

REVIEW ARTICLE

Human resource management in crisis and the right to decent work: An analysis from the perspective of ethics and organizational responsibility

Gestión humana en crisis y derecho al trabajo digno: Un análisis desde la ética y la responsabilidad organizacional

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Abstract This article examines the transformative role of human resources management in crisis contexts, highlighting its shift from a logic of entrepreneurship and growth to one centered on resilience, care, and organizational sustainability. Through a systematic review of scientific literature published between 2020 and 2024 in databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and EBSCO, emerging human resource practices linked to adaptive leadership, occupational health, organizational resilience, and emotional support are examined. The research shows that, in the face of highly uncertain scenarios — such as pandemics, social conflicts, or economic disasters — the traditional Functions of HR departments are insufficient, requiring a reconfiguration toward more flexible, humanized, and collaborative models. The results reveal a paradigm shift in how organizational success is understood, prioritizing collective well-being, psychological safety, and internal cohesion over traditional productivity indicators. Effective strategies are also identified, such as strengthening internal support networks, empathetic leadership, implementing mental health protocols, and activating external alliances with a solidarity approach. The discussion argues that human resources play a crucial role as a mediator between external pressures and internal stability, thereby becoming a key driver of organizational resilience. It is concluded that, in crisis contexts, resisting implies more than just surviving: it means rebuilding the organization based on an ethic of care, inclusion, and collective co-responsibility.

Keywords human resources, organizational resilience, empathetic leadership, sustainability.

Resumen Este artículo explora el papel transformador de la gestión humana en contextos de crisis, destacando su tránsito desde una lógica de emprendimiento y crecimiento hacia una centrada en la resistencia, el cuidado y la sostenibilidad organizacional. A través de una revisión sistemática de literatura científica publicada entre 2020 y 2024 en bases de datos como Scopus, Web of Science y EBSCO, se examinan prácticas emergentes en recursos humanos vinculadas al liderazgo adaptativo, la salud ocupacional, la resiliencia organizacional y la contención emocional. La investigación evidencia que, frente a escenarios de alta incertidumbre —como pandemias, conflictos sociales o desastres económicos—, las funciones tradicionales de los departamentos de RRHH resultan insuficientes, exigiendo una reconfiguración hacia modelos más flexibles, humanizados y colaborativos. Los resultados revelan un cambio de paradigma en la forma de entender el éxito organizacional, privilegiando el bienestar colectivo, la seguridad psicológica y la cohesión interna sobre los indicadores clásicos de productividad. Asimismo, se identifican estrategias efectivas como el fortalecimiento de redes internas de apoyo, el liderazgo empático, la implementación de protocolos de salud mental y la activación de alianzas externas con enfoque solidario. En la discusión se argumenta que la gestión humana adquiere un rol clave como mediadora entre las presiones externas y la estabilidad interna, convirtiéndose en un motor de resiliencia organizacional. En contextos de crisis, resistir implica más que sobrevivir: es reconstruir la organización desde una ética del cuidado, la inclusión y la corresponsabilidad colectiva.

Palabras clave gestión humana, resiliencia organizacional, liderazgo empático, sostenibilidad.

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Introduction

Human talent management has undergone significant evolution in recent decades, particularly under the influence of paradigms centered on entrepreneurship, innovation, digitalization, and efficiency. These models have promoted a vision of human capital as a driver of growth and competitiveness, aligning its development with the organization's strategic objectives in contexts of relative stability (Ulrich et al., 2015). However, this orientation has been severely challenged by the multidimensional impact of recent global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, systemic economic crises, geopolitical conflicts, and the advancement of climate change. These situations not only destabilize production systems but also reconfigure organizational priorities and, especially, the dynamics of human resource management (Iturralde-Pulla et al., 2020; van der Walt et al., 2023).

In this new scenario, human resources management faces an existential challenge: how to sustain connections, values, and organizational continuity amid disruption? The pandemic has exposed the limitations of the traditional approach, while accelerating a transition toward more humane, supportive, and resilient models. Thus, new questions are emerging that require urgent attention: What does it mean to lead in times of crisis? How is organizational success redefined when the environment is hostile and uncertain? What is the role of human resources management in preserving the emotional, symbolic, and ethical fabric of the organization?

Far from being a marginal phenomenon, the need to reorganize human resources strategies based on criteria of emotional sustainability, psychosocial support, and structural adaptability has become an ethical and strategic imperative (Gittell et al., 2010). Various studies have shown that the organizations that have managed to resist the effects of crises most effectively have been those that knew how to prioritize the physical and mental health of their employees, implement empathetic leadership, foster internal support networks, and build organizational cultures with a high degree of cohesion and trust (Kuntz, 2021; Taris et al., 2022).

