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EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF DIGITALIZATION AND WORK-LIFE-BALANCE

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Extraordinary changes caused by COVID-19 have enforced companies around the globe to accelerate transition to digital business processes. Human resource management (HRM) is in the heart of these transformations helping organizations to navigate in the vague present and unforeseeable future. HRM needs to manage people in companies during the crisis in order to enable business continuity and ensure work-life balance. Since the future will bring more flexible, remote-friendly, digital working norms, the changes in policies, processes, workspaces, collaboration systems, and employee wellness are of increasingly urgent importance. The paper discusses the challenges HRM is facing due to the current crisis in terms of remote working, and identifies the implications the pandemic has on human resources. The expert interviews conducted in Georgia indicate that HRM should consider ways to develop new policies for hybrid working models as a response to the current pandemic crisis.

Introduction. The recent changes brought by the worldwide pandemic (Covid-19) have imposed organizations to accelerate transition to digital operations. This shift has compelled the human resource management (HRM) to navigate employees in this extraordinary situation. Human Resource Management has an important role to play on the one hand to help employees in using digital platforms to access to their jobs, and on the other hand to support organizations in their efforts to continue business processes.

In the digital ecosystem, employees need to upgrade their knowledge, or obtain new skills.

This research is determined by the influence of the recent unexpected crisis on companies and business continuity. The aim of this research is to identify the changes occurred in the companies in Georgia as a response to the crisis. The qualitative research method was used to understand how companies respond to the pandemic lockdown, how digitalization and employee wellbeing have been managed during the crisis, and how HRM processes were interrupted by the Covid-19. For this reason, expert interview method was employed. In order to investigate the transition to the remote, acceleration of digitalization especially in the Georgian companies, and their impact on work-life balance of employees, the research questions were designed in an open-minded way.

For this research, existing theoretical foundation in the literature gave direction to the research questions. The primary data collection implemented by semi-structured face-to-face video interviews, and analytical procedure was determined by theoretical framework as well as the qualitative characteristic of the gathered data.

Research questions for this manuscript are as follows.

RQ1: Why and how did the Covid-19 pandemic affect the Human Resource Management generally, and in particular in the Georgian companies?

RQ2: Why remote working can be the adequate respond to the pandemic crisis and how HRM can help companies in digital transformation?

RQ3: How did HRM respond to the crisis in Georgia and how they create conditions for adaptability of employees to the new reality?

The research results have a significant impact on managers and organizations in terms of crisis management from the HRM perspective. Overall, the manuscript contributes to scholarship by emphasizing that digitalization is the future of the business, yet remote working has an effect on work-life balance of employees, as shared spaces for work and private live can be a major source of stress.

The remainder of this manuscript is organized as follows. First, literature and theory are reviewed on digitalization, work-life balance, Covid-19 implications, as well as crisis consequences in Georgia. Then, the primary data collection methods are presented, followed by the research findings and discussions. Finally, conclusions and future research areas are suggested.

Literature Review

The role of HRM in digital transformation

The current crisis of the new coronavirus pandemic initiated dramatic changes around the world. In this context, both companies and customers switched instantly to digital models. The Covid-19 has intensified digital transformation for companies, and many workers around the world need to have necessary skills to use technologies (Sheppard, 2020) in order to perform their jobs remotely. The digital technologies enable virtual work as well as to automate tasks and make decisions (Parry & Battista, 2019). The pandemic has made it visible that the most demanded skills for the employees are digital, but also collaborative (Sheppard, 2020).

Any problems happening in the interconnected world encourage organizations of any size to respond and adapt to the change, as well as manage their employees accordingly (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). Recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has shaped extraordinary demanding conditions for human resource management. HR managers have to help their employees to handle with the rapid changes in both the workplace and the society (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020).

