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ARTICLE

Crisis, resilience, and human resource management: Strategic adaptations of Brazilian federal universities in Minas Gerais due to the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic posed global challenges to institutions, requiring swift adaptations to sustain operations. This study investigates the strategic role of human resource management (HRM) in the adaptation of Brazilian federal universities located in the State of Minas Gerais and their technical-administrative staff due to the pandemic. Based on qualitative data from interviews with university staff and grounded in the literature on strategic human resource management (SHRM), the findings indicate considerable variation in digital preparedness among institutions. Universities with established digital infrastructure before the pandemic were able to adapt more rapidly, ensuring educational and administrative continuity with limited disruption. In contrast, institutions lacking such resources faced substantial obstacles during and after the health emergency. Changes in leadership styles—marked by greater empathy and flexibility—contributed to managing the transition. The study also emphasizes the relevance of the *Programa de Gestão e Desempenho* (PGD) (a performance and management program adopted by the Brazilian public administration) to support both operational continuity and staff well-being. Overall, the pandemic accelerated digital transformation and innovation in HRM practices, prompting a shift toward more resilient, adaptive, and digitally integrated management models.

Keywords: COVID-19. Crisis management. Federal public universities. Strategic human resource management. Performance and management program.

Crise, resiliência e gestão de pessoas: adaptações estratégicas das universidades federais mineiras no contexto (pós) pandêmico

Resumo

A pandemia de covid-19 desafiou instituições globalmente, forçando adaptações rápidas para manter as operações. O presente estudo teve como objetivo central compreender a natureza estratégica da gestão de pessoas na adaptação das universidades federais mineiras e de seus servidores no período (pós) pandêmico. Utilizando dados qualitativos de entrevistas com servidores técnico-administrativos universitários e integrando achados da literatura sobre a gestão estratégica de pessoas, os resultados revelam disparidades significativas na prontidão digital entre as universidades. Instituições bem equipadas com infraestruturas digitais adaptaram-se mais rapidamente e com sucesso, mantendo a continuidade educacional e as funções administrativas com mínima interrupção. Por outro lado, universidades com estruturas digitais menos desenvolvidas enfrentaram vários desafios. As adaptações na liderança, com a transição para estilos de gestão mais empáticos e flexíveis, foram importantes. O estudo também revela a importância do Programa de Gestão e Desempenho. Essas mudanças facilitaram a manutenção das operações e o bem-estar dos funcionários, sublinhando o papel da gestão estratégica de pessoas em promover a resiliência organizacional. A pandemia acelerou a transformação digital e inovação nas práticas de gestão de pessoas, atuando como catalisador para uma mudança significativa em direção a práticas de gestão mais resilientes, flexíveis e digitalmente integradas.

Palavras-chave: Covid-19. Gestão de crises. Universidades federais públicas. Gestão estratégica de pessoas. Programa de gestão e desempenho.

Crise, resiliência e gestão de pessoas: adaptações estratégicas das universidades federais mineiras no contexto (pós) pandêmico

Resumen

La pandemia de COVID-19 planteó desafíos globales a las instituciones, exigiendo adaptaciones rápidas para mantener sus operaciones. Este estudio analiza el papel estratégico de la gestión de personas en la adaptación de las universidades federales de Minas Gerais y de sus servidores técnico-administrativos en el contexto (pos)pandémico. A partir de datos cualitativos obtenidos mediante entrevistas con estos servidores y fundamentado en la literatura sobre gestión estratégica de personas, los resultados evidencian una variación considerable en el grado de preparación digital entre las instituciones. Aquellas con infraestructuras digitales consolidadas lograron adaptarse con mayor agilidad, garantizando la continuidad educativa y administrativa con interrupciones mínimas. En cambio, las universidades con recursos digitales limitados enfrentaron obstáculos significativos. Las transformaciones en los estilos de liderazgo —caracterizadas por una mayor empatía y flexibilidad— contribuyeron a la gestión del período de transición. El estudio también destaca la relevancia del Programa de Gestión y Desempeño (PGD) en la preservación tanto de las operaciones institucionales como del bienestar del personal. En conjunto, la pandemia aceleró la transformación digital y la innovación en las prácticas de gestión de personas, promoviendo un cambio hacia modelos de gestión más resilientes, adaptativos e integrados digitalmente.

Palabras clave: COVID-19. Gestión de crisis. Universidades públicas federales. Gestión estratégica de personas. Programa de Gestión y Desempeño.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges for public and private organizations, requiring swift adaptations to work models to meet health protocols and social distancing requirements (Lee, 2021). Within this context, strategic human resource management (SHRM) played a central role in enhancing organizational adaptability and flexibility, both vital for navigating crisis situations.