This paper is based on the premise that, to be effective in crisis contexts, human resource management must abandon the one-dimensional logic of productivity and continuous growth and adopt a holistic approach focused on organizational resilience. Here, "resilience" is understood not only as survival or harm reduction, but as the active capacity for adaptation, transformation, learning, and recovery in the face of changing and challenging environments (Duchek, 2020). It also implies an ethical dimension: the commitment of organizations to the dignity of work, collective well-being, and

organizational justice.

In this sense, we propose a critical analysis of the conceptual and practical transition in human resource management "from entrepreneurship to resistance," that is, from the drive for expansion and competitiveness to a model centered on people care, social cohesion, and organizational sustainability. This transition does not imply abandoning innovation or development, but rather rethinking them from more inclusive, sensitive, and adaptive perspectives.

From a methodological perspective, this article is based on a systematic review of scientific literature indexed between 2020 and 2024, focusing on empirical and theoretical studies that address the relationship between human resources management and organizational crises. The overall objective is to identify the key elements that define effective human resources management in disruptive scenarios and propose a conceptual framework to guide the actions of leaders and human resources managers in complex contexts.

At a structural level, the article is organized into five sections. The first corresponds to the current introduction, which justifies the relevance of the topic and outlines the study's approach. The second section outlines the methodology employed, detailing the criteria used for source selection and analysis. The third section presents the results, organized into four key dimensions: paradigm shift, emotional management, social innovation, and redefining success. The fourth section discusses the findings in light of the theoretical frameworks and case studies reviewed. Finally, the fifth section presents conclusions and recommendations for human resource management focused on resilience and sustainability.

In short, this work aims to contribute to the academic and practical debate on the future of work in times of crisis, highlighting the importance of human management that, far from focusing solely on economic indicators, places life, relationships, and the organizational community at the center.

Addressing human resource management in crisis contexts requires a multidisciplinary approach that articulates theoretical perspectives to capture the complexity of organizational processes in highly uncertain scenarios. This section reviews the main conceptual frameworks that support the analysis of transformations in human resource practices, highlighting those that allow us to understand the transition from entrepreneurial-oriented models to forms of organizational, emotional, and ethical resilience.

Traditionally, human talent management has been viewed as a set of processes designed to recruit, develop, retain, and

optimize employee performance in alignment with the organization's strategic objectives (Armstrong & Taylor, 2023). Under the strategic management paradigm, this function assumed an instrumental role, aligned with indicators of productivity, efficiency, and economic return, with a strong emphasis on assessing competencies and individual performance (Boxall & Purcell, 2021).

However, recent studies have begun to question this technocratic logic, pointing out that in times of crisis, the value of human capital is redefined based on its ability to sustain relationships, generate internal cohesion, and contribute to organizational resilience (Kaufman, 2020). In this context, human capital management expands beyond work administration, integrating dimensions such as emotional well-being, protecting psychosocial health, and building trust in times of adversity.

Organizational resilience is defined as an organization's ability to anticipate, prepare for, respond to, and adapt to changing conditions and disruptive events, maintaining its core operations and generating opportunities for learning and transformation (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). This approach recognizes that organizations must not only withstand the impact of crises but also rebuild on new foundations that foster their long-term sustainability.

From this perspective, human resource management is a critical factor in building resilience, as it involves practices that foster adaptability, commitment, effective internal communication, and a sense of community. As Burnard and Bhamra (2011) argue, resilient organizations are not necessarily the largest or most technologically advanced; instead, they are those capable of activating rapid, ethical, and humane responses to crises, based on their internal relationships.

Leadership in crisis contexts requires different skills than leadership in normal conditions. Heifetz et al. (2009) propose the concept of adaptive leadership, which refers to the ability of leaders to mobilize people to face complex challenges, sustain uncertainty, and promote change without pre-established technical solutions. This type of leadership involves active listening, empathy, a systemic vision, and a willingness to share power with work teams.

In this sense, human resources management must foster the development of leaders capable of generating psychological safety, emotionally supporting their employees, and making ethical decisions, even when this means slowing down production processes or modifying strategic goals. As Weinzimmer et al. (2021) point out, leadership in turbulent contexts ceases to be an individual function and becomes a distributed practice that mobilizes emotional, cultural, and

community resources.

Organizational crises often have a profound impact on workers' mental health. Symptoms such as anxiety, chronic stress, emotional exhaustion, and demotivation are common in these contexts, especially when combined with job instability, social isolation, or task overload (Fetzer et al., 2020). Given this scenario, various studies have emphasized the importance of integrating well-being and emotional support policies into human resource management strategies.

Interventions such as psychological assistance programs, therapeutic support, training in emotional intelligence, flexible working hours, and spaces for collective expression have demonstrated positive effects on occupational health (Kuntz, 2021; Taris et al., 2022). Well-being ceases to be an ancillary benefit and becomes a fundamental condition for sustainable performance, especially in sectors with high demands or significant risk exposure.

