



# The changing face of HR professionals' expectations amidst COVID-19: a comparison in between Sri Lanka and foreign context

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 has brought significant transformation to organizations throughout the world in expediting the sudden transition to digital business operations for business continuity. Thus, businesses need to examine the expectations of Human Resource (HR) professionals to adapt to the unexpected changes aroused by the novel COVID-19 pandemic. The study aimed to compare HR professionals' expectations from the workplace in Sri Lanka and foreign countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers utilized the qualitative research method and applied the thematic analysis in order to analyze the gathered data from 28 semi-structured interviews. According to the findings, HR professionals in Sri Lanka anticipate returning to work at office premises, and if this work transition continues in the future, they expect more incentives and strategies for work-life balance. In contrast, HR professionals in foreign countries anticipate a hybrid work culture with employee wellbeing sessions. Accordingly, the study implies that organizations should facilitate the expected requirements to continue work in the current and future crises. The HR policymakers will be able to carry out more precise planning activities in the future when developing policies related to managing HR functions in crises.

**Keywords** COVID-19 · Human Resource Management · Human resource professionals · Work from Home · Workplace

## 1 Introduction

The novel coronavirus responsible for COVID-19 has spread aggressively over the world (Sebbani et al. 2020). The increasing uncertainty caused by the pandemic has substantially impacted many countries' cultures and economies (Janadari 2020). The workplace has changed considerably due to its ties to the national and worldwide economies, as well as its overdependence on global services influenced by globalization (Mwita 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has compelled numerous firms to close, causing unprecedented disruptions

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in various industry sectors (Donthu and Gustafsson 2020). According to Gigauri (2020a), 66% of companies in Georgia country have incurred financial losses, and 76% of companies there have reported a reduction in company turnover in the last six months. However, 53% of companies anticipate retaining their employees for the following months, while 43% of the employers have decreased salaries and wages. The COVID-19 pandemic also poses an unexpected threat to Asia Pacific economies as well (Roger 2020). Thus, organizations are struggling for survival amid one of the worst crises in history. Consequently, due to the concerns caused by this pandemic, the negative consequences on the Sri Lankan economy have increased. This pandemic has disrupted income-earning sectors such as agriculture, tourism, textile and clothing and small-medium enterprises. Accordingly, the Sri Lankan economy dropped by 1.6% and by 2% in the first quarter of 2020 (Rusniya and Nufile 2020). The recent COVID-19 outbreak has shown how quickly firms must adapt to rapidly developing Human Resource (HR) related concerns (Wahyudi, Kistyanto & Surjanti 2020). Thus, Human Resource Management (HRM) is a crucial component in assisting organizations in navigating through the significant changes brought by the dramatic changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gigauri 2020c).

HRM is currently confronted with a significant challenge as the COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked destruction on their employees in technical, physical and socio-psychological aspects that have not been experienced previously (Carnevale and Hatak 2020). According to a survey conducted by Paychex (2021) with 598 HR professionals worldwide, it claimed that evaluating employee productivity was the most frequently identified challenge caused by the outbreak, while another 48% said that gauging employee productivity was the most commonly discovered challenge caused by the outbreak. Employees' work habits, work environments and overall well-being have all changed drastically due to the crisis. The work environment will never be the same as before the pandemic and HR will play a critical role in the 'new normal'. Furthermore, in the face of massive disruptions, HR professionals have been under heavy pressure to handle the HR practices during the COVID-19 pandemic (Amarapala 2021). Thus, HR professionals are progressively performing a strategic role in addressing issues and opportunities for business sustainability during the pandemic (Dharmasiri 2020). HR professionals also face issues regarding safety regulations, and they are concerned that their employees may become infected with the virus, endangering the company's productivity (Gigauri 2020c). Consequently, HR professionals have been forced to cope with layoffs during the pandemic lockdown period. For cost-cutting and employee development to go together, they must determine the proper balance between the needs. If not, achieving effectiveness and efficiency will be challenging. Therefore, it is apparent that changes caused by the COVID-19 have had extensive consequences for businesses all over the world and have had a significant impact on HRM (Gigauri 2020a).

Based on the facts mentioned above, researchers conducted a pilot interview to evaluate the influence and challenges faced by HR professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers interviewed six HR professionals in national and multinational companies, including HR Coordinator, HR Recruiter, Training and Development Manager, Compensation and Benefits Manager, HR Manager and HR Information Specialist. Based on the responses of HR professionals, the most significant challenges experienced by HR professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic are work-life balance issues, issues in managing work arrangements, issues in managing employee communications and technical barriers. According to Mwitwa (2020), many employees were forced to Work From Home (WFH) dur-

ing the pandemic, thus HR managers had to deal with problems related to work-life balance. Moreover, as per the research conducted by Dissanayake (2020), all project work and team activities are conducted through online platforms, maintaining a good line of communication with employees has been crucial in HR decision-making during the pandemic.