In the public sector, particularly within federal universities, these challenges were compounded by limited resources, distinct organizational cultures, and rigid regulatory frameworks (Leite & Lemos, 2021). Federal universities in Minas Gerais were required to adopt measures such as suspending in-person classes, transitioning to remote teaching, and digitizing administrative processes, all of which significantly affected both administrative and technical personnel as well as faculty members (Silva et al., 2021).

This study examines how human resource management (HRM) was strategically applied to support the adaptation of federal universities in Minas Gerais and their staff during the post-pandemic period. It focuses on analyzing the SHRM practices adopted, the challenges encountered, and employees' perceptions of these initiatives.

This study contributes to the literature by addressing gaps in the practical application of SHRM within public higher education institutions during crises. Through a multiple case analysis, it examines how specific institutional variables shape the effectiveness of crisis management strategies, offering guidance to enhance organizational resilience in the education sector.

In addition to this introduction, the article comprises four sections. The next section examines strategic human resource management in crisis contexts, followed by a description of the research methodology. The third section presents the results, focusing on the pandemic's organizational effects, its impact on work and employees, and subsequent changes in HRM practices. The final section offers the study's conclusions and discusses its implications.

STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The contingency approach to SHRM rests on the premise that no single model is universally effective; HR practices must be tailored to specific organizational and environmental contexts (Boxall & Purcell, 2022). Strategic HR decisions are influenced by internal factors, such as organizational culture and structure, and by external pressures, including government regulations and public health crises. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for organizations to dynamically adjust their HR policies to address unforeseen challenges (Minbaeva & Navrbjerg, 2023).

The health crisis required emergency adjustments in HRM, particularly in the public sector, where bureaucracy and regulations make rapid changes difficult. In this context, the contingency approach became essential, as SHRM practices needed to adapt quickly to environmental demands (Boxall & Purcell, 2022). In the context of Brazilian federal universities, the pandemic revealed flaws in institutional adaptation, reinforcing the need for managerial flexibility (Cavalcanti & Guerra, 2022). The lack of planning, evidenced by the absence of an effective contingency plan, exposed the structural rigidity of public institutions (Pait, 2022). However, emergency initiatives were implemented to maintain the continuity of academic and administrative activities, despite significant challenges in digitalization and people management (Silva et al., 2021).

Digitalization emerged as a decisive contingency factor, with organizations showing higher digital maturity implementing telework more effectively (Kleiman et al., 2023). However, the shift to remote work highlighted disparities in infrastructure and digital competencies among employees (Pandini & Pereira, 2021). The pandemic's impact on public sector digitalization showed that adopting new technologies was crucial for operational continuity but also exposed unequal access and limited digital proficiency (Rocha et al., 2021).

Organizational culture and bureaucracy also played a key role in how federal universities adapted to the pandemic. More conservative institutions, characterized by highly regulated processes, tended to resist the implementation of new SHRM practices (Cavalcanti & Guerra, 2022). This institutional conservatism limited the adoption of telework and new performance monitoring methods, generating uncertainty and operational disruptions across several universities (Pait, 2022). Pfeffer's (1992) organizational power theory suggests that internal resistance can pose a major obstacle to change, particularly in tightly regulated settings.

The concept of strategy openness, as discussed by Lavarda et al. (2021), is relevant for analyzing how federal universities responded to the pandemic. Strategic processes can take either a deliberate or an emergent form. The deliberate model reflects centralized decision-making, hierarchical structures, and tighter control over actions, whereas the emergent model prioritizes collective decision-making, creativity, and continuous learning. The development of these processes depends on the specific organizational context (Lavarda et al., 2021).

The crisis had a profound impact on strategic human resource planning in universities, highlighting the need for a more adaptable and resilient SHRM approach. Boxall and Purcell (2022) emphasize that HRM must balance economic objectives with sociopolitical demands, ensuring both operational efficiency and organizational legitimacy. For universities operating under multiple institutional pressures, the public health crisis revealed governance rigidity and underscored the need for more flexible policies to manage unpredictable challenges (Cavalcanti & Guerra, 2022).

Lockwood (2005) highlights the importance of proactive planning and organizational strategies to ensure operational continuity and safeguard employees during crises. Key measures include forming crisis management teams, developing emergency response plans, and maintaining clear and effective communication to reduce the impact of unforeseen events. The HR department also plays a critical role in supporting employees and sustaining organizational stability throughout uncertain periods. These actions underscore the need for proactive leadership and consistent communication to keep all organizational levels aligned during times of disruption (Presti & Mendes, 2023).

Nevertheless, applying these theories in federal universities in Minas Gerais presents distinct challenges. Rigid institutional culture, bureaucratic structures, and the power dynamics outlined by Pfeffer (1992) often hinder the timely implementation of SHRM strategies. These difficulties are consistent with Azizi et al. (2021) findings, which highlight the need for systemic and strategic planning to manage crises more effectively. Cultural rigidity and organizational resistance remain major barriers to adaptation, underscoring the need to cultivate a more innovation-oriented and change-responsive organizational culture (Pait, 2022).

