

# Well-being and Performance of Work Force with Disability in Hospitality Sector during COVID: A Case of Internal Marketing

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of how HRM systems in the hospitality sector can effectively manage and support workers with disabilities during the COVID-19 crisis. By exploring the role of flexible HRM practices, the study provides insights into fostering well-being and performance in this disadvantaged workforce. The findings can inform the development of policies and practices that enhance the well-being and performance of workers with disabilities in the post-COVID-19 era. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the hospitality sector, posing challenges for businesses and threatening the well-being of workers. Workers with disabilities are particularly vulnerable during this crisis, facing stigmatization and difficulties adapting to sudden changes. Organizations need to implement flexible policies and practices to support this workforce segment. However, there is a lack of research exploring the nexus between flexible HRM systems and the well-being and performance of workers with disabilities in the hospitality sector. This study aims to address this gap and examine the impact of flexible HRM practices on workers with disabilities during the COVID-19 crisis. The study adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on the hospitality sector. Primary data is collected through interviews and observations to explore how HRM systems in the sector respond to the COVID-19 crisis and support workers with disabilities. The study considers the three levels of analysis in HRM systems: employee skills, employee behaviors, and flexibility in HR practices. The study fills several gaps in the existing literature. Firstly, it examines how flexible HRM systems foster the well-being and performance of workers with disabilities in the hospitality sector. Secondly, it considers the three levels of analysis in conceptualizing and implementing HRM practices. Thirdly, it investigates the response of HRM systems to the early and pandemic stages of the COVID-19 crisis. The findings of this study can guide occupational rehabilitation agencies, HRM professionals, and state-based organizations in supporting the well-being and performance of workers with disabilities.

## KEYWORDS

HRM, Wellbeing and Performance, COVID-19, Hospitality S

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Among all sectors, the hospitality sector is the most vulnerable to crises caused by unpredicted catastrophe in particular epidemics, natural disasters and terrorist activities (Chan and Lam, 2013; Chen, 2011). COVID-19 with the latter being is the most terrible among previous for this sector, by far and has been anticipated to cost around USD 22 billion globally (Wallis, 2020). CEO of the World Travel and Tourism Council declared: “50 million jobs globally are at risk”, occupancy rates has fell to bottom line as decreased to 65% or more around the world with comparison to 2019. There is substantial decline as 6 to 9% in terms of international tourist arrivals in 2020, resulted in projected losses of USD 40 billion to USD 60 billion in global visitors spending (World Tourism Organization, 2020).

Researchers have observed a number of challenges associated with disable workers as this disadvantageous group is at high risk of facing poor outcomes during the pandemic. They often find themselves as stigmatized part of society (Elassar, 2020) and struggle to adjust in circumstances of sudden change and coping with unusual economic and employment shocks (Livneh H, Chan F, 2019). Experts assert that well-being and job

performance of disable workforce is at stake during the Covid-19 crisis and thus organizations need to formulate special and flexible policies and practices to support this segment of workforce (Bullock, 2019; Holt-Lunstad, Robles, & Sbarra, 2017). This fact is also supported by Organizational Support Theory which asserts that favorable environment and supportive organizational practices lead to high degree of Perceived Organizational Support. This factor increases the performance of workers and helps to improve their well being as well (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison & Sowa, 1986).

