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MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Lessons learned in people management after COVID-19 crisis. A qualitative study in Spain

Jesús Labrador Fernández[1], Pedro César Martínez Morán[2] and Gisela Delfino[1]*

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to find out the consequences the COVID-19 crisis has had on people management and the future challenges human resources (HR) departments in Spanish companies must face. We qualitatively explore in-depth HR managers' experiences, beliefs, and expectations, holding three focus groups with 25 (16 women) HR managers from companies of different sectors, sizes, origins, and locations. Once the discourse analysis had been carried out, it was clear that talent, though scarce, is a priority goal for organisations; HR must implicate strategic decision-making. There was broad agreement that flexible and hybrid work models were the most apparent practical consequences of the crisis. On the other hand, the need to pay more attention to the holistic well-being of workers and the care of the leadership function of managers are essential functions in HR departments.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The various crises organisations are going through are putting human resources departments to the test. Still, above all, they are a tremendous challenge for the leaders of the organisations. The traditional leadership based on transactions and a constant distance between boss and collaborator must change towards more flexible, adaptable, and technological relationship forms. The research that supports this article aims to find clues to explain the changes that are taking place in the management of people and talent, which have been critically highlighted in human resources practices in response to the COVID crisis.

1. Introduction

The human resources (HR) function has profoundly transformed over the last three decades (Beer, 1997; Lepak & Snell, 1998; Lundy, 1994; Truss & Gratton, 1994). It has moved from a transactional to a strategic approach as it has had and must be at the side of the business and help anticipate the company's needs, be it growth, stability, or realignment (Amladi, 2017; Fenech et al., 2019). The more strategic approach has allowed new responsibilities and functions to be developed and tackled. Like the implementation of the talent cycle, the definition of the employee experience (Plaskoff, 2017), the performance of well-being and work-life balance policies (McCarthy et al., 2010), the implementation of teleworking (Sánchez et al., 2007), or the coexistence of job descriptions and evaluations with a competency framework that aims to allow a better fit with the flexibility needed by organisations and the enrichment of jobs desired by employees (Wright & Snell, 1998). Moreover, the prevailing uncertainty has encouraged the use of means and resources to provide real-time information for decision-making in people management.

The irruption of technology through platforms, apps and other resources has facilitated the concentration of data on the people in the workforce and the acceleration of specific processes (Gilch & Sieweke, 2021; Larkin, 2017; Vardarlier & Ozsahin, 2021). Regulatory compliance and the legal area have become a commodity for organisations. Their existence and the obligation to implement all the legislation in force in each case are essential. They do not distinguish one organisation from another, except for those that move into the dangerous area of illegality. However, the management of culture, the ability to achieve more significant commitment from staff members, the sharing of values, and the integration of other wills, habits and thoughts with the same common goal have been a transcendent competitive advantage (Flamholtz et al., 2012; Sadri & Lees, 2001). Organisations that have managed to implement these milestones have achieved higher levels of internationalisation in their workforces, more agile and more effective in the face of storms in the form of economic crises, sectoral crises, etc. HR departments have become generators of policies to be implemented by the line. The line manager has become the manager of people in their area of responsibility (Azmi & Mushtaq, 2015; Gilbert et al., 2011). HR has become a support consultant for implementing all the measures necessary for better workforce management (Wright, 2008).

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared a global pandemic state. Its impact on organisations and workers was starkly evident, and its consequences still unfold. An unprecedented labour market crisis in 2020 was followed by an uneven, uncertain, and fragile recovery throughout 2021. In 2022, labour markets were reeling from further shocks primarily caused by the conflict in Ukraine, which has significantly disrupted trade and commodity markets, with rapidly rising prices, especially for essential goods such as food and energy. Inflation is a factor that started to be seen as temporary and contingent. However, all indications are that it may be more permanent and structural. The overall economic and political environment is even more uncertain than at the beginning of 2022. Global growth is projected to be just 3.6 per cent in 2022, 0.8 percentage points lower than the January 2022 projections (International Monetary Fund, 2022).

Even before the pandemic, Western companies faced two fundamental paradoxes. The first is how to reconcile the demands of principles and culture on employees with the demands of sustainable profits, and the second is how to resolve the tension between the need for short-term shareholder dividends and long-term interests that affect all stakeholders (Aust et al., 2015; Daubner-Siva et al., 2017). The COVID-19 crisis has made these tensions more evident, noticeable, and relevant to those managing it, especially HR managers (Collings et al., 2021). Although HR departments were already immersed in a developing digital transformation process, in the heat of

advances in artificial intelligence, robotics and automation, they have endured disruptive change since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The epidemic's beginning has been a destabilising factor, sometimes in revenue losses and workforce adjustments and reductions, sometimes in the form of substantial changes and the incorporation of new resources and working models. Many of the changes that have taken place in the workplace were already underway before the global events cited. Many organisations were already undergoing digital transformation, and the pandemic accelerated this transition. However, some new challenges are emerging that could become entrenched in civic cultures, such as social distancing (Bennett & McWhorter, 2021).

HR managers have faced the need to manage a critical-complex situation (De Clercq & Pereira, 2022). On the one hand, managers of an unexpected change whereby the working conditions of employees underwent a substantial difference: a new workplace, i.e., the home, new operational means, new formulas for communication with customers and suppliers or with hierarchy, peers or collaborators, new staffing levels because of adjustments, reduction or, where appropriate, incorporation of new staff. Moreover, workers have been subjected to the consequences of the pandemic: suffering from the disease in themselves or their relatives, fear and stress of the pandemic, and its after-effects (Chang et al., 2022; Sinha & Jain, 2021). On the other hand, they have claimed their crucial role in strategic decision-making (Azizi et al., 2021) together with the rest of the management team, as well as being responsible for the adjustment of talent in their companies at a time when digital profiles, in the heat of the digital transformation, dominate the search for and replacement of current talent. Therefore, companies must change towards servant leadership (Linuesa-Langreo et al., 2018) that provides staff psychological safety and security in their workplaces (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021). HR departments should occupy this accountability and manage to support the entire workforce.

