Employee Resilience of Moroccan MSMEs in the face of crisis: Exploratory Analysis of Human Resource Management Practices

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Abstract : Micro, small and medium enterprises are vital to the Moroccan economy : In 2018, SME constituted more than 90% of the total number of operating businesses. (HCP, 2019)

However, despite their significant contribution to economic growth, their development has been constrained by challenges particularly the covid-19 crisis. Some of them have been capable to survive and adapt. In this context, organizational resilience is seen as one of the possible innovative solutions for surviving in a dynamic context and periods of great turbulence.

This paper aims to better understand how MSME leaders manage to survive in a turbulent environment. In other words, it investigates how they mobilize resources and skills and deploy dynamic capabilities to develop effective and sustainable practices.

Our exploratory research was conducted on June - July 2024. The interviews took place through phone calls with managers of micro, small and medium moroccan companies.The data were then subjected to thematic analysis in accordance with the recommendations of (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The results from this exploratory qualitative research are intended to give a general overview of human resource management in some Moroccan SMEs analyzing their structure, their Human resources and their HR practices, etc.

One of the main conclusions drawn from our research is that employee resilience in Morocco is increasingly recognized as having a positive effect on several aspects of the business. Managers interviewed also point out that certain HRM practices play a central role in employee resilience. However, other practices remain neglected by managers in these companies.

Keywords : Employee Resilience, HR Practices, MSMEs, Qualitative study

1. Introduction

For many years, organizations have been faced with numerous economic and financial crises. (Cavallaro, 2020) : The stock market crash of October 1929, the Second World War, the crisis of the European monetary system in 1993 and the subprime crisis of August 9, 2007.

Morocco has not been spared with these crises, with riots and protests against rising food prices, epidemics (plague, smallpox, typhus and cholera), natural disasters (3 consecutive years of drought) and businesses largely dominated by the informal sector, etc.

It's an environment faced with high competitiveness, unpredictability, internationalization of activities, technological development, climate change and serious recurrent crises. The world has become so vulnerable that the only certainty is uncertainty. Isabelle Luschevici's quote (2020) " In a crisis, the only thing predictable is the uncertainty that follows " has a particular resonance in today's volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment.

The coronavirus crisis also known as covid-19 is a recent example, it has become a household name around the world in recent years.

As soon as it appeared on March 2, 2020 in Morocco, Covid-19, a virus just a few nanometers in size, swept the planet with devastating effects for millions of lives and many economies and societies. (Bureau International du Travail, 2022, p.9) : The virus spread rapidly around the world forcing governments to implement containment measures to reduce transmission rates and avoid saturation of hospital emergency departments. (Tušl et al., 2021)

As a result of these social restrictions and health fears, the pandemic affected all sectors and facets of economic life worldwide, leading to a significant slowdown in global economic activity and rising unemployment rates in many countries.

Also, the covid-19 crisis has proven to have a direct impact on the company's objectives, operating methods and the ways employees understand, organize and do their work. It has also increased focus on well-being at work and the need to do more to help employees with stress and burnout. Therefore, it was crucial for companies to rewrite their own rules, think of ways to adapt and reconsider their practices, particulary in terms of their Human Resources Management. As Jeffrey Immelt (2017) said : " HR must be profoundly convinced that it must transform itself, and that doing so is a matter of life or death. " (Minbaeva, 2021, p.6)

However, as Albert Einstein pointed out : "In the midst of every crisis lies great opportunity". In this context, the resilience of both people and organizations is critical. In fact, It is an essential component for an organization to flourish in today's environment.

Empirical and theoretical studies show that resilience is the most direct factor explaining why companies can successfully overcome crises. (Chen et al., 2021). Resilience as a subject has attracted growing interest, first in a number of scientific disciplines, then in management science. Studies suggest that it is necessary for organizations to develop their employee's emotional resilience so as to fight back unexpected threats and challenges; thus, being able to respond to crisis in a more effective manner. (Näswall et al., 2019)

An organization's capacity to survice and develop is contingent on employee capabilities, especially those proactive in nature. (Lee et al., 2013)

However, despite the crucial importance of employee resilience and the increasing interest lately in understanding the factors that contribute ot its development, research remains limited. (Bardoel et al., 2014; Kossek & Perrigino, 2016).

