

Opinion

HR under fire—The role of HR in war time

Yonatan Shertzer

Human Resources Department, Peres Academic Center, Rehovot 7610202, Israel; yshertzer@gmail.com

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Abstract: On the morning of the 7th of October, the Hamas organization launched an attack on Israel, causing over 1200 casualties and kidnapping over 250 Israeli citizens. Israeli workers, their families, and the country's economy were all directly impacted by the war. The effects of the war were vast and created many challenges for the HR departments in various organizations. The HR departments had to respond to these issues with promptness, determination, and thoroughness. I will discuss the functions of HR departments during times of war in this opinion piece. They include eliminating ambiguity and uncertainty; providing managers with the tools they need to handle such circumstances; maintaining resilience and high morale; overseeing volunteer programs; maintaining contact with the reserve forces; providing support to war-affected families; carrying out an effective workforce reduction without jeopardizing the company's ability to continue operations; and managing workplace tensions.

Keywords: HR practices; crisis management; internal communication plan; business continuity plan; organizational resilience

1. Introduction

1.1. HR Challenges during wartime

The attack that began on the seventh of October was an unusual national emergency, even for a country as familiar with crises as Israel, which had known its share of wars and conflicts. Beyond the existential threat, the attack unavoidably had a significant impact on the Israeli economy and all institutions and businesses operating in Israel. Numerous workers were called up to the reserves, and a significant portion of business activity was impacted (certain industries, such as tourism or leisure, were obviously impacted more than others).

This resulted in many workers going on an unpaid vacation, having their salaries cut, or facing layoffs. Many factories located in combat zones or targeted areas were promptly closed, and many workers were unable to report to work due to the threat of missiles, a lack of protected spaces, or restrictions to the educational system (which meant that parents had to stay at home).

Furthermore, companies that depend on foreign labor, whether it be Palestinian or other foreign laborers (many countries immediately evacuated their citizens), suddenly found themselves without manpower (thousands of Israeli citizens volunteered to help with various agricultural tasks because agriculture was particularly damaged). As in many crises, beyond the economic implications, the events of the war influenced organizational and personal resilience, morale, satisfaction, and productivity at work (Markovits et al., 2014; Sharifian et al., 2023; Beam and Spratt, 2009).

There are certain distinctive features of the war that started on 7 October 2023, that set it apart from past conflicts. First, there was a lot of ambiguity and uncertainty during the war. There was a great deal of confusion, and organizations had no idea how long the conflict would last. Naturally, this also has to do with a lack of information regarding paying compensation to organizations whose operations were hampered by the conflict. Second, the scale of the conflict. Israel had not seen a war of such magnitude in at least fifty years. In this current war, most citizens know someone who has been murdered, maimed, raped, or abducted. The scope of it also involves the horrors of this particular kind of assault. This includes severe violent rapes, the decapitation of victims, the kidnapping of children, and occasionally massacres involving the entire populace of a settlement. Thirdly, even though some nations, like the United States and Germany, backed Israel internationally, Israel was forced to deal with antisemitic sentiment and the prosecution of Jewish communities abroad.

1.2. HR role during wartime

Any organization's HR department's work is greatly impacted by each of these concerns. The organizational human-related infrastructures that enable proper organizational conduct even in an emergency are mostly the responsibility of human resources departments (Vardarlier, 2016). This includes organizational processes that these personnel are directly in charge of. These processes include information about employees' status, termination of employment, recruitment of employees, employees' mental health, emergency preparedness training, and giving managers the tools necessary to handle a wide range of challenges that they are not accustomed to facing (Wooten and James, 2008).

In this section, I will examine the six major roles of HR during the recent war in Israel:

1.2.1. Handling tensions and anxieties among employees

Following an incident of this nature, which can be characterized as a national trauma, workers feel extremely scared, anxious, fearful of what lies ahead, and powerless (Collings et al., 2021; Elhadi et al., 2020). Many organizations strive to be a source of stability for their employees, if only in their specific realm. In this context, organizations and HR departments try to reduce feelings of isolation by fostering a sense of community within the organization (Palovac, 2020). They also try to reduce feelings of hopelessness and despair by offering employees and their families mental health hotlines, counseling services, and employee assistance programs.

Another important aspect of helping the employees is restoring routine (Rabenu and Tziner, 2021; Kim, 2020). Reestablishing a routine for organization is crucial for providing stability in a turbulent world. It also helps to divert attention, restore control, and eradicate the sense of powerlessness that permeates the circumstances (Channa et al., 2019). Organizations can also provide guidance and training on a psychological or mental level (many have provided personal resilience training for their employees and their families), much like many organizations did during the COVID-19 crisis (Moghanibashi-Mansourieh, 2020).