Spain has a population of 47 million and a half (Population Pyramid, 2022) and a GDP per capita of 30 thousand US dollars. Since 1980, Spanish GDP has grown continuously with seven year-on-year declines, three consecutive (2011, 2012, and 2013) and a sharp decline because of COVID-19 (Expansion, 2022). Despite its strong development, the Spanish economy comprises small companies. Spain has 3,430,663 enterprises, with 95.8% of them employing less than nine workers and 3.95% between 10 and 99 workers (National Statistical Institute, 2022). These companies lack a minimum human resources structure. Only 0.2% of Spanish firms employ more than 100 workers and have a skilled person or team in this responsibility, having generated practices and knowledge in people management.

This research stems from the need to understand the incorporation and modification of HR function tasks caused by the impact of COVID-19 on organisations. An attempt has been made to answer the following research questions. What changes have occurred in HR departments because of COVID-19? Has the meaning and image of the HR function within companies changed? Have the tasks and purposes of HR departments changed concerning employee welfare? Are HR departments focusing on being managers of uncertainty and safeguarding the care and well-being of employees? Are they moving from a support function to one linked to strategic decision-making? (For a detailed list of the research objectives, see Appendix 1).

2. Method

2.1. Study design
Faced with such a broad, complex, and intangible research object as the future of the human resources function, we have opted for an exploratory qualitative method to collect primary data on the discourse of people management managers in Spain. The aim was to create spaces for open and in-depth reflection in which human resources managers with more than 10 years of experience in the field could contribute their expertise and knowledge. The focus group is recognised as one of the forms of information gathering in qualitative methodology. Its objective is the creation of a collective discourse on a focused topic through the meeting and collaborative discussion of

individuals with expertise on a topic. Conducting a focus group and analysing it as a discussion requires moderation skills to keep participants focused on the subject, motivate them to reveal in-depth facts, and give all group members a fair chance to contribute (Flick, 2018; Krueger, 2014). The interactive and synchronous nature of focus group discussion allows participants to elaborate on agreements and disagreements and makes it possible to obtain spontaneous information that emerges right in that social interaction (Flick, 2018; Merton, 1987).

This work has been done by discussing and analysing synchronous online focus groups. Online groups facilitate expanding the number of potential participants by relocating the meeting place space and increasing flexibility in managing already complex informant agendas (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017). The fundamental disadvantage of online discussion groups is the loss of some of the non-verbal language and the impossibility of creating a climate in a shared space (Dodds & Hess, 2020). Nevertheless, on the other hand, their advantages are easily recognisable: they are more comfortable, less intrusive, and easier to organise. Although specific differences in language use have been identified concerning face-to-face groups, it has also been found that the content of the discourse generated is very similar (Woodyatt et al., 2016).

2.2. Participants
The sample selected for this research corresponds to a convenience sample from the consultant collaborating with this work. All participants should be practising human resources or talent management managers, and we sought to include organisations from different sectors and geographic locations. The purpose was to achieve depth information from various fonts rather than statistical representativeness, so this research does not claim to represent all human resources managers (Hennink et al., 2020). The research team took special care to ensure that the groups included HR managers from large and small companies, from different sectors, with knowledge and manual workers, based in large and small urban centres. These different perspectives enriched the discourse generated in each group. Three focus groups were conducted between December 2021 and March 2022, each lasting an average of 95 min (range = 93–96). A total of 25 human resources managers participated (see Table 1).

2.3. Procedure
A week before the focus group was held, an email was sent to each selected participant. We formally invited them to the group, presented the research's general objectives, and gave them a preview of the vectors that would guide the discussion. These discussion vectors were the COVID crisis and its lessons, talent and people, the role of HR management vis-à-vis the CEO, digital challenges, new work models, and the future of the human resources function.

Table 1. Focus group participants' information			
	Focus group		
	1 (*n* = 9)	**2 (*n* = 8)**	**3 (*n* = 8)**
Gender			
Male	4	3	2
Female	5	5	6
Companies' sectors	tourism, technology, and industrial manufacturing	consulting, insurance and health, technology, and real estate	banking, pharmaceutical, food and industrial manufacturing
Size of the companies (Number of employees)	35–46,000	249–15,094	260–7,300

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Table 2. Codes used for the analysis of the focus groups		
Reacting to the crisis (C)	People (CP)	*Uncertainty* *Anxiety and fear* *Concern for well-being* *Discontent* *Dual workforce*
	Department (CD)	*Improvise* *Prevention* *Protagonists* *Pride* *Grief* *Caring for the caregiver* *Demands from above* *Demands from below* *We are everywhere* *Relations with other departments*
	Procedures and Technology (CT)	*Search for tools* *Tool learning* *Training*
Learnings (A)	People (AP)	*Trust in workers* *Mistrust* *More dimensions of workers* *Holistic care* *Proximity and knowledge* *Inadequacy of young talent*
	Department (AD)	*Foresight and prevention* *Preventive programmes* *Adaptation to change* *Care and support of managers* *Communication processes* *Openness* *Authenticity* *Flexible work design* *Challenging talent*
	Procedures and Technology (AT)	*Procedures* *Evaluation of procedures* *Continuous learning* *Intangible data*

Note. See some representative quotes in Appendix 3.