Moreover, Covid-19 will impact profoundly on the employment, and can cause career shock for people (Akkermans, Richardson, & Kraimer, 2020). HRM needs now to deal with the increasing stress of their workforce caused by remote working when work and family boundaries have blurred (Giurge & Bohns, 2020).

Previous reports anticipated that the trends towards online workers and platform workforces increase, which presents reskilling needs from employers and workers (World Economic Forum, 2018). According to the Sheppard (2020), businesses should prepare to changes and turbulence in the future by introducing and adopting platform-based technologies, and develop business models accordingly (Sheppard, 2020).

The studies from previous years confirmed that emerging technologies including digital platforms, Artificial Intelligence, robotics, augmented reality, and blockchain − would change the functions HR professionals perform (Parry & Battista, 2019).

To adapt to the digital work, employees should learn new skills that increases their employability (Sheppard, 2020). Based on the study, Parry and Battista (2019) demonstrated that human resource management should help employees to use the advanced technologies in organization. Since employees alone cannot cope all the challenges the recent pandemic crisis brought, HR professionals should help them to upgrade their digital skills, and to arrange their wellbeing (Parry & Battista, 2019). In this respect, leaders acknowledge the importance of lifelong learning and developing talents; consequently, they are planning training sessions online (Narayandas, Hebbar, & Liangliang, 2020). The recent survey of Chinese companies showed that they invest resources rather than preserve funds, in strengthening their competitive ability (Narayandas, Hebbar, & Liangliang, 2020).

It is also noteworthy that business continuity, employee wellbeing, and customer orientation are considered to be the main challenges (Singer-Velush, Sherman, & Anderson, 2020).

Moreover, as new technologies increase flexibility and allow the workforce to work remotely, HR management needs to create appropriate policies and performance systems to ensure that

employees meet standards, but at the same time eliminate the negative effects of digital working in particular with regard the social interactions (Parry & Battista, 2019).

The large-scale research of 869 teams and 11,011 workers in 9 European countries confirms that remote working is not beneficial for all employees; especially team performance is reduced and sharing knowledge suffers when coworkers are working from home (Van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2019). However, job characteristics, satisfaction, and commitment are the factors that influence individual performance, while team performance declines when members work from home more than 8 hours per week (Van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2019). Agile teams, earlier confirmed to be effective with remote working, can be inefficient when working fully remotely (Comella-Dorda, Garg, Tharej, & Vasquez-McCall, 2020). These findings suggest that HR function should address those issues and accordingly organize flexible work.

While workplace stressors intrude into personal life disturbing mental health, the reverse dynamics are also noticed. The studies found that remote workplaces reduce boundaries between work and personal life causing personal stress to spread to work, and ultimately resulting in burnout (Peasley, Hochstein, Britton, Srivastava, & Stewart, 2020). Peasley and colleagues (2020) indicate that although remote work has many advantages, employees experience "mix of business and home life", which causes troubles for both managers and workers in terms of long-term wellbeing (Peasley, Hochstein, Britton, Srivastava, & Stewart, 2020). It is worth noting that wellbeing has impact on motivation and performance outcomes of employees.

The pandemic has centered the physiological and mental health of people in the organization as priorities (Spence, 2020). Since many employees will be happier to return to their offices while others prefer continue working remotely, companies reframing the workplaces should take into consideration these differences (Spence, 2020).

The research based on Workplace Analytics at Microsoft revealed that workdays prolonged as the employees working from home signed into work earlier and signed off later as they assigned time in the meantime for personal issues (Singer-Velush, Sherman, & Anderson, 2020). Although time of meetings online has reduced to 30 minutes, managers had to help employees to prioritize work and lessen potential negative effects caused by the shared space of work and home (Singer-Velush, Sherman, & Anderson, 2020). However, jobs performed at night and weekends increased, which indicates the disruption of work-life balance (Singer-Velush, Sherman, & Anderson, 2020).