The late implementation of the Performance and Management Program (in Portuguese, Programa de Gestão e Desempenho – PGD) triggered uneven responses across universities. While some adapted quickly, others faced difficulties stemming from unclear guidelines (Kleiman et al., 2023). The lack of effective centralized planning for telework led to varied impacts on both productivity and the well-being of public sector employees (Pandini & Pereira, 2021).

Another important contingency factor involved employee profiles and their individual needs. The impact of telework varied considerably, with employees who had family responsibilities, particularly mothers with young children, facing additional difficulties in balancing work and personal life (Ferreira & Reis, 2021). The disproportionate burden on women during remote work reflects structural inequalities in the labor market and underscores how personal contingencies can influence the effectiveness of SHRM practices (Lemos et al., 2020).

In response to the pandemic, Brazilian federal universities had to implement their strategic human resource management on an emergency basis, considering various biopsychosocial factors affecting employees, organizational culture, and both internal and external political dynamics. This study aims to examine how this process took place within the universities under analysis.

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to examine the strategic role of human resource management in how federal universities in Minas Gerais and their staff adapted during the post-pandemic period. Minas Gerais was selected for its proximity and because it hosts the largest concentration of federal universities in the country. Five universities were analyzed, chosen for their socio-geographic similarities and accessibility.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with managers and HR staff to explore their perceptions of university contingencies during the pandemic. The study used snowball sampling, where initial participants recommended others. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached, defined as the point when no new relevant information emerged (Vinuto, 2014).

The study complied with the ethical guidelines of Resolution No. 466/12 from the Brazilian National Health Council, which governs research involving human subjects. All participants received information about the study's objectives, procedures, potential benefits, and risks. Informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews.

Participant anonymity and confidentiality were fully protected. Data were securely stored and used solely for this research. The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Viçosa. Table 1 summarizes key participant information.

Table 1
List of Research Interviewees

Code	Department	Time in department (years)	Age	Race	Gender	Young children at home
E1	Payroll	4	38	White	Female	Yes
E2	Payroll	5	39	White	Female	No
E3	Retirement and Pension	4	35	Mixed race	Male	Yes
E4	Occupational Health and Safety Division	30	56	White	Male	Yes
E5	Human Resources Office	12	65	White	Male	No
E6	Operational Support Division – Personnel Administration Directorate	6	51	White	Male	No
E7	Integrated Health Promotion Actions Sector	5	32	Mixed race	Female	Yes
E8	Employee Quality of Life and Health	4	64	Mixed race	Female	No
E9	Health and Safety Assistance Unit	10	39	White	Female	No
E10	Health Coordination Office	2	36	White	Male	No
E11	Human Resources Office	2	55	Mixed race	Female	No
E12	Human Resources Office	15	41	Black	Female	No
E13	Human Resources Office	24	55	White	Male	No
E14	Human Resources Office	3	46	White	Male	Yes
E15	Employee Support	16	61	White	Female	No

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Following the pre-analysis phase, the data were systematically reviewed and organized into spreadsheets, using the content analysis method proposed by Bardin (2011). Thematic content analysis was applied, based on the categories developed by Presti and Mendes (2023), who conducted an extensive literature review on the pandemic, human resource management, and work. Their framework is particularly relevant to this study as it offers a structured approach to understanding the pandemic's effects across different organizational and labor dimensions. This categorization was selected for its ability to provide a consistent theoretical foundation for the discussions presented in this article and for its alignment with the study's analytical objectives.

The interviews were conducted remotely, lasted approximately 30 minutes each, and were fully recorded and transcribed. Data processing followed established anonymization and organization protocols to maintain reliability and analytical consistency. The results were grouped into three predefined thematic axes: the pandemic's impact on organizations, on work and workers, and on human resource management. The entire corpus was coded according to the subcategories outlined in Table 2 to ensure a systematic and structured analysis.

Table 2
Categories of Analysis

Organizational	Internal factors
	Biosafety
	External factors
Work and Workers	Telework
	Psychological and Personal
	Physical
Human Resource Management	Support
	Performance Monitoring
	Training
	Leadership

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Each thematic axis was further divided into subcategories to enable a more detailed analysis of the data. At the organizational level, the subcategories addressed biosafety, external factors, and internal dynamics. To assess the effects on work and workers, the study examined telework along with psychological, personal, and physical dimensions. For the analysis of federal universities' specific HRM actions, the subcategories included support, performance monitoring, training, and leadership.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Organizational effects

In the organizational context, analysis of the interview data identified a set of pandemic-related themes, grouped into three distinct subcategories: biosafety, internal factors, and external factors.

Content analysis of the data highlighted several key themes, such as concerns over high infection rates, internal conflicts, university governance, initial response measures, telework adaptations, staff rotation arrangements, testing strategies, the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), and vaccination efforts.