The groups were conducted online, and the moderators proposed a short talk to contextua-lise the discussion. The participants already knew the opening script, followed by the questions already asked (see Appendix 2). The meetings, therefore, had a predetermined structure, although they allowed for flexibility and adaptability to the group's needs. All questions were used to ensure consistency across the focus groups, and the pre-structuring reduced the amount of data to be analysed. These initiatives were intended to bring participants into the discussion, knowing the task and sharing information. An atmosphere of trusting openness was created, and the conversation in all three groups flowed smoothly. We held online meetings, and the talks were structured according to the stimulus questions. This method provides a great deal of order and systematisation of information but has the disadvantage of limiting the exchange of arguments through dialogue. Even so, there were replies and counter-replies to the arguments put forward.

2.4. Ethics

All participants in the study accepted and signed an informed consent that comprised the privacy and image rights policy. We removed all identifying information from the transcripts to ensure participants' confidentiality and anonymity.

2.5. Data analysis

The group information was collected in field notebooks, and all the verbal content of the meetings was transcribed. The analysis was carried out on the group meetings' verbatim transcripts, favouring the interpretation of the issues that emerged in the discussions. The transcribed conversations were analysed following three main stages. The data were divided into small units during the first stage (i.e., open coding). Researchers assigned a descriptor, or code, to each of the units. Then, these codes were grouped into categories in the second stage (i.e., axial coding). Finally, in the third and last stage (i.e., selective coding), researchers developed one or more themes that express the content of each of the groups (Table 2 presents the used codes).

3. Results

As noted above, meetings were pre-planned with a document outlining a series of discussion vectors. This way of proceeding has the advantage of focusing the discussion very quickly and allows the participants to elaborate on the ideas they want to discuss. Another advantage is that initial coding already has the first structure and thus addresses the first frameworks from which new theoretical contributions emerge. Before entering the analysis of the discourses, it is necessary to refer to two phenomena that occurred very quickly in all the groups and determine all the generated speeches.

First, a climate of mutual solidarity was created. Despite the circumstances of each person and organisation, it soon became apparent that there were many common denominators in the stories told by the participants. Having gone through similar experiences created a climate of openness and mutual understanding. Second, a shared emotion of achievement, success in overcoming an unprecedented crisis that generated great uncertainty, also emerged. In general, there was a discourse of satisfaction with the overcome challenges. The efforts made in managing the emergency had borne fruit, and the adaptive management capacity of the human resources departments had been demonstrated. A common expression, "They have finally realised", appeared. They felt that other departments and managers finally saw the importance of the human resources department.

These two shared emotions, having suffered similar circumstances and having managed to overcome them, generated a climate of cohesive solidarity in all the groups that not only facilitated but also determined the rest of the content that emerged in the discussions.

3.1. COVID crisis and lessons learned

The pandemic impact was the first topic raised. It was also the focus from which all the other issues emerged. This crisis has meant that people and their management have become an essential priority and determining element in senior management decision-making. We used a historical event, the COVID-19 pandemic, as a starting point for the discussions. Participants' discourses were articulated according to a timeline defined by the pandemic's impact on people and its consequences. A series of successive stages or moments over time were identified. This temporal continuum was articulated when the pandemic forced the closure of many workplaces or the creation of unprecedented health and safety protocols in organisations. Four distinct moments can be distinguished, each with tasks and functions shared by almost all informants: foresight, survival, connection, and reconnection.

3.1.1. Foresight

All the stories started with the challenges for the HR departments when employees were prevented overnight from coming to work. From that moment on, many of the tasks that had to be carried out, including improvisation, are mentioned. They explain how the organisation implemented some practices facilitating the transition to remote working: technological support for applications or devices, flexible internal communication systems, and pilot projects for offshoring work. However, it is no less accurate that, alongside this concept of improvisation, its opposite has arisen: foresight.

This function of anticipating the future is explained in detail and pointed out as an essential function of any people department. This foresight capability marks one of the future strategies for having a recognised and recognisable role in the business. When organisations could not or did not know how to have this vision of the future, there is a critical and regretful tone for having had to react unprepared. Although the informants generally feel satisfied with the initiative and capacity to respond, they express regret for having learned in such a traumatic way.

3.1.2. Survival

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has directly affected people, all people. Human resources departments were the first to be called upon to come up with solutions. The cross-cutting nature of these departments provides them with detailed knowledge of the entire organisation. This ubiquity has given them a solid value to be protagonists in this crisis. In one of the groups, the situation was defined with a graphic image: "They passed us the ball, and we played". In all groups, the general response is to secure value at risk, i.e. to survive. Two very different demand scenarios were described: drastic fall vs. massive increase. In a minority of cases, the organisation's activity was considered essential.[1]

The business operation was required to adapt overnight. Human resources had to undertake what one informant called "campaign management", including regulatory and administrative employment issues, workforce structure, the implementation of teleworking systems, the articulation of increasingly complex and synchronous communication systems, the updating of health protection systems, and above all, a continuous demand to deal with people's uncertainty and fear.

High levels of improvisation were necessary, in many cases with successful results, but as mentioned above, there is a certain sense of having failed in the essential foresight. According to human resources managers, the coherence and consistency of the values proclaimed in organisations had become evident in the worst moments when uncertainty was the main protagonist. This coherence and consistency are another of the proposals for the future of people management departments. The other significant consequence of the response to the crisis has been the substantial increase in the relevance of people departments on management boards. This centrality and prominence are possibly one of this crisis's most striking and relevant effects.