Furthermore, social isolation has a negative impact on employees. Therefore, HR practitioners need to maintain social interaction among employees who are working remotely. Small-group meetings, networking, virtual connections should be arranged to conquer isolation as work relationships are source of motivation (Singer-Velush, Sherman, & Anderson, 2020).

There is also shift towards keeping video meetings and virtual events, and many HR leaders are trying to maintain the flexibility and collaboration by redesigning jobs, duties, and work processes (Narayandas, Hebbar, & Liangliang, 2020). For example, for PwC flexibility means to encourage employees to work in a different way in compliance with their lifestyles, and they believe flexibility "results in a happier, healthier, and more productive workforce" (Donovan, 2019). The survey of Chinese companies reported that communication was more personal during the pandemic lockdown as employees have used audio apps more frequently than emails (Narayandas, Hebbar, & Liangliang, 2020).

For evaluate workload and performance of human resources, managers have used digital data and online dashboards with the intention of assessing for example number of sales, tickets closed, calls made, hours logged on, or number of customers served (Narayandas, Hebbar, & Liangliang, 2020).

Thus, HRM should help companies to transform their business processes into the digital space by upgrading employee skills, create organization culture for adaptability to digitalization, and keeping work-life balance to maintain employee health, motivation, and efficiency.

Tendencies during the Covid-19 crisis in Georgia

According to the survey of PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) Georgia, disruption in the supply chain and decrease in demand among Georgian companies resulted in revenue decrease (PwC Georgia, 2020). 53% of companies report that sales have declined (GCCI, 2020), and 63% of surveyed organizations confirm that their incomes reduced by more that 50% to compare with the same session of the last year (PwC Georgia, 2020). Under these circumstances, about 50% of Georgian companies have reduced personnel, while 40% of companies in Tourism industry dismissed all their staff on grounds of redundancy (PwC Georgia, 2020).

The survey of the Georgian Chamber of Commerce and Industry shows that 53% of the surveyed companies intend to maintain their employees for the next 6 months, but 43% of the employers have reduced the salaries (GCCI, 2020).

Interestingly, the way out of the situation from the point of view of the Georgian companies is in financial aid from the government as well as in long-term/ soft loan (GCCI, 2020).

As for shifting to remote working, 17% of surveyed companies want to move online, but admit to not having the necessary skills, while 7% of them plan to transfer to online working systems in the near future (GCCI, 2020). Remarkably, the interest of Georgian companies in working online increased from 0.33% to 17% in the last 3 months (GCCI, 2020).

In this vein, how organizations should maintain employee wellbeing and work-life-balance during working remotely from the perspectives of the human resource experts. By the same token, HR managers being at the forefront of development organizational culture as well as human resource policies created deliberately for remote working should pave ways for the digital transition and work-life balance simultaneously.

Data Collection Methodology

As the aim of this research is to understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis on the Human Resource Management, digitalization, and work-life balance, qualitative research approach was used. The semi-structured open interview with experts provides the space to reveal opinions, thoughts, and reflections of an expert, and hence, it was considered to be appropriate for this study. The following procedures were applied to collect primary data from the experts. After selecting a research topic, and preparation and planning phase, conduction series of interviews begun followed by transcriptions of the recorded interviews, then data were analyzed and interpreted, and finally conclusions and recommendations based of the results was made.

Data collection Instrument: Expert Interview Method

To collect the primary data for this study, expert interview method was used. Expert interviews conducted in April and May 2020. The selection of the experts was based on the purposive sampling method; interview participants were chosen based on their characteristics.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) state that research question dictates the methodology employed to carry out a research. Besides, qualitative research enables to "discover rather than test variables" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Expert interviews is a legitimate method for some research, especially in the exploratory phase it presents an efficient and concentrated way to collect data, and quickly gain good results (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, Interviewing Experts, 2009).

