

# Impact of COVID-19 on Human Resource Management Functions in Zambian Organisations

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**Abstract:** The impact of Covid-19 pandemic has been devastating on the global economy, national economies, institutions and indeed organisational operations. One of the key organisational operations that has been impacted by Covid-19 is human resource management (HRM). The impact of Covid-19 on HRM in organisations has been reported to have covered all the key functional areas of human resources practice ranging from the governance of HRM practice to workplace environment. This development has influenced the world of work profoundly. This study conducted on the impact of Covid-19 on HRM functions in Zambian organisations has revealed the continued negative impact of Covid-19 on organisational operations. However, the results of the study indicate that while all the HRM functions that were investigated namely: Organisation Design and Development; People Resourcing; Performance Management; Training and Development; Reward Management and Employee Relations reported to have been impacted, only two functions namely Training and Development and Performance Management reported significant negative impact having scored 77% and 48% respectively. The rest of the functions namely: Organisation Design and Development; People Resourcing; Reward Management and Employee Relations scored 35% and below, scores that indicate some relative stability in the operations of the functions. These results suggest the availability of a relatively stable operational environment of HRM functions in Zambian organisations and that the role of HRM function in the organisations has remained stable despite the on-going challenges posed by Covid-19. The prevalence of such an operational environment is critical for business operational continuity amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Human Resource Management, HRM Functions, Zambia

## I. INTRODUCTION

The impact of Covid-19 pandemic has been devastating on the global economy, national economies, institutions and indeed operations within institutions (Mphahlele, Seeletso, Muleya and Simui 2021, Açıkgöz and Günay 2020; African Union 2020; Association of Certified Chartered Accountants 2020; Astuti and Mahardhika 2020; Cilliers et al 2020; Dev and Sengupta 2020; International Labour Organisation 2020a; Kanu 2020; Ozili and Arun 2020; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2020; World Health Organisation 2020a). One of the key organisational operations that has been impacted by Covid-19 is the human resource management (HRM) (Gigauri 2020a; Mala 2020; Shil et al 2020). The

impact of Covid-19 on HRM in organisations has been reported to have covered all the key functional areas of HRM practice ranging from the governance of human resources practice to workplace environment (Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited 2020; Foss 2020; Gigauri 2020b; Kayula 2020; Kshirsagar et al 2020; Markey 2020; McGuire et al 2020; Mwita 2020; Sahni 2020; Susilo 2020).

Despite the above reality, the role played by HRM function during this Covid-19 period has been enormous. As argued by Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited [2020-3], “HR leaders, in particular, have been at the centre of their organization’s rapid response to this crisis, and have been playing a central role in keeping the workforce engaged, productive and resilient”. To this end, during this Covid-19 period, HR professionals in organisations have served as conduits, contact and focal points for communicating institutional policy guidelines as approved and adopted by managements on combating Covid-19 in work places. Given the fear, stress, anguish and uncertainty that gripped employees in workplaces arising from the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, it has been understood that underperformance of the human resource function in an organisation could have direct detrimental effects on the overall performance of the entire organisation. Thus, the HRM function during this strenuous period has implemented strategies such as working remotely as a way of guaranteeing business continuity and cushioning work related stress that has emanated from the dictates of the new normal in work places (Gogauri 2020c; Markey 2020; PwC 2020; Vyas and Butakhieo).

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The HRM function in organisations has evolved overtime to become a strategic business partner, a role that is critical to the achievement of organisational mandates (Shil et al 2020). This critical organisational function aids institutions to achieve their goals through its eight key main areas of practice namely: Organisation Design and Development; People Resourcing; Performance Management; Training and Development; Reward Management; Employee Relations; Health, Safety and Welfare; and Employment & HRM Services (Armstrong 2009). Accordingly, Shil et al (2020) argue that HRM functions and practices create “an environment and infrastructure that affects employees,

customers, stakeholder's effectiveness, and the overall performance of an organisation". Thus, over the years including during this period of the Covid-19 crisis, effective HRM policies, systems and practices have proved to be a source of competitive advantage in organisations owing to its capacity to change the attitudes, behaviour and performance of employees (Mala 2020). Specifically, Gigauri (2020b:1) argues that during this Covid-19 period, HRM has had a serious role to play through helping "employees in using digital platforms to access their jobs, and on the other hand to support organisations in their efforts to continue business processes".

