

EXPLORING PROMOTING FACTORS FOR EMPLOYEE RESILIENCE DURING COVID-19: INSIGHTS FROM LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract. *Lately, organisations have been focusing on enhancing employee resilience due to turbulent, unpredictable changes caused by major crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Employee resilience refers to a key capability enabling employees to manage and adapt to continually changing circumstances, and finally to flourish at work. While there is an increasing body of the literature on antecedents of employee resilience while dealing with work-related challenges, there is still a lack of understanding what determines resilience in the COVID-19 context. Due to this, the paper aims to explore promoting factors for employee resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic using the systematic literature review. More specifically, the paper focuses on four aspects, namely, the construct conceptualisation, the factors for enhancing employee resilience, underpinning theories used in the research to ground the relationship between antecedents and employee resilience; and core practical implications. Regarding theoretical conceptualisation, the analysed studies treated employee resilience rather as capacity, which can be developed, than a stable trait. Further, the findings revealed four clusters of promoting factors to enhance employee resilience in the light of COVID-19, namely leadership, HRM practices, personal factors, and job resources. For explaining the relationship between constructs, broaden-and-build theory and conservation of resources theory (COR theory) were employed predominantly, also invoking other theories, such as person-in-situation theory, social identity theory, social cognitive theory, and job demand-resource theory. Finally, practical implications were mainly related to enabling organisational context encouraging policy makers and implementers to consider employee residence as a core resource for sustaining humans and organisations in the light of crisis.*

Keywords: *COR theory; COVID-19; Employee resilience; HRM practices; Leadership.*

Introduction

For a couple of decades, to remain viable, organisations had to respond to a diversity of challenges like resource scarcity, increased pressure from customers and suppliers, changes in governmental policy or technological advantages (Tonkin et al., 2018; Trenerry et al., 2021). Additionally, the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 created universal adversity and caused a huge impact on employment, business operations and finally organisations themselves while plunging people in general and employees in particular into a seismic paradigm shift in how they live and work (Luthans & Broad, 2022). Looking at the continuously changing and uncertain environment in which today's organisations and their employees operate, the way the businesses manage risk and continue to remain vital and competitive and the employees survive and thrive under these new and unfamiliar circumstances has become the key issue that must be addressed by decision-makers (Chen et al., 2021). The fundamental questions include the ones like: "Why are some organisations better equipped to survive in the face of crises?"; "Why are some employees better prepared to cope with adverse environmental conditions?". In essence, these are issues of resilience (Bani-Melhem et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2023) When change becomes the new normal, resilience becomes a new skill for both organisations and employees helping to recover quickly from emergencies (Liang & Cao, 2021). In Oxford English Dictionary, resilience is defined as "being able to withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions" (Hu et al., 2015). As previous studies demonstrated that employee resilience can enhance organisational resilience (Liang & Cao, 2021), the current paper focuses only on employee resilience arguing for a "win-win" effect for both organisation and employee. Acknowledging the plurality of approaches, the concept of resilient employee usually implies a key capability enabling employees to manage and adapt and to flourish at work under continually changing circumstances (Näswall et al., 2019).

Organisations are only as strong as their employees. However, it seems that employees globally feel the lack of resilience. According to Aon's Rising Resilient Report, only 30% of employees identify themselves as being resilient (Aon, 2020). Thus, how to enhance employee resilience is a question of high relevance. Previous studies argued for the antecedents of employee resilience related to personal traits and cultural value orientation, personal resources, personal attitudes and mind-sets; personal emotions and work demands and resources (Hartmann et al., 2020). However, in the light of COVID-19 pandemic and following the notion that "the only constant is change", it is important to address the previous call in the literature (Britt et al., 2016) and analyse the contemporary understanding of employee resilience and its drivers. The situation of pandemic provides the unique context of crises; hence, this paper tries to narrow the gap and analyse employee resilience, which was observed when a major crisis arose.

