

The Impact of COVID-19 on Recruitment and Selection: A Digital and Network-Oriented

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
<p>History Received: May 10, 2025 Revised: June 15, 2025 Accepted: June 21, 2025 Published: July 01, 2025</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords COVID-19 Recruitment & Selection Digitalization Network-oriented Talent Acquisition Human Resources</p>	<p>Purpose This systematic review comprehensively examines how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced recruitment and selection practices in organizations, particularly in relation to digitalization and network-oriented approaches.</p> <p>Methodology A systematic search of peer-reviewed literature was conducted through electronic databases, such as PubMed and Scopus, since January 2020. The search terms combined "COVID-19" or "pandemic" with "recruitment," "hiring," "selection," and "digitalization. Two independent reviewers have screened titles, abstracts, and full texts against pre-defined inclusion criteria. Bias was assessed, and findings have been synthesized narratively, identifying common themes, benefits, and challenges across diverse global contexts.</p> <p>Findings This review revealed rapid and widespread acceleration in the digitalization of recruitment and selection processes, including the mandatory shift to virtual interviewing, online assessments, and digital onboarding. It increased reliance on network-oriented recruitment methods, such as professional social media platforms and enhanced employee referral programs, driven by talent shortages and remote work imperatives. The synthesis likely identifies benefits such as expanded talent pools and increased efficiency, alongside significant challenges, including digital stress, the complexity of maintaining organizational culture and candidate experience in virtual settings, and navigating governmental or cultural barriers in global hiring.</p> <p>Conclusion This systematic review offers robust synthesis of the literature on how the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped recruitment and selection practices through accelerated digitalization and network-oriented approaches. The findings provide crucial insights for HR professionals adapting to the new methods of talent acquisition and long-term innovations in HRM.</p>

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1. Introduction

In March 2020, COVID-19 was emphasized as a global pandemic by the WHO. It introduces the world to challenges like strong health systems, changing patterns of work, and altering economic activities (Sarkar & Clegg, 2021). COVID-19, as compared to SARS, required extensive lockdowns and immediate work-from-home arrangements. This pandemic situation introduces widespread unemployment and issues of motivation to continue for the remaining workforce (Azizi et al., 2021). In 2008, the financial crisis faced by HR officials made them capable of handling the pandemic, like restructuring jobs and dealing with new demands of distant working conditions. HR in all established organizations plays a vital role beyond their traditional functions by guaranteeing the health and safety of employees in evolving work environments (Gonçalves et al., 2021). Organizations immediately started to review existing roles and work structures to become more flexible to tackle the challenges of COVID-19 (Lund et al., 2021).

Recruitment and selection were two areas that posed greater challenges to HR officials because of the lockdown; the traditional face-to-face interviews became impossible during the pandemic. This situation increases the demand for the adoption of digital tools and exploring different approaches to find talent and acquire them. For example, in Sri Lanka, before COVID-19, it was uncommon to work from home, but at that time, they immediately planned to work during lockdown by keeping in view the safety of their workforce (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021). The whole world is focusing on working and managing work from home and relying on digital tools for continuity (Battisti et al., 2022). Organizations shift towards network-oriented methods of recruiting, depending on employees' referrals, social media platforms of professionals. At that time scarce labor environment of business poses greater challenges for HRM, like digital stress, organizational culture management, and in an online setting issue of proximity favoritism (Lai & Cai, 2023). The speed of these changes demanded a high-level response for the survival of organizations (Aggarwal et al., 2023). It becomes mandatory for the HR department to make a comprehensive plan for recruitment and selection in a pandemic situation (Battisti et al., 2022; Siddiqui et al., 2025).

There is extensive literature to find HR activities during COVID-19; there remains a need for a systematic blend of intensive focus on the forces of digitalization and network-oriented approaches for the acquisition of talent from a diverse workforce during this pandemic. This work provides insights for future research on recruitment models and the post-pandemic talent market. This systematic review responds to the query about the influence on recruitment and selection practices in organizations, particularly concerning digitalization and network-oriented approaches due to COVID-19.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This systematic review is theoretically anchored in a conceptual model that links the external shock of the COVID-19 pandemic to key changes in HRM, specifically in recruitment and selection. The model integrates two prominent theories: Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory and Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) theory. The pandemic introduced new job demands (e.g., remote work, technological stress) and required a rethinking of job resources (e.g., digital tools). Simultaneously, organizations had to find new ways to recruit candidates with the right Abilities (digital skills), Motivation (to work in a new environment), and Opportunities to succeed, as theorized by the AMO model. This framework guides our synthesis of the literature, allowing us to

explain not just what changed, but also why these changes occurred and what their long-term implications are for organizations.