1.2.2. Internal communication plan

Effective internal communication is associated with higher organizational and personal resilience, which in turn boosts employees' sense of belonging to the organization (Alhuwaymil, 2022). This relationship has been identified in several studies as a predictor of various organizational outcomes, including turnover, productivity, profits, and satisfaction (Quirke, 2017; Kulachai et al., 2018). This is especially important during times of crisis or war, when information is extremely needed (Covello, 2003).

There are several key elements for a successful internal communication plan. Firstly, it should be a continuous storyline of messages that are recurring (Rogala et al., 2016). All information channels should convey factual, accurate information that is consistent. In times of war, these messages might include the security and safety of the workers, gratitude for the employees' hard work, a sense of unity, nationalism, and business continuity. Secondly, the plan should include frequent updates. Since everyone is constantly in need of information, it's critical that there be frequent updates—ideally daily, but at the very least once a week (Heide and Simonsson, 2021). Thirdly, the information must be customized and accessible. It's critical that all staff members have access to this information, not just those with access to organizational software such as e-mail. The information should be accessible for employees who might not frequently check a single channel by using a variety of channels (Björck and Guhl, 2023). Fourth, as things change, organizations must be ready to modify the internal communication plan and make sure the plan stays relevant and effective. They should be receptive to criticism and make the necessary modifications (Ma and Zhang, 2022). Lastly, the content needs to be modified for every kind of population. The organization must consider the various needs and backgrounds of the employees when creating and executing the internal communication plan. (Björck and Guhl, 2023). An internal communication program during wartime should include the following issues:

1.2.2.1. A coherent explanation of the organization's current state

Companies must present as accurate a picture of their current state of operations as they can. The employees ought to be aware of the financial effects of the war on the organization as well as what lies ahead. Rumors and pessimistic predictions replace information when it is scarce (Zaumane, 2021). In this regard, it is advised to inform the staff of both what the management knows and what they don't know, as it is reasonable to assume that a great deal of information is unknown, or, in other words, to be honest and transparent with the employees (Connolly, 2021).

1.2.2.2. Up-to-date and accurate information

The internal communication program should include relevant information concerning the immediate needs of the employees. This may include emergency protocols (for example, what to do during missile attacks), evacuation procedures, emergency shelters, communication protocols, and reporting safety concerns. Also, information should contain details on salary or benefits concerns that were affected because of the crisis (Lu et al., 2017).

1.2.2.3. Establishing channels for sharing information higher up the organization

It's critical to stay in touch with the "organizational pulse", so the plan should include a call to action for employees to communicate their struggles, anxieties, and administrative concerns (Zhang et al., 2022). This could be carried out by "round tables", surveys, discussion forums, and open meetings with managers. (Seebauer et al., 2019). Organizations need to provide staff members with a way to voice their concerns, make suggestions, and ask questions. Also, managers and HR personnel need to engage in active listening while promptly and openly addressing their concerns (Cristófol et al., 2020).

1.2.2.4. Policy in all areas pertaining to diversity and inclusion

Companies frequently hire people from a range of backgrounds, including Muslims and Jews, ultra-orthodox and secular, and leftists and rightists. During such an explosive time, the organization needs to know how to establish some rules for organizational conduct while still being sensitive to all populations (Kuknor and Bhattacharya, 2021). For example, some organizations had to confront situations in which employees posted messages on social media who were supportive of the Hamas. On the other hand, organizations had to make sure that Muslims and Arab employees wouldn't feel threatened coming to work because of the general sentiment in Israel.

1.3. Administrative procedures and preserving employee function

Even in times of war, which are certainly quite emotional, an organization must ultimately continue to operate (Janka et al., 2015). In this regard, it is noteworthy that the employee's continued employment at the company depends on the organization's survival. The organization's management and HR personnel must balance conducting themselves in a way that demonstrates consideration, empathy, and care while keeping their company operating smoothly (König et al., 2020; Fox et al., 2020).

Human resources play a variety of roles in this section. These roles include personnel planning that fits the organization's tasks and needs, occasionally carrying out painful cost-saving procedures (such as salary reductions, unemployment benefit expenditures, and organizational reductions), and managing a contact list (which entails knowing the whereabouts of every employee in the organization). One of these roles is also keeping clear and updated status reports so that management can see the most recent and updated information (Vardarlier, 2016).

Preserving the continuous functionality of the organization also includes applying procedures for remote working for employees who can't come to work since there are no safe spaces, their spouses are in the reserved forces, or their children have no schools because of the missile threat. The organization had to make sure to establish clear guidelines for working from home or supply employees with relevant equipment such as laptops, cameras, Zoom licenses, etc. (Schulz et al., 2023).

1.4. Training managers to handle the challenges of war

The role of human resources ultimately consists of providing guidance, outlining policies, and communicating, but ultimately, managers are the ones who will work with employees daily (Jones and Saundry, 2012). We must remember that managers are also people and are not emotionally detached from the situation, and therefore there

is no reason to assume that they can handle the emotional complexity of the situation (Ketelaars et al., 2024). Nevertheless, they still need to set a personal example for their staff and model resilience. Organizations should provide managers with a range of tools from human resources to facilitate talks, stay in touch with staff, listen to their employees, be inclusive, and create a safe emotional space (Longweni and Kroon, 2018). Past studies have shown that organizational resilience, as well as the resilience of individuals and teams, can be enhanced by training (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Robertson et al., 2015).

