

# CHALLENGES FOR HRM IN A CRISIS OF COVID-19 – CASE STUDY OF THE CATERING INDUSTRY IN POLAND

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**Introduction/background:** The public health crisis, which was the Covid-19 pandemic, made it necessary to introduce changes in the HRM (human resource management) process in almost all organizations and industries. One of the industries that felt the negative effects of the crisis in a very severe way was the catering industry. Both owners of catering enterprises as well as employees in the industry had to face the challenges posed by an unexpected crisis situation.

**Aim of the paper:** The main aim of this paper was to identify human resource management challenges and activities in the catering industry in times of Covid-19 pandemic in Poland.

**Materials and methods:** The work uses source material in the form of literature on the subject of the crisis, as well as available reports and studies that were created during and immediately after the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Primary research was carried out on the basis of a survey method. The questionnaire was distributed among the owners or managers of catering enterprises, as well as to industry's employees.

**Results and conclusions:** The pandemic was an unexpected phenomenon, and its effects left a significant mark on the processes related to human resource management. The catering industry turned out to be one of the most sensitive to such crises, which meant that many current employees decided to change their profession, and the owners and managers understood the need to both diversify activities and services provided, as well as the need to introduce changes in areas directly related to human resources management. The pandemic also increased awareness of the role and the importance of qualified, competent, motivated and committed staff in overcoming crises and achieving the success of the company.

**Keywords:** human resource management, crisis, crisis situation, Covid-19 pandemic, catering industry.

## 1. Introduction

The possibility of emergence of a crisis situation is embedded in the risk of management of almost every enterprise. A crisis usually occurs at an unexpected moment, it is characterized by the presence of chaos and uncertainty. In dealing with the crisis, it is important to make well-

considered and appropriate decisions that will affect the enterprise and its personnel. In this regards an entrepreneur or manager during a crisis is faced with the choice of making difficult and courageous decisions that require not only the knowledge, but also an experience and skills. The unstable economic situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has greatly affected the operation of many businesses. Industries that rely on face-to-face interactions were most affected, thus the service sector including the catering industry. The operation of food service facilities depended on indicators of new infections, guidelines and restrictions. The sudden crisis, inexperience, inadequate management of the business and human resources resulted in the closure of many companies, while others struggled with the crisis.

The main purpose of this paper is to identify the human resource management activities in the catering industry in the era of the pandemic. The paper adopts the following research problems: 1. How does the crisis situation affect human resource management? 2. What changes in the process of business management in the food service industry, especially in the area of human resource management, occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic? 3. In what way was the catering industry affected by the pandemic? 4. What recommendations have resulted from the crisis situation in the catering industry for the future?

The thesis of the work assumes that the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to the introduction of changes in the process of human resource management in the organization of the catering industry. The objects of the study were selected enterprises in the catering industry, while the subject of the research were employees, owners and managers of food service enterprises. The considerations in the theoretical part are related to human resource management and the determinants of the crisis and the conditions of management in crisis.

The literature on human resource management and crises was used in the creation of the paper. The sources of the work also include industry reports and statistical data available on industry's websites. In the empirical part the work is based on surveys that were conducted in companies in the food service industry. For the purposes of this work, the surveys targeted two groups: owners and managers as well as employees.

## **2. Theoretical foundations of human resource management**

There are many approaches to defining human resources and human resource management. The term human resources is used to describe people together with their skills, knowledge, experience and qualifications, which together with natural and capital resources appear as part of the economic resources. Among the terms that can be used in a company to describe people, names such as employees, human resources, human capital, social potential of an organisation and human resources should be classified (Harasim, 2013, p. 9). Poczowski writes that human resources consist of a set of characteristics that enable people to perform different roles in

an organisation. Among the key components of human resources he mentions: knowledge, skills, attitudes, abilities, health, values and also the level of motivation to act. The author also emphasises that the managers of the human resource are the selected employees, who decide on the extent of its use during work (Pocztowski, 2008, p. 33). According to Król (2006), the term human resources is a value concept - it emphasises the important role of employees in the process of the organisation's functioning; because human resources affect the use of other resources of the organisation (material, financial), which is why the term has replaced other previously used terms, such as labour force or personnel" (Król, 2006, p. 54). Human resource management has become a new view of the HR function and implies a comprehensive view of HR issues in the company. Such differences are the result of accepting the following assumptions in human resource management (Wyrzykowska, Karbowski, 2009, p. 92):