The present paper is needed to study how organizations are behaving in the face of new challenges from a Human Resources Management perspective. This decision is based on many reasons :

- The possibilities of human resources to influence beneficially organizational resilience has been recognized in previous studies (Bardoel et al., 2014; Khan et al., 2019; LengnickHall

et al., 2011, as cited in Myllykoski, 2021) especially with this crisis proven to have a direct impact on the company's objectives, operating methods.

- The dynamic relationship between individual resilience and human resource practices has yet to be explored empirically. (Bardoel et al., 2014; Cooper et al., 2019)

Given the specificity of the Moroccan context, this study seeks to answer the question : What are the human resource practises through which managers of micro, small and medium moroccan enterprises strengthen the resilience of their employees ?

Our research will therefore be structured as follows : The first section proposes a brief literature review of resilience and the importance of reinforcing it through HRM by mobilizing two theories : conservation of resources theory and positive psychology theory.

Next, we will present in the second section the methodology used to conduct this research. Finally, the last section is about analyzing and discussing the results.

2. Literature review

2.1. Resilience : a unique concept explored in different fields through time

Resilience is a complex concept that has evolved considerably over time and has been examined in a variety of fields and disciplines : physics, psychology, ecology, management sciences, etc. Indeed, resilience is a common research topic in the science field but it has received less attention in management research, particularly in business and organizational management. Its evolution thus deserves special attention.

Although the term resilience has been used for decades, ecology was the first scientific discipline to adopt the term from a theoretical perspective. Thus, in 1973, Holling introduced the concept of resilience for the first time in the field of ecology in his paper entitled " Resilience and stability of ecological systems ": The concept refers to the ability of systems to absorb changes of state variables, driving variables and parameters, and still persist. (Holling, 1973, p.8). The concept of resilience subsequently gained ground in psychology in the 1970s, focusing on at-risk children who have experienced adverse conditions in terms of biological inheritance, perinatal conditions, poverty, daily instability and environmental circumstances. (Richardson, 2002). Researchers were surprised to find that these children, despite the precarious conditions of life, were able to overcome these difficulties, flourish and become responsible, liberated adults. (Bardoel et al., 2014).

With the multiplication and intensification of catastrophic events jeopardizing the sustainability of companies, the concept of "organizational resilience" has emerged. (Tennakoon & Janadari, 2021). Attraction to the subject was born out of the fragility and vulnerability of organizations faced with numerous economic, financial and political crises and natural disasters.

Based on the literature review, there appears to be no universally accepted definition or standardized set of variables that definitively influence resilience. (Chen et al., 2021b; Hillmann & Guenther, 2021). Due to its ambiguous nature, organizational resilience is defined in various ways: as a capacity, a characteristic, an outcome, a process, a behavior, a strategy, a type of performance, or a combination. (Hillmann & Guenther, 2021, p.2)

Pasteur (2011) suggests that organizational resilience can be viewed through either active or passive perspectives. Passive resilience, also known as adaptive resilience or soft resilience, is perceived as the ability to "bounce back" after a crisis or disaster. It reflects "how quickly an organization returns to normal without suffering major losses, damages, or disruptions."(Sawalha, 2015, p.3). This definition draws on research in physical sciences, where an object retains its initial shape after being stretched or struck.

In this second conception, also known as hard resilience (Proag, 2014), organizational resilience extends beyond the ability to return to its initial state. It is characterized by proactive activities

aimed at developing new capabilities and exploiting opportunities to thrive in uncertain and challenging environments. Firstly, it involves the implementation of proactive and transformative activities throughout the organization's lifecycle to develop specific responses to situations and prevent crises. (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). Additionally, it can be continuously developed and improved within an organization. Therefore, in active resilience, learning is emphasized, and it is believed that " by developing new skills, the organization's capabilities are enhanced " (Tennakoon & Janadari, 2021). Finally, resilience is synonymous with prosperity due to its ability to leverage challenges and unexpected changes. (Altintas, 2020).