3.1.3. Connection

Once the first impact has been overcome and the procedures, whether planned or improvised, have been put in place, a period in which change management takes centre stage is described. From providing business continuity in the face of an anomaly, discourse moves on to creating value by facilitating change and even being agents of that change. In the previous stage, the keyword was uncertainty. In this phase, the terms are communication and care.

Participants suggested the need to develop more conscious and reflective forms of communication. The new grammar in communication processes and team management implied digital technologies. While the most remarkable physical distance between workers was imposed, maintaining a more intense and continuous presence was necessary. Many efforts to mitigate uncertainty and the consequent emotion of fear are mentioned. Motivation and workers' commitment should be maintained. It was essential to communicate and make the measures taken understood. It was like the "putty that binds the company together" during significant disintegration. Maintaining closeness in the distance involves much learning that has not yet been consolidated.

The difficulty of managing staff who can telework alongside people who cannot telework has also been highlighted. Transparency and authenticity defined the communication challenge duality of those who "work" and those who are privileged to "telework". The words fear, anguish, and illness became present in the work environment. Workers' health care has become a vital vector of work. Physical health, the traditional area of prevention, and mental health: containing fear, taking

into account suffering and aiming at the holistic well-being of all were essential in the work of the departments. One of the most immediate ways to care is to stay connected. It is necessary to be attentive to the new needs of workers and the fact that many no longer want to work the way they used to. Some organisations are doing rigorous analyses of new ways of working and analysing and highlighting the dangers of technology, making digital disconnection programmes necessary.

After the experiences generated by the crisis in which psychological well-being has been critical, reflections related to the more significant the authentic knowledge, the greater the trust appeared. People departments' classic "soft" functions of accompanying care and support, i.e. managing emotions and improving interpersonal relationships by enhancing authenticity, have acquired great relevance. According to the managers, teams can be built, and staff cohesion can be achieved if vulnerability is allowed and listened to. The mantra repeated in all analysed groups is "listening, listening, and listening". It has been necessary to create cooperative interdisciplinary teams and to foster closeness. The individual provides a perspective that is too weak and must pay attention to the community.

Halfway through care and communication, the narrative of the relationship with the CEO emerges in the discourses. The HR department is "the shoulder on which to cry". It also is the one to convey the concerns of change, the novelties of the digital transformation of work and the changes in culture. Caregivers' questions arose here: Who cares for the caregiver? Humanising the company, improving interpersonal relations by enhancing authenticity, and communicating with transparency are the critical trends in thinking about the future of the human resources function. This humanisation must be accompanied and supported by the possibilities opened up by massive data analysis; close listening is not incompatible with big data.

3.1.4. Reconnection

The last stage is the effort to humanise organisations by generating a cultural change through digitisation. Most organisations were already implementing plans to return to "normality" at the time of the focus groups. Offices were starting to fill up, and it was time to put into practice the lessons learned from all the experience accumulated. The discourse of the managers when they considered this moment was aspirational. Ideas were exchanged on how to operate from now on. Two protagonists in this period are hybrid working models and conscious and reflective leadership.

All informants favoured deepening and consolidating the learning gained regarding flexibility at work. A 3-2-2 model is the most frequently mentioned: three days of local employment, two days of remote work and two days of leisure. Communication and care should still be present. Maintaining digital communication systems and different types of communication according to the collectives and the channels used are factors of great concern. Hybrid work models are already here; managing them well and having more and better information for anticipation is necessary. It is essential to create new forms of work and labour relations with humanist confidence and the tool of digitalisation.

Attention to the management role and leadership style has occupied a large part of the discussion. In this crisis, the good managers have shone, and those who ignored people have collapsed. One manager said, "A leadership must have humanity, humility, and humour". Human resources departments must support and train managers on the path of conscious and reflective thinking about what is done and how it is done to create good teams. A good manager must have the skills to deal with people (interests, motivation, career, etc.) and groups (interaction, belonging, identity, etc.). All this by developing trust and collaboration. In this last aspect, transparent and authentic communication was again mentioned as a strategic line to combat people's and organisations' limiting beliefs.

This discourse is the one with the most specific component of idealised aspiration and is the one that marks the objective of the departments. Nevertheless, it was not all about high ambitions.

There was also a discourse of complaints about the obstacles in the rules and laws of labour regulation. Labour regulations are seen as a clear impediment to flexibility in the forms of work and even a hindrance to competitiveness with other countries with regulatory environments that are more adapted to this flexibility. The danger of very fearful corporate cultures, with little trust in their human capital that devolves in this reconnection towards direct control and supervision of the employee, also emerged in the discussions. Some informants declared they have undertaken "surgical operations" without noise and with the desire to renew their talent.

3.2. Talent and technology

The irruption of new digital technologies in people management has been another of the topics most present in the speeches of human resources managers. On the one hand, it is acknowledged that without digital tools, the response to the crisis in all its phases would have had to be different. Thanks to this crisis, many underused tools have been amortised with massive use, and everyone has learned to work in more digital environments. On the other hand, the power of information management that is beginning to be used through the descriptive and predictive analysis models of business analytics strengthens and determines the future of the human resources function. Human resources departments can finally have accurate data to make decisions with greater certainty and security.

Attracting, retaining, and making loyal, unique and relevant talent is becoming increasingly complex, and it is increasingly necessary to be an attractive organisation in many dimensions (values, purpose, image, technological updating, etc.). It is essential to update the organisation's systems, processes, reputation, etc. All participants agreed that talent recruitment is an increasingly less asymmetric binary process. The choice must be a two-way process, and organisations must face a continuous upgrading effort to "seduce talent". There is an evident war for technological talent, with the imbalances this can generate in the wage bands. It is compounded by increasingly dynamic and growing offshoring: the countries with the best flexibility and wage conditions are taking the most unique and necessary talent.