- People are the most valuable resource of the organisation and the key to its success.
- The objectives, together with the HRM policy, should be in line with the mission and vision of the organisation's strategy.
- The management of human resources is based on the organisation's culture, which should be developed accordingly.
- Developing the participation of employees, their commitment to the organisation and their positive attitude to change.
- Decentralising the HR function by increasing the involvement of line managers.
- The individualisation of labour relations is desirable.

Zajac (2007, p. 13) understands human resource management as a strategic, coherent and comprehensive approach to managing people, who are the most valuable resource of an organisation. It aims to integrate the main goals of the organisation with the goals of each employee based on his or her needs. According to Król (2006, p. 55), human resource management is about designing and deploying the organisation's human resources in such a way that the organisation's objectives can be fully achieved, taking into account the interests of the employer and employees. Another definition is that human resource management is a function that is performed with other management functions under certain internal and external conditions. Internal factors include the company's economic situation, relevant technologies, management style, organisational structure and long-term goals. The latter include, for example, the situation on the labour market, legal conditions and socio-cultural conditions (Wyrzykowska, Karbowski, 2009, p. 95). Human resource management is the strategy and practice of attracting, using, improving and retaining people - their skills and abilities in an organisation or company (Adamiec, Kozusznik, 2000, p. 18). It postulates the strategic integration of HR and business issues, the active role of line management in resolving HR issues, and the need to shape organisational culture, integrate HR processes and build employee involvement as tools for achieving goals (Pocztowski, 2008, p. 34).

### 3. Global public health crisis - Covid-19 pandemic

Crises are an integral part of both human life and the functioning of organisations. They are the subject of study by many scientific disciplines. They need to be analysed in relation to several levels and areas. As Kral and Zablocka-Kluczka (2004) claims, one can speak of political, social, cultural, economic crises, parliamentary and agrarian crises, crises in medicine, in the family and crises of identity, morality, etc. Under the term crisis there can be different situations. The common feature of these situations is a threat to the current acceptable state of affairs in a particular area of individual or societal functioning. Situations refer to a threat to the fundamental values, interests or goals of institutions and social groups. A crisis is associated with an imbalance and, at the same time, with a disruption of activities and the realisation of goals (Wojciechowska-Filipek, 2014, pp. 16-17).

Crises are a widespread phenomenon, which affects the economy, companies and the staff employed by companies. Consideration of the crisis occurring in a company should begin by defining the concept of crisis, which can encompass its various spheres. The first definitions and approaches to crisis in the enterprises were concerned with the legal and economic aspects of collapse, the threat to existence and were close to the concept of bankruptcy. With the passage of time, crisis was noticed also in other spheres of enterprise activity, among others: in relations occurring between groups and individuals in the enterprise or between the enterprise and various entities in its environment (Romanowska, 2016, p. 16).

As Zakrzewska-Bielawska emphasises, the concept of crisis in an organisation is difficult to define due to its multidimensionality and various subject references (Zakrzewska-Bielawska, 2008, p. 65). Crisis can be analysed in relation to (Walas-Trębacz, Ziarko, 2011, p. 18):

- the process - attention is paid to its course,
- the phases of the process - distinguished by the intensity of the crisis,
- place of formation,
- problems in development concepts.

