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## Review Article

## Unveiling HR roles: Fostering employee gratitude amidst pandemic like Covid19

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## ABSTRACT

Human resource managers are taught the value of acting in a socially responsible manner by COVID-19 and giving employees social assistance and psychological recovery, which can foster a feeling of gratitude for the employers. The body of knowledge on HR roles and employee gratitude is fragmented and a gap still exists in understanding HR roles and employee gratitude in times of crisis. This scientific investigation attempts to trace the relationship between HR roles and employee gratitude during India's peak of the COVID-19 crisis. The sample consists of n=331 employees operating in the NCR of Delhi, India. A causal survey design was adopted to measure employee gratitude through analysis of quantitative data and was subjected to SPSS and AMOS. The results indicate a causal relationship between employee gratitude and four HR roles – HR communication, HR leader-member exchange, HR adaptive capacity & HR networking. This study has industrial implications.

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## 1. Introduction

Crisis always creates a great amount of uncertainty and anxiety amongst the organisational members (Ulmer et al., 2015).<sup>1</sup> During COVID 19 employees showed various emotions ranging from anxiety to relief. Research on gratitude has shown that when employees feel grateful, they indulge in organisational citizenship behaviours and are ready to give back more than expected (Spence et al., 2013).<sup>2</sup> Employees are bound to harbour feelings towards HR, who is the face of management during the time of crisis. Their feelings are a reflection of the efficiency and effectiveness of initiatives of HR. Millions of people died in the second wave of coronavirus in India (Zachariah, 2021)<sup>3</sup> and more than 10 million jobs were lost (Business Today, 2021). Companies struggled to retain and support employees and tried to offer monetary and

non-monetary support (Zachariah, 2021). Benefits ranged from one-time compassionate payment, continuation of salary till retirement of the deceased employee, education to surviving children and employment opportunities for surviving spouses, and many more (Zachariah, 2021).<sup>3</sup> HR departments took special initiatives to provide support in the form of flexible work systems, leaves, logistical support, counselling, vaccination drives etc. The initiatives led to positive psychological outcomes like wellbeing, psychological empowerment, affective commitment and employee gratitude. When organisations move beyond psychological contracts gratitude arises (Hinrichs et al., 2019). Organisations can benefit immensely from employee gratitude in terms of organizational resilience, job performance, organizational citizenship behaviour and employee engagement (Fehr et al., 2017; Kaplan et al.,<sup>4</sup> 2014; Grant & Wrzesniewski, 2010).<sup>5-7</sup>

HR is the face of the organisation and the actual link between the management and the employees. In order to sail

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through the crisis, HR needs to be proactive in providing the support to the employees, including strategic collaborations across departments and industries and monetary as well as non-monetary benefits for employee (Shen et al.,<sup>8</sup> 2020). During COVID19 time, many organisations in India have undertaken various initiatives like work from home, mental webinars, wellness programs, 24\*7 covid assistance, vaccinations, etc., and HR is the one who entrusted with communicating the initiatives to the employees (Duncan, 2020).<sup>9</sup> During the crisis, if the HR follows an empathetic attitude while communicating to the employees, the results could be significant in terms of increasing employee engagement, satisfaction, trust, and productivity level (Honigmann, 2020). The body of knowledge on HR roles and employee gratitude is fragmented and a huge gap still exists in the understanding of how HR roles actually increases the gratitude of employees at the time of crisis. Based on this understanding, the following two questions are investigated through the study:

1. **RQ1:** What are the different HR roles at the time of crisis like COVID19?
2. **RQ2:** What is the contribution of different HR roles to the employee gratitude?

## 2. Review of Literature

Many researchers have defined gratitude and argued that it has many dimensions, meanings and faces (Shelton, 2004; Lazarus and Lazarus, 1994 and Emmons, 2004).<sup>10</sup> In simple language, gratitude is an emotion, attitude, gesture, or appreciation of things which are meaningful and valuable for the person. With gratitude, people acknowledge the good things happen to them (Emmons, 2007).<sup>11,12</sup> When the person feels that someone has contributed in their life, it inculcates the feeling of respect and indebtedness towards them (McCullough et al., 2001). In the time of crisis like COVID19, the HR navigate its employees from the uncertainties and provided them the support, security and psychological relief to tackle the challenges. Employees with gratitude are motivated, contented, develops healthy working relationships, mentally and physically fit with low stress and feelings of discontent, and highly satisfied and engaged with their jobs (Honigmann et al., 2020; Kim et al. (2018).<sup>13</sup> The existing literature is fragmented, so, we have divided the review of literature to understand the different role of HRs during crisis to find answers to our research questions. The conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