Biosafety

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted federal universities in Minas Gerais to implement biosafety measures swiftly to protect the academic community's health. Their initial focus was on adopting protocols recommended by organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO). To coordinate these efforts, some institutions created crisis committees tasked with planning and executing health strategies to maintain essential operations.

> A committee was assembled, a special committee that included all unit directors, student representatives from undergraduate and graduate programs... representatives. [...] This committee worked on all the documentation, and we managed to complete the planning. A protocol was followed across the entire university, and adaptations came over time (E11).

The establishment of these committees underscores the role of crisis management, as Lockwood (2005) stresses the importance of protocols and continuity plans during crises. Faculty and staff actively contributed to the development and implementation of these measures, demonstrating their commitment and aligning with recommended SHRM practices that emphasize employee engagement as a factor in policy effectiveness (Dessouky & Al-Ghareeb, 2020).

These actions are consistent with Silva and Moraes (2021), who highlight the importance of protecting human capital during crises to sustain both productivity and worker well-being. In defining which activities required on-site presence and which could shift to remote formats, the universities demonstrated adaptability in reorganizing processes to safeguard the health and safety of all stakeholders.

The experience of these federal universities in Minas Gerais demonstrates the effective integration of SHRM and crisis management. Implementing biosafety measures ensured the continuity of operations while strengthening organizational resilience. Their ability to align HR strategies with emerging demands underscores the strategic role of SHRM in responding to global health crises.

Internal factors

Most federal universities, due to their hierarchical and bureaucratic structures, adopted a predominantly deliberate strategic approach in responding to the pandemic. Decision-making was centralized within top management, following a top-down flow and limiting participation from other institutional levels. The initial response, however, was described as "reactive" and "improvised" by interviewees. As E5 stated: "At first, it was a very abrupt situation. There was no way to plan immediately, and things unfolded as difficulties arose." Similarly, E15 noted: "There were also many changes in the higher councils, many meetings. So [...] the leadership teams were heavily overloaded. Here, we were still quite behind in some areas, so establishing this dynamic took some time."

This approach reflects the deliberate strategy formulation model, where top management defines guidelines that are implemented through formal and controlled processes (Lavarda et al., 2021). Yet, highly hierarchical structures often face difficulties in risk planning and management, limiting their capacity to respond effectively to institutional crises (Cavalcanti et al., 2022). Most of the higher education institutions (HEIs) analyzed were unprepared for the surge in unpredictable demands triggered by the pandemic. In contrast, organizations with pre-established crisis committees responded in a more coordinated and effective manner (Silva & Moraes, 2021). This scenario exposed a pre-existing vulnerability: the lack of a systemic perspective that could have supported a more structured response and reduced reliance on short-term, reactive solutions (Azizi et al., 2021).

While the deliberate strategy ensured institutional control and regulatory compliance, it limited the universities' capacity to adapt quickly to changing conditions. Their experience highlights how hierarchical structures tend to favor centralized decision-making, often at the expense of flexibility and innovation during crises. This limitation became clear as universities struggled to adjust to frequent changes in operational protocols throughout the pandemic.

On the other hand, process digitalization proved to be a positive factor for some institutions. Universities with existing electronic systems adapted more easily to remote work. As E6 explained: "We were already moving toward digitalization, so we managed to respond quickly." E15 shared a similar experience: "Here, not everyone was using SEI [electronic information system, from "Sistema Eletrônico de Informação", in Portuguese]. We had to start that process, and our digital personnel records were still far behind. Before, we relied heavily on paper. Now, even after returning, we hardly use paper at all."

The universities were at different stages of process digitalization, which affected the efficiency and adaptability of their work routines in responding to pandemic-related challenges. This variation is largely due to the role of digitalization in enabling more efficient remote workflows and internal communication, whereas its absence created barriers to implementing telework (Hilmi & Febriansyah, 2021), a critical issue during the pandemic. These differences suggest that varying levels of digitalization produced distinct degrees of adaptability and responsiveness in how institutions managed adverse conditions such as those created by the pandemic.

Organizational fragmentation and internal corporatism also made it difficult to implement unified policies. Different departments and employee groups, such as faculty and administrative staff, expressed conflicting perspectives and needs. Faculty resistance was particularly strong toward programs intended to benefit administrative staff. As E14 explained: "We naturally face class-based conflicts linked to different career tracks, which shape how people see things. Most of the resistance came from faculty, who opposed implementing the management program for administrative staff."

These corporatist dynamics, combined with the lack of systemic thinking, hindered crisis management in several ways. First, they prevented a cohesive and unified response to the pandemic, with each group or department focusing on preserving its own interests rather than working toward the common good, as illustrated by the following interviewee:

> I found the meetings really exhausting and not very objective. There was a lot of political bias from other members, which made things even more draining. People kept pushing their own agendas. Many were acting selfishly, thinking only about their own department's interests, not about the university as a whole (E9).

