

# HUMAN RESOURCE STRATEGIES DURING AND POST-COVID-19 IN SOUTH AFRICAN FARMS

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## ABSTRACT

*The global Covid-19 pandemic that occurred in the midst of the fourth industrial age has disrupted operations in various organizations. The organizations in the agriculture sector were equally impacted by the conditions of Covid-19. Employees were high impacted by changes that farms had to make to be effective in terms of performance and productivity. The human resource management of agricultural systems had to play a huge role in ensuring a balance between the well-being of farm workforce and the goals of the farms. This research aimed to explore human resource management strategies used by farm managers to cope with Covid-19 conditions and are suitable to use post-Covid-19. It also addressed how these strategies can be coupled with the gradual changes to adapt in a fourth industrial age. The external desk research method was adopted to fulfill the aims of the study where secondary data was extract from online research papers. The research concluded that farm managers consider up skilling and reskilling of workers a priority to cope with Covid-19 conditions and adapt with future conditions that require advanced farm skills. However, more research is required in the field of farm human resource management in South Africa.*

**Keywords:** Human Resource Management, Covid-19, Agriculture Systems, Labor Management

## INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic affected numerous industries on a global level. Each organization in their respective sectors had to adjust instantly to remain effective despite the rapid change experienced on a global scale. The agriculture industry was equally affected (Kharbikar et al., 2020). Farm managers had to put their human resource management strategies together to plan and implement effectiveness in farms. The alert of Covid-19 being present in South Africa, along with other countries, triggered consumers into panic mode. This lead to customers shopping for food beyond their normal shopping scale. Pressure was increased in the agriculture industry to meet the sudden high food demand (Karodia et al., 2020). Above that, there was a threat on food security due to restricted access to food markets, closure of programmes such as school feeding schemes and food banks, wastage of fruits, vegetables and dairy products caused by disturbances in their transportation to local markets. The broader agricultural systems were affected by the outward ripples of these shocks (Ayanlade & Radeny, 2020).

The South African government declared agricultural services as essential which meant farm employees had to work during the pandemic. The human resources department in each farm

had to ensure effectiveness in the operation of the farms. This had to be done through prioritizing training, human relations, employee selection, labour relations, strategic planning, health and safety (Mangaleswaran, 2016) to suit the Covid-19 conditions. Organizations in the agriculture sector had to come up with strategies that align with their goals without compromising their employees.

An issue of labour availability in the agriculture sector arouses. This is a labour intensive industry which includes planting and harvesting of crops, processing and livestock production systems (Thompson, Bir & Widmar, 2019). Quarantine measures, restrictions on labour movements, deaths and illnesses restricted labour in many regions. Designing safe working conditions for workers and resolving labour shortage is important to avoid future disastrous consequences for food supply and security (Li & Li, 2018). In the case of Covid-19 not being contained, farms are concerned with the free and safe movement of farm workers. Most of these employees are in housing or work lines that are not compatible with maintaining social distance. Working in a farm is more common in older age groups which are declared to be vulnerable to the virus. This raised concerns on how farms are going to fill labour shortages sufficiently. The adaptability of agricultural systems is also of concern where permanent changes may occur (Cortignani, Carulli & Dono, 2020).

Farms managers also faced an issue of farm system resilience. Large scale farms that are greatly dependent on labour hired externally are less likely to be resilient to the pandemic. The pandemic occurred in the midst of the fourth industrial revolution in most sectors globally. Farms, like many other organizations, seek measures that will still be effective after the pandemic. Various farms have an interest in investing in technological tools and measures to reduce being dependent on human labour and increase efficiency in farming (Di Vaio et al., 2020). These measure are to also boost resilience of agriculture systems. However, it raises uncertainties about employability and employment in a post Covid-19 world. The pandemic had an impact beyond the labour force of farms where export restrictions limited global market access and trade of agricultural produce (Bochtis et al., 2020).

This paper will explore human resource development strategies used by farm managers to plan and implement effectiveness in South African farms during and post Covid-19. It also aims to address a gap in agricultural human resource development in a fourth industrial age within a South African context.