The aim of the paper is to explore promoting factors for employee resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic using a systematic literature review. More specifically, the paper deals with the following research questions:

RQ1 How was employee resilience conceptualised in the academic studies related to the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2 What factors are proposed to improve the employee resilience in the period of COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ3 What underpinning theories were used in the research?

RQ4 What are the key practical implications the studies suggested?

The paper is organised as follows. First, the theoretical background is presented focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic and employee resilience. Afterwards, the methodology is described. Then, results and discussion are provided. Finally, conclusions, practical implications, and limitations with future research directions are proposed.

Literature review

COVID-19 pandemic. The global COVID-19 pandemic at the end of 2019 created unprecedented challenges for organisations. It shocked the world when, in a short period of time, 50% or more of the workforce were no longer able to carry out their normal work (Gourinchas, 2020). The rapid spread of the virus disrupted organisational business models by challenging their core processes and routines, forcing organisations to immerse themselves in unfamiliar environments in order to adapt to new circumstances and to make critical decisions in a short timeframe, with a major impact not only on the organisation's operations, but also on the organisation's employees.

Organisations and employees in all sectors have found it extremely difficult to operate under increased mobility constraints. The pandemic disrupted previous patterns of organisational activity by introducing changes in the day-to-day operations of organisations through online-working and digitalisation (Raghavan et al., 2021). In this situation, organisations developed many different digital employee engagement activities such as virtual learning, remote team building activities, webinars with experts, team lunches and coffee breaks, online gaming sessions, etc. (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021).

While online working has provided flexibility, it has also created new challenges. Isolation, blurred boundaries between work and personal life, and technical problems have put pressure on employee morale and job satisfaction. Many workers have demonstrated remarkable resilience in a pandemic situation by changing their routines and adopting new practices. They adapted to new routines, used virtual collaboration tools and found innovative ways to manage stress. Resilience has become a crucial skill for both workers and organisations (Zhai et al., 2023).

Employee resilience. The word 'resilience' originates from the Latin verb *resilire*, or, 'to leap back' (Hu et al., 2015). The concept of individual resilience emerged in the 1970s, initially in the clinical research context (Wang et al., 2014). Nowadays, the term 'resilience' is used in the widely differing fields of ecology, sociology, engineering, psychology, organisational sciences, and education (Kowitarttawatee & Limphaibool, 2022). Employee resilience has gained a lot of attention in HRM literature as a result of the impact that crises have on business and employees themselves (Asamoah Antwi et al., 2023). Research on employee resilience builds on the ideas of positive psychology, which focus on positive human strengths (Luthans, 2002). In this case, employee resilience is treated as a positive internal resource to deal with turbulent work environment (Liang & Cao, 2021).

Actually, in the literature there is no a consensus on the definition of employee resilience, and its definition involves three orientations (Hartmann et al., 2020). From a trait perspective, resilience is considered an ideal trait that can help individuals cope with multiple adversities (Hu et al., 2015). State-like developable capacity orientation suggests that resilience as a state-like attribute, which, although stable over certain

periods, is also malleable in the long run (Näswall et al., 2019). A process-oriented approach regards resilience as a dynamic process of individuals actively adapting and recovering from adversity (Hartmann et al., 2020). Despite the plurality in defining the concept, the core message is more than clear: to survive and thrive under new and unfamiliar circumstance, employees must adapt themselves continuously (Rurkkhum, 2023). This makes the concept of employee resilience increasingly important.

As the previous studies have demonstrated that employee resilience boosts employee satisfaction, organisational commitment, and employee engagement (Mao et al., 2023), and leads to other positive attitudes and behaviours (Tonkin et al., 2018), the question of what determines the resilience of employees in the pandemic context still need some attention.

