disciplining of employees, mentoring, engaging employees, creating shareholder wealth and collaborating with customers, among others (Arulrajah & Opatha, 2010). The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in the re-organisation of numerous economic and human resource activities in the formal and informal sectors.

In addition, entrepreneurs need to come out of the reactive and survival mode, and instead, develop appropriate HRM skills that can help them confront the numerous people management challenges they face (Ngoc Su *et al.*, 2021). In support, Orakwi and Iguisi (2020) argue that HRM is a major driver of business success. It is therefore important that women entrepreneurs, acquire relevant skills which they leverage during and post Covid-19 pandemic to support their employees and sustain their businesses (Henry *et al.*, 2016).

HRM skills are vital assets for any individual to carry out tasks and duties in a triumphant manner. In today's globalised and exigent business environment, women entrepreneurs need apposite skills to thrive in their businesses. An explorative study done in Sri Lankan organisations indicated that communication skills, interpersonal skills, computer literacy, leadership skills and negotiation skills were identified as the most expected skills for HR Managers, (Weerathna & Pintoe, 2016). In addition, Aina (2006) points out that, the inadequacies in the management of human resources in the Niger Delta is as a result of the administrator's lack of human resource management skills and knowledge. In addition, a study in the hospitality sector by Browne (2021) suggested that HRM skills must be modified in line with the work culture and overcome the adverse effects caused by the Covid-19 pandemic through upskilling and reskilling methodologies to build higher level of resilience.

An HRM study of the COVID-19 pandemic has been done from a crisis perspective and focused on the public health system and policy (Salvador-Carulla *et al.*, 2020). Another study also revealed how COVID-19 has changed the way of work, setting new norms (Meister, 2020). Some studies focus on HRM competences of HR professionals (Boam & Sparrow, 1992; Jamshidi *et al.*, 2012; Ulrich *et al.*, 2007), HR skill adjustment in the service sector, COVID-19 and HRM, (Hamoche, 2021; Mojosola, 2021; Sulamaiman, *et al.*, 2020), challenges faced by women entrepreneurs, (Mauchi, *et al.*, 2014; and HRM skills required of tertiary institute administrators in the Niger Delta States of Nigeria, (Ekankumo, *et al.*, 2011). However, few studies have attempted to provide or suggest HRM solutions to crises posed by the Covid-19 pandemic in women entrepreneur businesses notwithstanding the fact that crisis management is an important facet of HRM. The researcher seeks to close an empirical gap that exists in women entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe especially in the area of HRM skills of women entrepreneurs post Covid-19. In light of the criticality of HRM in impacting the bottom line, this research paper explores the HRM skills needed by women entrepreneurs and suggests strategies that can help them navigate and recover from the adverse effects of the pandemic, and also help achieve competitiveness after the crisis.

As a result, this study is particularly significant for Zimbabwe and other developing nations, where the application of HRM skills in women entrepreneurs' businesses has not been successful over time. The performance and survival chances of women-owned businesses in Zimbabwe, in the various sectors, have been particularly poor (Jachi & Muchongwe, 2019; Majukwa *et al.*, 2020). Due to their specific problems and vulnerability during times of crisis, businesses run by women entrepreneurs typically do not survive for longer than five years (Tran *et al.*, 2021). One of the major factors contributing to the untimely death of women-owned firms is a lack of HRM skills for employee management. Thus, sound HRM skills for women entrepreneurs are useful in circumventing the negative effects of covid 19 on people management issues in the business to remain sustained and competitive.

After this introduction, the rest of this paper is organised as follows: section two presents the materials and methods, followed by the findings in section three and then section four with the discussion and the paper ends with a conclusion in section five.