Second, these internal divisions caused delays, mistrust, and confusion in implementing critical measures like process digitalization and telework, both of which were essential for sustaining institutional functions and employee activities during the pandemic (Vilarinho et al., 2021; Zhong et al., 2021).

The experiences of federal universities in Minas Gerais during the pandemic underscore the need for SHRM approaches that go beyond reactive crisis responses and encourage proactive planning and cooperation. Effective strategy implementation in times of crisis relies on SHRM's capacity to overcome corporatist barriers and build a culture of collaboration and organizational resilience.

External factors

The internal challenges faced by federal universities in Minas Gerais were further intensified by the lack of clear guidance from the Federal Government during the pandemic. Without an adequate legal and regulatory framework, public institutions encountered uncertainty and ambiguity, complicating their decision-making processes.

E13 noted, "Politics got in the way. We really lacked clear guidance." The absence of defined directives from the Federal Government and the Ministry of Education created confusion and mistrust among university administrators. This lack of coordination led to fragmented responses across institutions, underscoring the need for centralized leadership and consistent guidelines during crises (Alketbi et al., 2022; Felipe et al., 2021).

A key example is the PGD, introduced by the Federal Government under Decree No. 11,072, dated May 17, 2022 (Brasil, 2022). The PGD established telework regulations for technical staff and marked a transition from attendance-based monitoring to performance-oriented management (Kleiman et al., 2023).

The PGD experience underscores the need for ongoing adjustments in legal and regulatory frameworks to sustain emerging work cultures. Its effects are expected to extend beyond the pandemic, promoting more flexible and effective management within the public sector.

TRABALHO E TRABALHADORES

This section examines the pandemic's impact on work conditions at federal universities, with a focus on the experiences of technical-administrative staff. It explores changes resulting from the emergency shift to telework and how employees perceived these transformations. The analysis also addresses the pandemic's psychological and personal effects on workers.

Telework

The suspension of in-person activities forced federal universities in Minas Gerais into an abrupt shift to emergency telework. With no prior preparation, appropriate equipment, or clear guidelines, the transition proved challenging. Staff faced initial difficulties, but many quickly developed new technological skills, showing their capacity to adapt. Reflecting on this, E13 recalled: "When I first started working remotely, I didn't even use WhatsApp. I had to get into social media and the whole internet thing, kind of by force." E8 added: "After that first moment, we managed to adjust to this new way of working. We solved everything by phone with the team. I don't think we left anything undone."

These accounts show that the pandemic served as a catalyst for digitalization. As E14 noted, "the pandemic accelerated this digitalization process." Adopting new technologies, essential for supporting telework, played a central role in this transition.

The shift to telework also exposed inequalities across university roles. Administrative and IT positions adapted more easily, while many essential functions had no remote work option. This disparity may heighten perceptions of unfairness and fuel resistance to telework, particularly when it is viewed as an unequal benefit (Cavalcanti & Guerra, 2022).

The challenges described by interviewees reflect findings in the literature (Barbieri et al., 2021; Hosogaya, 2021), which identify limited technological skills and poor access to equipment and infrastructure as major barriers to effective telework implementation. Commenting on the main difficulty, E2 noted: "The problem was remote access; it took us a long time to get things done." This experience mirrors Pait's (2022) analysis of how weak digital infrastructure in Brazilian universities hindered the transition to remote teaching and work during the pandemic.

There is also noticeable cultural resistance to telework, likely tied to longstanding rigid work practices among university staff. As E14 noted, "Many employees are resistant to remote work." Cavalcanti and Guerra (2022) reinforce this view, highlighting how entrenched cultural norms in Brazilian universities complicate the adoption of new work models, with a strong emphasis on face-to-face interaction and reluctance to change established routines.

Government regulations play a central role in shaping how universities implement telework. This is especially true in highly regulated settings like federal universities, where federal directives can rapidly alter work practices, as seen with the PGD. Sudden legislative changes often trigger hurried telework implementations, as Pait (2022) observes.

These factors highlight the need for strategic, context-specific approaches to telework management in federal universities, considering their structural, cultural, and regulatory constraints. Addressing these challenges is essential for designing effective crisis management and remote work strategies that support the long-term adoption of telework in the post-pandemic context.

Personal and psychological effects

The pandemic's isolation and social distancing measures profoundly changed how people relate to society. Given the human need for social connection, enforced isolation and the broader climate of uncertainty, loss, and anxiety took a toll on individuals' mental health.

Due to their educational mission and the pressure to maintain continuous operations, universities faced intense demands that directly affected employees. Interviewees reported a rise in depression and anxiety cases during and after the pandemic. As E11 observed: "We're seeing a lot of post-pandemic illnesses." This psychological strain is echoed in Cavalcanti and Guerra's (2022) analysis, which links increased occupational stress to the rapid shift toward new work models in demanding academic settings.