## **Background to Study**

Human resource has been a concern to many industries since the global changes brought about by the fourth industrial revolution. This is an age where human resources are faced with challenges in recruiting, competition for talent, training and development of employees, compensation that is competitive and fair, management of a workforce that is multigenerational, employee wellness and benefit initiatives (Li, Hou & Wu, 2017). The agriculture sector is a labour intensive industry and human resource management should be part of the priorities of the agriculture organization. It is vital to improve the level of skills in the agriculture industry since challenges, such as climate change, food security, technological advancements (Masud et al., 2017) and now the Covid-19 pandemic, keep increasing in the industry. The South African agriculture industry has heightened challenges due to it being a developing country. Above the global challenges, the agriculture sector of the country experiences shortage of water, droughts, expensive farming equipment, rising demand for food, gender and race inequality (Taljaard & van der Walt, 2018), shortage of farming skills, tough economic conditions, land redistribution

and urbanization (Shilomboleni, 2020). These issues play a major role in the treatment and performance of farm employees. Young highly educated and knowledgeable farmers are slowly entering the industry due to carrying on with family farming businesses or a simple love for agriculture where they are first generation farmers. This industry was previously dominated by elderly uneducated female basic workers and the managerial positions were mostly filled by white elderly men. The multigenerations that are coming together in the basic and managerial operations of farms have a lot of advanced and traditional farming methods to share with each other for the betterment of the industry. Their methods can play a role in shaping the training and development of farm employees to suit the challenges and changes brought about by the industrial revolution and the pandemic.

## **Purpose of Study**

The occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic in the midst of a global shift towards adapting in a fourth industrial age has resulted in overnight changes in most economic sectors. Most of these changes were gradual since the fourth industrial revolution was foreseen unlike the pandemic. One of the economic sectors affected was the agribusiness sector. Like every industry, the agribusinesses have human resource departments which deal with employees and were highly impacted by the pandemic. They were also most likely to be impacted by the fourth industrial revolution. The world is shifting more towards a technologically advanced workplace and the agriculture is slowly adopting technological operations. South Africa is a developing country and has farm workers that are mostly old age who are used to traditional farming practices. According to the World Health Organization, people over the age of sixty years are more vulnerable to the Corona virus. The human resource department in an organization is responsible for the employees and their performance in the organization. Human resource practices in South African agribusiness is not well studied. This paper serves to look into these practices during the pandemic and post-pandemic in a South African context. It also looks to address the direction in which the agriculture sector is headed globally and how the South African one is catching up with the resources it has and circumstances it is experiencing, such as shortage of water, electricity and the lack of advanced skills, as a developing country. The study is also beneficial to the researcher as an aspiring young agripreneur who seeks to adopt advanced farming in an effective manner and make farming fashionable enough to attract other young people into the industry. This is of importance since food security is an issue in Africa where the human population is also on the rise. Adopting advanced ways of farming to produce high quality and high quantity farm products is a priority in the agribusiness. This goal is highly dependent on the different employees in the farm. South Africa is also facing a high youth unemployment rate which is also made up of graduates. This paper could also assist in pointing out which scarce knowledge is needed by farm employees from other industries such as that of information technology and engineering. It will also assist farm managers in knowing skills to seek for future employment or how to upskill their employees.

## **Study Objectives**

This paper reviews the human resource development management strategies used by managers in the agriculture and agribusiness industry in South Africa. The results could however be applicable beyond this country. The aim of the review is to extract information and obtain guidance for agribusiness managers on effective human resource strategies post Covid-19 in a

fourth industrial age environment. It also aims to obtain guidance for future research in agribusiness human resource. The specific research objectives of this study is to (1) identify the human resource strategies used by managers in South African farms during Covid-19; (2) identify human resource practices that agriculture managers could use to prepare for a post-Covid-19 environment; (3) identify human resource practices that agriculture managers could use in a fourth industrial age environment.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The control of production in a farm is achieved through people, whether they are in supervisory, management, administrative or production positions. The selection and management of these individuals makes a huge difference (Brasier et al., 2006). In an ever changing world due to the fourth industrial revolution and the sudden changes by the Covid-19 pandemic, it is important to form strategies that will effectively manage employees. To create effective strategies, there has to be concern for employees as much as there is for productivity (Mangaleswaran, 2016). There has to be action that is purposeful and the understanding of human resource management development is also important. The issues of human resource management, organization and human resource development and competence in farms need to be addressed.