The implementation of this function is guided by governance oversight and management leadership exercised through the enforcement and compliance with the broader conventions and recommendations emanating from the International Labour Organisation as domesticated into national labour laws (International Labour Organisation 2020b; Ibrahim and Zulkafli 2016). Further, included in this category are HRM strategies and policies that are developed and formulated by governance structures (boards of directors) for organisations (Ibrahim and Zulkafli 2016). During this Covid-19 period, both the HRM governance guidance tools and the HRM functions have been impacted (International Labour Organisation 2020). Thus, with regard to the impact on HRM governance environment, the impact of Covid-19 caused changes which saw the International Labour Organisation issue a number of guides touching areas such as health and safety at work as well as employment and HRM services (International Labour Organisation 2020). Similarly, countries amended labour laws while organisations amended their HRM policies (Alhambra et al 2020; Gigauri 2020b; Kayula 2020; Sachs 2020).

Another key HRM area impacted by Covid-19 is the work place environment and the nature of work. In terms of the work environment, the impact in this area has included physical presence, fear, stress and health matters (Gigauri 2020d; Hamid 2020; Markey 2020). To this end, a number of interventions such as health guidelines have been issued by the World Health Organisation to control safety and health aspects in work places (Hamid et al 2020; International Labour Organisation 2020; World Health Organisation 2020b). In terms of the nature of work in organisations, a great transformation has been experienced with many organisations reporting having put in place flexible working arrangements (Markey 2020; Singh and Kumar 2020; Vyas and Butakhieo 2021). A number of studies have been conducted on the implementation of flexible working arrangements such as rotations, virtual working and working from home (Singh and Kumar 2020; Vyas and Butakhieo 2021). In their study that investigated 100 IT staff and explored the emerging trends and impact of the pandemic caused by novel coronavirus on working professionals on IT sector in Bengaluru, Karnataka, India, Singh and Kumar (2020) established that the impact of Covid-19 on IT staff in Bengaluru were both positive and negative in that, two thirds of the respondents worked from

home and were productive enough to meet their work expectations. However, two thirds of the respondents indicated that the down fall of this new and accepted culture was that employees felt more alienated from their work places and there was need to ensure that "more frequent organisational communication and better clarity of expectations on assigned task to them" is made to staff. Further, the study established that over two thirds of the respondents felt that their jobs were being threatened due to declining economies and the threat on the going concern of organisations in the event that the pandemic was not halted. Further, reporting on their study findings on working from home in Hong Kong, Vyas and Butakhieo (2021) established that overall, the population of Hong Kong that has a 93% access to internet was satisfied with the introduction of working from home.

Other studies have reported on the impact of Covid-19 to human resource functions such as organisation design and development (Adonu et al 2020; Foss 2020); people resourcing (Gigauri 2020a); performance management (Hamid 2020); training and development (Gigauri 2020a; Kshirsagar et al 2020); reward management (PwC 2020) and employee relations (Markey 2020). Some of the findings have confirmed the negative impact of Covid-19 on some of these functions while others have reported potential further impacts (Markey 2020). In all these circumstances, some suggestions have been made on how best to cope with the devastating impact of Covid-19 on the HRM function (Adonu et al 2020). To ease pressure on the function, a number of interventions such as sending people on leave; working in rotations, working from home, teleworking/virtual working and suspending salary increments have been implemented by employers (Kayula 2020; Markey 2020; PwC 2020; Vyas and Butakhieo).

### III. PURPOSE OF STUDY

The general purpose of this study was to assess the impact of Covid-19 on HRM functions in Zambian organisations. Specifically, the study inquired on the impact of Covid-19 of the following key HRM functions:

- a) Organisation Design and Development;
- b) People Resourcing;
- c) Training and Development;
- d) Reward Management;
- e) Employee Relations; and
- f) Performance Management.

The other two key functions namely Health, Safety and Welfare; and Employment & HRM Services were not investigated mainly because these have been the main focus areas of World Health Organisation, International Labour Organisation and national governments in the guides which have constituted interventions in combating Covid-19 in work places (International Labour Organisation 2020a; International Labour Organisation 2020c; International Labour Organisation 2020d; International Labour Organisation 2020e;

World Health Organisation 2020a).