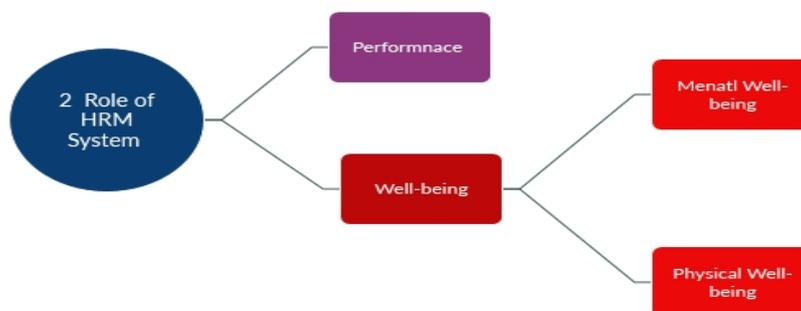
Bal & De Lange (2015) stated in their model of path to Flexible Human Resource Management, “a set of opportunities organizations provide to employees where they can choose working conditions at times of economic transition, globally restructuring, and unpredicted circumstances”. Prior studies assert sudden changing in the context of business development demands firms to anticipate and design flexible practices to experience maximum level of well-being and performance (Kooij, & Akkermans, 2018). However research has remained slightly quiet regarding the nexuses between flexible HRM system and behavioral and attitudinal outcome such as well being and performance of work force with disabilities in hospitality sector in particular (Cavanagh et al., 2017; Yang & Konrad, 2018). These systems are theorized, conceptualized and implemented at three levels including: employee skills, employee behaviors and flexibility in HR practices (Wright and Snell, 1998). Literature is relatively silent about configuration and alignment among three components of flexible HRM system (Lepak et al., 2004; Úbeda-García et al., 2016). This gap in literature can be filled by; a well-timed research examining how this sector’s individuals perceive flexibility in HR practices. Moreover during this pandemic the focus of studies by researchers, health policy makers and psychologists is towards health issues, high risk for infection, high mortality rates, employment concerns for workers with disabilities (Evans, 2020; Department of Public Health California, 2020). But there is a need of the hour to conduct studies that can exhibit how HRM systems with flexibility in nature leave impact on the wellbeing and performance of disable employees in similar contexts as these workers represent one of the largest disadvantageous communities.

Our study can fill at least three gaps emerging in the body of knowledge. The foremost and primary contribution of this study is to cover up the void in prior studies by exploring when and how flexible HRM system foster the well being and performance of workforce with different disabilities and stationing this association in hospitality sector. Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) by well being we refer to both subjective wellbeing (life satisfaction) and psychological wellbeing (job satisfaction). Second, this research attempts to fill the gap in literature by considering three levels of analysis in conceptualizing, implementing and perceiving the HR flexible practices: employee skills, employee behaviors and flexibility in HR practices (Sundar & Brucker, 2019). Third, this research is unique as it tries to examine how the HRM systems of hospitality sector reacted to the preliminary (early February) and pandemic (early April) stages of the COVID-19 by conducting continuing study in the during crisis stage. Even in the days of post COVID-19 the findings of our study can present a roadmap for occupational rehabilitation agencies, HRM professionals, state- based rehabilitation and health organizations to consider more about disable workers well being and performance.

The central objective of this study is to explore the human resource management systems that hospitality sector are practicing to manage their disable workforce during COVID-19 crisis. Secondly the purpose of this study is to explore the role of flexible HRM practices to maintain the well being and performance of workforce with disabilities.

Figure 1: Mind Map for the objective of study

Source: NVIVO (Pro 11)



From this overarching aim, our two research questions are: What HRM practices hospitality sector has adopted during Covid-19? How these practices leave impact on well-being and performance of disabled workforce?

The first section of the paper presents a theoretical literature of HRM system, flexible HR practices and analysis of three components of FHRM system, impact of COVID-19, workforce with disability, well being and performance and their link with HRM. The second section demonstrates the methodology used for data collection, data analysis and ethical consideration. The third section explains the results of thematic analysis and NVIVO (Pro 11) while fourth section comprises the findings of the research and its implications. The last section delineates the limitation of the study and guidelines for future researchers.

### *HRM Systems with Flexible Practices and COVID-19*

The examination of the human resource management performance relationship has transferred from individual HR practices towards HR systems. The HRM system perspective regarded as the influence of both HR content and HR process on end results in literature (Karatepe, 2013). Sanchez (1995) explained flexibility in organizational context as, the capability to react to various demands and requirements emerged from rapidly changing environment out of any cause. In addition, it entails firm's vibrant abilities to behave in proactive way, or to adapt diverse systems in unpredicted patterns of business. Its history goes back into the late 1965s, where the Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety stands on the roots of Viable System Model. This law states "*a controller has requisite variety that is, has the capacity to maintain the outcomes of a situation within a target set of desirable states - if and only if it has the capacity to produce responses to all those disturbances and catastrophes that are likely to take the outcomes out of the target set*" (Ashby, W.R, 1964, p. 769).