Based on the responses received from HR experts and the past literature, researchers believe COVID-19 has an influence on conventional HR procedures. Despite the fact that numerous studies have been undertaken on the influence of COVID-19 on HR professionals' problems and changes in work environments, there has been inadequate attention to HR professionals' expectations. Moreover, while the subject of COVID-19 on HR has been well explored in various situations throughout the world, there was limited literature comparing the Sri Lankan situation to other international contexts. Furthermore, the Sri Lankan context has received less attention (Jayathilaka 2021). Therefore, the present study is focused on identifying the expectations of HR professionals on the changes in the companies HR practices to the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to the foreign context.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 HR managers rethink their role during the COVID-19 pandemic

HRM is the process of recruiting new employees, selecting the best candidate for the job, accepting representatives, offering orientation, training and development, determining remuneration and benefits, maintaining legitimate relations with employees and their unions, motivating employees and ensuring employees' health and safety (Sivanandam and Kumar 2020). During this pandemic, HR Managers have emerged as a significant catalyst in reassuring and strengthening employee morale (Kumar and Kapoor 2021). One of the main priorities for HR managers during the COVID-19 era was to emphasize health and safety concerns in the work environment (for both employees and employers), as well as the quick adoption of teleworking to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on effective and efficient productivity. HR Managers have prepared the workforce to react to the impending pandemic by motivating them to be more resilient and productive (Onwuegbuna et al. 2021). In this regard, HR professionals must rethink how they recruit, develop, retain and lead their employees (Amarapala 2021).

After this pandemic situation, the HR manager should make initiatives by counseling their employees to ensure communication efforts help engagement and offer appropriate employee wellbeing sessions with employees to help them offload their isolation anxiousness. The disengaging effect of constraints on innovation and risk-taking is especially severe for high-potential employees who may feel demotivated, as a result, the HR managers must emphasize the need and provide opportunities for process improvements. A HR professional should go a long way toward reinforcing employee trust in the company and improving their perceptions based on how HR professionals react or respond in the face of crisis and uncertainty in order to move things forward (Sivanandam and Kumar 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to consider the expectations of HR professionals from the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2.2 Post-COVID-19 expectations of HR professionals

Even though all employees are experiencing a certain level of disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the variety of expectations are wide as they approach the post-COVID-19 context (Diab-Bahman & Enzi 2020). Working from home is challenging without technology advancements. One must be skilled in technical capabilities in order to effectively continue with the WFH procedure. The availability of technology is highly anticipated in order to complete the task while being at home. A laptop, desktop, software, webcams and a stable internet connection for video conferencing, and knowledge on how to utilize all of this are required to perform the tasks (Kaushik and Guleria 2020; Veloso et al. 2020) revealed that most HR professionals expect to continue to telework even after the pandemic outbreak. In contrast, Diab-Bahman & Enzi (2020) found in their study that when offered the choice of a hybrid model that includes part-time remote work and part-time onsite employment, a significant number of respondents stated that they can efficiently complete at least 80% of their job expectations.

Consequently, HR professionals anticipate organizations to implement health and wellness strategies focused at preserving employees' mental health, providing resources and social help tailored to each employee's particular needs (Hamouche 2021). Further, Gigauri (2020a) noted that expectations of employees from their workplaces include the creation of a business continuity strategy and the development of internal resources while strengthening HR capabilities to deal with crises. As a result, businesses should build flexible procedures, implement new technology, and construct business operation continuity environments. Thus, narrowing down which employees expect more and various types of assistance, organizations may adopt strategies that improve generally shared sentiments of well-being and cohesiveness across the workplace.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Research design

An exploratory approach was used for this study. This study intended to develop research insights on expectations of HR professionals from the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than measuring causal relationships. Hence the exploratory design was compatible with this study, and all the other designs (such as action research design, case study design, causal design, cohort design, descriptive design, and experimental design) were rejected by the authors considering their incompatibility with the aim and objectives of the study. An inductive approach to theory development was adopted to gain a more holistic understanding of the research phenomenon (Wilson 2010). Hence this study tried to understand the subjective experience of HR professionals and gain insights into their expectations from the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. The nature of the social world must be "discovered", and this can only be achieved by firsthand observation and participation in "natural settings" (Sharpe 2018). As outlined by Creswell (2014), a quantitative research method is appropriate when a researcher seeks to understand relationships between variables; whereas the purpose of this study was to examine the experience and perceptions of HR professionals during pandemic situation, hence a qualitative method was

the most appropriate choice. Also, researchers selected qualitative analysis for this study which requires more thorough reporting than is typically seen in the accounts offered for quantitative analysis, how to present the analysis of qualitative data within interdisciplinary studies for readers in the life and natural sciences (Casimir et al. 2021).

### 3.2 Methods

Commonly, qualitative research is viewed with skepticism and is deemed unreliable because it employs small samples that may not be representative of the larger population, it is perceived as lacking objectivity, and the results are viewed as influenced by the researchers' personal experiences or opinions (Hammarberg et al. 2016). The term "qualitative" refers to research techniques that are used to answer questions regarding experience, meaning, and perspective, most frequently from the perspective of the participant. In most cases, these data cannot be counted or measured in any meaningful way (Hammarberg et al. 2016). In the current study also, we were exploring the experience of various HR professionals on amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following parts, we will discuss the sample method, the data collection process, and the measurements that were used in this study.