### 2.1. HR empathetic and employee gratitude

Empathy, the ability to understand and share feelings of another, is one of the critical HR leadership skills. It facilitates development and maintenance of strong employee relationships through cooperation and collaboration (Hirsch, 2018). Empathy and gratitude go

hand in hand, the empathetic person shows the gratitude and the person who is feeling grateful will show the empathetic attitude (Worthen & Isakson, 2007). Fostering empathy may improve one's capacity to identify the good deeds done by others (Kim et al. (2018).<sup>13</sup> Empathetic communication of HR during the crisis shows that organisations care for the employees and this helps in increasing trust and engagement levels (Honigmann et al., 2020). Thus, the review of literature lead to the development of the following hypothesis:

H1: The HR empathetic and employee gratitude is significantly related.

### 2.2. HR adaptive capacity and employee gratitude

Human resource managers faced a lot of challenges as well as uncertainties to guide employees during COVID19 (Hamouche, 2021).<sup>14,15</sup> HR leaders had to take all the extraordinary measures to keep their employees safe and also understand their concerns for providing necessary support (Bingham, 2020).<sup>16</sup> When a crisis occurs, the HR department's primary responsibility is to determine if the human resources are prepared to handle the issues it presents (Athamneh, 2017). HR managers had to be quick in analysing the situation so that the organisation can continue and recover without any loss. The immediate continuity plans by HR managers included remote work and telecommute strategy (Finnell, 2019). The capacity to anticipate and adapt to any circumstance is improved when HR is flexible (Baird and Zorbas, 2020, Adikaram et al., 2021).<sup>17</sup> HR can improve adaptation by offering training and all the assistance required for a smooth transition (Sharma, 2022). The authors feel that employees are grateful when they know that their jobs are secured as the company is not impacted by the crisis and HR has taken all the steps to make sure that their jobs are continued. This led to the development of the following hypothesis:

H2: The HR adaptive capacity and employee gratitude are significantly related.

#### 2.3.1. HR network and employee gratitude

HR networking and innovative collaborations played a significant role in bringing back the organizations to its pre-covid state (Torfin, 2019).<sup>18</sup> Not just the existing networks were expanded but new networks were created to find pioneering solutions to the threats created by COVID19. Regular interaction and communication with the pertinent intra-organisational and inter-organisational players are paramount for effective crisis management (Bovaird, 2007).<sup>19</sup> In fact, HR networking improves access to critical information, knowledge, expertise and resources across departments and hence, leads to innovative problem solving and a respect for teamwork in co-creation and co-production (Ostrom, 1996). At the time of COVID19,

employees were working remotely and they appreciated the support from the HR which enables them to maintain and build new networks for solving their business problems. The following hypothesis is developed:

H3: The HR network and employee gratitude are significantly related.

### 2.3.2. HR LMX and employee gratitude

As per the 'Leader member exchange theory', leaders develop different quality relationships with followers in their teams (Berrin Erdogan, 2015).<sup>20</sup> During COVID19, those who provided emotional and financial support made the employees feel grateful and those who did not lost employees trust (RF Guzzo, 2021).<sup>21</sup> In fact, organisational support is considered as an investment which have long-term fruitful returns (O'Driscoll, 2009).<sup>22</sup> HR played an essential role in managing the emotions of the employees by providing all the support like 24\*7 COVID helpline, tie-ups with hospitals, vaccination drives, establishing dedicated COVID-help teams, building hospital alliances, etc. (Duncan, 2020).<sup>9</sup> This led to the development of the following hypothesis:

H4: The HR LMX and employee gratitude are significantly related.

### 2.3.3. HR communication and employee gratitude

Communication is the key to any disaster recovery (Maurer, 2012; Parsi, 2016). The 'Social exchange theory' which focuses on relation building and internal communication channel has been used cognitively for job enrichment and engagement during the COVID19 pandemic (S Einwiller, 2021).<sup>23</sup> All the organisations support mechanism during the pandemic would go vein if not communicated timely to the employees (Duncan, 2020).<sup>9</sup> The Human resource managers are the voice of the top management, and both formal and informal communication channels are equally vital to inform the employees that organisation cares for their wellbeing and will provide all the necessary care (Heery, 2008).<sup>24</sup> This led to the development of the following hypothesis:

H5: The HR communication and employee gratitude are significantly related.