In this context, workplace relationships were noticeably strained. Colleagues became more distant, likely due to the absence of effective policies for reintegrating staff into on-site work. As E15 noted: "I don't think it's really over... the pandemic created distance. I feel people became more closed off and withdrawn afterward."

> "[...] besides being able to interact with people in person [...] the environment is more conducive. I can concentrate better, and everything gets done faster and more easily. There's face-to-face conversation, the internal phone system... you can actually see communication happening. So honestly, I really don't want to go back to telework" (E11).

University organizational culture is deeply rooted in plurality and the exchange of ideas, making these institutions reliant on face-to-face interaction (Cavalcanti & Guerra, 2022). However, the relational distancing brought on by the pandemic challenges this norm and disrupts how work relationships are built in academic settings. These changes may affect institutional cohesion, the sense of belonging, and the integration of new members into the academic community (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Pait, 2022).

Limited face-to-face interaction has undermined communication flows, making information exchange less fluid and increasing the risk of misunderstandings. This barrier has slowed decision-making and reduced collaboration, making it harder to resolve organizational issues quickly. The lack of direct contact has also weakened strategic discussions and hindered consensus-building within the academic community (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Li et al., 2022).

Telework brought additional challenges, especially the need to balance work and family responsibilities. The overlap between home and work spaces caused tension and psychological stress (Barbieri et al., 2021). As E14 described: "During the pandemic, I had to juggle work and home life: cleaning, childcare, school, my son's online classes, and sharing the office space with two other people."

These challenges emphasize the need for managers to adopt flexible approaches and prioritize employees' mental health (Hilmi & Febriansyah, 2021). Building skills like autonomy and time management became increasingly important (Chen, 2021).

Telework also revealed gender-based disparities (Lemos et al., 2020). Social norms that position women as primary caregivers at home increased their domestic workload, leading to accumulated tasks and rising cases of stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout (Ferreira & Reis, 2021).

> The hardest thing was getting used to remote work. Especially for us, as women. Sure, some men help at home, but we're the ones who have to handle both housework and job duties... balancing both was really hard at first (E1).

As E2 explained: "That's not the reality for most people. But I could work because I don't have kids, I lived away from the city center, and it was a quiet place. When I sat down to work, I could really focus without outside distractions."

The differences among respondents' accounts highlight the need for policies that reflect the diverse realities of university staff. Strategic human resource management must address both operational demands and employee well-being, fostering a more resilient and adaptable work environment. Lessons from the pandemic offer opportunities to strengthen crisis management practices by promoting flexibility and sustained support for mental health moving forward.

Physical effects

The abrupt shift to telework exposed staff at federal universities in Minas Gerais to notable physical challenges. Many lacked adequate ergonomic setups at home, leading to discomfort and potential health issues from working long hours in unsuitable conditions. Some institutions tried to reduce these impacts by lending ergonomic chairs. As E6 noted: "Besides the computer I mentioned, we even lent out chairs because the ones we have are ergonomic."

Still, bureaucratic and logistical barriers limited the impact of these efforts (Pait, 2022). Many employees kept working in poor conditions, underscoring how difficult it was to recreate the office's ergonomic setup at home. As E10 remarked: "Some support structures are just hard to take with you."

The absence of ergonomic assessments during telework made the situation worse, as on-site interventions were not possible (Silva et al., 2021). This shortcoming underscores the need to create evaluation methods suited to remote work, a continuing challenge for institutions with traditionally centralized and on-site structures.

Physical health in general also declined. Reduced physical activity during the pandemic had a noticeable impact on employee well-being (Martins et al., 2022). As E8 noted: "It's important to build and maintain healthy routines, even when working remotely."

These challenges point to the need for universities to revise their occupational health policies to address telework conditions. Introducing wellness programs that promote healthy habits can help reduce the negative effects observed during the pandemic, prevent long-term health problems, and enhance organizational resilience. Still, the pandemic exposed clear gaps in human resource practices concerning employees' physical well-being.

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

In response to these challenges, the Human Resources Offices of the universities studied played a central role in supporting staff and addressing the pandemic's impact on quality of work life. Their efforts centered on four main areas: support, training, performance monitoring, and leadership.

Support

During the pandemic, Human Resources Offices at federal universities in Minas Gerais adopted several strategies to support staff. They adapted key support processes for remote delivery, using live sessions, institutional emails, and instant messaging apps. As E8 noted: "We shifted the focus of our actions and started handling these issues remotely. The live sessions became the best way to stay connected."

Despite these technological adjustments, many employees felt the initiatives were superficial and did not address the everyday challenges of telework. The absence of strategic planning led to scattered efforts with little focus on emerging staff needs. As E3 remarked: "I know there were some talks and training, but nothing really different from what we already had."

The lack of effective support left many employees feeling helpless, forced to manage work overload, stress, and technological challenges on their own. Institutional communication was often weak, dominated by generic and uninteresting messages that led to low employee engagement. As E1 explained: "I didn't pay much attention. I opened the emails that interested me and ignored the rest."