Two main domains of FHRM are discussed in literature (1) flexibility in coordination (denotes a firm's capacity to regulate the overall workforce) 2 flexibility in functional/resource (denotes the versatility of available workforce to execute a broad range of responsibilities (Cordery, Mueller, & Parker, 1994). HR flexibility is an inner attribute of an organization explained in prior work by three conceptual components: employee skills (flexibility in how employees with various abilities are redeployed hastily), employee behavior: (flexibility in the degree to which workers holds a broad repertoire of attitudes and behaviors that can be modified to condition based specific requirements). Third component is flexibility of HR practices refers to (firm's HRM practices that can be designed and implemented over numerous circumstances or across a variety of projects, tasks, or units. Additionally it refers to the speed with which these variations and applications can be in practice (Bhattacharya et al, 2005, p. 24). FHRM influences performance, by the provision of firm's structures that encourages workers to take participation and allows them to enhance how their well-being (Sekhar et al., 2015; Sekhar et al., 2016). The job of HRM has become more critical to evaluate up to what extent the systems at these levels are capable and aligned of coping with uncertain working conditions than ever during pandemic (Salanova and Schaufeli, 2008)

### *Well-being and Performance of Workforce with Disabilities*

In literature the term disability is explained as "significant impairment within an individual that limits his or her ability to perform major life activities on account of a physical, mental or intellectual health problem" (Olkin et al., 2006). Approximately 25%, or over a billion people in the world, are facing several forms of disabilities (World Health Organization, 2017). Persons having disabilities still face inequalities in all aspects of life more specifically in working setups. On the other hand over decades the construct of well-being has received immense importance from researchers and practitioners and policy makers. Wellbeing in prior work is measured as welfare, contentment, mental strength, material existence; societal life, liveliness, self-actualization, or quality of life one spends (Andrews and Withey, 1976; Campbell, 1981; Diener, 1986; Larson, 1975; Keyes et al., 2002). Although literature comprises many dimensions of well-being yet subjective and psychological wellbeing are considered to be more comprehensive empirically and theoretically among other aspects of this construct. By subjective wellbeing we referred to the hedonic domain of wellbeing as it is a combination of one's cognitive and affective (positively or negatively) predispositions towards life (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Psychological comprehended the eudaimonic aspect of wellbeing; it forecasts variation in employee performance and fulfillment of finding work meanings (Van De Voorde et al., 2013). While performance relates to the effectiveness of workers they exhibit in performing out activities that contribute to meet the organizational goals. Prior studies established a positive association between HRM and wellbeing and performance where as literature of HRM system configuration has advocated that the effects of HRM on worker's wellbeing and performance depend on the alignment of the HRM system (Kooij et al., 2013; Korff et al., 2017).

### **THEORETICAL SUPPORT**

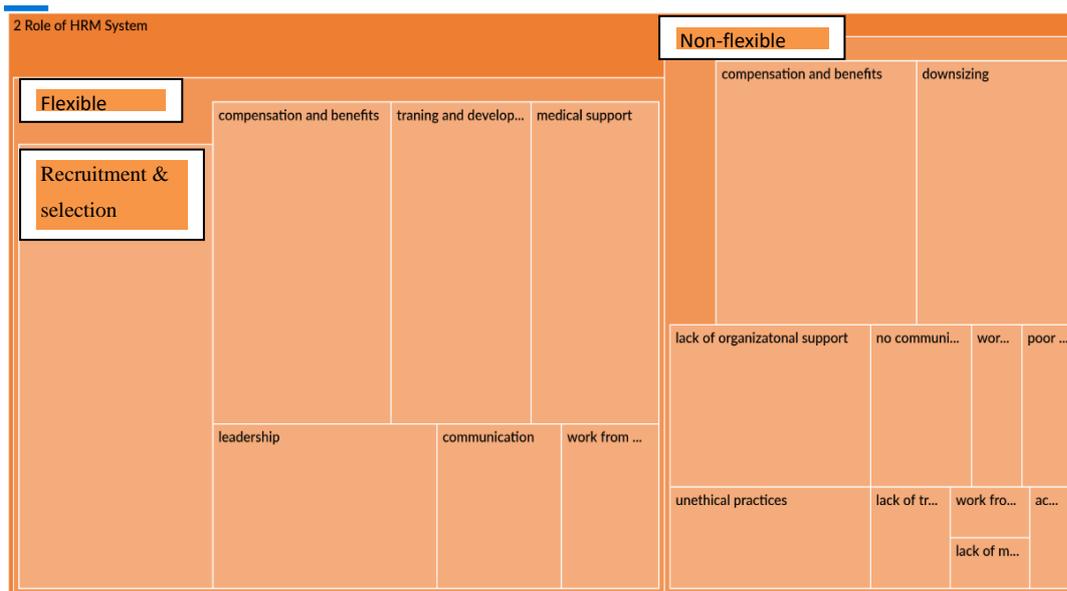
Prior studies have established that Organizational Support Theory develops "a sense of Perceived Organizational Support in workers where they exhibit their beliefs with reference to the extent to which the