1.5. Supporting the employees

During times of war, HR must be especially compassionate and caring to every employee and recognize the crisis' emotional toll on their employees. The HR department is ultimately responsible for ensuring that all employees are contacted and that they also need to maintain contact with their families. Managers within the organization may assist with this.

During the war, a few companies made changes to their benefit plans to make them more appropriate for the circumstances. For instance, companies purchased goods for their employees from companies located close to the Gaza Strip. Another example is that many company events were cancelled due to safety concerns or the inappropriateness of celebrating or rejoicing during these hard times. Naturally, some benefits were specifically directed to employees who were on the reserved forces or supporting their families (such as care packages).

1.6. Managing volunteer programs

The war's most poignant and likely only good outcome was an increase in volunteerism across Israel. This rise in volunteering is common in times of crisis (Gray et al., 2023; Yang, 2021), but even compared to other crises, it was quite extraordinary. Families that were forced to leave war zones were housed by families from safer areas; soldiers were fed hot meals by civilians, and there were endless queues for blood donations. Additionally, thousands of psychologists and other therapists volunteered to work with traumatized civilians; actors and singers visited hospitals to entertain and cheer up injured patients; and during the war, civilians donated money, food, clothing, toys, and furniture for those who had lost everything.

There was also this enormous volunteerism and caring wave within organizations. Numerous organizations have launched extensive volunteer programs. Some of the programs focused on organization personnel who were directly impacted by the conflict, while others were more general in nature and supported a range of causes, such as evicted citizens, soldiers, aiding in agricultural tasks (such as harvesting), purchasing produce, etc.

Beside the benefit of helping other people, recent research has indicated a positive correlation between volunteering and certain workplace attitudes, including organizational identification, retention (Bauer and Lim, 2019), organizational commitment (Jones, 2010), happiness, and self-esteem (Stukas et al., 2016).

2. Conclusions and practical implications

The term “human resources” encompasses the intricate nature of HR work, particularly in times of war. Although people are the organization’s most valuable resource, we are constantly reminded of the “human” aspect of “human resources,” that people are not machines or materials, and how challenging it is to function at work in these hard times.

The role of HR during the war contains this important balance between being empathetic or caring for this objectively difficult situation and the continuous functioning of the organization. In this section, I will elaborate on the key takeaways from this paper:

HR ought to be able to support the employees and their well-being (Maddox-Daines, 2023). HR can give the employees access to counseling services and mental health resources to help them deal with the emotional and psychological effects of the conflict. They should adapt their guidelines for more flexible work arrangements. Allowing employees to work from home, adjusting schedules, and implementing leave of absence procedures can all assist the employees in juggling personal obligations and needs during trying times.

I have mentioned the importance of communication and transparency (Erickson, 2021): Anxiety can be reduced, and a sense of security can be promoted, by regularly informing all employees about the circumstances, corporate guidelines, and available support resources. They should also initiate activities that can foster a sense of community among employees and give them a sense of belonging during trying times.

Alongside being empathetic and reducing anxiety, HR still must maintain operational continuity and business resilience (Herbane et al., 2004). This means planning and mobilizing the workforce. HR may be involved in handling staff shortages brought on by relocation, leave, or deployment. This can entail hiring temporary workers, reassigning current employees, making salary cuts, or rearranging the workload and priorities. This also means they need to review policies and procedures, examining and updating leave, security, and safety policies to make sure they remain relevant in the present circumstances. HR should be able to supply management with an accurate picture of the HR data relevant to understand the possible implications of any potential disruptions or modifications to operations brought on by the conflict.

Maintaining this balance is especially important during periods of high employee stress and conflict, as is the case in Israel’s complex and diverse workplace (where Jews and Muslims work side by side, for example). Due to the increased stress and emotional strain of workplace conflicts, HR may need to get involved by ensuring that every employee feels safe and respected, irrespective of their nationality, background, or viewpoints on the conflict (Pradies et al., 2021).

3. Limitations and future research

It is significant to remember that this paper was written in the midst of the ongoing conflict, which is a highly extreme and unclear circumstance. As time passes, organizations and various institutions gradually return to a routine that has a different

nature and challenges. This return to some sort of routine occurs even though the war is still ongoing and will likely continue in some capacity for a long time in some parts of the nation.

Organizations will need to find more long-term solutions for a variety of problems once the emergency starts to subside. These solutions include policies for working from home, ongoing absences of key personnel, new locations (for structures that were damaged or evicted from), new training requirements, new performance evaluation standards, etc. These new issues and the long-term effects of the solutions this paper suggests should be the focus of future research.

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