Table.1.Theoretical Framework

Variable	Description	Literature
Independent Variable	HRM Practices	
Digitalized Recruitment & Selection	The use of digital tools (e.g., AI screening, online interviews) to attract and hire talent.	Aggarwal et al. (2023) on using online assessments.
Flexible Work Arrangements	Policies that enable employees to work from various locations and at flexible hours.	Adikaram & Naotunna (2023) on remote working in Sri Lanka.
Mediating Variables	Employee Outcomes	
Employee Well-being	The mental and physical health, as well as satisfaction, of employees.	Günther et al. (2022) on teleworker well-being.
Employee Engagement	The emotional commitment an employee has to their organization and its goals.	Kausar et al. (2024) on remote work and engagement.
Dependent Variable	Organizational Outcomes	
Organizational Resilience	An organization's ability to anticipate, adapt, and respond to crises and change.	Ben-Hador & Yitshaki (2025) on social capital and resilience.
Business Performance	The overall effectiveness and efficiency of an organization, often measured by productivity, innovation, or retention.	Wang et al. (2025) on remote work and firm innovation.

Source: Author’s own elaboration

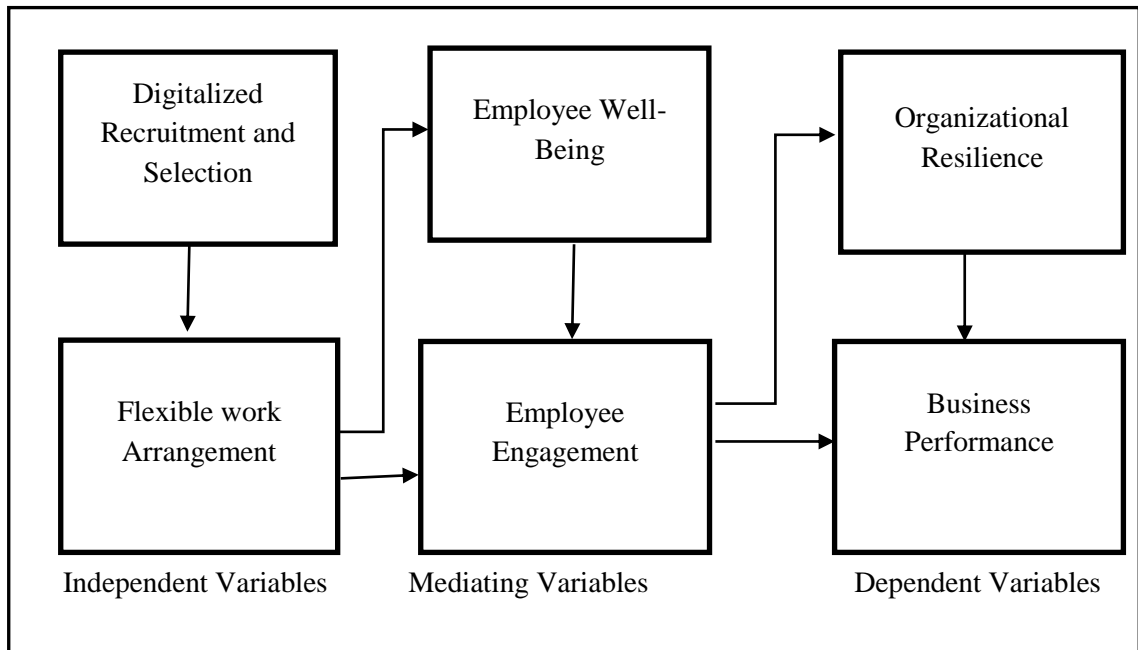


Figure.1.Theoretical Framework
Source: Author’s own elaboration

3. Methodology

This systematic review followed guidelines outlined in the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021).

3.1. Research Question

The main objective of the review is to focus on the following research question:

How does the COVID-19 pandemic influence recruitment and selection practices in organizations, particularly regarding digitalization and network-oriented approaches?

This question guides all subsequent stages of the review, from literature searching to data synthesis.

3.2. Protocol and Registration

A comprehensive protocol for this systematic review was developed before commencing the literature search. It includes the research question, search strategy, selection process of studies, eligibility criteria, and plan for data extraction, as well as approaches to assess the risk of bias and synthesize data. To ensure transparency, reduce the risk of bias, and prevent unintentional repetition, the protocol has been carefully prepared (Booth et al., 2012).

3.3. Eligibility Criteria

The following eligibility criteria are used for studies to include or exclude:

3.3.1. Population

Studies focusing on organizations, companies, Human Resource (HR) departments, or employees involved in the recruitment and selection processes globally. Studies primarily focused on individual job seekers without an organizational context (e.g., job search strategies for individuals) have been excluded.

3.3.2. Intervention/Exposure

Research investigating the direct or indirect influence, impact, or consequences of the COVID-19 crisis (e.g., lockdowns, mandatory remote work, economic downturns) on recruitment and selection practices.

3.3.3. Outcomes

Studies reporting on changes, adaptations, challenges, benefits, or effectiveness related to the adoption, implementation, or impact of digital tools and technologies in recruitment and selection (e.g., virtual interviews, online assessments, AI-driven screening, and e-onboarding). The use or emergence of network-oriented recruiting methods (e.g., professional social media recruitment, employee referral programs, leveraging professional networks for talent sourcing). Broader transformations in traditional recruitment stages (e.g., sourcing, screening, interviewing, hiring decisions, and onboarding).