#### 3.2.1 Sampling

HR professionals are crucial to the company's bottom-line growth and the success of its business strategy (Muñoz-Pascual et al. 2019). As a result, the study focuses on HR professionals working in Sri Lanka and foreign countries. Accordingly, the total population of the study consisted of HR professionals and researchers considered HR professionals with more than 3 years of experience in the current workplace. As a result, the current study chose individuals (HR professionals) as the unit of analysis. However, in the present study total population count is unknown and examining the research problem in the local context as well as in global level. Therefore, there is a high room of using maximum variation sampling or heterogeneous sampling. Heterogeneity of sample helps provide proof that findings are not exclusive to a specific population, time, or place, which can assist in demonstrating whether a theory produced in one setting is applicable to other contexts (Robinson 2014). Moreover, cross-cultural qualitative research may also require a diverse sample. This research compares and contrasts people from different cultures (Robinson 2014). Therefore, in the current study also it is having both local and foreign HR professionals across different cultures and facilitating to generate more rich findings with similarities and differences. Moreover, when conducting quantitative research, it is typically necessary to use a sample that is statistically representative. When conducting qualitative research, on the other hand, where we require a sample that varies along the independent variables, this is not always the case (Trost 1986).

Among two sampling methods, nonprobability methods of sampling are utilized for qualitative research studies & probability methods of sampling are utilized for quantitative research studies (Abedsaeidi & Amiraliakbari 2015). By getting approach for the study mainly with the snowball sampling technique since there is no proper data base for going with the probability sampling technique. As a nonprobability method of sampling, snowball sampling is a method which current study participants find new participants from their social networks sampling continues until data saturation.

There are major strengths of snowball sampling which facilitated the researchers to choose this as the sampling method. One is, participants display more willingness to attend for the study as an acquaintance has referred them (Adikaram et al. 2021). Also, since the samples are acquainted with the first sample and are connected to the researcher, the snowball approach not only requires little time but also gives the researcher the chance to interact more comfortably with the samples (Naderifar et al. 2017). Both purposive sampling & stratified sampling were ignored from the study as researchers had an intention to fit the respondents to the inclusion criteria of the study and respondents are restricted though they have the interest to attend for the study (Campbell et al. 2020). Authors decided to not to use stratified sampling because there was not enough database of HR specialists on either the local or worldwide level to use for stratifying the sample (Galica et al. 2021). Lastly, convenience sampling was rejected as it has the risk of poor data and credibility (Adikaram 2021). Totally, 28 HR professionals were invited to the interview, of which 16 are local HR professionals & 12 are international HR professionals.

### 3.2.2 Data collection and measures

According to the interview guidelines, the primary data was obtained through expert interviews performed from June to August 2021. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the primary data for this study. The existing literature and the research question were used to build the interview questions and establish the study's analytical direction. Secondary data sources used for the study are research articles, the International Labor Organization (ILO), the websites of World Health Organization (WHO) as well as news articles that appeared timely on HRM and Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) related newsletters (online) were reviewed for relevant information. The interviews were audiotaped with the permission of the interviewees and then transcribed verbatim. To guarantee consistency in the data collected, the researchers used an interview guide based on existing literature. Thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the collected data. When engaging with HR professionals, researchers have always requested permission to record the conversations to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the information collected. To ensure privacy and secrecy while being more ethically disciplined, the researchers accepted the perceptions of HR professionals and excluded the questions that appeared to be more sensitive in the company's perspectives.

Furthermore, the researchers have taken the required procedures to ensure that each respondent's acquired data is protected with high security and that the data is stored at high confidentiality levels. Moreover, the received data will be maintained in a secure location and utilized strictly for the objectives of the study activity.

### 3.3 Data preparation

All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researchers themselves as it has been pointed out that transcribing data is interactive and that it engages the reader in the process of deep listening, analysis, and interpretation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Thus, through their personal engagement in the activity, the researchers were able to recall the things that happened during the interviews and to be more engaged with the data. Further, own transcribing facilitated the researchers for "getting inside" the data much

easily (Morse and Richards 2013), and it made the process of data analysis more effective and efficient. Next, each interview transcript was shown to the participants for their consent and confirmation on the content to assure the credibility of the study. All the interview transcriptions were organized in the chronological order by each participant, date, time, and place. Multiple copies of completed data were maintained and one master copy was kept for safekeeping.

### 3.4 Data analysis

Analysing text and multiple sources of data presents a challenging task for qualitative researchers (Creswell 2014; Saldaña 2016) described that there are more than 20 different genres available for qualitative research. Each qualitative study is unique, and hence the data analysis procedures used will also be unique (Patton 1990). In order to analyze the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis was utilized. The analysis was carried out by familiarizing oneself with the obtained data. In the process of familiarizing and identifying key ideas based on the interview transcripts, all authors conducted an independent parallel coding for generating initial codes. After that, all authors get together and discuss identified initial codes. When, compiling the generated codes by all authors, it was able to recognize that some codes were overlapping. The overlapped codes are the codes which we have taken for the further processing of the analysis since the same process enhances the validity of the qualitative data analysis process. Apart from that, authors have identified two sets of codes based on local interviews and the foreign interviews conducted. Finally, when the authors compiled both sets of codes together, authors noticed that there are overlapping concepts with a meaningful saturation for the obtained data with the interview process. In addition, the general inductive approach employed for the current study's data analysis. Since the general inductive approach provides an easily used and systematic set of procedures for analyzing qualitative data that can produce reliable and valid findings. Further, it gives a basic and straightforward method for obtaining results in the context of focused evaluation questions (Thomas 2006). Therefore, the aforesaid analytical approach best fits when evaluating the semi structured interview transcripts in this study.

After that, preliminary codes were assigned to the data in order to describe the content and searched for sub themes before generating the final themes in the codes from the interviews. Finally, the themes were examined and defined as needed. During the analysis, the researchers identified 3 major themes depending on the initial codes. Based on the highlighted themes, the researchers investigated the workplace expectations of HR professionals working in Sri Lanka and other countries affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, HR professionals working in Sri Lanka and foreign countries were compared in terms of workplace expectations during the COVID-19 outbreak. The data analysis results are reviewed, and conclusions are formed.