An expert is defined a person who possess technical as well as interpretative and process knowledge in a specific competences field (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, Introduction: Expert interviews - An introduction to a new methodological debate, 2009). Experts have not only systematic and organized knowledge, but also experience (Mergel, Edelmann, & Haug, 2019). An expert has relevant knowledge about processes, decisions, behaviors, as well as access to information, and they have an ability to solve problems in their field of expertise (Meuser & Nagel, 2002). Researchers highlight the following criteria for assessment of the competences of the expert: education and skills, position, work experience in the field of research topic, the level of public recognition (Libakova & Sertakova, 2015)

Based on the abovementioned principles, the following criteria were elaborated to invite experts for the interview: An expert should (1) have theoretical knowledge and expertise in the field of human resource management, (2) have work experience with organizations on human resource management issues, (3) be engaged in research at an university, in consulting or training business and therefore, have direct contacts with HR managers in Georgian organizations (Figure 1).

Thus, the experts invited to participate in this research are in close connection with the various organizations in Georgia, have frequent and immediate relations with HR managers in the course of their day-to-day work, so that they see present conditions imposed by the pandemic.
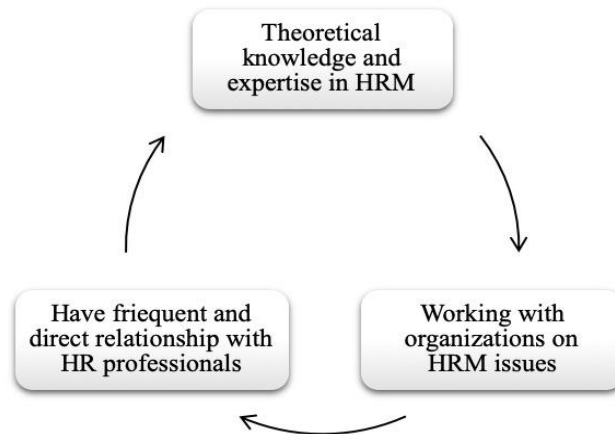
Fig. 1. Criteria for Selecting Experts for the Intervnew

Sampling

The number of interviewees is defined by both the research question and accessibility to experts (Baker & Edwards, 2012). The researchers suggest ten interviews with experts in order to analyze properly (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to Guest, Bunce & Johnson (2006), the size of purposive sampling as the widely applied method of nonprobability sampling depends on the saturation concept (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). As soon as saturation has been reached, data collection should stop (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Sampling in expert interviews should be kept as long as the knowledge of the issue is increasing, and stop when there are no new insights gained (Cooper & Schindler, 2014).

In total, 33 experts were invited to the interview for this research, and 10 of them were actually interviewed. Experts were recruited through the professional contacts of the researcher. Initially, we contacted them via Email explaining the purpose of the research and sending general interview questions.

The experience and insight of the experts allow gathering primary data from various background and experience in order to study the impact of the crisis.

They are experts of the field of HRM, and the information they provided is true reflection of current state in this area. They come from diverse organization ranging from consulting companies to training centers to universities. Their working experience in HRM consulting, training, and research field ranges between 9 and 25 years (Figure 2).

Fig. 2. Expert characteristics

Interview guideline

The face-to-face expert interviews were carried out using online video platform Zoom. Interviews were conducted in the Georgian language. After each session, transcripts of the interview

were made, and later translated into English by the researcher. The depth interview with an individual expert took between 23 and 46 minutes. The interview was prescheduled. The experts were asked to allow video-recording in Zoom in order to transcript it later. They were ensured that their personal data will be protected, thus their identities remained confidential as well as will not be available for any third parties.

The semi-structured interview followed similar outline that allowed to compare data, and to keep the interview within the topic boundaries; all questions were open. At the end of the interview, the last question was about their additional comments or viewpoints they thought it could be important to the research.

The questions were based on the current literature, and relied on the expert answers to pose additional questions. The questions were open-ended and comprehensive answers were expected. Overall, the interview guideline consisted of 9 questions covering the 6 main themes (Table 1).