A crisis in relation to a company refers to a condition that threatens the survival of the company, the realisation of its objectives, reduces the time available for remedial action and surprises decision-makers with its emergence, resulting in conditions of strong pressure (Piaseczny, 2011, p. 259). In another view, a crisis in a company is an unpredictable event that, in perspective, threatens stakeholders with important and serious consequences, among other things: it may affect organisational performance and induce negative results (Wojciechowska-Filipek, 2014, p. 25). Barton (1993) understands crisis as an unpredictable phenomenon that has negative effects that significantly reduce an organisation's activities in the areas of services, employment, financial health and reputation. Wawrzyniak (1984) considers a crisis in an enterprise to be a situation of great danger to the organisation as a whole, in which, due to the piling up of various difficulties and the intensification of conflict phenomena, the realisation

of its basic functions is threatened. Another definition says that a crisis is a breakthrough, a decisive moment, a turning point. This definition implies a need of choice, a decision making moment, a struggle and a fight, in which acting under time pressure is crucial (Barczak, Bartusik, 2010, p. 13).

According to Urabanowska-Sojkin (1999), a crisis is a pathology in the development of an organisation, often caused by a disproportion between goals and the resources to achieve them. In view of this, a crisis is a pathological situation that threatens the economic existence of an enterprise. Rozwadowska (2002, p. 65) formulates the definition of a crisis as follows: "A crisis is a sudden, unexpected and undesirable event that disrupts the balance in a company and poses a threat to any sphere of activity". According to Zelek (2003, p. 32), a crisis is understood as a consequence of disturbances in the existence or realisation of one or more factors determining the existence and development of an enterprise, both those of external influence and those internal to it, dependent on the efficiency of management. As the authoress claims, the basic features of a crisis are manifested by (Zelek, 2003, p. 40):

- permanently disrupted economic activity,
- a real or apparent loss of control over one's activities,
- disruption of the internal balance of the organisation,
- threat to the existence of the organisation or parts of it,
- a decline in the financial condition of an organisation, limiting its development possibilities,
- a threat to the fulfilment of the company's strategic objectives,
- ambivalence about opportunities for growth and recovery,
- a shaking of the basis of public trust and internal faith in the organisation, which may contribute to a deterioration of its image.

As it can be seen from the literature review, a crisis is an uncontrolled and unpredictable phenomenon that can contribute to a threat to a company's existence. Considerations of crises provide a basis for defining a crisis situation. A crisis-related situation refers to a state resulting from the formation of certain unfavourable phenomena over time, which does not pose a direct threat to the existence of an organisation, but means an unsatisfactory assessment of its activities from the point of view of changes occurring in the environment and/or in relation to benchmark states (assessments) (Zakrzewska-Bielawska, 2008, p. 67).

A crisis situation can be perceived as a series of activities that precede a crisis and influence its course. A crisis situation is characterised by uncertainty, increasing destabilisation and social tension (Walas-Trębacz, Ziarko, 2011, p. 24). Another definition states that a crisis situation can be treated as a state in which no threat to the organisation's existence appears, but the results show that the organisation is not keeping up with the demands of the environment. In the context of a company, a crisis situation can be defined as a steady deterioration in economic and financial performance, an increasing decline in market share and a company's

declining strategic potential. The developing crisis situation leads to a crisis, which means that the overall balance of the organisation is upset (Barczak, Bartusik, 2010, p. 14).

On 5 March 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Poland. Just six days later, the World Health Organisation declared a global pandemic. The pandemic has become a serious public health threat. The increasing number of infections, the high number of deaths, and the inefficiency of health care systems created fears of infection, death, complications, and contact with people who might be infected. The pandemic caused many changes in social life. Society has had to face isolation, as well as reduced contact (Dymecka, 2021). The dynamics of the coronavirus outbreak shook the global economy, disrupting many industries, cutting supply chains or changing the demand for certain goods.

One solution to curb the development of the pandemic was the introduction of the so-called lockdown - the freezing of socio-economic life. The lockdown aimed at the so-called maximum flattening of the disease curve. The impact of the pandemic affected the economy, businesses as well as workers. As a result of the restrictions put in place, many factories closed down resulting in a decrease in the number of jobs. The pandemic caused an economic downturn, an increase in the number of unemployed and governments developed rescue packages to help and save the economy (Czucharski et. al., 2020).