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology followed in this study was quantitative. A survey was carried out using questionnaires for data collection. The population surveyed was a congregation of HRM practitioners who were attending a workshop under the theme "Highlights of Judicial Decisions affecting HR Practice in Zambia, A Case Study of the New Employment Code and the Amended Constitution" organised by the Zambia Institute of Human Resources Management (ZIHRM). The workshop was held at Lake Kariba Inns in a town called Siavonga, in Zambia.

Questionnaires were circulated to 109 attendees out of which, 94 were returned representing a response rate of 86 percent. The questionnaire had both closed and opened ended questions. Data was analysed using SPSS and Excel.

#### V. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Results of the study have been presented using the following sub-headings: Background of participating organisations; Impact of Covid-19 on HRM functions covering the following: organisation design and development, people resourcing, training and development, reward management, employee relations, and performance management; perceived overall impact of covid-19 on HRM functions and perceived positive impacts of covid-19 on HRM functions.

##### 5.1. Background of Participating Organisations

There were 109 delegates who attended a training on Highlights of Judicial Decisions affecting HR Practice in Zambia, A Case Study of the New Employment Code Act No. 3 of 2019 and the Zambia Constitution amended in 2016 organised by the Zambia Institute of Human Resource Management (ZIHRM). Out of the 109 attendees, 94 responded to the questionnaire. Out of the 94 attendees who responded, 57% were from public institutions while 43% were from private institutions. In terms of industry representation, the delegates were drawn from the agricultural, education, tourism, manufacturing, service, telecommunication and banking sectors. Figure 1 below presents the participating organisations by sector of the economy.

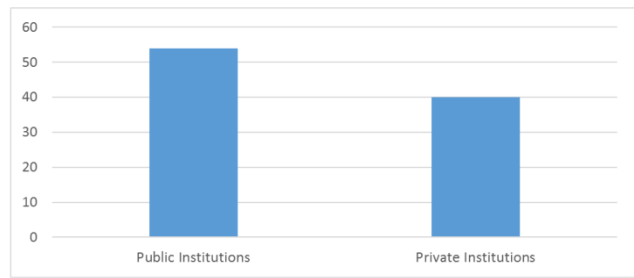


Figure 1. Categorisation of institutions that were represented at the workshop

##### 5.2. Impact of COVID-19 on HRM Functions

The HRM function in an organisation has the responsibility of implementing labour laws and HR strategies and policies. In view of this fact, the effect of Covid-19 have, with no doubt, had a great impact on the operations of organisations in general and HRM functions in particular. In this study, respondents were asked to indicate the HRM functions which had been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in their organisations. Predetermined responses were provided for six major HRM functions namely: organisation design and development; people resourcing; training and development; reward management; employee relations; and performance management.

##### 5.2.1. Impact of COVID-19 on Organisation Design and Development

The HRM function of Organisation Design and Development is concerned with the design of organisation structures, design of jobs, institutional development as well as matters regarding change management and institutional transformation.

Regarding the impact of Covid-19 on organisation design and development, the HR experts reported that 35% of their organisations did not carry out any activities on organisation design and development due to the financial challenges they were experiencing posed by the pandemic, while 65% of organisations were not affected by Covid-19 and continued to undertake organisation design and development activities. The specific activities that were impacted by Covid-19 included deferment of restructuring activities and cancellation of organisational development activities such as institutional diagnosis and team building. These results are presented in figure 2 below.

Further, respondents who affirmed the impact of Covid-19 on the function of Organisation Design and Development were asked to indicate the ways in which the function was affected. Their responses are presented in table 1 below.

Table 1. Type of Covid-19 Impact on Organisation Design and Development

| Impact on Organisation, Design and Development                   | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| Inability to perform any works on the function                   | 12        |
| Inability to grow the institution due to stagnated customer base | 15        |

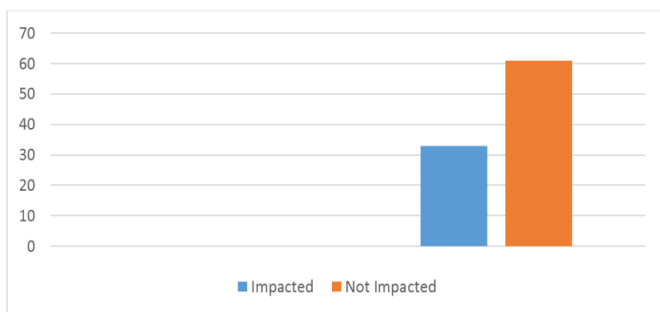


Figure 2. Impact of Covid-19 on Organisation Design and Development

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Stoppage of on-going restructuring activities | 6 |
|---|---|

5.2.2. Impact of COVID-19 on People Resourcing

The HRM function of People Resourcing involves carrying out workforce planning, talent management, succession planning and career management, staff induction and orientation, employee separation as well as conducting exit interviews.