Methodology

To answer RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4, scientific literature has been systematically reviewed. A literature review methodology provides a systematic and reproducible design for collecting and evaluating the extant body of scholarly works on the topic studied (Ferrer-Estévez & Chalmeta, 2021; Mishra et al., 2018). The research methodology is broken down into three phases: (1) definition of the research scope, (2) data collection, (3) analysis of results. Phase 1 has made it possible to explore the literature on employee resilience in order to define the four research questions and to detect possible gaps.

In phase 2 (data collection phase), keywords, search strategy, and criteria for the selection of papers were established. While selecting keywords for this study and to ensure that the topic of the study was fully captured, keywords “employee resilience” and “COVID” were used as the major keywords for data collection. The data was collected from the Web of Science Core Collection (*Clarivate Analytics*). The search was performed using the aforementioned keywords in “title, abstract, keywords” of articles belonging to the Web of Science database. The search was carried out in September, 2023, encompassing the period up to September 7, 2023.

The search strategy resulted in 28 articles: 10 – 2023, 13- 2022 and 5 – 2021. Eighteen of them were open-access.

After carrying out a content analysis of the abstracts and screening the full text of articles, some papers were eliminated. The criteria for elimination included the following: employee resilience was analysed only as mediator or mediation between two or more constructs; employee resilience was analysed as an outcome; papers with qualitative approach only. Thus, only papers focusing on antecedents of employee resilience in the light of COVID-19 pandemic were included in further analysis. Thirteen papers comprised the sample on which this research was based. The list of the papers is provided in Annex 1.

Phase 3 was dedicated to the analysis of results.

Results and discussion

The results and discussion are presented according the four research questions stated in the introduction.

RQ1: How was employee resilience conceptualised in the academic studies related to the COVID-19 pandemic?

The findings allow to state that mostly studies provide a brief overview on the construct of employee resilience acknowledging the variety of approaches towards it.

As regards the definition itself, usually, studies borrow the definitions proposed by Luthans et al. (2007), Luthans (2002), or Kuntz et al. (2017). Although several studies provided their own definitions (Wut et al., 2022), the inspiration for them was found in the previously mentioned references (Table 1).

As it is seen from Table 1, the papers associated employee resilience with complexity and adversity and also indicated favourable adaptation. Resilience has been acknowledged as the ability to bounce back and perhaps thrive in the face of particular adversity. Further, papers mostly considered employee resilience as an advanceable capacity to overcome certain difficulties. Some authors argued that employee resilience was a process that protected against distressing conditions and helped employees to cope with stress factors, to survive and adapt to changing work environments (Bagdžiūnienė et al., 2022).

Table 1. The conceptualisation of employee resilience (Source: Authors' own research results)

Author,	Employee resilience
(Zhai et al., 2023)	State-like developable psychological resources that help an individual to adapt effectively and bounce back to their original position or even advance beyond that to attain success when facing adversities (Luthans et al., 2007)
(Wut et al., 2022)	Employees' ability to deal with unfavourable situations
(Peng et al., 2022)	Ability to adapt to changes in the current environment; that is, to still moderately "bounce back" in the face of tremendous pressure
(Asamoah Antwi et al., 2023)	Ability of an employee to recover from unpleasant feelings and adapt to a continually altering situation (Hu et al., 2015)
(Prayag et al., 2023)	"Not only the ability to recover from adversity but also the capacity to utilize and proactively develop personal and workplace resources" (Kuntz et al., 2017, p. 225) Employee resilience was operationalised as a multidimensional concept that includes cognitive, behavioural, and contextual dimensions.
(Rurkkhum, 2023)	Behavioural capability of employees to ensure continual adaptation and flourish at work in both normal and challenging circumstances (Kuntz et al., 2017)
(Blaique et al., 2023)	Advanceable capacity to overcome certain difficulties. Therefore, resilience is considered a robust ability that can be strengthened and increased through organisational resources. (Luthans, 2002)
(Tuan, 2021)	"Capacity to rebound, to 'bounce back' from adversity, uncertainty, conflict, failure or even positive change, progress and increased responsibility" (Luthans, 2002, p. 702)
(Saleem et al., 2023)	Ability to face or solve challenges that employees encounter in their daily lives, specifically in their workplace