### **The Concern about People and Productivity**

Some farmers ensure long-term viability of their organization through seeking improvement in production. However, some farmers have limited interests in recycling profits and increasing production yield which leads to deteriorating farms. The attitude of a manager towards productivity can have a strong influence on the output of workers. Employee performance is usually enhanced by workers believing that they are part of a successful team and are making a contribution towards a product that is valuable (Ullah & Zheng, 2014). There is a direct connection between farm and employee productivity so the concern for both is important. Attending to employee well-being is vital especially in conditions that the pandemic has put people. Employees consider fair pay, job security, safe working conditions and courteous treatment as important (Ragkos et al., 2018). These factors have been threatened recently. Agriculture systems have experienced disturbances that resulted in reduced returns during the South African lockdown which led to the salaries of certain employees being cut down. The disturbances also resulted in certain people losing their jobs to reduce the costs of the farm. Working conditions that are safe have been of high concern since people had to maintain physical distancing, wear masks at all times and constantly sanitize. Organizations had to prioritize these measures for the safety of employees (Kharbikar et al., 2020). A considerate treatment towards all employees was also vital especially towards workers that displayed the Covid-19 symptoms and elderly workers. Trust between employers and an employee is also another vital contributor to the productivity of the agriculture systems since it sometimes requires employees to work additional hours. Activities such as packaging and delivery of farm produce usually occurs in the early hours or late hours of the day so employees are expected to carry out their responsibilities with integrity even beyond call of duty. Management in turn is expected to value employees and meet the terms and condition on employment that was agreed upon (Karodia et al., 2020).

## **The Management of Labour**

Labour management that is effective requires an understanding of its concept. For an example, the advertised salary scale could affect the quality of the applicants that the organization recruits. The amount of on the job training needed can be determined by the qualifications of the people hired (Choruma & Odume, 2019). Human errors can be very costly and farms could not afford this during the pandemic. Mistakes in a farm such as milking cows into the main tank causes contamination which leads to the milk having to be discarded. These types of mistakes can arise due to employees being required to perform multiple tasks in the farm to save on costs of hiring more workers or due to retrenchment of certain workers. To avoid this, agricultural systems have kept employees they consider highly knowledgeable, skilled and most valuable where cutting down on workers had to be done (Bochtis et al., 2020). The correct application of labour management principles includes selecting the correct set of tools to deal with similar future challenges and to adapt in a post-Covid work environment in the fourth industrial revolution (Griffin, Shockley & Mark, 2018). Some farms had to adjust their practices in labour management. These practices include a sudden adjustment in job design where certain workers were made responsible for a product from beginning to end, also keeping in mind that farming takes time to produce output.

### **DETERMINED ACTION**

Concern and understanding with the absence of action is purposeless. Some employers face hardships with confronting employees regarding their difficulties, poor performance and changes that might negatively impact them (Scholz, 2017). Obtaining a set result by carrying out a strategy can assist in creating opportunities from challenges. The use of action is not always the best option when human behavior is concerned. This is due to some difficulties disappearing as time goes on such as that Covid-19 will disappear or become the new normal as time goes on. However, there can be obstacles to action or the action can be ineffective. Ineffectiveness results from poor measures of planning, correction or evaluation (Ullah & Zheng, 2014). Obstacles can be due to limited financial resources required in a short period of time to equip employees with suitable skills. Fear of creating enemies through action was another obstacle. Reducing salaries of workers can cause demotivation which has a potential to birth poor productivity. Therefore the appropriate action is important in the management of a workforce (Li & Li, 2018). Careful planning is important before implementing especially during the Covid-19 pandemic where most organizations panicked about balancing the needs of an employee and organization. Most organizations strived for fast positive changes. Effective strategies are fundamental to successful management of workers and the farm. People management has become more responsive due to the changes brought by the pandemic (Cortignani, Carulli & Dono, 2020).

## **Human Resource Strategies used by Farm Managers for Effectiveness during Covid-19 Training and Development**

The South African farming sector is filled with an aging workforce. The Department of Health had declared that the old age individuals are more prone to the Covid-19 virus. On the other hand, workplaces value experience more when hiring people. Most of the old people that work in farms have worked there for many years and have exceptional farming experience

(Sharma et al., 2020). However, farming is a labour intensive industry so in the case of an old age worker unknowingly contracting the virus and still working the field, their health is greatly threatened. Due to this, farms had to develop middle aged employees to perform tasks that were not initially in their job descriptions (Hafez & Attia, 2020). The training for essential tasks in the farm had to be done speedily on the job. These tasks include feeding livestock on a daily basis, irrigating crops, operating farming machines, harvesting to meet the demands, maintaining the crops and livestock since there was also a livestock disease outbreak in KwaZulu-Natal during the lockdown (Aday & Aday, 2020).