In Poland, a number of restrictions were put in place to limit the transmission of the virus. Restrictions included a ban on foreigners entering Poland, and a 14-day quarantine was imposed upon arrival. The first lockdown implemented included the closure of most economic sectors. The activities of shopping malls were restricted to pharmacies and grocery shops. Air and rail services were suspended. Limits and bans on gatherings of more than 50 people were introduced (Ligaj, Pavlos, 2021, p. 63).

As a result of the restrictions, restaurants and entertainment venues were closed overnight. Learning in schools and universities was carried out remotely, as was work, which was moved from offices to homes (Skrabacz, 2021). An obligatory quarantine in case of illness was introduced, along with the designation of its location. In addition, people who were ill or suspected of being ill were forbidden to leave their quarantine places. A number of orders and prohibitions were introduced relating to staying in specific places, facilities or areas. In addition, mouth and nose coverings were introduced. Many businesses in various industries were affected by the coronavirus. One of the most affected industries was the tourism, hotel and catering industry.

#### **4. Specifics of human resource management in the catering industry during a pandemic**

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused many changes regarding the operation of the catering industry. Places such as restaurants, cafes and pubs closed down overnight. The restrictions imposed by the growing number of infections meant that takeaway orders with delivery or personal collection became the main business and source of revenue for enterprises. Unfortunately, due to the difficult situation and insufficient revenue, many entrepreneurs decided to close their businesses (Zagórska, 2020, pp. 10-12).

A study conducted by PMR (Zagórska, 2021) shows that 23% of HoReCa (Hotels, Restaurants, Catering) companies were forced to reduce employment (the study was conducted on a sample of 507 catering venues. Unfortunately, the inability to serve customers in the restaurant and the decline in turnover meant that the businesses could not pay fixed costs - including the rental of premises or costs related to employee remuneration (Szymkowiak, Gutowski, 2021).

A difficult situation existed in the area of employment policy. Individual restaurant owners had to fulfil the condition of maintaining employment in order to benefit from state financial aid. Due to the uncertainty regarding the time of reopening, it was also important for entrepreneurs to have employed staff when reopening the catering industry in stationary form (Tarnawa, Peterlik, 2021). Unfortunately, due to the numerous restrictions that the catering industry was affected by, some restaurateurs also made decisions to lay off, suspend employees or deprive employees of their bonuses. Companies directed employees to unpaid leave, reduced their working hours or wages. The reasons for such decisions were not only due to financial problems, but also problems resulting from the need for staff.

One of the key buzzwords and trends in the catering industry has become flexibility and efficient management, both in large and family businesses. This is linked to proper planning of operations, personnel management and diversification, which is often mentioned in the literature on tackling the crisis (Tomaszewska-Bolałek, 2021). Companies focused on proper work organisation, cost reduction and exclusion of unprofitable areas in their business and social media became a sales tool. The pandemic crisis contributed to more effective financial management, work organisation, better communication with employees, and increased activity in social media and e-commerce channels (Badowski, Marczak, 2021).

In the absence of employment guarantees, many workers decided on their own initiative to make redundancies from their existing jobs and to work in industries more resistant to public health crises, such as Covid-19.

## 5. Methodology of research

The main research objective of this paper was to identify human resource management challenges and activities in the catering industry in times of Covid-19 pandemic in Poland.

For the purposes of the research, the following research problems were formulated:

1. How does the crisis situation affect human resource management?
2. What changes in the process of business management in the food service industry, especially in the area of human resource management, occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. In what way was the catering industry affected by the pandemic?
4. What recommendations have resulted from the crisis situation in the catering industry for the future?

The thesis of this paper is as follows: the Covid-19 pandemic contributed to the introduction of changes in the human resource management process in the catering industry.

The main tool that was used in the research carried out for this paper was a survey questionnaire, used to collect respondents' answers. The survey questionnaire was aimed at two research groups: employees and owners of catering businesses.