Statement of the problem

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a complex and challenging environment for women entrepreneurs where the delivery of human resources management duties and responsibilities became difficult. The pandemic caused mandatory lockdowns to disrupt the flow of work in women's businesses resulting in a mounting backlog in the delivery of human capital products and services. HRM skills are the panacea in negotiating through this business environment quagmire as they are pivotal in managing the people resources and ensuring the sustainability and competitive advantage of women's businesses. In view of this background, this study explores HRM skills needed by women entrepreneurs to help them recover, achieve and maintain competitiveness post-Covid-19 pandemic.

Research objectives

- a) To ascertain the HRM skills needed by women entrepreneurs to recover and achieve competitiveness after the pandemic.
- b) To determine the HR strategies to be adopted to mitigate skills inadequacies in women entrepreneur businesses.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in Zimbabwe's capital city of Harare. The qualitative research approach was used to capture a broader picture of the HRM skills women entrepreneurs require to manage their employees in response to the pandemic effects on people management. The researcher obtained names of women entrepreneur businesses that operated in the city of Harare's CBD from the City Health Department as it is the office that issues out shop licences for operating. The study zeroed in on 15 purposively sampled women entrepreneurs from the retail and service sectors. The study used the subsequent criteria to select the women entrepreneurs who operated registered businesses with a minimum staff complement of 20. In-depth interviews were employed to obtain empirical evidence. In-depth interviews are conducted to gain in-depth insight into a phenomenon using relatively few participants (Brounéus 2011). Data saturation was reached on the 15th interviewee. Before collecting data, the researcher got informed consent from participants after explaining the purpose of the study and guaranteeing their confidentiality. The identities of the participants in the in-depth interviews were concealed by using the numbers 1 to 15. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data collected.

FINDINGS

The results and discussion of this study will reveal the HRM skills that women entrepreneurs require to remain competitive post-Covid -19 period. On the demographics of the participants, of the 15 participants, (4)26.7% were below 30 years, (8) 53.3% were between 31-40 years and those who had 51 years and above constituted (3)20%. Of the total participants, of the respondents (3) 20% had less than 3 years in the business and were start-ups, whilst (8) 53.3% had between 4-10 years doing their business and about (4) 26.7% had more than a decade's experience in entrepreneur business. Of these entrepreneur women businesses (6) 40% were in the clothing retail sector, catering was in (6) 40% and transport constituted (3) 20%. These demographics reveal that the women entrepreneurs were of varying ages, have different experiences in their businesses from being start-ups to and some stabilising in their businesses hence the different levels of appreciation of HRM skills needed in running their businesses. The major themes that emerged from the study findings are highlighted below. These findings also highlighted the challenges that they faced.

Leadership skills

The study findings from the interviews revealed that all the women entrepreneurs agreed that they needed key HRM skills for their survival during this Covid-19 pandemic. Good leadership skills were identified to be key to any entrepreneurs' business's survival. *Participant 8* said:

'I need to appreciate what it is to be a good leader to my employees during a crisis like covid-19. I want to know how to influence and motivate my employees so that we work together towards the same goal...I cannot plan, supervise them if I do not know how to lead or manage them.'

On the challenge Participant 5 said:

'I once tried to make employees do something under duress and I was not successful. I ignored the employee's suggestion and forced my way instead. Umm, I must say...the employee was not happy about it...my way did not work out and had to use the employee's suggestion. The employee slackened in work cos of frustration and I failed to meet a customer deadline.'

Communication and interpersonal skills

The participants highlighted communication and interpersonal skills; especially soft skills are as regarded as a necessity by the women entrepreneur respondents as they felt that they help them to reconnect with their employees. The study revealed that employees were absent from work for a prolonged time because of the mandatory lockdown and some even worked from home where they were isolated from the rest of their teammates and management hence the need to have good communication skills. Furthermore, the women entrepreneurs highlighted the need to communicate effectively by consistently updating their stakeholders with fact-based information on any changes that happen within the workplace.