These accounts point to a clear gap between HR management and employees, limiting the effectiveness of the initiatives. The literature underscores that during crises, communication should be clear, empathetic, and tailored to employees' specific needs (Ilie et al., 2020; Lee, 2021).

Although medical and psychological support services were available, they faced important limitations. Some universities offered these programs, but their impact was reduced by poor outreach and overworked staff. As E6 explained: "We have a department focused on employee health and quality of life, which offered support for those who needed it."

Still, the rising demand for psychological support went largely unmet, leaving many employees without help during a vulnerable period. This failure to scale services exposed clear gaps in the human resources office's ability to respond.

In summary, the support strategies adopted by federal universities in Minas Gerais during the pandemic were fragmented and largely ineffective, falling short of meeting staff needs. Weak institutional communication and disconnected initiatives revealed gaps in HR management during the crisis. These findings point to an urgent need to rethink support practices by strengthening strategic planning, improving communication, and aligning actions with employees' actual circumstances, as emphasized in the crisis and HR management literature (Jin et al., 2022; Zacher & Rudolph, 2022).

Training

The pandemic revealed major gaps in training and development at federal universities in Minas Gerais. Although remote work and teaching demanded quick adaptation, the institutions lacked strategic planning and failed to provide adequate support for technical-administrative staff.

Social distancing requirements accelerated the move to digital platforms, but many employees struggled with limited tech skills and weak institutional support. One interviewee shared their frustration with remote learning: "My former boss was very patient with me. So were my teammates... I had to learn everything remotely. You know how much harder that is."

This statement underscores the lack of prior training programs to prepare staff for effective use of digital tools. Relying on colleagues and supervisors to bridge this gap reflects an institutional failure to provide structured capacity-building.

Training efforts during the pandemic were mostly reactive and short-term, lacking an integrated approach to address employees' emerging needs. As E12 explained: "The training department surveys staff needs for planning... and the sessions happen based on demand. For example, our team had remote training on interpersonal skills."

This fragmented approach runs counter to the literature, which stresses the need for proactive and comprehensive strategies during crises (Chen, 2021; Jayathilake et al., 2021). Without a training plan focused on essential skills like digital proficiency, stress management, and resilience, employees struggled to perform effectively in the new work environment.

One university stood out by offering "training for technology-related tasks and for using the teaching platform," as E14 noted. This exception reinforces the broader trend of limited institutional support for employees transitioning to remote work. Another university focused on skill development: "We covered communication, assertiveness, teamwork, and anxiety management. We always bring that up: anxiety... how to handle control issues" (E7).

Still, the overall lack of training, as repeatedly noted by interviewees, reflects more than just low investment in professional development. It also reveals a gap between HR management and employees' real needs. Universities overlooked the fact that training is not simply an emergency measure but a critical element of strategic HR management that supports organizational resilience (Azizi et al., 2021).

By failing to implement effective training programs, the institutions weakened service quality and harmed employee well-being (Rocha et al., 2021). This gap may have long-term effects on staff motivation and engagement (Pandini & Pereira, 2021), while also exposing a resistance to change that limits the evolution of institutional practices.

The lack of strategic planning and the weak response to training needs underscore the urgent need to rethink professional development strategies. To align with best HR practices and build institutional resilience, universities must take a proactive approach, investing in training programs that meet current demands and equip staff for future challenges.

Performance evaluation and attendance control

The pandemic revealed structural weaknesses in the performance evaluation and attendance control practices adopted by federal universities in Minas Gerais. The shift to remote work highlighted the rigidity and limited effectiveness of traditional systems, which relied heavily on monitoring working hours and requiring staff's physical presence.

While an attempt was made to shift attendance control toward a performance- and results-based model, the change was implemented hastily and without adequate strategic planning. As one interviewee noted: "Our work was entirely online, with management based on deliverables. My supervisor could monitor whether I was performing well" (E6).

Despite its apparent efficiency, many managers were unprepared for this new form of monitoring. The absence of clear and standardized criteria for evaluating performance in a remote setting led to uncertainty and perceptions of unfairness among staff. This abrupt and unplanned shift in approach undermined the effectiveness of the new practices.

The PGD was introduced as a response to these deficiencies, seeking to replace hour-based control with results-oriented management. As one interviewee noted: "What emerged after the pandemic was this move toward replacing working hours with performance management" (E10).

However, the implementation of the PGD faced resistance and lacked adequate training for both managers and employees. Differences across departments and positions were overlooked, hindering the uniform implementation of the new practices. Moreover, the absence of clear guidelines and insufficient preparation led to inconsistent and unreliable evaluation processes.

Performance evaluations shifted to remote formats without necessary adjustments to criteria and methods. As interviewee E14 noted: "We had to revise the resolution to conduct an evaluation that was purely qualitative rather than quantitative."