Table 1. Main Interview Themes

Part	Theme
I	General question about the expert experience and exact field of expertise
II	Questions about Covid-19 effect on organizations and challenges HRM have faced
III	**Questions about changes caused by the crisis (e.g. Work-life balance, Digital transformation)**
IV	**Questions about the company response to the pandemic crisis from HRM perspective**
V	Expert opinions regarding the future of HRM, and their recommendations to HR managers
VI	Additional thoughts/ views if applicable

In the framework of this manuscript, questions in the part 3 and 4 are analyzed.

The experts were asked what they think about the major alterations in organizations and with HR management, which took place due to the pandemic, what exactly was the company's response to the sudden changes, and whether any opportunities are considered for Georgian companies.

Data Analysis

At the stage of the analysis, the collected data through the expert interview were interpreted and analyzed with the approach of qualitative content analysis.

The systematic analysis includes concepts, themes, and categories derived from the data, which are discussed (Silverman, 2000). The thematic parts and passages with similar elements need to be noticed (Bogner, Litting & Menz, 2009). Additionally, the data were grouped and labeled by category; relevant themes to the research questions were determined to make connections (Flick, 2014).

Thus, themes, issues, categories were identified, patterns were discovered in the content, and were labeled appropriately. Then, data were sorted according to similar themes and subthemes as well as conflicting points of view. Thematically similar passages from different expert interviews were put together as described by Bogner, Litting and Menz (2009) to further conceptualize and reveal the commonly shared expert opinions.

Findings and Discussion

Remote Working as a Response to the Pandemic Crisis

The pandemic lockdown imposed many challenges to the organizations, human resource management, and employees. The interviewed experts indicate that the main difficulties companies have to deal includes suspended operations or business closure as well as financial problems. In addition, systemic deficiencies and unpreparedness have been reported in many cases in terms of business continuity. Instead of quickly adapting to new reality and beginning operations under the pandemic circumstances, the companies were forced to shut down, so they started waiting for the pandemic to pass.

"I do not see that companies have any organized approach to learn living and operating with the virus" (R3, *my translation*).

Besides, corporate brand and organizational culture are under question, while the management have less experience in crisis management. Further, they need to consider flexibility and digitalization when employees begun working remotely.

As stated by the experts one of the biggest problems was the vague and inconsistent regulations in line with the lack of communication with the governmental agencies.

"When regulations change frequently and there is no direct contact with the regulators, the risks of imposing fines on companies increase if a company does not meet every aspect of the legislation requirements because of its ambiguity and possibility of various interpretations" (R4, *my translation*).

With regard to employees, the experts claim that their stress, fear and anxiety increased. They now need to adapt to the new reality with digital processes and remote working, and therefore upgrade their skills in online tools. Moreover, the workforce has to handle with unemployment or salary reductions due to the recessions caused by the pandemic.

The respondents believe that HRM carries out an unequivocal commitment to companies' success and employees' wellbeing. According to the experts, main challenges HR managers have faced during the pandemic are lack of knowledge in new technologies as well as in crisis management. Besides, they needed to manage people online while monitoring employees' job performance. At the same time, HRM has dealt with dismissals, turnover, and managing panic within the organization. Additionally, new safety regulations must be interpreted for company and employee standpoints. The experts noted that some Georgian companies have already introduced a labor safety consultant to help organization and its workforce to obey the safety regulations.

Furthermore, work-life balance must be also addressed as the most employees were working from home where the space between work and personal life may not exist causing increasing stress.

When it comes to remote work the experts mention that some companies have already had a flexible working schedule especially those in IT industry or consulting business. Consequently, their employees have adapted easily and relatively painlessly to work from home. Moreover, many employees want to be allowed to continue working online after the post- pandemic period.

As stated by experts in the interview sessions, Georgian organizations and HR systems were not ready to work remotely neither technologically nor mentally. Besides, the management of many companies has lacked experience in managing stress and in change management.