On the significance of this skill, Participant 15 summed it up:

'I need to how to communicate with my employees on adjusting to the change and uncertainty brought about by the pandemic. Working from home and being in isolation has made all of us stressed but the business environment hasn't been stagnant either. The contracts of employment have unfortunately changed...so I need to know how best to communicate such things to my employees without hurting their feelings or making things worse more than it already is.'

Participant 3 added: 'One of my employees lost a relative with Covid, I struggled to confer my condolences and even communicate the message to other employees...it took me some time to find the right words to console him...'

Digital and technical skills

Digital and technical skills were indicated by the participants as a major skill in order to survive post the pandemic as most HRM functions were embedded in an organisation's human resource information system (HRIS). HR technology facilitates the automation of tasks, monitoring of important HR metrics, and management of the workforce for organisations. As well as engage with customers and oversee the management of their talent pipelines. The study participants declared that the mandated Covid lockdown period forced them to be innovative and embrace working from home strategy and they digitalised and migrated most of their processes to using online platforms to continue doing their business. *Participant 12* echoed:

'When lockdown happened, I knew that I had to think so fast so that I would not close shop. Since I was working from home, I began to hold meetings using Google Teams, I closed deals with customers using WhatsApp and Skype, doing e-recruiting, e-marketing, e-store, and online training and all this was and is still new to me. I realised that there is no running away from digitalisation of the business and as a business woman I must be versatile with such skills.'

Participant 7 said:

'During this Covid crisis, ICT is the key driver of change and I cannot survive without it. Every employee needs to be connected to the business's IT network and system wherever one is, for the business to continue operating. ICT has permitted us to be flexible in working from home and bringing down the barriers of lockdown'

In support, participant 12 added: *‘I was happy to flex my digital prowess when doing my work...it was easy and most importantly was able to balance my personal life and working at the same time...it was kinda a blessing in disguise for me.*

However, participants also lamented the high cost of data, poor network or connectivity when using ICT as well as lack of basic ICT skills as some felt that they are too old to learn new things.

‘It is so frustrating that you are in the middle of an important meeting with your staff or client and then the network suddenly disappears and you do not know how to reconnect or which button to press because you do not have simple digital skills. Working from home becomes an expense considering the data that you have used and the postponement of a meeting...’ Participant 1

‘At times I cannot afford the high cost of internet data for me to do my business....’ Participant 9

‘...look at me ...I’m above 50 years... do you think I am capable of learning how to use computers?...my phone is chimbudzi (phone that is not an android or smartphone) and I don’t even own a laptop...and I prefer it that way...I like the old way of doing business...no technology stress...’ Participant 3

Meanwhile, the participants highlighted that despite the cost of data and other ICT infrastructure-related challenges, their businesses do not mainly depend on technology in their operations so they end up outsourcing some of these services.

Workplace culture management skills

The epidemic has had a profound and rapid impact on workplace culture, particularly in relation to remote employment. The woman entrepreneur in the case of this study defines and leads the organisational culture, while it is influenced by the workers within the company. Developing a favourable workplace culture is crucial for attracting high-caliber employees and ensuring their long-term commitment to the organisation. The majority of participants emphasised that they had to modify their work regimen since they no longer need to be physically present in an office to carry out their tasks, since they are able to do most of their work remotely.

One participant expressed that; *‘I started incorporating digital technologies into my business processes which allowed me the opportunity to work remotely from home. However, I soon realised that my initial belief that being physically present in the office was unnecessary was incorrect and deceptive. I have come to the realisation that face-to-face encounters with my employees remain significant due to their ability to establish rapport and foster trust. Interacting with someone allows for the establishment of a connection and the interpretation of their non-verbal signals.’ Participant 13*

DISCUSSION

The study findings from the interviews revealed that all the women entrepreneurs agreed that they needed key HRM skills for their survival during this COVID-19 pandemic. These findings are in tandem with Richardson *et al.* (2016)’s study which revealed that most women entrepreneurs admitted to lacking the abilities, expertise and skills in particular business matters which have hindered the viability of their businesses. These findings also highlighted the challenges that they faced. Good leadership skills were identified to be key to any entrepreneur’s business’s survival. Given the Covid-19 pandemic, business owners need to arm themselves with the right skills mix to address the different challenges confronting their organisations. These include but are not limited to understanding labour laws, creating and managing competitive remuneration packages, employee engagement and overseeing a healthy business culture (Opatha & Arulrajah, 2010). Business leaders also need HR these skills to coach and develop their employees into agile assets who are creative problem-solvers in times of crisis (Soekarso, 2011).