2.2. Strengthening Employee Resilience

Resilience is a complex and multidimensional concept that has been approached from various theoretical perspectives.

2.2.1. Conservation of resources theory

Developed by (Hobfoll, 1989) to understand stressful situations ranging from war to natural disasters and poverty, the conservation of resources theory is based on the idea that individuals seek to preserve, protect and develop resources to avoid stress and that the potential or actual loss of these precious resources is a threat.

Within this framework, the theory identifies three main categories of resources obtained, conserved or protected by individuals: (Dodeler et al., 2018)

- Object resources : corresponding to the various objects that a person possesses and that have value due to their usefulness or the status they confer (house, car, clothes, furniture...).
- Social resources : refer to the means conferring social status through links with families and the social environment.
- Personal resources : include both personal competencies and personality traits (creativity, optimism, hope, etc.).
- Energy resources : Having time is not considered a value in itself, but it does enable us to preserve resources or acquire new ones.

In this context, the conservation of resources theory is based on two founding principles : the first is the primacy of losses, which states that resource losses have a greater impact than resource gains The second principle is the investment of resources, suggesting that available resources must be enhanced and invested to prevent resource loss. Individuals adopt a proactive approach by developing strategies to optimize their resource capital or prevent its erosion. (Hobfoll, 1989).

Based on this argument, we propose that resilience, seen as a personal and a social resource, can be valued and developed over time.

Resilience can be strengthened through effective management and preservation of personal, social, and psychological resources. For instance, an individual who maintains strong social connections during difficult times is better equipped to face stressful situations and may demonstrate greater resilience. In the workplace, appropriate HR practices can serve as a potentially effective intervention approach to develop and sustain employee resilience. For example, providing a motivating and challenging work to empower employees and use their skills are elements that can improve employee resilience. (Guest, 2017)

2.2.2. Positive psychology theory

Much of the discussion on resilience is rooted in positive psychology theories (Khan et al., 2019). Indeed, resilience researchers in the late 20th century focused significantly on the human capacity to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity. (Wright & Masten, 2005)

In this context, Luthans, (2002) began studying positive organizational behavior and defined it as " The study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and

psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and managed effectively to enhance performance. ". (Luthans, 2002, p.4)

(Luthans et al., 2008) also suggested that resilience plays a significant role in stress management and positive organizational behavior.

Thus, relevant resilience practices, referred to as "proactive" practices, include human resource management strategies aimed at improving employee well-being and performance. (Luthans et al., 2010). For example, an HR practice that enhances resilience could be the implementation of employee assistance programs and support for coping with the loss of a loved one. (Bardoel et al., 2014).

Therefore, positive psychology theory and the conservation of resources theory provide a solid theoretical framework for considering HR practices as one of the elements that strengthen employee resilience.

3. Research methodology

Our exploratory research was conducted on June - July 2024. The interviews took place through phone calls with managers of micro, small and medium moroccan companies. We choose managers as the interviewed population as " they are best positioned to have a comprehensive view of the organization " (Hambrick, 1981)

Our analysis unit consists of seven interviewees who meet our inclusion criteria : manager (male or female), he/she experienced the covid-19 crisis at work, each having at least 5 years of experience in the organization and the last criteria is the size of the company (Very Small Company or Small and Medium Enterprise), coming from different sectors of activity.

This table provides a description of the interviewed managers, the locations of the sampled SMEs, and the various sectors to which they belong.

Table 1 : A description of the interviewed managers

Intervie wee	Years of experience	Number of employees	Activity	City
Int_1	47 Years	20	Stationery, furniture, office supplies, and IT equipment and consumables	Fès
Int_2	15 Years	10	Industrial Electrical Maintenance	Marrakesh
Int_3	5 Years	15	Cleaning, Security/Guarding, Landscaping, Pest control…	Casablanca
Int_4	12 Years	9	Cleaning, Security/Guarding, Landscaping…	Témara
Int_5	8 Years	13	Cleaning	Rabat
Int_6	14 Years	21	Security/Guarding	Marrakesh
Int_7	15 Years	13	Importation/distribution of computer hardware, accessories, consumables	Casablanca

Source : Authors

Semi-structured interviews have been the preferred qualitative data collection method. The

reason for choosing this method is because it provides a degree of freedom to the interviewees aiming for maximum objectivity. This approach helped to uncover aspects that were not considered in our conceptual analysis.