## 4 Results and discussion

Demographic details of HR professionals working in Sri Lanka and foreign countries are shown in Table 1 below. In total, out of 28 HR professionals interviewed, 16 are local HR professionals & 12 are international HR professionals. Thematic analysis was carried

**Table 1** Respondent Profile

Respondent	Designation	Gender	Experience	Local/ foreign	Country
<b>Respondent 01</b>	Senior HR Executive	Female	6 Years	Local	Sri Lanka
<b>Respondent 02</b>	Deputy HR Manager	Female	3 Years	Local	Sri Lanka
<b>Respondent 03</b>	HR Assistant	Female	3 Years	Local	Sri Lanka
<b>Respondent 04</b>	Senior Manager-HR Business Partnering	Female	7 Years	Local	Sri Lanka
<b>Respondent 05</b>	HR Assistant Manager	Male	3 Years	Local	Sri Lanka
<b>Respondent 06</b>	HR Executive	Male	3 Years	Local	Sri Lanka
<b>Respondent 07</b>	HR Executive	Female	3 Years	Local	Sri Lanka
<b>Respondent 08</b>	HR Manager	Male	6 Years	Local	Sri Lanka
<b>Respondent 09</b>	Associate HR Executive	Male	3 Years	Local	Sri Lanka
<b>Respondent 10</b>	HR Executive	Female	3 Years	Local	Sri Lanka
<b>Respondent 11</b>	Group Manager-HR	Male	3 Years	Local	Sri Lanka
<b>Respondent 12</b>	HR Business Partner	Female	9 Years	Local	Sri Lanka
<b>Respondent 13</b>	Senior HR Executive	Female	8 Years	Local	Sri Lanka
<b>Respondent 14</b>	HR Manager	Female	7 Years	Local	Sri Lanka
<b>Respondent 15</b>	Executive (HR Development)	Male	8 Years	Local	Sri Lanka
<b>Respondent 16</b>	Assistant HR Manager	Female	7 Years	Local	Sri Lanka
<b>Respondent 17</b>	HR Operator	Male	3 Years	Foreign	Bahrain
<b>Respondent 18</b>	Assistant HR Manager	Male	3 Years	Foreign	Singapore
<b>Respondent 19</b>	HR Manager	Male	8 Years	Foreign	United States of America
<b>Respondent 20</b>	Chief People Officer	Female	9 Years	Foreign	Australia
<b>Respondent 21</b>	Assistant HR Manager	Female	3 years	Foreign	India
<b>Respondent 22</b>	HR Manager	Female	5 Years	Foreign	United Kingdom
<b>Respondent 23</b>	HR Manager	Male	7 Years	Foreign	United Kingdom
<b>Respondent 24</b>	HR Project Manager	Male	5 Years	Foreign	Canada
<b>Respondent 25</b>	Staffing Coordinator	Female	3 Years	Foreign	United States of America
<b>Respondent 26</b>	HR Compliance Advisor	Female	3 Years	Foreign	United Kingdom
<b>Respondent 27</b>	HR Manager	Female	5 Years	Foreign	Canada
<b>Respondent 28</b>	Talent Acquisition Consultant	Male	6 Years	Foreign	Australia

Source: Authors' Compilation

out in this study through the process of coding and constructing themes. The researchers uncovered three key themes during the analysis, which were discovered from the interview responses. Thus, researchers examined the expectations of HR professionals employed in Sri Lanka and foreign countries from their workplace due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

According to the study findings, most HR professionals employed in both Sri Lanka and foreign countries are in managerial positions. HR professionals employed in Sri Lanka and foreign countries have a range of three to nine years' experience at the current workplace. Out of total respondents, twenty (20) HR professionals are employed in multinational corporations, while the remaining eight (08) are employed in national corporations. Twelve



**Table 2** Main Themes Identified Through Thematic Analysis

Themes	Codes
<b>Work Mode</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Hybrid work culture</li> <li>● On premise work culture</li> <li>● Digitalized work</li> </ul>
<b>Incentives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Financial benefits</li> <li>● Career progress</li> <li>● WFH Resources</li> </ul>
<b>Adoption Arrangements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Work-life balance strategies</li> <li>● Employee well-being sessions</li> <li>● Crisis management strategies</li> </ul>

Source: Authors' Compilation

(12) of the total HR professionals employed in Sri Lanka considered for the present study are from multinational corporations, while four are from national corporations. Out of the total number of HR professionals employed in foreign context, eight (08) are from multinational corporations while four (04) are from national corporations. Bahrain, India, the United States, Australia, Singapore, the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand are among the overseas nations where HR professionals have been interviewed.

As per the interview results, researchers have identified three main themes regarding expectations of HR professionals from their workplace during the COVID-19 (See Table 2), such as work culture, incentives and adoption arrangements.

#### 4.1 Work Mode

Expectations concerning the work mode were revealed as part of this range of expectations. Researchers have identified three distinct work cultures that HR professionals expect to persist in the future. These include hybrid, on premise and digitalized work culture

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, a variety of alternative work cultures have emerged due to the changes in work settings. Organizations have been pushed to create new work patterns as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which comprise both physically present and remotely contributing workforces. From the interviews conducted, six (06) out of twelve (12) HR professionals in foreign countries intend to continue their work utilizing a hybrid model that combines workplace presence with working from home practices.