## 2.4. HR Roles

## 3. Research Methodology

The study intends to trace the HR enablers during the peak of second wave COVID19 crisis in India. The quantitative data captured the perception of employees regarding the role of HR in their organisations during COVID and their own positive affect.<sup>25,26</sup> The quantitative data was subjected to SPSS and AMOS to find the significant enablers of HR in

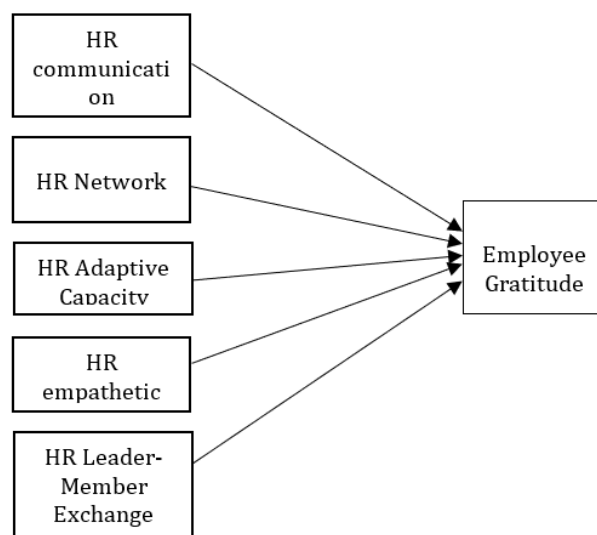


Figure 1: Conceptual model

Table 1: Employee demographics

		Percent
Age	Between 20-35	61
	Between 36-45	28
	Above 45	11
Gender	Male	76
	Female	24
Manager level	Lower-level manager	42
	Mid-level manager	50
	Top level manager	8
Organisation Type	Private sector organisation	82
	Public sector organisation	18
Employment Type	Full-time	95
	Part-time	5
Headquarter	India	58
	Foreign	42

employee gratitude.

### 3.1. Questionnaires

Adaptive versions of standardised questionnaires were used for Employee Gratitude by McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002, Human Resource LMX by Graen and Uhl-Bien's, 1995 and HR Empathy by Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004.<sup>27</sup> Self-authored questionnaire was used for - HR communication, HR adaptive capacity, HR Network based on studies of Bishop's (2006)<sup>28</sup> communication model, Salehi and Veitch (2020) and Liker & Choi (2004).<sup>29</sup>

Table 2:

	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV	HREMP	HRLMX	HRCOM	HRAC	HRN	GRAT
HREMP	.73	.52	.24	.13	.81					
HRLMX	.72	.58	.41	.17	.37	.71				
HRCOM	.81	.60	.38	.09	.19	.38	.79			
HRAC	.75	.68	.40	.18	.31	.68	.43	.81		
HRN	.80	.67	.18	.12	.38	.39	.21	.025	.78	
GRAT	.82	.61	.40	.18	.47	.48	.33	.35	.39	.82

Table 3: Summary of results for impact of HR enablers on employee gratitude

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
GRAT	<—	HRN	.101	.022	4.429	***
GRAT	<—	HREMP	.095	.035	2.682	.007
GRAT	<—	HRCOM	.432	.026	16.749	***
GRAT	<—	HRAC	.171	.025	6.821	***
GRAT	<—	HLMX	.269	.023	11.672	***
HRN3	<—	HRN	1.000			
HRN2	<—	HRN	.926	.035	26.621	***
HRN1	<—	HRN	.990	.039	25.306	***
HREMP3	<—	HREMP	1.000			
HREMP2	<—	HREMP	1.577	.178	8.844	***
HREMP1	<—	HREMP	1.331	.136	9.783	***
HRCOM3	<—	HRCOM	1.000			
HRCOM2	<—	HRCOM	.969	.027	35.551	***
HRCOM1	<—	HRCOM	.982	.030	32.571	***
HRAC3	<—	HRAC	1.000			
HRAC2	<—	HRAC	1.128	.039	29.101	***
HRAC1	<—	HRAC	.989	.039	25.194	***
HRLMX3	<—	HLMX	1.000			
HRLMX2	<—	HLMX	.929	.030	31.258	***
HRLMX1	<—	HLMX	.933	.031	29.752	***
GRAT1	<—	GRAT	1.000			
GRAT2	<—	GRAT	1.014	.042	23.907	***
GRAT3	<—	GRAT	1.048	.042	24.981	***
HRAC4	<—	HRAC	1.105	.040	27.420	***
HRLMX4	<—	HLMX	.931	.031	30.511	***
HRCOM4	<—	HRCOM	.988	.028	35.422	***
HRCOM5	<—	HRCOM	.974	.030	32.972	***

4. Results

4.1. Employee demographics

hows the demographics of sample in percentages. 61% of the employees are in 20-35 age bracket, 76% are male, 50% are mid-level managers, 82% are from private sector, 95% are full-time employees and 58% of them have company’s headquarter in India.