(Kowitarttawatee & Limphaibool, 2022)	Teacher resilience is the capacity to bounce back or recover from highly traumatic experiences and the capacity to maintain equilibrium and a sense of commitment and agency in which teachers teach (Gu & Day, 2013)
(Mao et al., 2023)	An employee's adaptive behavioural capacity; with such capacity, one can gather, integrate and utilise organizational resources, as well as seek opportunities for continuous improvement and cope with work-related challenges, especially in the challenge of a crisis context (Kuntz et al., 2016)
(Prayag & Dassanayake, 2022)	"Developable capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, failure, or even positive events" (Luthans, 2002a, p. 702).
(Bagdžiūnienė et al., 2022)	Teacher resilience has been described as "the capacity to maintain equilibrium and a sense of commitment and agency in the everyday worlds in which teachers work" (Gu & Day, 2011, p. 26)

The findings allow concluding that in the light of COVID-19 the understanding what employee resilience is about has not changed essentially. The prevailing notion was similar to pre-pandemic situation arguing that employee resilience as a suite of adaptive, learning and networking behaviours captures the adaptive capabilities (Kuntz et al., 2016, 2017) that require an enabling organisational context (Näswall et al., 2019). Summing up, employee resilience is arguably the most important positive resource for navigating an unpredictable, turbulent and stressful workplace, which is ordinary in the era of the new normal.

RQ2: What factors are proposed to improve the employee resilience in the period of COVID-19 pandemic?

As it is seen from Table 2, the papers proposed a quite extensive variety of factors. However, the analysis allowed identifying four clusters of promoting factors to enhance the employee resilience in the light of COVID-19, namely leadership, HRM practices, personal factors, and job resources.

Table 2. Summary of promoting factors and applied theories (Source: Authors' own research results)

Author, year	Promoting factors of employee resilience	Grounding theory used
(Zhai et al., 2023)	Strategic HRM	Broaden-and build theory of positive emotions
(Wut et al., 2022)	Psychological resilience; organisational resilience	The person-in-situation theory
(Peng et al., 2022)	Servant leadership	Social identity theory
(Asamoah Antwi et al., 2023)	Crisis-induced HR practices	COR theory
(Prayag et al., 2023)	Resilience leadership	COR theory

(Rurkkhum, 2023)	Strategic HRM	COR theory
(Blaique et al., 2023)	Organisational learning	Broaden-and build theory of positive emotions
(Tuan, 2021)	Event communication	COR
(Saleem et al., 2023)	Task challenge	Broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions
(Kowitarttawatee & Limphaibool, 2022)	Mindfulness	n/a
(Mao et al., 2023)	Authentic leadership	Broaden-and build theory of positive emotions
(Prayag & Dassanayake, 2022)	Employee creative self-efficacy	Social cognitive theory
(Bagdžiūnienė et al., 2022)	Supportive leadership	Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory

Leadership. Four types of leadership were proposed with the potential to make employees more resilient. One of the papers argued for resilient leadership, which refers to vision sharing, initiating and managing change, and directing complex and contradictory tasks during crises (Morales et al., 2019). Resilient leadership can be seen as an integration of transformational and transactional leadership (Prayag et al., 2023). Another study (Peng et al., 2022) proposed servant leadership arguing that servant leadership was demonstrated by empowering and developing people and by expressing humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship; and by providing direction (van Dierendonck, 2011). Compared to other leadership styles, servant leaders put the subordinates' needs at top priority and in the first place (Peng et al., 2022). The third paper (Mao et al., 2023) introduced authentic leadership defining it "as a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development" (Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 94). Finally, supportive leadership was proposed, describing it as helping facilitate goal accomplishment by guiding subordinates to be effective and learn in their roles (Bagdžiūnienė et al., 2022).