*"We expect to conduct work from home practices in the future as well with a hybrid model by combining physical office work as well"*

##### **Respondent 25.**

HR professionals from other foreign countries believe that combining physical activities that include employee engagement with virtual approaches will be both interesting and cost-effective.

*"Work from home and coming to the physical office and moving to a hybrid model will have to be a good mix in the future because it would be an interesting work approach which will also help us to reduce the cost"*.

##### **Respondent 18.**

Hite & McDonal (2020) also emphasized that some employment types can be performed from home and that employees can be reached online more cost-effectively and safely than traveling to certain other parts of the country or world. As a result, it is apparent that working in a hybrid mode is a distinctive and cost-effective working approach.

In contrast, twelve (12) HR professionals in Sri Lanka expect to return to the office premises (in a conventional office environment) and hence do not wish to continue their official work in a virtual environment.

*“Rather than depending on this online mode, I expect to visit the office”.*

**Respondent 2.**

*“I recommended that the work be continued in the future by returning to normal where it has a physical presence at the office”.*

**Respondent 9.**

Since they do not anticipate being as productive at work as they were before the pandemic, most of the HR professionals in Sri Lanka intend to return to the physical workplace.

*“But I don’t believe we’re getting the same output as before. As a result, I expect a return to the pre-COVID condition, in which we can go to the office and continue our work”.*

**Respondent 11.**

This study highlights that the same state of improved productivity in a virtual workplace does not pertain to HR professionals in Sri Lanka as a result of the interruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the present research, six (06) out of twelve (12) HR professionals from other countries expect the business to boost the present digitalized culture by implementing more technology-driven initiatives that are compatible with remote work.

*“We need to move towards technology and work hands-on with IT. We should digitalize things. Human touch should be there through the technology”.*

**Respondent 17.**

HR professionals that favor digitization enhancements believe that a digitalized workplace will benefit them in terms of skill development and overall productivity.

*“Digitalization will assist us in improving our technology capabilities while also enhancing our professional abilities and talents”.*

**Respondent 27.**

Mikołajczyk (2021) further noted that in line with the rapidly changing corporate environment and digitalized culture, an employee who is expected to be professionally productive could constantly develop their skills, expand their competencies, and improve their capacities, even during a pandemic. Therefore, it is evident that exposure to technology and familiarity with the technology support employees in terms of strengthening their skills and capabilities.

## 4.2 Incentives

In terms of expectations of HR professionals regarding the incentives, the findings indicate that they expect three significant incentives during the COVID-19. These include financial benefits, career growth, and work-from-home resources. Ten (10) out of sixteen (16) HR professionals employed in Sri Lanka expect to have more incentives than HR professionals employed in a foreign context. Aside from that, HR professionals working in foreign countries are accustomed to collaborating with smart devices. As a result, they do not anticipate special financial benefits during the COVID-19 outbreak. Gigauri (2020) mentioned that the COVID-19 could significantly impact jobs and cause employees to experience career shock. According to the study findings, the majority of HR professionals working in Sri Lanka believe that career and professional development may have taken a setback during the epidemic era since they are unable to get promoted and their compensation is occasion-

ally lowered. These facts prompt researchers to believe that the COVID-19 outbreak had a detrimental impact on the career progression of HR professionals who are working in Sri Lanka. As a result, they anticipate from the organization that they prefer an innovative approach to develop their career.

With the WFH culture, HR professionals in Sri Lanka were required to work long hours and even pay for their internet facilities (carried out for official work) out of their pocket. As a result, eight (08) out of ten (10) HR professionals in Sri Lanka anticipate financial benefits during the pandemic.

*“Sometimes I have to work more than eight (08) hours per day, and I have more work duties than before, but I’m receiving the same amount of money as I received before so, personally I would like if the company could give us some more financial records”.*

**Respondent 5.**

Elsafty and Ragheb (2020) supported this finding by stating that financial advantages are one of the most important factors in improving employees' job satisfaction. As a result, many HR professionals who are working long hours had to pay for work-related expenses out of their pocket during the COVID-19 outbreak evidently need financial incentives. Nevertheless, most HR professionals employed in other countries do not have many additional responsibilities. As a result, HR professionals in foreign nations were rather unconcerned about financial rewards.

*“Whether you work from home or work from the office, the duties were the same”.*

**Respondent 17.**

The COVID-19 has had a substantial impact on jobs, causing employees to face career shocks. According to the findings, four (04) out of ten (10) HR professionals in Sri Lanka aimed to improve their careers. They were unable to develop their careers, and occasionally had pay cuts. As a result, many HR professionals expect to have more opportunities to progress their careers.

*“I think this pandemic has impacted my career growth because I was about to get a promotion, but I didn't receive it, so I would like if the company could provide new opportunities that can help to grow employees' careers since this pandemic is heading to a new normal”.*

**Respondent 7.**

According to Hite and McDonald (2020), many people are of the view that the COVID-19 outbreak will substantially impact their professional growth and livelihoods due to job destruction, abrupt changes in work performance, and company closures. As a result, it is understandable that the COVID-19 outbreak has an influence on some HR professionals' jobs for a variety of reasons related to the new normal. Fear of getting fired, a significant shift in the work environment, recurrence of the same duty, and technological adoption are only a few instances.