Therefore, we conducted these interviews using an interview guide. According to Baumard et al. (2007 as cited in Léon, 2017), in a semi-structured interview, the interviewer relies on a structured interview guide to address a series of pre-defined topics. The interview guide is divided into three main sections or themes :

- How Human Resources are perceived ? to evaluate how managers see their employees and examine the importance of the HR function in these companies
- The concept of resilience, its significance, and its consequences: to measure the level of awareness concerning this subject in Morocco in the context of the covid-19 crisis.
- Factors and HRM practices that may be associated with employee resilience : to understand how employee resilience may be triggered and strengthened in organizations.

Once all the interviews had been completed, they were transcribed. The transcription stage proved rather difficult, given that the interviewees were reluctant to have their words recorded, which led us not to comply fully with this methodological rule. We therefore opted for the note-taking technique.

The data were then subjected to thematic analysis in accordance with the recommendations of (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a rarely recognized method of qualitative analysis, but is widely used in social sciences and psychology. (Roulston, 2001). Based on our note-taking, this method enables us to carefully reread the data, perform data coding, identify the main themes, carry out an analysis and write a report.

4. Results

The following results are drawn from the interviews with managers regarding employee resilience and the management of Human Resources :

4.1. How Human Resources are perceived ?

Since the study was exploratory in nature, one of our main goals was to learn how managers saw the added value of the HR function and the importance of their employees.

The results indicate that managers do recognize the value of their employees as a valuable resource and that they are the driving force for the company to achieve its goals.

Int_2 : " We value our employees as our most valuable resource. Our team is our driving force. We are able to provide our clients with the highest caliber industrial maintenance services while ensuring their long-term success and satisfaction because of their dedication, skill, and commitment to perfection."

Int_3 : " Inspired by a genuine sense of service, united by the culture of human resources and driven by our ability to act at the national level, our company brings to every intervention: A proven track record and expertise with the only goal of identifying and choosing men and women who, in addition to their technical skills, will be able to fit into each company's culture."

The success of business have also been linked to the human resources management :

Int_5 : " The goal of personnel management is to place qualified candidates in appropriate positions and help them advance while maintaining the success of our business. To this end, the manager is always listening to its employees in order to facilitate the proper execution of planning and adhering to all directives from site managers."

4.2. The emergence of Employee Resilience in Morocco

However, we live today in a world with intensifying competition and rapidly changes of both the external and internal market environment (Liu et al., 2023) as said by a manager in one of

the interviews : "Our company has established three major priorities : products' availability, variety and quality in a market crowded with highly competitive competitors. "

Therefore, in today's competitive world, an employee is expected to be flexible, adaptable to changes, and constantly able to shape himself to new demands - in other words, a resilient employee (Ribeiro, Mattos, Antonelli, Canêo, & Goulart, 2011 as cited in Costa et al., 2019)

The interest for this concept has relatively grown these recent years. However, only limited research is available which emphasizes on HR practices and policies that directly affect the factors associated with employee resilience. (Ilyaz & Rizvi, 2021). Thus, despite the contribution of HR Practices to improving organisational performance, their impact on enhancing employee resilience is underexplored and more research is needed in wider management and organisation literature. (Bardoel et al., 2014; Kossek & Perrigino, 2016).

In the same route, the interviewees noted that it is imperative to draw attention to the growing interest of this new concept in Morocco :

Int_2 : " We have to adjust to issues with clients and competitors on a daily basis, but, it is more important during times of crisis, and the employee should be able to adapt regardless of the situation."

Int_5 : " Employee resilience is a topic that is crucial, but unfortunately, it is not well developed. We do not talk about the concept a lot as managers of small enterprises are usually more preoccuped with the technical tasks and supervising others rather than ensuring their employees are resilient. "

4.3. Evaluating the importance of the HR function in companies

Employee resilience is perceived crucial to the survival of companies by many interviewees. Thus said, after our discussion with the majority of interviewees, we have noticed that there is not a formal structuration of the HR department or at least an employee in charge with the human resources management of the company.