## **Health and Safety**

Every workplace was ordered by the South African government to take Covid-19 precautionary measures. Farms already have biosecurity measures put into place such as reducing unnecessary human traffic on the farm, disinfecting vehicles and farmers wear, isolating and vaccinating new livestock or poultry, and manage pests and weeds in crops. These measures catered mostly for the animals and crops (Hafez & Attia, 2020). The measures that concerned the workforce had to be implemented with the Covid-19 outbreak. These measures included workers sanitizing at different points of the farm after entering the farm and completing tasks. Masks had to also be worn and working in isolation where possible was practiced. The well-being of employees was also taken into consideration through allowing them to take leave and not stress about not getting paid (Lal et al., 2020). Virtual support was also offered to those that had lost close family members during these times. Symptoms were also checked on employees on a daily basis before working such as checking the temperature and asking if they have been sneezing, coughing or have an itchy throat (Kharbikar et al., 2020).

## **Labour Relations**

Many businesses suffered when the South African lockdown was implemented. Most of these businesses included the informal sector. This informal sector is made up of the vegetables and fruits street vendors which are a huge market for the farmers (Sharma et al., 2020). The decrease in demand from this market had an impact on the sales that farmers made. The activities of product such as sowing and preparing land were also impacted due to uncertainty. To save costs, some employees were asked not to work until there was certainty. Other employees had their salaries reduced (Aday & Aday, 2020). In this act, there were regulations that had to be considered such as rights of the farm employees that are in the Sectoral Determination 13: Farm Worker Sector. Some of these rights include the minimum wage which is R16.25 per hour and R146.28 per day (Griffin, Shockley & Mark, 2018). This had to be applied where hours or days of employees were adjusted due to the changes in operations and saving on labour costs. The application of deductions in wages had to be done with written permission from employees as well (Lal et al., 2020). The managers also had to consider extending paid sick leave which is one day for every twenty-six days worked. This was due to that if any employee suspects that they might have the Covid-19 virus, they had to be in isolation for fourteen days. In farms where employees faced retrenchment, the reasons had to be explained verbally and in writing (Fernando, 2020).

## **Strategic Human Resource Development for High Organization Performance**

It is vital to understand the significance of strategic human resource development when an agriculture system aims to become a high performance organization in a business sector that is modern. Shrivastava (2018) defines a high performance organization as an organization which reaches a financial state that is better than that of rivals in the industry over a long period of time. This is done by being able to adjust and adapt to changes in a quick way by managing for short and long term. The management is done through putting together and aligning management structures and treating employees as the main assets of the organization as well as continuous improvement of core capabilities. There can be limitations when an organization attempts to adapt to changes by changing infrastructure, policies and processes without human capital being touched on. For changes and strategies to be effective, people who understand the vision of the organization are needed. All aspects of human resource development need to be examined to form effective human resource development strategies.

### **Individual Development**

Individual development forms part of the human resource development where the job performance of an individual is improved through new skills and knowledge. It is more focused on the development of a single employee rather than that of a collective. It is considered to be short term in the effect of it. It can occur during training activities, on the job learning or any formal setting (Antle & Ray, 2020). This development forms the foundation to the strategic success of the organization. Adaptation to a changing business environment is easier when individual development is properly done. One of the roles of an agriculture human resource development professional is to be a change agent (Mikhailushkin et al., 2018). They currently play a major role during the changes brought about by the pandemic and technological advancements. They facilitate the transferring of job related learning and individual learning to individuals to assist them in adapting to changing of the operational landscape. This approach can be adopted in a circumstance similar to that of the pandemic which came with radical change.

### **Career Development**

Career development is another aspect of human resource development in an organization. This is a long term approach in individual development of employees. Aptitudes and interests of employees are analyzed and explored to align and grow their skills for their benefit and that of the organization. The structures of human resource in an organization monitor and resource jobs and position growth to achieve a long term individual employee progression and sustainment (Rademaker & Jochemsen, 2019). This is done under considering the long term goals of a farm. This approach is more effective when dealing with changes brought about by the fourth industrial revolution since they are gradual. Most farms are taking a technology advanced path to gain competitive advantage over other agriculture systems. Employees with career progression that align with the core capabilities of the farm stand a better chance in progressing in their careers and being better positioned in the farm. Human resource development provides counsel and guidance in the progress of employees (Mikhailushkin et al., 2018).