Another key challenge the experts highlighted is the ability of HR professionals to manage autonomously, result-oriented, and remotely. Previously, many processes and works have been done on paper, and Management was interpreted as control and monitoring of employees. During the remote working conditions those old approaches have been questioned, and requirements towards new procedures emerged. Yet neither HRM nor HR professionals nor employees are ready for developing and introducing novel management systems.

"We live in an age of artificial intelligence and how to exist without technology. This pushes a person towards self-development" (R2, *my translation*).

Tackling Covid-19 Crisis from viewpoint of HRM: Digital Transformation

In the course of the pandemic crisis, HRM has taken up leadership and more responsibility at many organizations concentrating their resources on solving problems. The respondents expressed their views how Georgian companies have dealt with the pandemic crisis from HRM perspective.

Digitalization was seen as a tool to make business activities possible during the pandemic. Moreover, the importance of digitalization has increased during the crisis period. Consequently, remote management of companies has been allowed, and potential of e-commerce has expanded. The pandemic accelerated digitalization of business processes also in Georgian companies. It is no more unimaginable for managers to work from home. Nevertheless, digitalization in Georgia is not in mainstream as after reopening many companies returned to the traditional offline way of operations.

While some Georgian companies see the online platforms merely as a transition bridge to get back to their usual reality, others used the whole potential of online technologies during the crisis to retain relationship with workers through online team meetings, and even to integrate new employees more quickly.

HRM should help companies to make decisions whether some positions will be moved partly or entirely remotely, whereas other positions need to be identified which are unable to be performed from home.

In the opinion of the experts, despite the negative impact in terms of stress, unemployment, business closures, some companies have been affected still positively as they have become more effective by using digital channels, and take care of development. The experts emphasize that the pandemic situation and safety regulations accelerate the process of working remotely coupled with transformation using digital channels in Georgian companies.

Jobs will be significantly transformed. Therefore, both the companies and the workforce need to obtain more technological knowledge and experience, develop digital skills, as well as be flexible, more adaptable to changes, and prepare for future uncertainties.

Effect of Remote Working on Work-life Balance from the Perspective of HRM

During the pandemic lockdown, the remote working issues were observed by the experts. The employees being at work are concentrated on their jobs for about 7-8 hours, while working from home involves major distractions such as child care, household chores, and hence, employees have to perform the assigned tasks at night. Many Georgian employees have complained that they did not understand when they started and when they finished the job i.e. where was the line between work and home. "The area where they rested, the house, is mixed with the work relationships" (R6, *my translation*). At the same time, if other members of the family also worked remotely and the study has been done online as well, there has been a lot of psychological pressure and tension.

Therefore, HRM should help the workforce to arrange the space and schedules for working remotely taking into consideration the individual differences or conditions to maintain work-life balance.

Although working online can be profitable for companies, its biggest disadvantage is a lack of socialization. The respondents noted that there should be a room left when switching to the remote mode with the purpose of organizing meetings in offices occasionally. This will lead to more comfortable state of mind and mental health resulting in improved motivation and productivity of the staff.

In the opinion of the experts, even if some positions remain fully remotely there should still be arranged face-to-face meetings occasionally to conquer isolation and facilitate social relations for employees.