HRM practices. As it is seen from Table 2, three papers examined HRM practices as the antecedent for employee resilience. Two of them (Rurkkhum, 2023; Zhai et al., 2023) followed the approach of strategic HRM arguing that strategic HRM practices took effect jointly as a system (bundles of strategic HRM practices were used in the empirical part, for instance, practices based on the ability-motivation-opportunity model). The third paper introduced a new construct, namely crisis-induced HR practices, describing them as HRM practices deployed by management in times of crisis (Asamoah Antwi et al., 2023; Lai & Wong, 2020).

Personal factors. Among the personal factors fostering employee resilience psychological resilience (consisting of adversity and positive adaptation) (Wut et al., 2022), employee creative self-efficacy (can help employees to face challenging circumstances, fulfil anticipated objectives and utilise resources effectively) (Prayag &

Dassanayake, 2022), and mindfulness, which relates to the ability to cope with unexpected circumstances and new situations (Brown et al., 2007; Kowitartawatee & Limphaibool, 2022), were proposed.

Job resources. As it is seen from Table 2, the proposed job resources differ, but all are highly relevant in the light of crisis. Thus, organisational resilience, referring to “the ability to recover from adverse situation by managing existing company resources and capabilities” (Chowdhury et al., 2019, p. 1219), was proposed to improve the employee resilience (Wut et al., 2022). Another paper demonstrated that organisational learning, defined as a group learning experience used to gain knowledge and advance skills, strengthened resilience (Blaique et al., 2023). Drawing upon communication challenges in the pandemic period, the next study encouraged organisations to use event communication to connect with employees, to correct imprecise reports about the organisation’s event-related policies and confirm information about employees’ situation during the event with the intention to increase resilience (Tuan, 2021). While analysing teaching setting, the task challenges, which were at a different level due to exceptional circumstances during COVID-19, were proposed as antecedent (Saleem et al., 2023).

RQ3: What underpinning theories were used in the research?

The analysis revealed that theories of organisational and social psychology, such as broaden-and build theory (4 papers), COR theory (4 papers), person-in-situation theory (1 paper), social identity theory (1 paper), social cognitive theory (1 paper), and job demand-resource theory (1 paper), were widely adopted. A short description of these theories is provided below.

Broaden-and build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001) argues that organisations through their practices enhance favourable emotions within their employees, such as pride, joy, interest, contentment, and love. These positive emotions enable the employees to develop both physical and psychological personal resources that act as a reservoir when facing future challenges. Thus, over time, positive emotions help people build enduring positive resources, undo lingering negative emotions and fuel employee resilience (Fredrickson, 2001). Drawing on the study findings, organisational learning (Blaique et al., 2023) or strategic HRM practice systems (Zhai et al., 2023) were proposed to bring about positive emotions within employees.

One paper (Wut et al., 2022) was built on the person-in-situation theory, which suggests that the behaviours of employees depend on the organisational context. More specifically, the theory describes how situational influences may either restrain or invite the expression of individual differences (Hirst et al., 2011). Following the person-in-situation theory, Wut et al. (Wut et al., 2022) argue that organisations could provide employees with more resources to deal with uncertainty and the organisational resilience is an example of such external resources.

According to the social identity theory, individuals tend to define themselves through group membership (Tajfel, 1978). Typically, two forms of identification are relevant in the HR setting: organisational identification and professional identity that distinguishes people from other professionals. The findings of this paper revealed that social identity theory was employed to explain the way the servant leadership might increase employee resilience (Peng et al., 2022).

The main idea behind the COR theory is about the resource-oriented behaviours of individuals striving to obtain and retain their resources to ensure self-preservation (Hobfoll, 1989). Resources are defined as personal characteristics, conditions,

material, or anything individuals perceive to help them attain goals, leading individuals to gain and protect these resources, since losing resources can cause stress and then negatively affect their goal attainment (Hobfoll, 1989). In the analysed studies, COR theory was used to explain the organisational resources, namely leadership (Prayag et al., 2023), event communication (Tuan, 2021) or strategic HRM practices (Rurkkhum, 2023), to build the employee resilience.