COVID-19 pandemic is a most challenging crisis to Sri Lanka as the country did not have experience any health crisis previously as the country faced only terrorist attacks and natural disasters (Tsunami, floods etc.). But other Asian countries had to face SARS, influenza (H5N1) and Ebola. Other than IT companies in Sri Lanka, most companies did not have the preparation to face for this crisis and they had to conduct many online discussions to plan WFH arrangements and those companies has taken steps to transport desktops to the residences of operational level employees during the curfew (Adikaram et al. 2021). As per our findings, most employees emphasized that they need more IT facilities to continue

WFH. In contrast, foreign HR professionals did not point out more IT facilities as they faced similar health crisis before and they are familiar with WFH arrangements. According to our findings, due to a lack of work-related resources, seven (07) out of sixteen (16) HR professionals faced a variety of obstacles with the implementation of WFH. Not every HR professional was able to provide them with favorable working conditions in the same sense that an office space offers. According to the study findings, seven (07) out of sixteen (16) HR professionals in Sri Lanka expect greater WFH resources to work efficiently while managing their personal lives. Kniffin et al. (2020) also pointed that most employees are concerned about not having a suitable workspace in their homes to work in. Therefore, it is evident that WFH resources are crucial in order to WFH.

*“Since I have to struggle with connection issues, I was unable to conduct meetings properly so, if this remote working continues for the coming future, I’m expecting a favorable solution for connection issues”.*

**Respondent 2.**

*“I did not have proper work from home equipment, and I was literary working on my dining table so, it was hard to work for long hours. If the company can provide work equipment or some allowance to buy them, it would be better”.*

**Respondent 10.**

### 4.3 Adoption Arrangements

Kniffin et al. (2020) emphasized similar findings that most employees are concerned about not having a proper workspace to work at home. In terms of expectations of HR professionals regarding the adoption arrangements, the findings indicate that they expect various adoption arrangements during the COVID-19. These include work-life balance strategies, crisis management strategies and employee wellbeing sessions. According to the study findings sixteen (16) out of twenty-eight (28) HR professionals from Sri Lanka and foreign countries expect adoption arrangements or coping strategies from their employers. In total, eleven (11) HR professionals in Sri Lanka anticipate adoption arrangements, of which seven (07) anticipate work-life balance strategies and four expect adequate crisis management strategies.

Due to the COVID-19, WFH has become increasingly vital for certain employees as the best way to continue working while lowering the virus risk and contagion. Therefore, HR professionals in Sri Lanka face more challenging times in separating their work and personal lives, making it more difficult to escape the demands of their jobs. According to HR professionals in Sri Lanka, seven (07) out of sixteen (16) expect work-life balance strategies from their workplace.

*“Since we work from home, sometimes our superiors scheduling meetings at odd times so we couldn’t balance work and personal life activities properly. So, I think it’s better if we have proper work-life balance strategies”.*

**Respondent 8.**

Kaushik and Guleria (2020) have also emphasized that workplace and time management can be problematic when working from home. While time management and work-life balance are essential, becoming adoptable, proactive, reasonable, driven and devoted are also important. According to Sooriyaarachchi (2020), having conflicts with family members due

to work-related difficulties indicates an insufficient work-life balance. As a result, it is clear that the WFH has had a negative impact on the work-life balance of some HR professionals.

Even though crisis management is a significant part of HR professionals' roles, they have no prior experience handling human resources in a similar situation as the COVID-19. According to the study findings, four (4) out of sixteen (16) HR professionals in Sri Lanka expect to establish crisis management strategies to stay competitive and sustain within the corporate sector.

*"I expect more strategies from the workplace that tackle unexpected situations like this pandemic in terms of training and development, recruitments, and everything".*

**Respondent 16.**

Adikaram et al. (2021) also stated that organizations operate in an unpredictable and dynamic world, and crisis management is essential. As a result, it clearly shows that crisis management is even more critical to sustain and keep business operations running smoothly during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 resulted in several unanticipated and significant changes in work techniques and HR policies. Even HR professionals had to face sudden and new challenges and new duties outside of their regular scope of work. Thus, HR professionals have difficulty in preserving employee health and well-being in the wake of the crisis, unlike in working environments before the pandemic. According to the study eight (8) out of twelve (12) HR professionals working in foreign countries expect non-financial support such as employee wellbeing sessions to alleviate the stress, anxiety and lack of social life associated with WFH.

*"I think it would be better if the companies can reconsider their employees' comfort and keep their mental health at a higher level than before".*

**Respondent 28.**

Further, Gigauri (2020b) affirmed that employee's physical and mental well-being has become a main priority during the pandemic. As a result, it can be accepted that employee well-being sessions are critical during the pandemic, as HR professionals are stressed and anxious about implementing WFH procedures.

To curb the spread of the novel virus, millions of employees across the world have been forced to work remotely, often in make-shift home offices, and use advanced digital technologies. According to the present study findings, most of HR professionals working in foreign countries expect that this work transition will proceed in the near future as well. Since this is not an unfamiliar work setting for them, they intend to continue with the WFH procedure or hybrid work model while improving the work culture digitally. Supporting this finding, Savić (2021) has also revealed that organizations which have improved their technology capabilities and remotely engaged their workforce are in a stable condition to not only sustain in the industry but also overcome the short and long-term complications that will inevitably emerge during the pandemic. However, HR professionals in Sri Lanka expect to proceed with their work by returning to the office premises and engaging with employees in a more physical approach. This is predominantly because of the unfamiliarity for the WFH and the vast range of challenges they had to encounter during the COVID-19 pandemic. Li et al. (2020) also supported this fact by revealing that when WFH is not by choice and for employees with minimal experience of WFH, this transition poses a significant challenge. As a result, it is apparent that familiarity and adaptation to technology are essential to effectively continue working from home.