The nature of the present research was based on purposive sampling. Both employees of the companies as well as managers and owners were surveyed. A total of 39 respondents took part in the survey targeting catering industry personnel. The surveys included 20 factual questions and 6 metric questions. The survey targeting owners/managers of catering businesses involved 31 respondents. The survey included 19 factual questions and 7 metric questions.

The research was carried out from March to May 2022, using an anonymous survey questionnaire. The subject of the research were selected small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the catering industry located both in rural and urban areas in Southern Poland.

The research was conducted in such catering objects as restaurants, hotels, cafés, clubs, pubs, cocktail bars, party houses, and companies delivering food to homes.

## 6. Human resource management activities during a pandemic from the perspective of employees and managers-description of the research findings

The analysis of survey questionnaires showed that as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, there were changes in the area of human resource management in the catering sector. The changes that employers and employees had to face were mainly negative in nature. They manifested themselves in the lack of information and motivational measures taken,



downsizing, temporary suspension of employees from their duties, reduction of wages depriving employees of bonuses. In many enterprises in the catering industry, there was no training or other activities aimed at retraining or acquiring new skills for employees. As a result, many enterprises in the industry have suspended or completely closed their operations.

Below are presented the results of research related to chosen areas of human resource management in the era of pandemic in the catering industry.

When asked about the motivational measures taken in the companies and allowing workers to keep their jobs, the vast majority of respondents stated that no motivational measures were taken at their workplace to keep their jobs in the pandemic. Only 18% indicated that such measures had been taken. Respondents indicated these measures as: new ideas, pay increase, no layoffs, expansion of the company's offerings - introduction of take-away dishes and delivery of meals.

The respondents were also asked about salary levels during the pandemic. More than half assessed said that the salary level decreased during the pandemic, while 44% of respondents said that the salary level remained the same. 10% of respondents indicated that for the duration of the pandemic the bonus system was stopped. 31% of respondents indicated that working hours were reduced as a result of the pandemic. 21% of surveyed employees indicated that they were sent on unpaid leave.

When asked about the opportunity to participate in training to acquire new skills, the vast majority of respondents said that no training was conducted at their location to acquire new skills. In contrast, 28% of respondents admitted that such training had been conducted. Managers and owners spoke in a similar vein, 81% of whom said that no training was conducted at their company to acquire new skills.

When asked about the type of workplace support for the pandemic, 97% of respondents said "I did not receive any support," while 3% said they received psychological support.

The respondents were also asked about the possibility of working elsewhere for the duration of the pandemic, and returning to their current job after the pandemic is over. More than half of the surveyed (51%) believe that employees were able to move to other companies for the duration of the pandemic and then return. A similar question was also asked of a group of managers. 61% of the respondents in this group indicated that employees were able to move to other companies and return.

A question was asked about a possible change of profession due to working in an industry that is highly vulnerable to similar crises. The survey found that only 26% admitted that they have changed their profession due to the pandemic. Among the professions indicated were responses such as salesman, cashier, real estate agent, registrar, educational project specialist, IT specialist, construction worker and automotive worker. At the same time, according to the survey, 56% of respondents encountered problems with changing jobs/industries, while the remaining respondents declared that finding a new job did not bring difficulties.

A question was also asked about the overall impact of the pandemic on food service employment, the most difficult experiences during this period, and fears of another crisis. As for the most difficult experiences, among the most common responses were: lack of work, lack of contact with people, lack of livelihood, closure of food service locations, helplessness, lockdown, restrictions due to strictures, reduced wages, lack of demand for food service jobs, lack of job satisfaction, stress of closure, alcoholism, change in working conditions, lack of government support. When asked about their fears of another crisis hitting the food service industry, 56% of respondents said they felt worried. 23% had no opinion, and 21% of respondents believe they are not worried about the next crisis.

Managers were additionally asked about the operation of catering enterprises during the pandemic. 42% of respondents said that, the venues stopped operations during the pandemic, while 29% said that the locals conducted business in the form of drop-offs and pick-ups of their own orders. The remaining 26% of respondents indicated that the companies were open and 3% said that they changed its business profile.