One paper was based on the social cognitive theory, which implies that employees' shared beliefs about their capacity to undertake challenging tasks and activities can contribute positively to organisational outcomes (Prayag & Dassanayake, 2022).

Finally, the job demand-resource theory was employed in one study (Bagdžiūnienė et al., 2022). This is a well-known and widely used theoretical approach that divides job characteristics into two categories: demands and resources, which differ in their impact on employees and their jobs (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Demands require employees' physical, mental, or emotional efforts, whereas job resources help attain work-related goals, reduce stress caused by job requirements, and promote personal growth (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Thus, following this theory, job resources (feedback, autonomy) were proposed to strengthen the employee resilience (Bagdžiūnienė et al., 2022).

RQ4: What are the key practical implications the studies suggested?

Although the analysed studies proposed a variety of suggestions, tools for thoughts how to implement the research findings in the daily managing of people, the majority of practical implications revolved about enabling organisational context. Several examples are provided below.

Leaders in public institutions should create a good environment and atmosphere, in order to encourage face-to-face communication, to create a safe, comfortable and bright workplace, to help employees to determine a clear professional plan and organise trainings to improve career satisfaction (Peng et al., 2022). Hotel managers were invited to emphasise offering work resources in emergencies, such as working remotely, using a shift system, or having fewer work hours (Asamoah Antwi et al., 2023). Ongoing employee development and fluid teamwork, initiatives to improve work-life balance, and transparent communication systems aligned with organisational values were proposed (Prayag et al., 2023). Flexible work arrangements or individualised coaching and mentoring at work were mentioned as measures helping employees in meeting their work goals while adapting more effectively to stressful experiences (Blaique et al., 2023). Appropriate supervisory support for employees, autonomy and clarity in tasks during stressful times and open communication were proposed to serve as means for increasing resilience (Crane, 2017).

Summing up, all analysed research are in line with the approach that employee resilience building on an organisational-level ought to be "a must" practice in business entities.

Conclusions

The paper aimed to explore promoting factors for employee resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic using a systematic literature review. More specifically, the paper focused on four aspects, namely, construct conceptualisation, factors for enhancing employee resilience, underpinning theories used in the research to ground the relationship between antecedents and employee resilience, and core practical

implications provided in the studies. For doing this, a systematic literature review was conducted. For the analysis, 13 papers were selected.

The findings allow to state that although the studies acknowledged the variety of approaches towards employee resilience, nonetheless, they treated it as a capacity which can be developed. Four clusters of promoting factors to enhance employee resilience in the light of COVID-19, namely leadership, HRM practices, personal factors, and job resources, were revealed. For explaining the relationship between constructs, broaden-and build theory and COR theory prevailed, although other theories, such as person-in-situation theory, social identity theory, social cognitive theory, and job demand-resource theory were employed. Finally, practical implications were mainly related to enabling organisational context.

This paper might provide several practical implications. Drawing upon findings, the core notion refers to the fact that employee resilience can be enhanced by managerial means. Among these means, leadership and HRM are of high importance. Thus, investments in leadership training and in HRM practices that corresponds to the respect, openness and connectivity principles, are really welcome.

The paper has several limitations. First, for the analysis, papers from the Web of Science database only were included. Seeking for the generalisation of the findings, further studies should include papers from SCOPUS and/or another database. Second, in order to elaborate on deeper insights, future research should analyse not only factors promoting employee resilience, but also conduct in-depth analyses regarding moderating and/or mediating elements in the promoting factor-employee resilience nexus. Finally, as employee resilience might be context-specific, in further research, industry should be taken into consideration.

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Annex 1. Paper included in the analysis (Source: Authors' own research results/contribution)

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