organization values their contributions and care about their well-being” (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986, p.501). Literature on Organizational Support Theory advocates those organizations that treat their workers fairly and on equity basis convey a sense of concern for the well-being of employees (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). For instance, prior research has confirmed that workers with high degree of Perceived Organizational Support experience stress at minimum at work and are more inclined to return to work sooner after crisis (Shaw et al., 2013). It will be an easy measurement for employees to evaluate their valuation by the company and may help to build a positive perception that organizations value them and their contribution instead of disdaining them to get rid of them (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison & Sowa, 1986). In addition Organizational Support Theory is positively relates to performance and well being (Kurtessis et al., 2015; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Organizational support develops a sense of worthiness and meaningful human capital in disable employees as they transform their perception of dysfunctional and they see themselves as compatible and resilient workers for any setup (Domínguez, Hernandez-Arriaga, & Paul, 2020; Goodman, 2015). Thus, constructive support and flexible HR systems and practices works as antecedents, where workers are more contented with their roles, enjoy good levels of mental well being this enhancers a sense to feel more close relationship with the organization, consequently are more obliged to take organizational goals as their own and are in a state to perform at best in their abilities (Way and Johnson 2005; Sun, Aryee and Law 2007).

**RESULTS:**

The results of our data identified a number of human resource practices that hotels have adopted during pandemic. Practices that certainly leave impact on well-being and performance of employees positively are labeled as flexible HRM practices, whereas practices with negative effects are labeled as non-flexible.

Figure 2: Hierarchy chats of HRM practices flexible vs. non-flexible  
Source NVIVO (Pro 11)



**RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION:**

All over the sector there were no new hiring’s for that period. Covid-19 catastrophe has sent the hospitality sector, significantly the industry of hotel into an extraordinary recession (HNN, 2020). According to the data collected, not a single hotel taking part in this study hired any worker. One of our respondents shared: *“This sector is no doubt having much potential to make progress but at the same time see how badly this industry fall down. The complete sector went for block, even the rooms are being used to stay the COVID patients by Government. So you can imagine how badly we effected and our business. They are not hiring any trainee and internee so what about the young generation in such crisis they discussed with me they are under immense stress”*

**Controlled Compensation and Benefit:**

In terms of compensation and benefit practices, those hotels encounter high levels of well-being and performance of employees who adopted new flexible benefits plans that worked above and beyond to old practices. These new practices cover the domains of HR activities including cutoffs, paid leaves, organizational support, medical coverage and accommodation plans. Data revealed 40% hotels had not announced any pay cuts or leave without salary for that period. After two months these hotels called the employees back to work in shifts and paid them salaries according to reduced working days. 45% hotels permitted the out station disable employees to stay within hotel property during COVID-19 for the sake of their mental and physical well-being. All hotels provided the necessary medical support to their employees including COVID test. 35% hotels provided laptops and printer to employees who offered work from home. Data stated that 25% hotel management announced the bonuses to all employees during Covid. These flexibilities with regard to compensation and benefit domain resulted positively as one of the respondent stated:

“We are very thankful to our hotel’s owner we all were at paid leave during that period. This would help us to manage the bread and butter. We know even most of the hotels didn’t pay a single penny during leaves. But I feel proud to say our hotel didn’t go for cut offs during two months leaves for all staff”

On the whole, 4 participants delineated having episodes of strong mental anxiety, disturbance, disappointment, anger, grief, or signs of depression because of cut offs and late salaries. Data disclosed 45% hotels announced leaves without salary for two months for the whole staff. Hotels who paid salaries after due date were 35%. In hotels where no compensation is provided in respect of accommodation, affected badly the performance of workforce with disabilities. One out station respondent noted: “I am not from Lahore so I have to come only for 2 days, my hostel was closed I was worried where to stay. Most of the time I just thought about this, and didn’t perform well at job”