There was also a question about the overall impact of the pandemic on running a business. 74% of those who took part in the survey said that the pandemic had negatively affected the running of the business, 13% of respondents indicated a response of " Difficult to say". 10% of respondents hold the opposite view and believe that the pandemic has positively affected the conduct of business, while 3% believe that the pandemic has not affected the conduct of business in any way.

When asked what actions were taken against employees, respondents answered that working hours were reduced (55%), downsizing was carried out (42%), base salary was reduced (39%), wage allowances were eliminated (39%), wage allowances were reduced (39%).

## **7. Discussion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the global economy, resulting in a number of job losses, reduced wages, and widespread business closures. Many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have been particularly hard hit, with many facing financial difficulties, declining sales, and increased competition. In order to respond to these challenges, many SMEs have undertaken employment restructuring as a means of reducing costs, improving competitiveness, and ensuring their long-term viability.

The analysis of the survey questionnaires showed that as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, there were changes in the area of human resource management in catering facilities. The changes experienced by employers and employees were mainly negative. This is an unsatisfactory result, indicating that the crisis has had a serious impact on the business and human resource management approaches adopted to date.

The pandemic has had a negative impact on work. According to respondents, various measures have been taken against employees, such as reducing working hours, cutting salaries and sending employees on unpaid leave. In addition, respondents reported that bonus schemes in catering companies were suspended for the duration of the pandemic. The pandemic contributed to staff reductions and also to job changes. Such actions were linked to the reduced demand for staff and the financial problems faced by companies. They contributed to the perception of the catering industry as unstable. Working for an unstable company creates fear and anxiety about losing one's job, which has a negative impact on performance and commitment. It is important to emphasise that the owners of catering businesses who decided to take the above measures were forced to do so by the serious situation that prevailed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The surveys show that only a few catering companies have taken motivational measures to maintain work during the pandemic. It should also be noted that the vast majority of respondents reported that no training was provided to acquire new skills. This is an unsatisfactory result as companies should be trying to retain skilled workers during this difficult time. Motivational measures are important during any crisis and were important during the Covid-19 pandemic. The harsh conditions in which workers found themselves and the associated fear and uncertainty led to many redundancies.

The issue of support at work in relation to the situation caused by the pandemic was also rated negatively. Employees who responded to the survey were asked about the support they received at work in relation to Covid-19. Sadly, employees responded that they could not count on support from their employers during the pandemic. They did not receive any psychological or financial support. The majority of respondents also said that no information session had been held to prepare them for the changes introduced by the pandemic.

## **8. Conclusions**

One of the key challenges faced by SMEs in a crisis situation is the need to reduce costs. This can be achieved through a range of measures, including downsizing, layoffs, and reductions in working hours or pay. While these measures may be necessary in order to address financial difficulties, they also carry significant risks and can have negative impacts on morale, productivity, and the wider community.

In order to mitigate these risks and ensure the effectiveness of employment restructuring, SMEs need to be strategic in their approach. This may involve developing a detailed plan that takes into account the specific needs and circumstances of the business, as well as considering the impact on employees and other stakeholders.

Another important factor in the success of human resource management in time of crisis is the development of a robust and flexible workforce. This can involve investing in employee training and development, and creating a culture that is supportive of employee growth and development. This can help to ensure that the business is better positioned to respond to changing market conditions, and can also improve employee engagement and morale.

Employment restructuring is a critical process for SMEs in a crisis situation, as it can help to address financial difficulties, improve competitiveness, and ensure the long-term viability of the business. However, in order to be effective, employment restructuring must be approached in a strategic and inclusive manner, with a focus on involving employees, improving the workforce, and building trust and transparency throughout the process.

In the course of further research in this area, it would be worthwhile to analyze whether companies have learned lessons from the crisis, whether they are optimizing their operations for the occurrence of various unforeseen crisis situations, whether they are preparing/making their personnel aware of the possibility of similar phenomena, whether they are diversifying their operations so that they can survive as a result of the emergence of crisis situations.

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