This admission shows that women entrepreneurs need to hone their leadership skills so they can tackle and navigate through the ever-arising challenges brought in by the pandemic. This is amplified by Antonakis *et al.* (2016) who state that effective leaders after the COVID-19 crisis understand and discuss openly the hopes and travails of their businesses and show confidence that they can realise organisational goals. In addition, women

entrepreneurs acquire work experience, managerial skills, and exposure to the entrepreneurial lifestyle informally from friends, parents and kin (Boohene, 2009; Dzisi, 2008; Muhumad, 2016). However prior studies indicates that employees prefer a leader who is masculine in a time of crisis (Van Vugt, 2008).

Communication skill as a soft skill was highlighted as regarded as a necessity by the women entrepreneur respondents as they felt that they helped them to reconnect with their employees. The right vocabulary, the right tone and being a good listener were cited as major requisites in communication. Being absent from work for a prolonged time because of the mandatory lockdown and working from home where they were isolated from the rest of their teammates and management hence the need to have good communication skills. These findings resonate with a study by Weerarathna and Pintoe (2019) which revealed that communication skills are the highest skill demanded by entrepreneurs as they deal with and deliver sensitive information to stakeholders hence the need to express themselves well both verbally and in written form. A study by Robbins *et al.*, (2013) proposed that interpersonal skills are the highest skill demanded by organisation where one is expected to understand, communicate, motivate and support the employees. Furthermore, the women entrepreneurs highlighted the need to communicate effectively by consistently updating their employees with fact-based information on any changes that happen within the workplace concerning their employment relationship.

Digital and technical skills were indicated by the participants as also key in order to survive the pandemic as most HRM functions were embedded in an organisation's human resource information system (HRIS). The participants defined digital skills as the practical appreciation of using information and technology devices and software in conducting e-HR functions like e-training and development, e-recruitment and selection or payroll management. In agreement, Kimosop *et al.*, (2016) highlighted a positive and significant relationship between information technology capabilities and the performance of women owned enterprises in Kenya. ICT especially human resources information systems can assist in prioritising other most crucial business objectives. By leveraging appropriate technology, women entrepreneurs can also enhance and streamline other aspects of their business operations as well as establish work-life balance in their lives. The crisis has clearly illustrated the potency of digital technologies, and certain alterations may now be too substantial to delay (Tregua, *et al* 2021).

The study participants declared that the mandated Covid lockdown period forced them to be innovative and they migrated to using online platforms to continue doing their business. Digitalisation also allowed them to interact with their customers easily without the physical boundaries of offices. Accordingly, a McKinsey survey published in October 2020, indicated that organisations are now three times more likely than before the crisis to conduct at least 80 percent of their consumer contacts digitally (Sull *et al.*, 2022). These findings were in consonance with the sentiments of Crittenden *et al.*, (2019) that having ICT skills allows female entrepreneurs to maintain business network ties cheaply and easily. With the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) in the business space entrepreneurs need to be more versatile in how they do their business.

However, the effective use of digital skills is dependent on the availability of ICT infrastructure to its employees. Working from home is made possible by the availability of these ICT tools. Technology HRM practices are dependent on ICT skills, resource availability, willingness of the user to learn how to use ICT. However, most entrepreneurs have financial resource constraints to buy these. The alignment of digital skills with HRM practices is a positive step that has been triggered by COVID-19 issues such as social distancing vis a vis working from home. WFH can lead, to an increase in the volume of information treated by employees, since they frequently use their emails (Leonardi, 2020). This resulted in technostress which is related to the use of ICT, which has increased among employees working remotely (Molino *et al.*, 2020). This can undermine the employees' work-life balance and psychological health especially those who worked in isolation and choose emails only as a way to communicate.