Figure 3 summarizes the main results of the research and provides answers of the research questions.
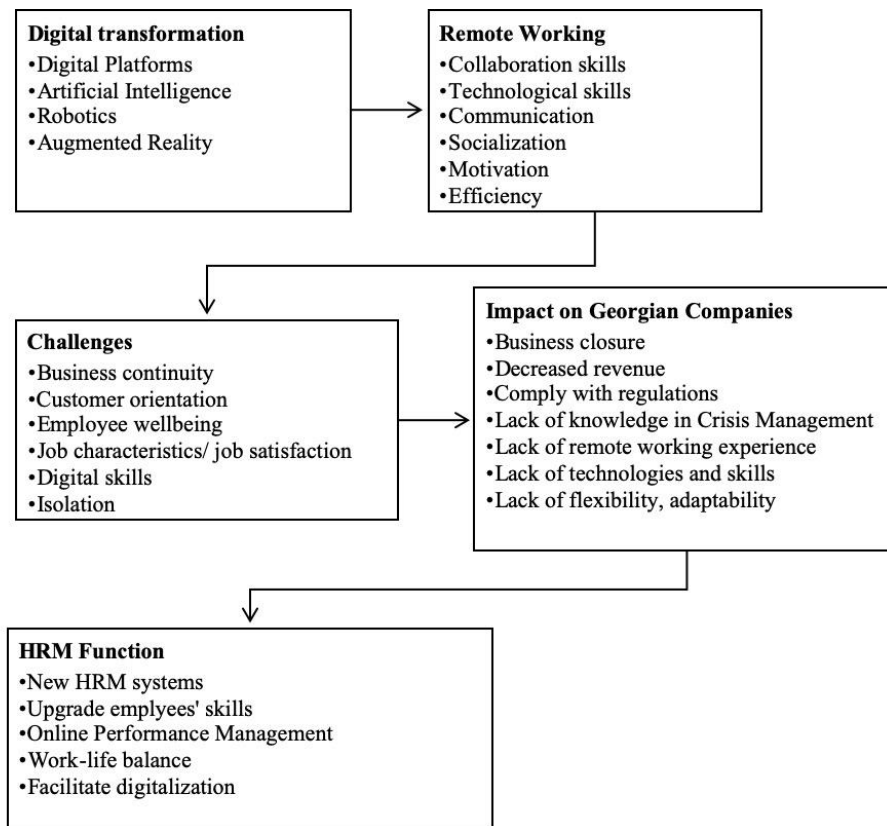

Fig. 3. Impact of the pandemic crisis on HRM

Conclusions. In this paper, the focus was on the influence of Covid-19 crisis on HRM as well as digitalization and its accompanying work-life balance issues.

Qualitative expert interview method was applied for this research as a first direction to better shape the difficulties caused by the current pandemic crisis. The aim of the research was to reveal the organizational decisions and to learn about the role of HRM during the crisis.

The experts' judgments were founded on their knowledge and personal experience. During the analysis, comparisons were made followed by data interpretations, discussions of findings, and conclusions.

The researchers have theorized the similar trends experienced during the crisis situation regarding human resource management and impact on employee wellbeing. The interviewed experts also noticed that job requirements filled the private space that has been previously reserved for personal life. Many employees in Georgia performed their jobs at night. They have been straggling to unplug from work and relax. Therefore, eliminate online meetings on certain days will solve this issue.

As remote working has risen during the lockdown, it is needed to adapt the new working life. In order to adapt quickly to changes, enhancing communication is of primary importance.

The HR managers do not need to monitor closely the employees work activities during remote working as they can perform tasks independently with responsibility. The workforce has increased requirement to safeguard health, and employees' health and safety is also decisive for companies to create organizational values and long-term brand. Thus, taking into account employees work-life balance during digitalization process is crucial.

Given that some employees prefer to keep working from home while others strive to return to offices, the new HR policy should allow the workforce to choose the work mode. HR managers are therefore encouraged to develop strategies accordingly. Moreover, the policy regarding travel, business trips, and corporate events need also to be transformed.

Today, the main goals companies set in association with HR management are to organize hybrid model to allow the workforce to continue working remotely, to revise organizational culture correspondingly, to hire remote employees, and create digital office spaces.

Future Research: Founding on the results of expert interviews, the questionnaire will be designed for the future quantitative survey of HR managers to study thoroughly the impact of Covid-19 pandemic crisis on the companies, employees, teams, and on the HRM system in Georgia. Besides, it would be interesting to gain data about the influence of digitalization and remote work on employee behavior, on employees' family members, and on the society at large.

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