Two increasingly relevant pull factors for young talent are flexibility in working hours and workplace and a more cooperative and horizontal culture. Another attractive force for talent is the authenticity of human relations in the organisation and transparency in management systems. One informant summed up these four critical attraction factors: autonomy, good project, responsibility, and flexibility. In this aspect of talent, classic function concepts such as person/position matching continue to emerge, which is much simpler in larger companies. In organisations negatively impacted by the crisis and with an overshadowed future, there is a drain of talent. The critical moment in the business model makes them unattractive organisations with little capacity to retain people. Young talent inadequacy, both in their knowledge acquired in the education system and their attitudes, appeared in all groups. Unfortunately, the group discussion never went beyond stating this lack of adequacy without devoting time or a more profound analysis.

3.3. Trends in people management

Once this first approximation, determined by the vectors that articulated the discussions, had been made, an axial codification was carried out in which new categories were created to propose an unprecedented knowledge structure. As mentioned above, the pandemic crisis accelerated transformations already underway and forced by circumstances. Every change process has progressive and regressive forces; in the focus groups, the protagonism has been for action and transformation. HR managers and the very function of the departments have a clear vocation to be protagonists and agents of that change. This privileged position has become much more evident in this latest crisis. As a transversal department that must be aware of the entire organisation, it is ideal to be connected with everything and everyone. The two axes of transformation have emerged from the discussions that can be seen as the

Figure 1. Dimensions of HR transformation.
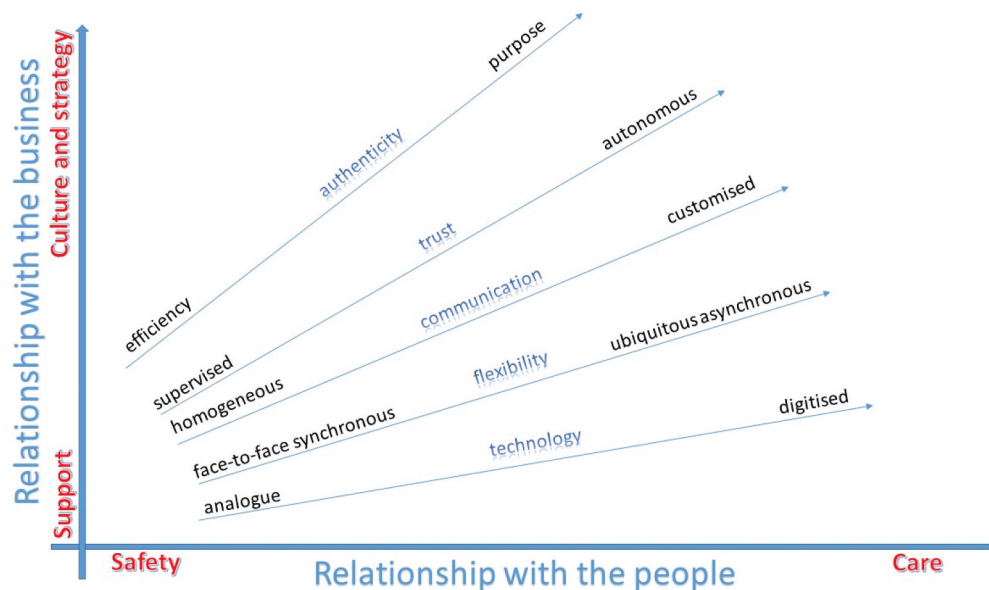
coordinates that delimit the transition of HR departments into the future. One axe is "support vs. culture and strategy", and the second is "safety vs. care" (see Figure 1).

3.3.1. From support to culture and strategy

This transformation vector has more to do with the department itself and its place in the structure of companies. It was already underway in many organisations, but this crisis, in many cases, has highlighted and accelerated it. Top management is increasingly aware of the human factor, and the department's projects are becoming increasingly essential and strategic. Also contributing to this is the growing capacity to convert the intangible into the tangible through increasingly powerful metrics and data analysis, with the ability to be a lever for future policies. Forward-looking strategies, organisational culture, adaptability, and sustainability are all areas in which HR managers are increasingly playing a leading role. The essential functions that emerged throughout the discourses are naturalising change and maintaining and protecting cultural coherence.

3.3.2. From safety to care

The pandemic crisis has meant radical changes in how we work so that the distance between workers is not merely an increase in metres or kilometres but a transformation in something as fundamental in organisations as internal communication. Staying connected at a distance, establishing new ways of listening, and dealing with emotions such as fear and anxiety, even though they are classic tasks, have increased the complexity of people management. Creating physically and psychologically safe environments is a priority for talent management. Human capital must be perceived in its integrity. Their safety no longer matters; their physical and emotional well-being is now essential. It is even more relevant in an environment where highly skilled and adaptable workers are most needed. Managers must do this work. They must be helped, trained and empowered with human resources practices and policies. Leadership is not a spontaneous and natural ability that some people have. It is a conscious and intentional capacity that must be nurtured and promoted.

The proposed scheme presents the different transformations that HR managers put forward in their speeches. We have identified the fundamental assumptions that give support and meaning to the development and evolution that organisations have ahead of them in managing their talent and, why not say, in their sustainability. Technology and communication are the facilitating tools in this process. Trust must be increased between the people who make up the organisation, whatever their status.

From there, technology, communication and trust, the challenges of greater authenticity in relationships and flexibility in working can be addressed.