Workplace culture development skill is essential for effectively cultivating, moulding, and guiding workplace culture. A robust workplace entails a constructive, efficient, and salubrious work setting for every individual, characterised by the overall principles and conduct of the collective. These abrupt shifts in workplace culture can motivate women entrepreneurs to substitute the implied messages conveyed in an office with clear instructions communicated from a distance. These entrepreneurs may require more regular communication with staff who are working remotely in order to assess how they might provide assistance in progressing.

Primarily, female entrepreneurs can establish trust by granting their employees autonomy and empowering them to execute their tasks according to their own judgement. According to a study conducted by Sull et al. (2022), it was shown that the majority of employees would decline an offer to work for a company that offers a greater income but has a negative work culture. In tandem, a study conducted by LaBerge et al. (2020), indicated that the workplace serves as a space for fostering corporate culture, providing training, facilitating social interactions, meeting with clients, and attracting potential talent.

Business survival hinges on the ability to manage resources effectively, especially human resource, to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. This is especially true in a Covid-19 crisis. The possession and effective utilisation of HRM skills by women entrepreneurs delivers a competitive edge and an ability to overcome the challenges that come their way. The lack of unique and non-imitable intangible resources such as HRM skills identified above which differentiates a women entrepreneur business from its competitors can lead to inefficiencies, and non-competitiveness, and reduce the chance of a business to survive in times of crisis. As espoused by Rasmulia (2019) HR skills are a major influence on the performance of women-owned businesses and it is important to focus more attention on improving the skills of women entrepreneurs. Furthermore, it is important for women entrepreneurs to do a thorough analysis to determine which cultural aspects have been repressed throughout the pandemic and require strengthening in order for the organisation to maintain its competitive advantage (Brown et al., 2022).

The willingness of women entrepreneurs to gain formal business skills and to develop non-formal management skills such as networking and flexibility, help them in periods of crisis, business development and growth and give them a competitive gain (Stanger (2004).

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the above findings this study can conclude that COVID-19 has brought about many undesirable changes to women entrepreneur businesses by upending the usual normal work routines. And the women entrepreneurs already had the general HRM competences to operate their businesses. The shift in the workplace culture in terms of communication, digitalisation and working from home has triggered work processes progressing towards increased collaboration, job flexibility, and teamwork. Communication and interpersonal skills, leadership skills and digital and technical skills and workplace culture development skills were the major HRM skills identified as needed by the women entrepreneurs to be resilient and remain competitive in the post Covid business world. However, Covid 19 showed that these competences are not a one size fits and have become obsolete hence the need to upskill in light of the current crises. Some challenges highlighted were the cost of data and network challenges when WFH, lack of adequate ICT resources, lack of knowledge to communicate with employees as well as leadership skills. To address these emerging patterns, the workplace culture needs to possess the flexibility to accept many working styles, hence enhancing the whole employee experience and leveraging their competences effectively. Women entrepreneurs must assess the cultural adjustments that have arisen in their organisation throughout the pandemic to determine their effectiveness and potential as sources of strength and creativity in the future. The study therefore recommends that women entrepreneur businesses adopt strategies like functional and numerical flexibility, training and development, outsourcing and flexible working arrangements to mitigate the HRM competences inadequacies so that their business remains sustained. Also, the Ministry of Small to Medium Enterprises, and the Ministry of Women's Affairs develop policies and provide platforms that capacitate women business owners with people management skills to help them manage their businesses well post-crisis periods. The study further recommends further study on the same aspect by using different methodologies like the mixed methods and using a wider sample size.

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