In terms of people resourcing, 34% of the HR experts reported that Covid-19 impacted people resourcing activities in their organisations, while 66% reported that Covid-19 did not affect people resourcing activities in their organisations. At the height of the pandemic, organisations which were impacted by Covid-19 imposed a hiring freeze on account of financial challenges they were facing. Furthermore, some organisations could not conduct job interviews and pended this activity to a time when the situation would be enabling to conduct face to face job interviews. Further, a limited number of organisations used online platforms to conduct job interviews. These results are presented in figure 3 below.

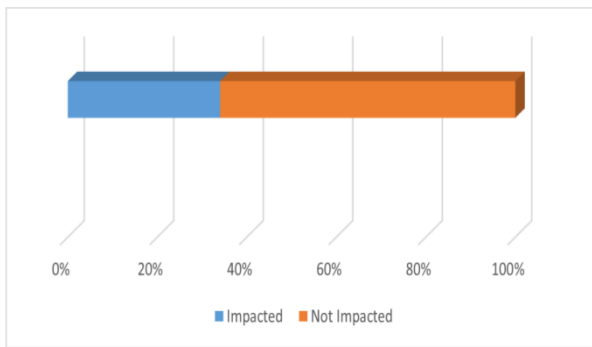


Figure 3. Impact of Covid-19 on People Resourcing.

Further, respondents who affirmed the impact of Covid-19 on the function of People Resourcing were asked to indicate the exact ways in which the function was affected. Their summarised responses are presented in table 2 below.

Table 2. Type of Covid-19 Impact on People Resourcing

| Impact on Employee Resourcing   | Frequency |
|---|-----------|
| Use of virtual systems caused challenges in identifying respondents                             | 1         |
| Some respondents not ready to move due to covid/immobility                                      | 3         |
| Could not interview respondents physically, interviews done online                              | 2         |
| Recruitment freeze/ Could not hire staff even when others resigned /cutting down on recruitment | 18        |
| Limited/slowed pace   | 3         |
| Expatriate staff could not return to Zambia   | 1         |
| Could not recruit staff due to financial challenges/Low revenue affecting recruitment           | 5         |
| Screening of physical documents   | 1         |

5.2.3. Impact of COVID-19 on Training and Development

The HRM function of Training and Development involves carrying out activities on both long and short term learning and development of staff, developing management capacity, coaching and mentorship of staff as well as ensuring that organisational learning and learning organisation activities are implemented. Respondents were asked to indicate how the function of Training and Development had been impacted by Covid-19 in their organisations. 77% of the HR experts reported that Covid-19 had impacted training and development activities in their organisations, while 23% indicated that their organisations were not affected by Covid-19. Organisations that were impacted by Covid-19 suspended or cancelled training and development activities due to financial challenges they were facing caused by the pandemic, while organisations that decided to implement training and development activities reduced the number of employees who were earmarked to undertake some training and development programmes as these organisations were trying to save costs.

Table 3 below summarises the main findings regarding the impact of Covid-19 on the Training and Development function.

Table 3. Type of Covid-19 Impact on Training and Development

| Impact of Covid 19 on Training and Development  | Frequency |
|---|-----------|
| Department closed during Covid  | 1         |
| Staff could not be sent for training  | 6         |
| Trainings were cancelled/suspended  | 37        |
| Reduced number of staff sent for capacity building programs/limited/Restriction of formal classroom training/reduced training | 13        |
| Online training not very effective  | 1         |
| Planned activities could not be executed  | 1         |
| In-house training suspended   | 2         |
| Closure of most learning institutions no access to external training/Difficulty to organise workshop and training gatherings  | 2         |
| Dwindling income/revenue /financial challenges did not support T and D Plan   | 7         |
| Use of It facility/Distance learning  | 2         |
| General Assembly of attendees   | 1         |

5.2.4. Impact of COVID-19 on Reward Management

The HRM function of Reward Management is concerned with the carrying out of activities on job analysis and evaluation, market rate analysis, grade and pay structures, employee benefits, pensions and allowances as well as compensation planning and remuneration. Respondents were asked to indicate how the function of Reward Management had been impacted by Covid-19 in their organisations.