## **Performance Management**

Short term efforts of an organization to improve performance are validated by system of processes part of performance management. Information is tracked, examined and analyzed by these systems to keep up with organizational and individual performance (Kamble et al., 2020). The aim of the tasks carried out by these systems is to develop short term solutions to performance issues and enhance the effectiveness of the organization quickly (Yadav et al., 2020). Human resource development with respect to performance management guides the organization and the individuals to gain great success by achieving short term results. It emphasizes small and tactical changes in the activities of the organization to better the outcomes of the business (Rademaker & Jochemsen, 2019). This aspect of human resource development strategies was important during the sudden strike of Covid-19. It was responsible for ensuring safety measures between farm workers. It was also responsible for quick short term decisions taken such as halting sowing activities for crops usually sowed in autumn in South Africa. Harvesting of market ready produce had to be done speedily to meet demands in supermarkets. However not all produce reached the market since sales by informal sector, restaurants, hotels and other food selling businesses were closed due to Covid-19 regulations. This affected the performance of farms.

## **Sustainable Human Resource Practices**

Agriculture systems need to be sustainable beyond the pandemic. For this to a success, various aspects of human resource need to be considered. Sustainability in agriculture can be seen as a set of strategies. In a study by Ferreira (2018), it is mentioned measurable and empowerment standards should be maintained for sustainability.

## **Measurable Standards**

Contracts were seen as a factor where some farm employees understood it to add to their job security. With the introduction of new operational ways in farms, contracts should have been explained in a manner that employees understand and made aware of their legal rights. Another standard is the wages of the employees (Chipfupa & Wale, 2018). Some employees do not understand the wage structure of the farm even though majority of farms pay the appropriate minimum wage set in South Africa. Benefits such as housing, water, electricity, medical aid, retirement funds and funeral covers, form part of the standards (Taljaard & van der Walt, 2018). With the labour required on farms such as working overtime and working in unfavourable conditions, benefits such as these are necessary. Another standard is the health and safety of employees. The agriculture sector uses complex machinery and safety of employees is vital due to that and other hazards that come with farming such as the high crime rate in farms. The well-being of employees is another standard which includes elements such as family planning, stress management, abused counselling and other elements (Rademaker & Jochemsen, 2019). Abuse and poor family planning are a major concern in South Africa and can affect how workers perform at work. These standards can ensure continuous high performance from employees even beyond the pandemic.

## **Empowerment Standards**

Communication with management is a vital standard. Management should make easier communication avenues between them and the rest of the employees. The importance of communication should be made clear to all employees (Shrivastava, 2018). Adequate representation is another important standard where employees should be well represented in managerial levels. Discrimination and harsh treatment is a vital standard as it affects how workers view themselves within the organization (Kamble et al., 2020). The way that employees feel at work can affect their mental health and performance. Another important factor is involving basic workers in decision making. This can improve the attitude of workers and increase a positive perception. Literature has shown that there is high commitment to the organization from employees that see themselves as part of the organization (Antle & Ray, 2020).

## **Agriculture Human Capital in Fourth Industrial Revolution**

Employees are affected by implementation of new technologies. The agriculture sector is slowly adopting new farming technologies. This puts traditionally skilled farm workers at a disadvantage. Highly skilled people will be recruited to align with the operations and goals of the organization. Agriculture operational systems are expected to be coupled with big data and artificial intelligence (Li, Hou & Wu, 2017). Production forecasting, seeding soil, farm management, irrigation and farm machinery will be converged into a single unit. Although this might put employees without advanced skills at risk, it will solve many current agriculture issues through precise optimization. These issues include reduced wastage of water, fertilizer and pesticides which results in a high input cost (Yadav et al., 2020). The inputs and outputs in the agriculture sector are sometimes inconsistent. The technological advances will be very beneficial to the performance of the farms. The performance of employees largely depends on their knowledge and skills.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This paper adopted the external desk research method where information was collected and research done outside of the boundaries of an organization. This type of study was used secondary data where research was done by reviewing previous research findings and gaining a broader understanding of the field being explored (Shevchuk & Kalyazina, 2019). This method was chosen due to the nature of the research which is to review what other researchers have gathered regarding human resource development in agriculture systems during and post Covid-19. It also looked at the constant changes being made in the workforce of farms to adapt in a fourth industrial workplace. It was also suitable for the study due to the time constraints of the research. This method was advantageous because of the readily available data and it was cheaper to conduct (Zaridis & Logotheti, 2020). Relevant and important academic papers were identified through conducting a systematic search of databases that were electronic. International and national articles were found on Google Scholar, Science Direct, Research Gate and the University of KwaZulu-Natal online library using agriculture and human resource search terms.