When considering HR professionals' incentive expectations during the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings show that three major incentives are expected. These include monetary incentives, career advancement and WFH resources. When compared to HR professionals in other countries, the majority of HR professionals in Sri Lanka expect monetary compensation. Main reason behind this is the incapability to afford a home office set up with a high-end computer, internet-connected devices and other equipment since Sri Lanka is a lower-middle-income country with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita of United States Dollar (USD) 3,852 (2019) (World Bank 2021). In contrast, HR professionals in foreign countries can adapt to shifting work conditions much faster, as they are relatively paid more and have a greater familiarity with smart devices than HR professionals in Sri Lanka. According to Gigauri (2020a), COVID-19 can have a substantial impact on jobs and force employees to undergo career shocks. The study findings emphasized, most of the HR professionals in Sri Lanka believe that during the pandemic era, career and professional development may have taken a step back. As a result, they expect the company to implement an innovative approach to develop their careers. Due to a shortage of work-related resources, most HR professionals in Sri Lanka faced a range of challenges due to the adoption of WFH. The most of HR professionals working in Sri Lanka were incapable of creating a suitable working environment since they were unable to purchase electronic devices. Furthermore, according to Fernando (2021), Sri Lanka has the lowest internet quality. As a result, most HR professionals in Sri Lanka face difficulties in speed, connectivity, interruptions when working on tasks that consume more data such as video meetings and transferring documents over the internet. To maintain functioning efficiently, the most of HR professionals working in Sri Lanka anticipate better WFH resources. HR professionals in foreign countries do not expect equivalent resources since they have high-speed internet access, high-end laptops, personal computers, and other technological devices.

There were multiple changes in work practices and procedures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of changes in the workplace, HR professionals had to deal with several new challenges and expectations. Simultaneously, they had to implement new concepts and strategies to cope with the issues posed by the pandemic. Study findings disclosed that most HR professionals in Sri Lanka anticipate crisis management strategies and work-life balance strategies to be in place. Gigauri (2020b) also mentioned that maintaining work-life balance requires preparing space and schedules for working virtually while considering individual variances or circumstances. The main reason for this expectation is that WFH has become prominent as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, many HR professionals in Sri Lankan families are unable to separate between staying at home with their children (personal life) and managing remote work (office work) while they are at home.

Moreover, findings revealed that HR professionals in Sri Lanka lack knowledge and less experience in crisis management. Therefore, they expect crisis management strategies to be initiated from their workplace. Mwita (2020) emphasized that crisis management is vital during times like this to enable people and their organizations to be minimally affected by COVID-19, and at this level, the HR department should improve their level of resilience and have a greater role to play. As a result, it is evident that crisis management strategies are required for similar scenarios to assist employees and businesses in mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to survive in the business niche.

HR professionals in foreign countries experience stress and anxiety due to the implementation of WFH procedures. Therefore, they anticipate employee wellbeing sessions from