Figure 3: Coding Matrix of Compensation & Benefit  
Source NVIVO (Pro 11)

1	I : cutoffs	J : delayed salary	K : leave without salary	L : no reward	M : paid leaves	N : reduced annual leave
2	3	2	1	1	0	1
3	2	0	1	0	1	0
4	3	0	0	0	2	0
5	2	0	0	0	0	0
6	0	0	0	0	1	0
7	1	0	0	0	1	0
8	2	0	1	0	0	0
9	2	0	0	0	0	0
10	1	0	0	0	1	0

**Learning and Development:**

According to data 80% hotels reported increase number of training session for the wellbeing and performance of employees during pandemic. Most of the trainings were conducted online and the employees appreciated the content of trainings. The employees of the hotels that attained training sessions reported low episodes of feeling fearful. New training topics designed by managemnet included COVID-19 safety guidelines, coping with poor well-being and stress, and lifestyle-based training. One interviewee noted: “Of course we gained a lot from those trainings. They trained the staff how to behave with guest during this crisis, how to arrange sitting of guests, how to serve them in a way to minimize the risk of getting virus at both ends. They paste the SOPs everywhere within hotel property. They send email us on weekly basis and send messages how to take precautions. They have conducted training session on monthly basis for our well being”

**Termination Lay-offs: (safety and security)**

There are 65% hotels that followed the termination layoff practices. Employees were notified about these terminations through emails or letters. Hotels involved in this practice did not follow any particular methodological procedure or approach to layoffs. They fired employees based on the hotels’ budgets. One respondent stated: “As far as about Hashoo group. They fired more than 2700 employees all over Pakistan and this number is on record. But off record they fire more than 2700 employees because of this pandemic. They restructured a lot of practices during these months”. We mentioned the name of group by the consent of interviewee.

## DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS:

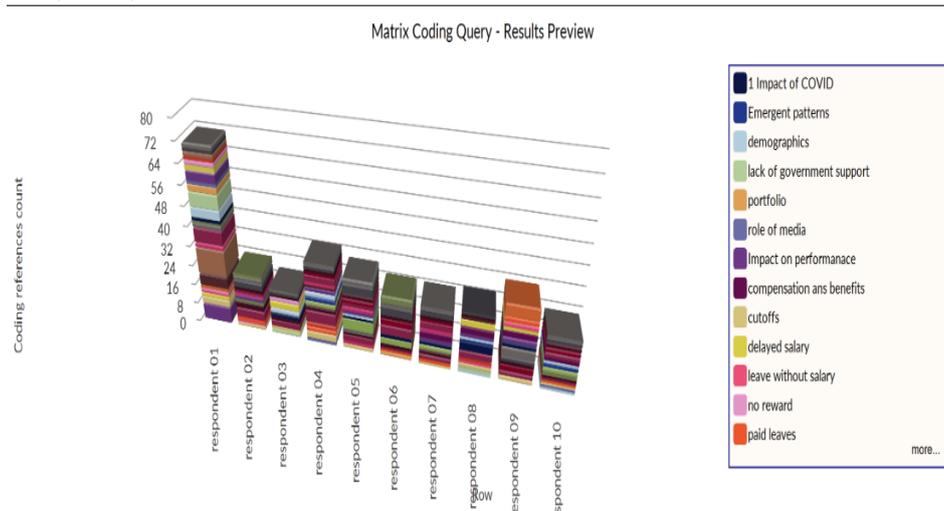
The core purpose of this research was to comprehend the human resource management practices applied by hotels to cope their employee's during the COVID-19 and how these practices maintained the higher level of well-being and performance. It was beneficial for both hotels and their employees when HRM practices expanded beyond traditional limits of HRM domains at the work place and engaged the employees at personal level to increase performance. Second, our work discloses that hotels have got benefited from flexible HRM practices. Flexibility in HRM practices means that to which extent they are adapted in different circumstances and how promptly the practices are "resynthesized, reconfigured and redeployed" (Wright and Snell, 1998). 65% hotels adapted the quickly designed new HRM practices within duration of one week. Workers got trainings in multiple roles. The employees of these hotels noticeably feel less fear of job loss although they faced the workload as the management regulate the human capital with full of their skills and abilities. One respondent reacted positively towards the flexible practices as: *"They arranged the staff very well and offered WFH according to skills and potential of employees. I am an accountant but I did the roles of content writer those days too"*. HRM flexibility enables the hotels to steer the employees by decreasing the anxiety and frustration due to uncertainty. Our study hence contributes to the body of knowledge by exploring the alignment among three components of flexible HRM systems that allowed the application of the same HRM practices across roles and functions. Moreover learning and development responded well for most of the hotels. Learning and development not only increased the well-being of the employees but also had a motivational impact during the pandemic to execute their job tasks well. Our study substantiated that FHRM practices create sustainable market value for organizations working in ambiguous environments (Conway et al., 2016).