The data was analyzed by combining and comparing the different information gathered from online research papers. The information collected was to fulfil the aims of the study which was to explore the strategies of human resource development used by farm managers during and post Covid-19. Another aim that the data fulfilled was the gap in agricultural human resource development with relation to the fourth industrial revolution in South Africa.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Employers in the agriculture industry have struggled to find and keep employees that are qualified in the farm. This has been the norm on a global scale even before the Covid-19 pandemic. General to any other industry, the occurrence of Covid-19 has been a catalyst to reinventing the future of work. The new technologies that come with the fourth industrial age will encourage new skills since they necessitate new roles in the workplace (Fernando, 2020). The new quickly changing workplace will benefit employees through them being taught new behaviours, mindsets and values. Most industries have moved from digitizing relationships between the organization and customer to digitizing the relationship between the employee and employer (Kinoshita, 2019). Trends such as innovation, digitization and automation have been fast tracked forward. Organizations that are capitalizing on post Covid-19 opportunities are positioning themselves well in order to attract and retain their talent once the situation stabilizes. Those that are failing to change with the times are risking being left behind in their respective industries and exposing their employees to risks of layoffs and financial distress.

Agriculture systems, like any other systems, should keep certain changes on their radar so as to cope with future catastrophes, such as Covid-19, that will require change in an organization overnight. One of the changes should be rapid reskilling of farm workers. Dealing with an abruptly or constantly changing environment would be easier for employees that have been taught how to build a learning mindset. The creation of new roles will be accelerated by the quick adoption of new and advanced technology (Langemeier & Shockley, 2019). New technologies such as drones in farms open up new roles like drone piloting. This shifts from human physical application of pesticides and provides precision irrigation. There are also technologies that do not need a farmer to physically collect data such as that of soil conditions, water conditions, livestock wellbeing and crop progress (Scholz, 2017). This saves the organization time and resources. It also equips farm workers with advanced farming skills. Upskilling and reskilling workers allows them to move from operating in one part of the farm to a different part since Covid-19 brought about changes in the workload creating a resource allocation imbalance.

Another change should be that of management and leadership competences. Covid-19 has impacted humans as much as it has impacted the economy. It has driven uncertainty and fear due to sudden changes such as routine and work environments. No organization had a plan for the sudden change brought by the pandemic so managers had to adjust strategies of the organizations to keep up. Focus on empathy by leadership skills and corporate culture is as important as the sudden improvement of infrastructure and digital skills in organizations (Di Vaio et al., 2020). Since farm employees are mostly made up of the elderly who were announced most vulnerable to the virus, it was vital to practice empathy towards them. Empathy had to also come to play towards employees who have lost loved ones due to the virus. This assists in making the work environment a better one for improved performance of the workers. Numerous organizations have been retrenching employees due to financial challenges brought by the pandemic (Cortignani, Carulli & Dono, 2020). Addressing the fear and uncertainty of jobs in farms

workers with empathy was of high importance since most workers are from rural backgrounds and are mostly breadwinners.

A culture of transparency and trust needed to be on the radar as well. Employees have learnt how to do work with reduced supervision. With reduced labour in agriculture systems, trust has played a vital role from the delivery of quality feed for livestock to the delivery of farm produce that is of consumption standards. This element has always been an important factor but was done with high supervision and verification (Lal et al., 2020). Building of adaptive teams in the name of working remotely for employees that do not require performing tasks physically at the workplace has become a priority. Individual wellbeing was crucial since the lockdown put pressure on the private lives of employees as well as on their wellbeing (Hafez & Attia, 2020). Mental health provision should also be expanded as most employees suffered from depression and anxiety due to the pandemic and the impacts it brought about. Wellbeing frameworks should be developed to deal with the challenges employees face in the workplace beyond the pandemic (Sharma et al., 2020).