Int_1 : " The company employs twenty permanent employees. Five are concerned with the commercial stuff. Two in charge of the technical elements (maintenance) and others are given the logistics tasks. For the human resources management, I am in charge with the recruitmet and the preparing of trainings if needed "

Int_7 : " We are structured as follows : One Sales manager / Two Sales reps / One Executive assistant / One Secretary / One Accountant / 2 Storekeepers "

4.4. Exploring HRM Practices that may influence employee resilience

When asked about the HRM practices, most interviewees talked about recruitment and training. These are the areas to which companies attach particular importance.

4.4.1. Recruitment

Recruitment and selection are the most critical steps of human resource practices due to their role in attracting and selecting the best-qualified applicants. (Huda et al., 2014)

Recrutment is usually done by the manager himself. All of the interviewees have mentioned a determined number of steps they follow to recruit new employees. They also talked about certain points a candidate needs to have for each position required.

Int_6 : " For example, the hiring of gardiennage staff follows a nearly rigid profile; the most common level of instruction required is bac or bac+2. The candidate must be in sufficient physical condition (1,75 et à partir de 70 kg). Upon arrival, candidates follow a path that starts with an experimental period according to the terms of articles 13 and 14 of the code of work "

Some managers talked about the importance of the last step of the process of the recruitment (Integration) to create a good working environment.

Int_3 : Integration of an employee on the first day of his arrival is very important. An experienced member of staff will guide him or her enabling the candidate to gain an in-depth

understanding of our customer's needs and to clearly situate his or her role.

Int_6 : " Real learning takes place in the field. New recruits discover the inner workings of the company through : a societal spirit of proximity, reduced hierarchical levels, straightforward, pragmatic relations that encourage autonomy and initiative…"

4.4.2. Training

Training has been considered by many managers and supervisors as an asset to employee resilience :

Int_6 : " I think that among the essential factors is the intervention of the organization through the training of employees and their personal development. A wide range of training programs are available to help upgrade, develop and optimize our staff's skills. "

Int_4 : " All our staff undergo additional training specific to their duties. Some of this training is provided by specific institutions, while others are carried out by the team leader. Through an agreement with the OFPPT, the company organizes a training course for its employees when they integrate their job the first day and systematically every 6 months. "

There are other few organizational factors that have been recognized that may promote employee resilience such as : Communication :

Int_4 : " Periodic meetings with existing staff and management enable us to : report any problems encountered, analyze the services provided by our agents, exchange ideas for improving our work and react effectively to the above. "

Int_3 : " We organize a weekly meeting with all supervisors to address : Site problems, Customer complaints and State of equipment on site. "

5. Discussion

5.1. Employee Resilience: A rapidly emerging concept

" For most of its history, the assumption in the vast majority of HRM studies has been that the sole purpose of HRM is ultimately to improve financial return to shareholders " (Beer et al., 2015, p.5). Indeed, since the HR function's contribution is rarely quantified in concrete terms, HRM has not been seen as a value-adding component in many organizations. (Guest, 2017).

This has been the case until the 1970s when human resources management was inspired by the human relations school. This movement recognized the fundamental importance of psychological climate on workers' behavior and performance: factors such as motivation, interpersonal relationships and employees' emotional well-being resulted in more productive workers. The main aim of the human relations movement was to establish more collaborative, participative and motivating work environments, where employees would feel valued and encouraged to actively contribute to the company.

(Wilson, 2016)In fact, people are the main protagonists in achieving organizational results and as Mallak (1998) stated : "A resilient organization needs a resilient workforce " (as cited in Wilson, 2016, p.5). Employee resilience was then born, a concept that has received increasing attention in academics over the last years and recently by managers in Morocco.

Positive psychology suggests that organizations that build resilience in their employees will be more adaptive and successful over time (Luthans, 2002). Thus, relevant resilience practices, referred to as "proactive" practices, include human resource management strategies aimed at improving employee well-being and performance (Luthans et al., 2010).