4.2. Model fit indices

Table 2 shows the testing validity scores for antecedents - Composite reliability (CR), Average variance extracted (AVE), Maximum shared variance (MSV) and Average Squared shared variance (ASV).

4.3. Model fit indices

Notes: HREMP: HR Empathetic, HRLMX: HRLMX, HRCOM: HR Communication, HRAC: HR Adaptive Capacity, HRN: HR Network and GRAT: Employee Gratitude

4.4. Structural model

The intended measurement model takes care of convergent validity, discriminant validity and reliability of the variables used in the study. SEM (Structure Equation Modelling) was incorporated to test our research hypotheses (refer figure 2 below). Model fit indices namely, Chi Square value (CMIN/DF=10.781), Goodness of fit (GFI=.935), Adjusted goodness of fit (AGFI= .897), Normal fit index (NFI= .789) and (RMSEA=.070) showed excellent model fitness

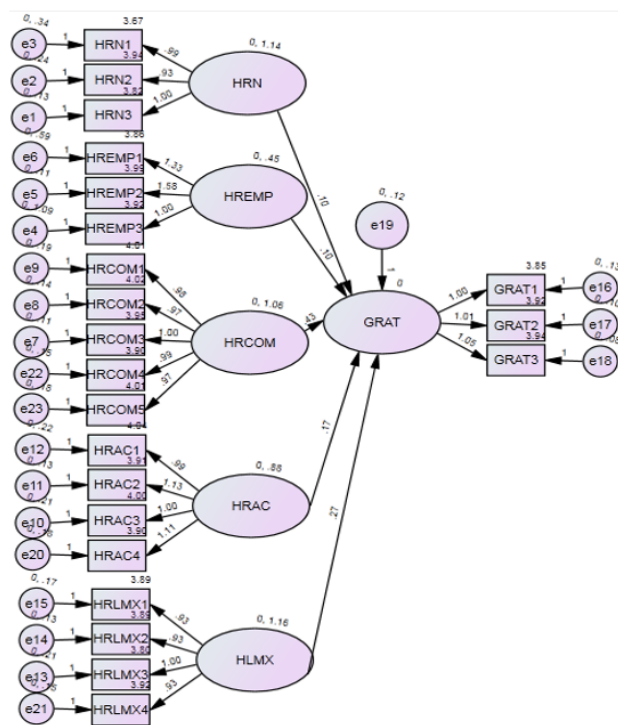


Figure 2: Structural equation modelling

(Bentler and Bonett, 1980) (refer table 2). The standardized path coefficients explained the variance in relevance to every path. In order to check the issue of multicollinearity, we have calculated VIF (Variation inflation factor). All VIF values for all the regressions were found to be within acceptable range that is less than 10, which confirms to the suggestions by Mansfield and Helms (1982). Results revealed that for the HR functions –HR Adaptive Capacity (H2) (Beta=.171,  $p=.00$ ), HR LMX (H4) (Beta=.269,  $p=.00$ ), HR Network (H3) (Beta=.101,  $p=.000$ ) and HR Communication (H5) (Beta=.432,  $p=.00$ ) were found to be significant predictors of employee gratitude. HR Empathetic (H1) (Beta=.095,  $p=.007$ ) did not show any significant relationship with employee gratitude.

## 5. Conclusion

This study reiterates the importance of HR in terms of controlling the emotions and insecurities of employees during the crisis. The COVID19 pandemic have given a chance to the organisations to show their employees that they care of them and will support them financially and emotionally. HR networking, HR communication about the organisation's initiatives and policies, HR leader-member exchange and HR adaptive capacity have emerged as a significant contributor in terms of employees feeling grateful about. Hypothesis – H2, H3, H4 and H5 are accepted (refer table 3). However, employees do not give much importance to the HR empathetic behaviour

in tackling the situation. The probable reason could be that employees look for solutions at the time of crisis and not just the assurance. In view of this, hypothesis H1 is rejected. This study has industrial implications as employees acknowledge the support provided at the time of crisis and shows gratitude towards them.

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## 7. Conflict of Interest

None.

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