### **Objective One**

Some managers in South African farms paused sowing of crops usually sowed in autumn. Individual development was also put into practice where employees were required to perform tasks beyond their job description. Some farms cut down on employees to save on costs that come with high labour. These measures were to benefit the organizations. The actions taken to benefit employees were health and safety measures that aligned with the Covid-19 government regulations. Some employees that were not vulnerable to the virus were reskilled for the short term goals of the agricultural systems. Virtual support was offered to employees affected by the virus. They were also granted sick leave when required. Employees were required to work in accordance with the demand for labour at certain farms where they had to work when there were tasks required to be completed.

### **Objective Two**

Like most organizations, the farms are slowly putting together human resource strategies to operate under after the pandemic or in the new normal. This is done by considering the implementation of the strategies that worked well under the pandemic combining them with those that were set out to be used in the long term goals of the farm for the betterment of the employees and the farm. Some of the strategies that seemed to work well during the pandemic include requiring employees to work required hours to save costs, activities that could be done remotely were done in that method and operating with precision to avoid certain tasks being done by multiple workers such as managing crops and livestock. This is largely done by exploring the measurable and empowerment standards for the sustainability of agriculture systems.

### **Objective Three**

The fourth industrial revolution came various changes in many industries. South African agriculture is yet to experience these changes. Career development within organizations has become an important aspect of human resource development. This is due to employees having to know their interests and upskill or reskill themselves or by the organization to align with the core

capabilities of the farm. Human resource development of farms need to benefit the performance of employees and the organization. Most farms seek stay ahead in the agriculture industry and keep up with the times.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is vital for any organization in this age to be alert and adaptive to unexpected events. These events can be external and pose threats to the viability and performance of the organization. They also create uncertainty in the workforce and the management should be aware of this. The Covid-19 pandemic drove organizations into creating strategies to manage the challenges that surfaced in their operations due to the sudden changes. Strategies that managers construct need to be sustainable. The findings of this study show the importance of constant planning for the organization to be fit for a forever changing world. Human resource development of farms keep in mind the South African socio-economic conditions when applying solutions to global issues. A certain strategy that works in another agriculture sector in another developing country does not simply mean it will work in South Africa as well. The agriculture sector operates with the economy, climate and people. All these components are different to each country. South Africa is currently experiencing a high rape and domestic abuse rate. There is also increasing farm murders. The country is also experiencing food and job insecurity. There is discrimination occurring and poor family planning. In the midst of all these issues which are very common in rural areas where farms are located, employees need to catch up with the rest of the world in terms of their performance. The foundation of organization performance should start with the well-being of workers which perform the labour intensive activities to those in managerial positions. Employees should really be treated like the asset of the organization.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

Future research should consider exploring the effectiveness of the human resource management strategies under the Covid-19 conditions in a post-covid-19 environment. It is also worth looking into ways in which technology can play a vital role in the agriculture workforce since the fourth industrial age is upon us. There is also a gap in how human resource management of farms are upskilling and reskilling the elderly workers that have been using traditional farming skills for many years. The strategies used by South African agriculture systems human resource should be compared to that of other countries that are currently in a state that South Africa could face in the future. For instance, the South African population is predicted to increase in the next decade. This increases a threat in the food security of the country. Farmers need to find ways to produce food at high quality and quantity. This requires employees that are skilled in advanced farming. Exploring strategies such as those used in India but in a South African context can broaden approaches that managers use to improve performance in farms. The farm workers should also be involved in research studies where they can share their opinions on their workplace challenges.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, a farm needs effective strategies to survive and adapt to changing conditions. This can be achieved by the top management focusing on goals that are long-term while front-line workers focus on goals that are short term such as day to day activities. Despite

human resource management barely being a skill set for producers, it should be a priority for a successful farm operation. The major radical changes brought about by the pandemic, in addition to the gradual changes caused by the fourth industrial revolution, have showed the importance of human resource management and development in farms. The study also concluded that the agriculture sector plays an important socio-economic role in South Africa. This is true to the employment opportunities, food security and eradicating poverty. The pandemic has disrupted the socio-economic state of farmers. The reforms done will assist in the health, efficiency, well-being and employability of farmers in the future.

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