Out of the 94 HR experts who participated in the study, 35% of the HR experts reported that reward management activities had been impacted by Covid-19 in their organisations on account of financial challenges, while 65% of the HR experts reported that their organisations were not impacted by Covid-

19. Due to dwindling income or revenue, some organisations imposed a wage freeze, while others awarded their employees minimal wage increments.

Figure 4 and table 4 below summarises the main findings regarding the impact of Covid-19 on Reward Management.

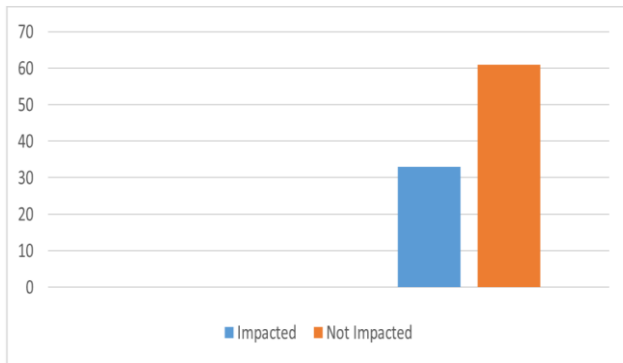


Figure 4. Impact of Covid-19 on Reward Management.

Table 4. Type of Covid-19 Impact on Reward Management.

| Impact of Covid 19 on Reward Management  | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| Events such as labour day awards were scrapped   | 2         |
| Limited resources due to low sales volume  | 1         |
| Low funds to recognise staff/Low revenue   | 7         |
| Low business affected profitability of the institution                                   | 3         |
| Some non-mandatory benefits had to be renegotiated/ Payment of some allowances suspended | 2         |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Non-essential label costs were reduced due to reduced revenue/Insufficient funds due to financial constraints | 3 |
| Fluctuating pay dates and incentives  | 2 |
| No increments due to spike in prices  | 2 |
| Wage freeze for all staff in 2020/ no rewards   | 7 |
| Budget constraints due to non-operations  | 2 |
| Salaries cut and reduced  | 1 |
| Minimal salary increase   | 1 |

### 5.2.5. Impact of COVID-19 on Employee Relations

The HRM function of Employee Relations is concerned with the implementation of employee relations processes, engaging in negotiations and bargaining as well as labour related communication. Respondents were asked to indicate how the function of Employee Relations had been impacted by Covid-19 in their organisations.

Of the 94 respondents who participated in the study, 20% indicated that the Employee Relations function in their organisations had been affected by Covid-19, while 80% indicated that this function in their organisations had not been affected by Covid-19. Figure 6 and table 5 below summarises the main findings regarding the impact of Covid-19 on employee relations.

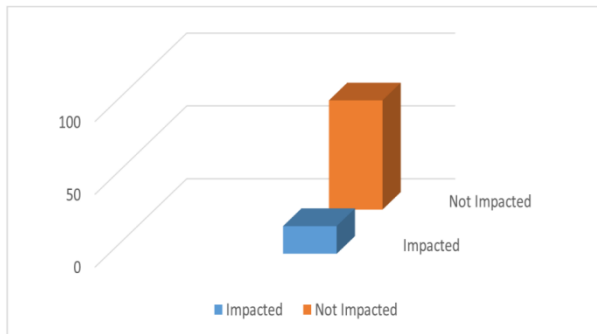


Figure 6. Impact of Covid-19 on Employee Relations.

Table 5. Type of Covid-19 Impact on Employee Relations

| Impact of Covid 19 on Employee Relations   | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| Cases could not be heard since meetings were cancelled/ Court cases did not take off | 4         |
| Case hearings became limited to avoid regular interaction                            | 4         |
| Could not conduct negotiations as virtual meetings proved difficulty                 | 2         |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Not able to conclude negotiations due to low business/Delayed negotiations     | 2 |
| Very little networking within the industry due to fears of covid transmissions | 2 |
| Employees sent on forced leave demanded for full pay instead of basic pay      | 1 |
| Management/Union meetings were put on hold for some time                       | 3 |
| Redundancies   | 1 |

### 5.2.6. Impact of COVID-19 on Performance Management

The HRM function of Performance Management involves carrying out both strategic and operational work planning and organisation, conducting staff performance appraisals and institutional performance reviews. Out of the 94 respondents who participated in the study, 48% stated that performance management activities in their organisations had been affected by Covid-19, while 52% indicated that this function in their organisations had not been impacted by Covid-19. Figure 7 and Table 6 below summarises the main findings regarding the impact of Covid-19 on Performance Management.