4. Discussion

Organisations are challenged to create, enable, and encourage different work styles without neglecting the power of simple conversations, as they are the source of innovation and long-term collaboration. Every organisation's approach will need to be different to meet the unique needs of its people. There is a hybrid work paradox: Employees want more flexible remote work options but, at the same time, also want more in-person collaboration post-pandemic (Nadella, 2021). COVID-19 has involved, at best, a powerful combination of downsizing economic activity, reorienting processes and reorganising ways of operating. At worst, it has seen the closure of companies and organisations, leaving the provision of these services orphaned or in the hands of other firms. A new, uncertain, unfamiliar situation has generated all these consequences.

The pandemic experienced during 2020–2021 has had two consequences for HR departments: it has accelerated the transformation process in which they were immersed and has led to their immediate conversion into agents of change, either forced or assumed. In any case, HR departments have been unable to remain on the sidelines and have seen their role amplified (Collings et al., 2021). As one of the informants in this research said, "The ball was passed to us, and we played it". Przytuła et al. (2020) anticipate some of the main challenges for HR departments in the post-covid era. They highlight restructuring the workplace and work content, application of technology in the talent search, greater involvement of managers and generating a sense of belonging among team members. Strauss (1987) predicted that organisations needing high commitment would be the most common, albeit with two conditions: the development of technology and favourable market conditions to carry it out. These challenges have emerged with absolute clarity in the focus groups held.

Two pillars, favourable conditions and technology, have been substantiated in HR departments. They have focused on different directions of development: crisis management-oriented and based on the company's actual values; close and transparent communication in environments of high uncertainty and physical distance; support for managers; talent management with technological tools and digital data management; maintaining an attractive organisation in multiple dimensions to attract and retain talent; supporting coherence between the culture and strategy of the companies. As the managers' speeches show, this checklist has gone beyond a survival manual for critical situations. In the managers' discussions, the experience has always been that when solid values are in place, they have provided constant cohesion to the workforce and a reference to successfully pass through the different stages resulting from the impact of COVID-19. The result of solid values is often generous: an atmosphere and climate conducive to achieving strategic and operational objectives, even in critical times like these. However, there is evidence of practices that limit and do little to enhance these achievements.

The type of leadership exercised by managers is critical in this coherence effort. One of the key consequences of the pandemic is the need for companies to practice what they disclose or promote in their statements, communications, or daily actions. Communication has been one of the critical factors in the pandemic, and there has been no manager who has not expressed this fact. Adapting from daily face-to-face, synchronous, and localised contact to remote work has been abrupt. Companies have been forced to journey from one day to the next, and these experiences are still being learned. Distance is tempered by devices that facilitate the relationship but are not perfect substitutes for face-to-face human communication. There is a danger of artificial detachment between individuals and organisations: one-way communication and an impersonal, passive style (Stone et al., 2015). Mefi and Asoba (2021) call for the HR department to move towards a kind of HR 4.0 that would add virtualisation systems. Caligiuri et al. (2020) argue that distance management is one of the current challenges of the function and that this factor should not lead to an increase in psychological remoteness, advocating that the unforeseen benefits of a virtual workforce should be considered. Our informants are fully aligned with these

proposals, also pointing out the need to accommodate channels and messages according to the type of community targeted and considering digital devices' new possibilities.

The complex combination of transparency, care for people, distance and technological innovation must be taken on by leaders who are not afraid of this complexity and who also set goals guided by the objective of the common good (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021). The increasing digitalisation of society, and companies in particular, cannot leave people behind without offering them the possibility of adapting to the new needs that arise, especially in a field such as this, where changes are occurring at a dizzying pace.

Technology becomes an ally, although it can cool the invaluable bond common principles, behaviours, and habits create in groups. The implicit consequence of a shift in focus towards people is that their well-being and satisfaction in organisations are neglected or less considered. Such a lack of concern affects the future of companies and the promotion of people within them, strengthening the department's role as an advocate for humanity at work (Cleveland et al., 2015). In line with Peccei and Van De Voorde (2019), managers in this work explain that employee well-being is both an essential objective and a mechanism that affects their professional and personal development. Maintaining a climate conducive to personal development in organisations is relevant. Hybrid working models would balance physical and psychological distance without detriment but with risks in both areas. Such models cannot thrive if communication characterised by authenticity and transparency is sacrificed. Without both, the strength of relationships and the politics of trust, adherence to values, promotion and fair and just compensation will be undermined. Such authenticity and transparency are essential characteristics for attracting and retaining talented employees.

One of the aspects that concerned and preoccupied most HR managers is team leadership. As Yarberry and Sims (2021) pointed out, amid the pandemic, continuous learning, effective communication, and maintaining collaboration are essential in the virtual/remote workplace.

The weakest line, also a consequence of modifying communication channels and habits, is found in the relationship between managers and employees. It is no longer a question of delimiting and waiting for the connection between the two roles; leadership is not a mechanical attitude. It is born from awareness and is intentional (Hakim et al., 2022). The team leader is the most direct manager of people and has a double focus: as a manager of the group and the individuals who make it up. Awareness must be adaptive to values, rules and habits from the singularity of example as the most effective and powerful means of exercising the leadership role. Leaders should be eager to work with the best talents. Supporting these intentional and autonoetic leadership practices is one of the future core challenges of the people management function.

With digitisation, organisations have received various tools to recruit the best talent (Balsmeier & Woerter, 2019) and advance talent management, development, and loyalty (Panova et al., 2022). Data management guides decision-making (Grillo & Hackett, 2015; Parmar, 2020; Verma & Rana, 2021) at different stages of the employee lifecycle. Investment in digitisation could correlate with an improvement in human factor management. However, the digitisation of activities and processes is related to the company's size, as small and medium-sized companies lack the means of larger firms. In the focus groups, different rates of digitisation and transformation of work have become evident not only in size but also in terms of the geographical location of the companies. New work formats and models, such as nomadic workers or the gig economy, have emerged as a new source of complexity in attracting the most dynamic and digital talent. This new type of worker moves away from at least the first objectives set out by Stuart et al. (2021), for whom HR management can play an essential role in laying the foundations for a new social contract that provides job security and a good job.