In the same line and building on the conservation of resources theory, we propose that resilience, viewed as a resource, can be valuable and developed over time. Appropriate HR practices can effectively develop and sustain employee resilience and organizational resilience.

5.2. Fostering Employee Resilience through Organizational Factors

A person's capacity to be resilient and flourish is influenced by both internal and environmental factors, as discussed in the literature on resilience. Internal variables also called personality factors or individual resources. These factors appear to have significant impact on how a person interprets and deals with the crisis. They may include : positive selfesteem, optimism, robustness, self-efficacy, adaptability, perserverance and strong social skills, etc. (Ledesma, 2014).

Apart from these personal factors, researchers have stressed the organization's key role in building the resilience of its employees : employee resilience is a malleable skill that can be developed and exploited through a A resilient organization needs a resilient workforce human resource practices. (Bardoel et al., 2014). These practices contribute to the development of psychological capital which emphasizes employee wellbeing, happiness, and resilience as a route toward enhanced employee performance. (Seligman, 2002; Youssef & Luthans, 2005, as cited in Cooper et al., 2019)

One of the main factors talked about about by researchers is organizational learning. This can be achieved through training and development, mentoring, and career support to improve employee knowledge, skills, and abilities conributing therefore to the employee's resilience. This is in line with the resource based view which views organizations as a broader set of resources that not only add value for customers, but also help the organization to achieve its goals. Researchers add that a firm's competitive position depends on its valuable, rare, and inimitable capabilities and core competencies rather than on its static resources. (Newbert, 2007). Thus, organizational leaning is a recommended skill to be developed by organizations. Another major factor is social support. This concept plays an important role in widening an individual's pool of available resources and replacing/reinforcing other resources that have been lacking. (Hobfoll, 1989, p.8). Human resource practices should provide a safe workplace, employment security, and opportunities for social interactions. (Cooper et al., 2019). Also, according to (Asfar and Saeed 2010, as cited in Kakkar, 2019), research indicates that the relationship with the manager plays a decisive role in the work of the subordinate, this dynamic is formulated in the social exchange theory which shows that human resources management plays a vital role in developing positive employee perceptions towards their manager : when employees perceive their organizations as committed to their health and wellbeing, the workforce tend to develop psychological links which yield positive outcomes. (Baumeister & Alghamdi, 2015).

Besides, recruitment is the fundamental function where employees enter into an organization. In today's current economic climate, organisations need to make correct effective assessments to spot talents : According to Andrew et al., (2019) : " Being able to make effective assessments also improves efficiency ". (Andrew et al., 2019, p.4)

This was aligned with the interviewees point of view who agree with the need to effectively select their recruits, regularly improve their employees skills and focus on developing their social supports.

6. Conclusion

The aim of our study is to explore employee resilience in micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in Morocco. We try to identify the main relevant human resources practices that can be put in place to strengthen employee resilience. One of the main conclusions drawn from our research, according to the managers we spoke to, is that employee resilience in Morocco is increasingly recognized as having a positive effect on several aspects of the business. They also point out that certain HRM practices play a central role in the development of employee resilience. However, other practices remain neglected by managers in these companies.

In addition, our study makes several significant contributions.

On a theoretical or scientific level, this study aims to shed light on employee resilience. This provides a contribution to the existent literature on resilience as it is still descriptive and outcome focused. Furthermore, very few studies in the context of covid-19 have been conducted with organizations on Moroccan territory about employee resilience. (Daghmoumi, 2023). Our study makes an empirical contribution by focusing specifically on the Moroccan context.

On a practical or managerial level, the study will enable managers of enterprises to assimilate the importance of enhancing the resilience of their organizations and their employees. Empirical validation of the research hypotheses will contribute to a better understanding of the role of human ressource practices in times of crisis in the resilience of companies.

However, our research remains very limited. This is one of the first of its kind—an exploratory qualitative study. As such, the findings of this study cannot be applied generally.

Overall, identifying a set of human resource management practices that enhance resilience is a crucial first step towards developing research that includes resilience into the human resources management field. Therefore, organizations are invited by researchers to conduct HR practices which promote resilience of their human resources.

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