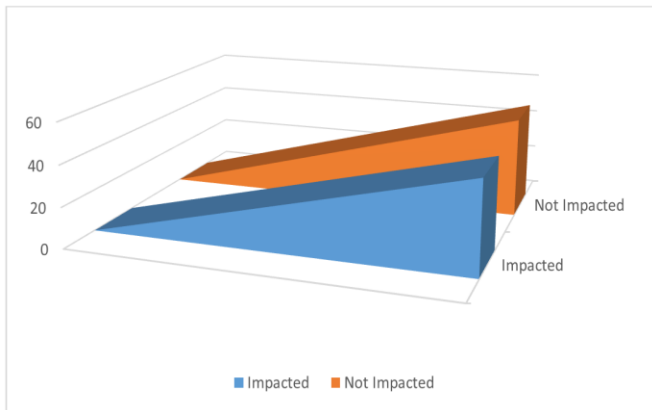


Figure 7. Impact of Covid-19 on Performance Management

Table 6. Type of Covid-19 Impact on Performance Management

| Impact of Covid 19 on Performance Management   | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| Assessment was impossible as employees were not working full capacity/working on-off   | 6         |
| Monitoring of certain physical aspects could not take place  | 1         |
| Stretched few staff on site  | 1         |
| Working/forced leave made it almost impossible to assess employees   | 3         |
| The aspect of social distancing made it difficult for supervisors to effectively interact/assess their staff   | 3         |
| Low motivation, poor work output   | 1         |
| Difficulty in measuring KPIs/ difficult to achieve targets/ PM affected/lowered expectations   | 5         |
| Not able to implement PMS due to low business/disturbed PM cycle   | 3         |
| Suspended  | 2         |
| Hard to accurately monitor performance   | 3         |
| Change of performance targets due to reduced activities and business closure /List of things happened that were not initially agreed which distorted PM  | 7         |
| Working remotely did not facilitate effective performance management review/Rotational basis of staff reporting for work affected levels of productivity | 9         |
| Employees went on recess   | 4         |
| Delayed completion of appraisals   | 5         |

5.3. Perceived Overall Impact of COVID-19 on HRM Functions

Respondents were asked to indicate what they perceived to be the overall negative impact of COVID-19 on the HRM function in their organisations. 19% of the respondents indicated employment and HRM services; 36% indicated performance management; 27% training and development; 12% indicated reward management and people resourcing; 4% indicated occupational safety and health; and 2% indicated industrial relations and organisation design and development. Figure 8 below summarises the main findings with regard to the perceived

overall impact of Covid-19 on HRM functions.

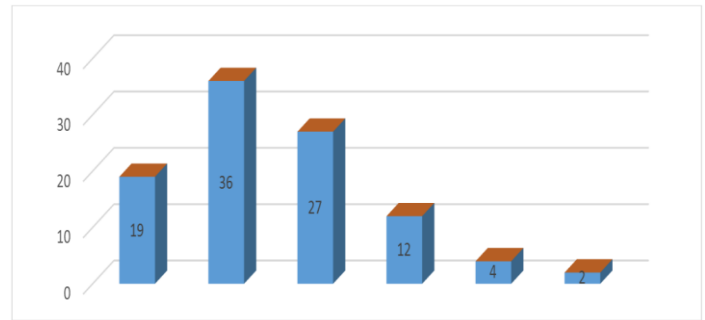


Figure 8. Perceived Overall impact of Covid-19 on HRM functions.

5.4. Perceived Positive Impacts of COVID-19 on HRM Functions

Respondents were further asked to state what they perceived to be the positive impact of Covid-19 on HRM Functions. Multiple pre-determined responses were solicited for this question. The responses are presented in table 7 below.