The purely transactional activities of the department (e.g. administration of payroll, employee benefits or services) need to give way to strategic initiatives (e.g. talent management, mergers and acquisitions, diversity management and inclusion) (Obedgiu, 2017). HR managers participating in this research stated that if the focus is on the use of technology rather than on people, the strategic part is replaced by the management part. Nonetheless, it can be avoided if added value is generated. One of the informants defined this as the "naturalisation of change". The sphere of influence of HR is widening and becoming more decisive for business performance (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015).

Efficiency and constant improvement have become firmly established because they go hand in hand with the need to do the job well, based on the demands of the markets and the need to provide a better image for employers. Their operations must ensure a more dynamic, committed and autonomous management and provide a better service (DiRomualdo et al., 2018; Schalk et al., 2013). If the above premises are not met, finding and growing talent will be challenging, jeopardising the company's sustainability. HR managers will need to have a holistic view of the organisation. As their roles become more strategic, they must be able to define the necessary objectives, cooperate with employees to achieve the goals and understand the financial aspects of the company (Lipiec, 2001). They will have to effectively manage the impact of using artificial intelligence, data analytics and robotics. Technology drives change in companies and people (Sousa & Wilks, 2018). It triggers the transformation of the companies (Vilaplana & Stein, 2020), although people define, assume, and apply the principles, values, habits, and desirable behaviours. The anxiety generated by change and introducing new formulas and operations should not be detrimental to the relationships between people and departments, nor the fluidity of hierarchical relationships. From this perspective, the greater closeness and influence of the departments on top management has become evident.

4.1. Practical implications

Human Resources departments, after the attention and prominence acquired during the COVID crisis, must pay special attention to the work of managers. Their training and development care has always been essential (Linuesa-Langreo et al., 2018). An accurate assessment of good people policies in organisations is now critical. One informant noted how, during the pandemic, "good leaders have shone, normal ones have collapsed". Leaders who manage their teams well will be responsible for effective talent management, resulting in healthy turnover and sound management practices. The shortage of talent will be made up for through coherence, transparency, fairness, equal opportunities and the humility to recognise any mistakes that may be made.

It is up to HR departments to ensure good care and communication practices in their training and development programmes and be vigilant in perceiving the necessary changes to be implemented in people management. Management must harmonise elements that are, in principle, contradictory, such as close communication at a distance and human care of talent in technological environments. Ensuring an attractive working climate and working conditions is the other major challenge for HR departments. This challenge also forms part of the hard core of business strategy, bringing people policies to the strategic core of companies. In times of crisis and fierce talent competition, salary is not the only or the most essential attractor for knowledge workers. Knowledge workers also want coherence in values, sustainability, transparency, and flexibility (Muisyo & Qin, 2021). People departments must take advantage of the lessons learned from the crisis to become the managers of these "attractive organisational cultures" and attract or, as one of our informants put it, seduce talent (Bhagia, 2022).

4.2. Limitations and future research

This work describes overcoming one of the most global and disruptive crises organisations have faced. It also proposes an outline for future development due to the lessons learned from this process of overcoming the crisis. The selection of participants was careful and aimed to obtain certain representativeness of the types of organisations in Spain. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that other methodological approaches should be used to facilitate the contrast and comparison of data and greater representativeness. Our next step will be to carry out quantitative work with a battery of questions that, this time, will be answered by the employees of the companies that are collaborating with this work.

Considering the results of this qualitative approach, four scales will be created to try to measure the current situation in terms of (1) care and communication, (2) change and flexibility, (3) psychological safety in the organisation, (4) talent management, and, finally, (5) transformation in the HR department.

This work has focused on the perspective of HR managers. Even though it is an essential perspective given the study's objectives, it is necessary to investigate other views, such as those of CEOs, other managers, or workers themselves. This contrast of perspectives would undoubtedly enrich the contributions presented here. Therefore, in the third phase, we will again use a qualitative methodology and conduct in-depth interviews with CEOs and senior managers on the lessons learned in overcoming the crisis. Today's dynamic, not to say volatile, reality makes it necessary to create data collection systems that provide a more continuous picture of the processes. These are continuously fed back into the social reality and are difficult to predict.

5. Conclusions

The HR departments have tried to adapt to the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis. Their capacity for foresight or improvisation has been demonstrated. In general, there is great satisfaction with the work done, but also some pain at having had to learn in such a traumatic way. Human resources departments have been the protagonists of change processes based on technology and communication. The care for the employee's integral well-being has become one of the determining functions of human resources departments. Both levers, technology and communication, facilitate the transformation of organisations into more flexible structures with a culture of trust and greater transparency and coherence between principles, purposes and actual practices. There are tensions between these proposals for change and transformation and rigid, distrusting working methods. The leadership role of managers is critical, and HR departments must support this task to be performed consistently and thoughtfully. Talent and people management is a hardcore of an organisation's adaptation and sustainability policies, and people departments have increased their status and relevance within organisations.