HR Professionals' Expectations Model

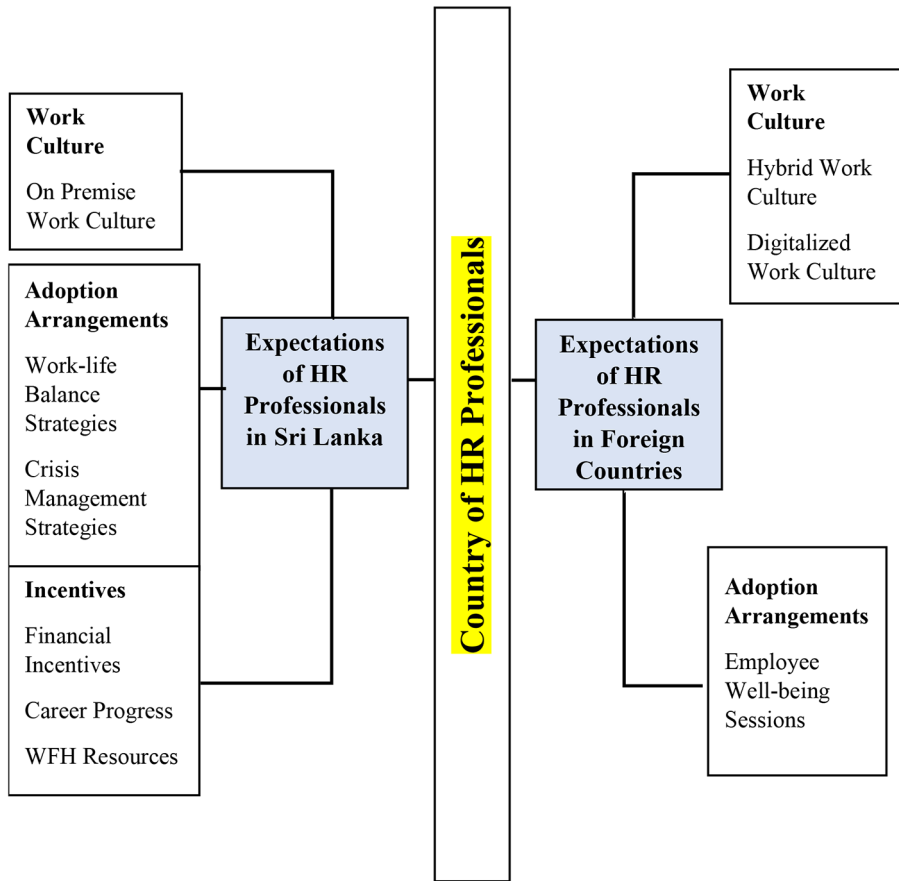


Fig. 1 HR Professionals' Expectations Model

their employers to mitigate their work stress and enhance mental wellbeing. Supporting this finding, Caligiuri et al. (2020) have stated that companies should provide stress-reduction resources such as webinars on persistence and mindfulness courses. As a result, it is obvious that stress-relieving offerings would be especially beneficial for HR professionals who work remotely, as they experience stress and anxiety during the pandemic. As illustrated in Fig. 1, researchers have developed an “HR professionals’ expectations model,” which consists of the expectations of HR professionals and manifested as a comparison between Sri Lanka and the foreign context. The model consists of three themes: work culture, incentives and adoption arrangements. Therefore, it is vital to consider these expectations of HR professionals regarding the future work modes, incentives and adoption arrangements when implementing policies and strategies.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper, the focus was on exploring the expectations of HR professionals of their workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interview method was applied for this research and conducted twenty-eight (28) interviews with HR professionals using the snowball sampling technique. The aim of the study was to reveal the expectations of HR professionals from their workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the course of the thematic analysis, comparisons between HR professionals employed in Sri Lanka and foreign countries were carried out, followed by data interpretations, discussions of findings and conclusions. Accordingly, the researchers have identified themes regarding the expectations of HR professionals from their workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As per the study findings, most of the HR professionals in Sri Lanka relatively have more expectations from the workplace during COVID-19 than HR professionals in foreign countries. The HR professionals working in Sri Lanka prefer the on-premises work culture because of unfamiliarity and inability to adjust to the virtual workplace setting and related technologies. On the other hand, HR professionals in foreign countries anticipate a remote or hybrid work culture since it is much more familiar and convenient for them. Moreover, due to the lack of financial resources, HR professionals in Sri Lanka were unable to cope with the work transformation since their remuneration is less when compared to HR professionals in foreign countries. Aside from this, HR professionals in Sri Lanka were not accustomed to the rapid transformation of technology. As a result, they were unable to sustain in the transformation. However, HR professionals in foreign countries do not expect these expectations since they perceive these aspects have not been disrupted. Furthermore, HR professionals in Sri Lanka suffer during the current pandemic due to the inability to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Due to this reason, they expect work-life balance strategies to proceed that can enable them to be prepared during another pandemic in the future. Simultaneously, stress and anxiety issues have arisen due to the remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, HR professionals employed in foreign countries expect employee wellbeing sessions to mitigate mental well-being challenges. Hence, the policy makers in the field of HRM can enhance their decision making by considering the resulting model based on the expectations of the HR professionals.

### 5.1 Managerial implications

The following implications for policymakers and professionals in the field of HRM may be proposed based on the study's findings. Developing the country's internet infrastructure should be a top priority for the Sri Lankan government's efforts. Since developing an extensive national broadband strategy is a necessary step towards developing more specific tactics for broadband development, concrete, quantifiable goals must be established for increasing broadband supply through infrastructure expansion and boosting demand for broadband applications and services. In comparison to HR professionals in Sri Lanka, HR professionals in foreign countries regard this work transition as a beneficial change because they were able to build creative approaches to perform their work practices with sophisticated technology while enhancing the productivity of firms. With their knowledge of the WFH approach and technology, they had been able to adapt promptly throughout the pandemic to their new work environments. These factors mean HR professionals working



in foreign countries face less difficulties and issues than their Sri Lankan counterparts. In foreign countries, HR professionals anticipate to continuing their work in a hybrid or digitalized work culture with the expectation of having more sessions for employees to improve their health and well-being. Therefore, health and wellness activities like virtual desk yoga, mindfulness meditation and coaching are encouraged for companies to provide their staff. Organizations evaluating their work cultures should take these expectations into account because some HR professionals prefer to attend to their office while others choose to work remotely or in a hybrid manner. Furthermore, HR policymakers should adjust HR policies in the HRM domain, which deal with particularly unexpected crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, by taking HR professionals' expectations into account.

## 5.2 Limitations and Future Research

As per the determination of the researchers of the current study, the major limitation was that this study was conducted by considering the expectations of HR professionals of the corporate world. The study focused only on the HR professionals and not considered employee expectations in the corporate world. Therefore, future researchers may be conducted by considering other professionals in other fields as well. Due to the COVID-19 lockdown rules and guidelines and the negative social environment in the country, researchers conducted online interviews. Moreover, in the present study, researchers have taken the entire result and interpreted it as a whole. Therefore, the future studies can be conducted by collecting and analyzing data sector-wise to see the sectoral views. The future researchers may extend the current study by including hypotheses or research questions.

Further, researchers conducted interviews in three developing nations (Asian-Baharain, India, Singapore) and four developed countries (United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada, and Australia), the sample group is said to grow like a rolling snowball or a chain as per the principals of snowball sampling. Hence, the participants of this study consisted with heterogeneous in nature. Therefore, future researchers are recommended to conduct the studies with respondents who are coming from similar context and the validity of this model can be tested with quantitative studies.

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