Table 7. Perceived Positive Impacts of Covid-19 on HRM functions

| Statement on positive impact of Covid-19  | Frequency |
|---|-----------|
| It has promoted flexible work arrangements such as working from home  | 67        |
| It has accelerated the rate at which our organisation has digitalised HR processes and other business processes | 43        |
| It has enabled the organisation to identify key positions and those that can be phased out                      | 24        |

VI. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the significance of HRM functions in organisations, especially during times of crises. The main findings of the study were limited to the following HRM functions namely: Organisation Design and Development; People Resourcing; Training and Development; Reward Management; Employee Relations and Performance Management. The rationale for not including the other two functions - Health, Safety and Welfare and Employment & HRM Services was that these two were already a subject of wider discussions from the interventions for combating Covid-19 as guided by World Health Organisation, International Labour Organisation and national governments (African Union 2020; International Labour Organisation 2020b; World Health Organisation 2020).

As presented in this paper, this study has revealed the continued negative impact of Covid-19 on organisational operations. However, the results of the study have revealed that while all the HRM functions that were investigated reported to have been impacted, only two functions namely Training and Development and Performance Management reported significant negative impact having scored 77% and 48% respectively. The rest of the functions namely: Organisation Design and Development; People Resourcing; Reward Management and Employee Relations scored 35%

and below, scores that indicate some relative stability in the implementation of the investigated HRM functions.

According to the findings of the study presented above, the most negatively impacted HRM function was Training and Development. This finding resonates well with the findings of Gigauri (2020d) who, in a her study in Georgia revealed that “Georgian companies that faced the recession due to the pandemic, could not be able or were not willing to invest in human potential development as they were trying to save costs. Companies were trying to spend less on employee development, which had an impact on employee motivation, retention, well-being, as well as on company’s effectiveness, further advancement, and its ultimate success on the market”.

Another key finding of the study is the fact that apart from training and development activities that were severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, the other functions namely Organisation Design and Development; People Resourcing; Reward Management; and Employee Relations were moderately impacted by Covid-19. As discussed below, a number of reasons could be attributed to these findings, among them being: quick government intervention; youthful population profile and economic performance (Kayula 2020; Umvilighozo et al 2020; United Nations Development Programme 2020).

With regard to Government interventions, a swift response from the Zambian Government saw the implementation of a number of interventions such as an imposition of partial lockdown, which included the ban on non-essential travel to all countries; quarantine of everyone that travelled to Zambia from the affected countries for a period of not less than fourteen (14) days; cancellation of non-essential travel outside the district boundaries; discretionary travel to certain places such as shopping malls or social visits were discouraged; all institutions were required to provide sanitising facilities for their staff and visitors as well as maintaining good hygiene practices in the work environment; and banning of conferences, meetings and workshops involving large groups of people (Kayula 2020; United Nations Development Programme 2020). The impact of these instituted measures were seen to be devastating as noted by the United Nations (UN) community in Zambia who, in offering solidarity to the Zambian Government, indicated that “COVID-19 pandemic will have a multifaceted effect on the lives of the people of Zambia considering that movement restrictions put in place to contain the pandemic are impacting people’s ability to access basic services to sustain their livelihoods. These well-intended preventive measures will undoubtedly exacerbate existing vulnerability of disadvantaged population groups such as the elderly, disabled, people living with HIV, youth, poor households, refugee and migrants” (United Nations Zambia Country Office 2020:4). However, this move could have been the correct measure instituted by the Zambian Government as argued in a study conducted by Umvilighozo et al (2020) in seven Sub-Saharan African countries which included Zambia. Accordingly, Umvilighozo et al (2020:5) argue that “the early

implementation of COVID-19 preventive measures delayed the rapid spread of the virus within the African population”. This very fact could be credited to have influenced the less impact of Covid-19 on HRM functions as the effective implementation of these measures may have entailed availability of HR professionals in workplaces.

Population profiles have been linked to the susceptibility to contraction of, and deaths arising from Covid-19 (Umvilighozo et al 2020). It has been established that a youthful population is less likely to be severely impacted by Covid-19 compared to a relatively elderly population. To this end Cilliers et al (2020:4) indicate that “to date, mortality rates in Africa are significantly lower than elsewhere, generally attributed to Africa’s more youthful population”. Thus, it may be argued that, the youthful population of Zambia which accounts for about 60% of the total population, may also have contributed to the low infection rates in Zambia. This assertion is consistent with other studies that have reported African populations to have contributed to the low penetration of Covid-19 and that the majority of recorded Covid-19 related deaths have been among the elderly populations (Lone and Ahmad 2020; Gaye et al 2020). To this end, it could be argued that Zambian organisations in general and the HR professionals in particular continued to operate owing to less infections and deaths experienced in the organisations due to the youthful population.