HR departments have become key players in business decision-making. The top managers of companies have relied on information from the people area to adjust the measures implemented. Even due to a wound as deep as a global pandemic, HR has had to respond effectively to questions and issues from the organisation's top. Opposed to the regular feedback on the state of the business (e.g. profit and loss account, sales figures or operations), HR has emerged with data essential for the company's running, which has underlined its imperative need to be at the side of the business. After COVID-19, companies have been affected by disruptive changes. The future will need more flexible companies and more compromised employees. Two subjects must be highlighted. On one side, technology impacts daily lives. Digitalisation will allow more flexible ways of working. Flexible work models will substitute those rigid models based on human control. On the other side, workforce health needs to be taken care of. Employee well-being will be one of the priorities of companies. On top of that, companies need to adapt to cultural diversity and equalise their way of selecting, attracting, and retaining talent, avoiding bias and discrimination.

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Note

1. The Spanish government by Royal Decree-Law 10/2020 of 29 March 2020 established a series of essential activities that could not be interrupted during the lockdown.

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Appendices

Appendix 1
General and specific research objectives

General objective: To understand the incorporation and modification of HR function tasks caused by the impact of COVID-19 on organisations.

Specific objectives:

(1) To find out how HR departments react to the COVID-19 crisis.

    (1.1) To know what challenges and difficulties the crisis posed for the management of employees.

    (1.2) To learn what management tools they put in place.

    (1.3) To understand the department's role in dealing with the crisis.

(2) To detect what lessons have been learned from managing the crisis.

    (2.1) To realise what changes have occurred in HR departments because of COVID-19.

    (2.2) To explore if the meaning and image of the HR function within companies have changed.

    (2.3) To note if the tasks and purposes of HR departments have changed concerning employee welfare.

    (2.4) To discover what changes have occurred in talent management and leadership.

    (2.5) To describe if HR departments are focusing on being managers of uncertainty and safeguarding the care and well-being of employees.

(3) To explore what is the future of people management.

Appendix 2
Questions that were given to participants before doing the focus groups

COVID crisis - lessons learned

The pandemic has significantly impacted companies' interpersonal relations and workers' interests and emotions. What role has the HR department played in the COVID crisis? What new demands have been made on the department?

HR management and its role vis-à-vis the CEO

Companies increasingly have better data management tools, workers with excellent autonomy capabilities and better-prepared managers. Does HR participate in the company's strategic decision-making?

Talent and people

In an environment with high unemployment rates, generational imbalances in the workforce and a continuous and accelerated change in the skill requirements of workers, what are the difficulties in finding talent? How difficult is finding talent, and what expectations does the new talent bring?

Digital challenges

Interaction between human intelligence and devices with artificial intelligence capabilities is a fact of life. Moreover, devices that allow us to break temporal and spatial boundaries increasingly mediate interpersonal contact and climate. About technology, how is it changing/influencing HR management?

New working models

The breakdown of the separation between work, family, leisure and work spheres or the new formulas of labour relations (gig-economy platforms) creates a new context in which everything can be done everywhere. How are workers engaged in this new context?

Appendix 3
Examples of participants' quotes

Example 1

Code: Foresight and prevention

Representative quote: "And this is helping us a lot in identifying data, not only descriptive data from the past but really predictive data. So, we are starting to use mathematical models for staff prediction. But also, not only us, at the subsidiary level, but also at the corporate level, to make big decisions" (Participant 4, Group 1).

Example 2

Code: *Preventive programmes*

Representative quote: *"One of our star programmes, which concerns us greatly, is youth. We need to be able to reduce the youth unemployment figures we have in Spain because it is a concern that affects us all. Our part of what we do is to help them with the development of their employability, of their skills, and of their knowledge"* (Participant 5, Group 2).

Example 3

Code: *Adaptation to change*

Representative quote: "We have taken the opportunity to analyse and implement telework seriously, haven't we? Moreover, we have played an important role in that. Other projects have had to go because they have been stopped—for example, the whole issue of the new ways of using the workspace. We were working on a project of collaborative spaces, but this was stopped. Conferences and corporate culture, well, it has slowed down. Projects have been slowed; others have been accelerated" (Participant 1, Group 3).

Example 4

Code: *Care and support of managers*

Representative quote: "That is to say, this is the point where we have given much more emphasis to self-management, also linked to the employee experience, to empowerment, right? So, it means putting this technology at the service of the manager and the employee with an important component of self-management. So they have access to everything they need for short-term and long-term management of the employees, right?" (Participant 2, Group 1).

Example 5

Code: *Communication processes*

Representative quote: "We have worked hard to accelerate and build different alternatives to understand how people were doing. On the one hand, through many press releases, many surveys, let us say, many communication impacts" (Participant 2, Group 3).

Example 6

Code: *Openness*

Representative quote: "Then we have worked a lot on the relationship, the 'we', the relationship with the company. We have generated spaces so that there are interactions, but they are controlled. That is to say, few and of quality because otherwise, we fall into digital fatigue. Moreover, we have to use it in a non-invasive way, so it has allowed us to create spaces of 'us', of the common DNA, of those shared values, of purpose" (Participant 1, Group 2).

Example 7

Code: *Authenticity*

Representative quote: "But it is clear to me that if someone powerful joins the company, it is clear to me that one day they will leave, and I have to work on my company to make it attractive so that when they leave, another one comes along who is just as good or better. Moreover, that is also a cultural issue that we have to understand so that talent wants to come to companies because we have to open the door to say, 'Hey, the day you leave, leave 2 euros for coffee for the rest of us, but we will open the door to say hey, congratulations, I hope you do very well'. Because I will be confident that someone else will walk through the other door" (Participant 3, Group 3).

Example 8

Code: *Flexible work design*

Representative quote: "In the end, we are all implementing flexibility formulas, but in the end, each one according to their culture, according to their needs, there has not been a one size fits all, so each one is trying to see how all this fits within their culture, and it has been seen that culture is important, not only because it is the glue that binds all our teams together, but also because, this dispersion that we are going to start having now in terms of employees" (Participant 3, Group 1).