The ethical theory of care, developed by authors such as Gilligan (1982) and Tronto (2013), offers a robust conceptual framework for rethinking organizational practices in times of crisis. From this perspective, care is not understood as a secondary or exclusively feminine activity, but rather as a fundamental, relational, and political practice for sustaining life in contexts of vulnerability.

Applied to the field of human resources management, the ethics of care involves recognizing the interdependence between people, assuming shared responsibilities, and building organizations that are sensitive to the needs of their members. This translates into more horizontal leadership, participatory processes, inclusive policies, and a revaluation of emotional and reproductive labor within labor structures (van der Walt et al., 2023).

This ethical shift is particularly relevant in crisis contexts, where management decisions can have a direct impact on the dignity, health, or safety of workers. Care-based human management allows us to transcend the instrumental logic of "human resources" and place the value of life and the relational sustainability of the organization at the center.

Methodology

This research is framed within a qualitative, theoretical, and documentary approach, aimed at understanding the transformation of human management from entrepreneurship-centered models to forms of organizational resilience, particularly in crisis contexts. The methodology adopted is based on a systematic review of specialized scientific literature, guided by the principles of the PRISMA protocol (Moher et al., 2009), which ensures transparency, comprehensi-

veness, and rigor in the selection, analysis, and interpretation of the consulted sources. From an epistemological perspective, the study is situated within the interpretive-constructivist paradigm, which recognizes the social construction of organizational meanings through narratives, practices, and human connections. In line with this approach, the documentary review is not conceived as a mere collection of information, but as a critical and reflective process that enables the generation of knowledge through dialogue between empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks.

The information search was conducted between March and June 2025 in high-impact academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, EBSCOhost, and ReDALyC, using Boolean combinations of keywords in English and Spanish, such as “human resource management,” “organizational resilience,” “employee well-being,” “crisis management,” “human management,” “adaptive leadership,” and “psychosocial occupational health.” Filters were applied to limit the results to publications published between 2020 and 2024 that were peer-reviewed, in full text, and either in English or Spanish. Subsequently, inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined, prioritizing original articles, systematic reviews, and case studies focused on human talent management in crisis scenarios. Duplicate documents, editorials without empirical support, or studies focused on contexts of organizational stability were excluded. After screening the articles by title, abstract, and full text, 42 relevant articles were selected to constitute the analyzed corpus.

For data processing, the thematic analysis technique proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed, which enabled the identification of patterns of meaning and emerging categories related to leadership, well-being, resilience, organizational care, and the redefinition of success. The procedure included an intensive reading of the selected texts, open coding of significant segments, axial grouping into thematic axes, and a narrative synthesis of the findings. The results were organized into an analysis matrix that enabled systematic comparison, triangulation, and correlation of the information. The validity of the study was strengthened through strategies of theoretical triangulation and critical contrast with conceptual frameworks from change management, organizational resilience theory (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011), adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009), and the ethics of care (Tronto, 2013). These tools enabled the enrichment of data interpretation and the overcoming of a fragmented view of the phenomenon.

Regarding ethical considerations, as this was a documentary research project, neither informed consent nor the intervention of an ethics committee was required. However,

the principles of academic integrity, responsible citation, and interpretative fidelity of the analyzed sources were guaranteed. A methodological limitation is acknowledged: potential publication bias, a common issue in studies that focus on peer-reviewed academic literature, as well as the difficulty in generalizing the findings to all organizational contexts. However, the value of this work lies in its contribution to a critical and situated understanding of how human resource management can be reconfigured as a strategic axis of resilience, sustainability, and care in highly uncertain environments.

Results and discussion

The results obtained from the thematic analysis of specialized literature reveal a significant transformation in the practices and discourses of human resource management in crisis contexts. One of the most relevant findings is the paradigm shift from an approach centered on entrepreneurship, innovation, and competitiveness to a model oriented toward organizational resilience, characterized by prioritizing emotional well-being, social support, and relational sustainability. This transition does not imply the abandonment of efficiency or productivity, but rather their subordination to ethical principles, such as care, protection of work-life balance, and collective co-responsibility (Iturralde-Pulla et al., 2020; van der Walt et al., 2023). In this sense, it is observed that the most resilient organizations were those that managed to redefine their strategic objectives, prioritizing the mental health of their employees, the meaning of work, and internal cohesion as the axes of their operational survival.