Emergent themes of thematic analysis and provisional coding of NVIVO of our study confirmed that HR activities labeled as flexible develop high level of eudaimonic and hedonic aspect of well-being and performance for instance: controlled compensation and benefit, flexible compensation plan for accommodation, strategic planning, constant communication, constructive relationship with management, reliable leadership, training sessions, mentoring to reduce stress, adequate plan for work from home, support in respect to domestic life and organizational support. One of the respondents shared his views *"We know our management and owners never experienced such a crisis and losses. But we are appreciating their efforts. You know management generate messages to us for asking about our health. We were really happy to see messages and feel sympathy for them. We admired them they are with us at times of toughness. Management tries to resolve the issues at every level. But we now our hotel is suffering from worst period so we are with this hotel management what may circumstances come"* This study contributes in literature with the notion of HRM system (more specifically compensation and benefit, learning and development and organizational support) enhances behavioral outcomes of workers (Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2019). Furthermore Study disclosed that where the management was in constant communication with workers, in those hotels employees showed less symptoms of psychotically stress. Yet the communication holds the content of bad news still this consistency provided clarity to employees and permitted them to take further steps for life and work. The participants of 75% asserted that their management was very consistent and transparent in ways of communication that enables them safer psychologically. Another vital factor to decrease the poor well being and enhance the performance among employees was healthy and constructive relationship with management. Those relationships enhance their positive energy to perform with full abilities (Ramdhony, 2019). Findings of our research contribute in the literature of organizational support theory that describes employees develop a general perception concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011; Shore & Shore, 1995). Results of this research plays a vital role for the management of hospitality sector in days of uncertainty and assist them how to maintain well-being and performance of disable workforce in particular or others in general.

Contrary this study revealed non flexible HR activities including lack of organizational and medical support, poor accommodation plans, downsizing, occupational hazards, less work or no work, difficult relationship, lack of communication and leadership considered as consequences of poor subjective and psychological well-being along with low degree of performance. One of the respondents noted about non-flexible practices *"apart from no bonuses and salary cut offs, management didn't contact with us. They were not ready to listen our issues our difficulties. They treated us badly. I faced poor health mentally. I have a large family to bring. They should do something for us"*. Current study exposes the significance of flexible HRM systems that can be adapted according to changing business requirements (Grandey, 2003). One unique findings of our research comprises is, hotels with un-ethical HR practices foster the poor hedonic aspect of well being with nepotism, frequent inter-department transfers, workloads and job rotation on the basis of favoritism. The workers who were not fired were compelled to work around the clock. Fear of job loss can cause strong stress and affects the psychological well-being poorly. This was the preliminary explanation by workforce select to work despite of requesting job rationalization. Employees reported being physically and mentally exhausted.

Figure 4: Matrix Coding Query for Potential Nodes

Source NVIVO (Pro 11)



### FURTHER GUIDELINES FOR RESEARCHERS

The major limitation of this study is, our research is conducted in a cross sectional design in context to time dimension paradigm. Consequently, the present results are uncertain until replicated in studies with longitudinal designs. Another limitation is the methodology we opted for our study is qualitative. The generalizability of results can be improved by implementing empirical or mix methodology approach. Moreover the data gathered to draw results comprises 11 hotels in this study, whereas in future studies the theoretical insights gained from findings can be modified to large number of population. The study tries to explore the configuration among three components of FHRM systems (employee skills, employee behavior and flexibility in HR practices) with respect to wellbeing and performance. These components must be further investigated under two domains (flexibility in coordination and flexibility in functional/resource) of FHRM systems with other constructs (Akingbola, 2013).

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