Another reason that could account for the less impact of Covid-19 on HRM functions is the fact that Zambia did not implement a total lockdown. This view is complemented by Umvilighozo et al (2020:5) who indicate that “to reduce the risk of imported cases” other “countries, with the exception of Zambia, swiftly closed borders, shut airports and reduced incoming travellers to essential workers and returning residents” and that “...With the exception of Zambia, the assessed Sub-Saharan African countries implemented a dusk to dawn curfew and nation-wide lockdown to enforce social distancing measures, limiting movements to essential service providers”. Further, Umvilighozo et al (2020:11) contented that “It was noted that Zambia, which did not fully implement the interventions described in this study as well as other countries not included in our review that have struggled to put into action public health interventions, reported no significant increases in deaths compared to countries with more robust responses reported here”. Owing to this fact, Zambian companies continued to operate even at the height of the pandemic. This fact may explain why the Zambian companies were not severely affected by the pandemic as economic activities were taking place in the organisations. In fact, most organisations implemented remote working and rotational work arrangements rather than completely shutting down businesses (Kayula 2020; UNDP 2020).

Another factor worth noting is the fact that Zambia is one of the countries with high level poverty rates. According to Saasa and James (2020:350) “Zambia’s economic situation prior to COVID-19 was already compromised and constrained

by unsustainable public debt (debt-to-GDP ratio of 78% in 2018), high poverty rates (1 in 2 below the poverty line) and inequality, overrepresentation (90%) of the workforce in informal sectors and heavy reliance on copper mining as the single commodity responsible for 70% of country exports and foreign currency earnings". This fact makes adherence to some of the instituted Covid-19 measures difficult to enforce as well as comply with as they jeopardised the livelihoods of most citizens who survive on daily incomes (UNDP 2020). Under such environments, it is difficult to expect institutions to completely shut operations.

Lastly and probably the most important argument could be the fact that since the HRM function has been at the centre stage by ensuring that employees, employers and stakeholders were being guided on how work was to be executed in the organisations, laxity in the performance of this function could have negatively impacted organisations (Gigauri 2020a; Mala 2002). Thus, HRM took the lead in helping organisations to navigate through uncertainties during the pandemic, providing leadership and direction in assuring and maintaining mental wellbeing of employees (Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited 2020). HRM supported the various business units in the organisations and also ensured that the workforces adapted to the challenging times in order to guarantee business continuity.

Overall, the results of this study suggest the availability of a relatively stable operational environment of HRM functions in Zambian organisations and that the role of HRM function in the organisation has remained stable despite the on-going challenges posed by Covid-19. This finding may largely be attributed to what (Umvilighozo et al (2020:5) argued in their study that "contrary to what was initially expected, the spread of SARS-CoV-2 has been relatively slower in Africa, and COVID-19 infections have been generally mild to moderate, leading to more recoveries and lower fatality rates ... compared to Western countries". This situation may continue to prevail given the global interventions being undertaken to eradicate Covid-19. This calls for total community involvement response for effective management of social related challenges such as COVID-19 (Mwanangombe, Mundende, Muzata, Muleya, Kanyamuna & Simui, 2020; Mwase, Simuyaba, Mwewa, Muleya, & Simui, 2020).

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

The impact of Covid-19 has continued to cause havoc to organisations and populations worldwide. However, going by the findings of this study, the impact of Covid-19 on specific organisational operations may vary depending on variables such as location, population profile as well as economic performance of countries. This assertion is being made considering the findings of this study on Zambian organisations which has revealed the moderate impact of Covid-19 on HRM functions. The study has suggested among other measures that the swift government interventions, poor economic performance, poverty as well as the need to maintain operations to sustaining livelihoods could have made

HRM functions less impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is thus concluded that the role being played by the HRM function amidst the Covid-19 pandemic is pivotal to the continuity of operations and ultimate overall performance of organisations.

As Covid-19 persists with new variants emerging, it is recommended that more research be conducted to establish the extent to which the newly adopted interventions such as virtual working could be entrenched in HRM policies beyond the pandemic. Further, in order to have a holistic picture of the impact of the pandemic on institutions, other operations such as business development, financial management and marketing should be explored as they complement HRM in making organisations achieve their mandates.

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