Second, the review of the articles allowed us to identify a central category linked to the management of psychosocial well-being. A large number of studies report that crises—notably the COVID-19 pandemic—generated profound impacts on workers’ emotional health, with an increase in disorders such as anxiety, chronic stress, mental fatigue, and burnout (Fetzer et al., 2020; Kuntz, 2021). Faced with this situation, organizations deployed a range of strategies, including flexible working hours, the implementation of psychological support programs, the promotion of safe spaces for dialogue, and emotional intelligence training for leaders and teams. These measures, far from being accessory, proved to be essential to preserving organizational performance under conditions of high uncertainty. In this context, human resource management assumed a preventive and therapeutic role, functioning as an articulator between institutional resources and individual needs, thus contributing to sustaining the symbolic and affective fabric of work.

A third relevant result is the leading role that adaptive leadership has acquired. Unlike traditional models based on control, rigid planning, and hierarchical supervision, effective

leaders in crisis contexts were those who could act with empathy, improvise flexible responses, share decision-making power, and generate trust in conditions of ambiguity (Heifetz et al., 2009; Hannah et al., 2011). These leaders did not focus exclusively on maintaining operability, but on sustaining the emotional integrity of teams, containing uncertainty, and facilitating organizational learning processes.

Adaptive leadership is emerging as a crucial competency for effective human management in times of disruption, and its development has become a priority for organizations that aspire to be sustainable and human-centered.

Fourth, a set of emerging practices linked to social innovation and interorganizational cooperation was identified. In many organizations, particularly in the public and community sectors, crises generated an opening toward collaborative support networks, strategic alliances, and mechanisms of interinstitutional solidarity. This relational dimension enabled the sustained critical resources, redistribution of functions, sharing of good practices, and emotional support for workers through collective strategies. Human resources management thus expanded its scope of action, ceasing to be an internal function and becoming a connecting node of organizational social capital (Burnard & Bhamra, 2011). In this sense, the studies reviewed demonstrate that organizations that promoted horizontal networks and relationships of mutual care were better equipped to cope with the effects of disruption, resulting in reduced turnover, absenteeism, and labor conflict.

A cross-cutting finding that runs through all the studies analyzed is the redefinition of organizational success. While before crises, classic metrics such as return on investment, market expansion, or process efficiency were valued, in critical contexts, success is redefined based on qualitative indicators such as job continuity, staff commitment, the overall health of teams, and the ability to adapt without sacrificing core values (Duchek, 2020; Gittell et al., 2010). This transformation implies an epistemological shift: it is no longer simply about optimizing human resources, but about sustaining working life in decent, safe, and emotionally sustainable conditions. In this framework, human resources management is no longer conceived as a technical support unit, but as a key strategic player in redefining the organizational purpose and the ethical governance of the company.

Finally, in the discussion of the theoretical framework, a clear correspondence is observed between the findings and the conceptual proposals on organizational resilience, ethics of care, and leadership in uncertain situations. The organizations that managed to resist most effectively were not necessarily the most technologically advanced or capitalized, but rather those that knew how to generate cultures of care, adaptability, inclusion, and co-responsibility. This observation reinforces the idea that crises are not only operational

threats, but also opportunities to rethink the cultural, ethical, and political foundations of organizational life (Tronto, 2013; Taris et al., 2022). Consequently, human resource management in crisis contexts is redefined as a situated praxis, sensitive to collective suffering, capable of articulating the value of work with the right to a dignified, protected, and emotionally meaningful working life.

Conclusions

This study concludes that human resources management in times of crisis is undergoing a profound transformation—not only in terms of operational procedures but also in its ethical, strategic, and organizational foundations. Events like the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the limitations of traditional HR models, which are often focused on efficiency, individual performance, and competitiveness. In their place, a renewed perspective is emerging that frames HR as a practice centered on care, emotional support, and relational sustainability. This new vision emphasizes the importance of maintaining a work-life balance amidst uncertainty, stress, and emotional fatigue. Human talent management is no longer merely an administrative function; it is becoming a vital link between internal organizational stability and external challenges, taking on roles that include psychosocial support, fostering community bonds, and building collective resilience. Organizations that have withstood recent crises most effectively are not necessarily the most innovative or productive, but those that have prioritized employee mental health, empathetic leadership, inclusive participation, and the redefinition of success in terms that value human dignity and sustainable well-being. Thus, resilience is not just about enduring adversity—it is about reimagining the organization itself by placing care, connection, and a renewed ethic of well-being at the heart of management. This shift is not a retreat from development but a necessary path toward its long-term sustainability and legitimacy.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: Valle, D., & Pérez, D. **Data curation:** Valle, D., & Pérez, D. **Formal analysis:** Valle, D., & Pérez, D. **Research:** Valle, D., & Pérez, D. **Methodology:** Valle, D., & Pérez, D. **Supervision:** Valle, D., & Pérez, D. **Validation:** Valle, D., & Pérez, D. **Visualization:** Valle, D., & Pérez, D. **Writing the original draft:** Valle, D., & Pérez, D. **Writing, review and editing:** Valle, D., & Pérez, D.

Data availability statement

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Statement on the use of AI

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