This change, though necessary, was implemented in a reactive manner, without careful consideration of relevant performance indicators for remote work. The literature emphasizes that transitioning to results-based evaluations requires a comprehensive review of performance management practices, covering training, clear communication, and employee engagement in the process (Kawaguchi & Motegi, 2021). In the universities studied, these steps were largely overlooked, undermining the effectiveness of the initiatives.

These transformations, such as the PGD, are particularly evident within universities, where work arrangements are typically more rigid and traditional. They may permanently reshape institutional practices by fostering greater flexibility and a more goal-oriented culture. As federal public universities recognize the benefits of these adaptations, such as increased employee autonomy and improved operational efficiency, many of these innovations are likely to remain in place after the pandemic.

Leadership

During the pandemic, many universities adopted leadership approaches emphasizing ongoing communication and support to mitigate the impact of the sudden shift to remote work (Yuste, 2021). Leaders had to adjust to a new context where monitoring deliverables and allowing task flexibility were essential to maintaining university operations. This is reflected in one interviewee's account: "We managed to distribute tasks in a satisfactory way, holding staff accountable as needed while considering each person's specific situation" (E3). This effective task distribution reflects recommendations in the literature supporting adaptive leadership that acknowledges individual capacities and limitations (Silva et al., 2021).

Empathetic and supportive leadership was also a consistent feature, as reflected in comments from two interviewees who emphasized the understanding and patience shown by their supervisors. Interviewee E1 expressed satisfaction with the leadership approach: "The vice-president here is very approachable, and so is the rector. They are very understanding people. I believe they recognize each person's situation. I didn't feel pressured at all." This type of leadership, centered on recognizing and supporting employees' individual needs, is crucial during times of crisis when stress and uncertainty dominate the work environment.

The ongoing use of these adaptations after the pandemic suggests a potential lasting shift in human resource management practices within federal universities, marked by greater emphasis on flexibility, effective digital communication, and empathetic leadership. What began as temporary measures may have laid the groundwork for enduring changes in university leadership and management practices.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the strategic nature of human resource management (HRM) in the adaptation of federal universities in Minas Gerais during the (post-)pandemic period by analyzing implemented HRM practices, the challenges encountered, and staff perceptions. The data analysis revealed clear discrepancies between HRM theories and the practices observed in the field before and during the COVID-19 crisis.

Prior to the pandemic, HRM in these universities remained largely limited to bureaucratic routines. However, the challenges brought on by the pandemic forced managers to move beyond this rigid approach, prompting more strategic, flexibility-driven, and innovative solutions grounded in resilience. The pandemic also revealed significant disparities among institutions, particularly in terms of digitalization levels. While some, with greater technological capacity, managed to transition to remote work relatively quickly, others faced considerable difficulties due to insufficient preparation and infrastructure. Although initially developed as an emergency measure, the PGD represents a step toward more results-oriented management.

The study also underscored the importance of adopting an HRM approach that emphasizes results-based performance and adaptive, empathetic leadership. Both elements are essential for overcoming crises and safeguarding employee well-being. Universities that adopted more flexible, technology-supported leadership practices were those that most effectively sustained their activities and provided support to their staff.

Theoretically, this study highlights the gaps between HRM theory and the actual practices observed at federal universities in Minas Gerais, especially in times of crisis. From a pragmatic and organizational standpoint, we conclude that the pandemic accelerated structural changes in HRM, consolidating more adaptable, innovative, and resilient practices. Process digitalization, the adoption of telework, the implementation of the PGD, and increased attention to leadership and employee well-being all point to a less bureaucratic and more strategic model. However, institutional, cultural, and technological factors continue to raise uncertainty about the long-term sustainability of these transformations. The crisis not only prompted temporary adjustments but also initiated a more definitive shift toward a dynamic, results-driven, and institutionally modernized HRM model.

Resistance to change and conservative approaches to HRM at public universities stem from bureaucratic structures and a rigid institutional culture, characterized by a focus on routine personnel tasks and a neglect of their strategic role in workforce management. This inflexible hierarchy limits strategic planning and risk management, leading to slow institutional responses during crises, as seen during the pandemic. Reluctance to adopt new technologies was evident in the shift to remote teaching, with university managers expressing hesitation and citing operational challenges and insufficient preparation to handle Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). The absence of legal and regulatory guidance from the federal government exacerbated the situation, leading to delays, insecurity, and uncertainty in institutional decision-making.

This study has certain limitations. Chief among them is its limited scope, focused on universities in Minas Gerais, along with the relatively short observation period after the pandemic's critical phase, which prevents a more in-depth analysis of long-term effects. Future research should investigate how the practices adopted during the pandemic become consolidated over time, analyze in greater detail the impact of the PGD on employee productivity, adaptation, and quality of life, and further explore the role of adaptive leadership within the university context.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

The dataset supporting the findings of this study is not publicly available in order to protect participant confidentiality.

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