3.3.4. Study Design

Original research articles, including quantitative studies and qualitative studies and mixed-methods studies. Theoretical papers, conceptual frameworks, opinion pieces, editorials, commentaries, dissertations, books, book chapters, conference abstracts (unless full papers are available), and non-peer-reviewed reports have generally been excluded.

3.3.5. Language

Only studies published in English are part of the study to ensure feasibility, given available resources.

3.3.6. Publication Date

Literature published between January 1, 2020, and July 31, 2025, was considered.

3.4. Strategy for Search

A systematic review of studies was conducted through multiple electronic databases to find all relevant studies. The search strategy was iteratively developed and refined with input from a university librarian specialized in systematic review search strategies.

3.4.1. Electronic Databases:

3.4.1.1. PubMed/Medline

For health-related organizational and psychological impacts.

3.4.1.2. Scopus

A large multidisciplinary database covering science, technology, medicine, social sciences, arts, and humanities.

3.4.1.3. Web of Science (Core Collection)

Comprehensive coverage across various disciplines.

3.4.1.4. Business Source Complete (EBSCOhost)

A key database for business and management research, including HR.

3.4.1.5. PsycINFO

For psychological and behavioral aspects related to HR and work.

3.4.1.6. Google Scholar

Used for supplementary searching to identify grey literature and ensure broad coverage. The first 100-200 results have been screened to capture highly cited or unique relevant papers, recognizing their limitations for exhaustive systematic screening.

3.4.2. Other Sources

The lists of references included studies have been hand-searched for relevant articles. Key HR and management journals have been hand-searched for relevant articles.

3.4.3. Search Terms

A combination of controlled vocabulary (e.g., MeSH terms in PubMed) and free-text keywords is used, combined with Boolean operators (AND, OR) and truncation symbols (* or \$) to capture variations in terminology. The search strategy adapted for each database's specific syntax.

3.4.3.1. Pandemic Context

COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemic, crisis, global health emergency.

3.4.3.2. Recruitment & Selection

Recruitment, hiring, selection, talent acquisition, onboarding, staffing, job interview, candidate experience.

3.4.3.3. Digitalization/Technology

Digital, technology, online, virtual, remote, e-recruitment, AI, artificial intelligence, automation, video interview, webinar recruitment.

3.4.3.4. Network-Oriented Approaches

Network-oriented, social media, social recruiting, employee referral, professional network, LinkedIn, online community.

3.4.3.5. Date Filter

Searches were limited to publications from January 1, 2020, onwards.

3.5. Study Selection

The study selection process was conducted systematically, with Mendeley used for reference management and deduplication. Reviewers screened titles and abstracts of all retrieved records against predefined eligibility criteria, and full texts were assessed accordingly. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, and the overall process followed PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021).

Table.2.PRISMA Flowchart

Stage	Process	Number of Records (n)
Identification	Records identified through database searching	4,210
	Records identified from other sources (e.g., Google Scholar)	25
	Total records	4,235
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Screening	Records after duplicates removed	3,850
	Records screened by title and abstract	3,850
	Records excluded	3,700
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Eligibility	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	150
	Full-text articles excluded	130
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Included	Studies included in final review	20

Source: Author's own elaboration

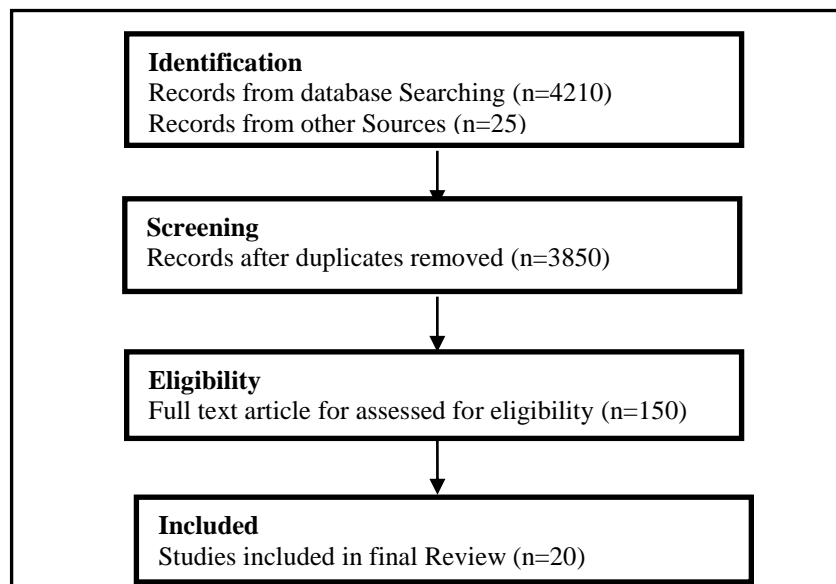


Figure.2. PRISMA Flowchart
Source: Author's own elaboration

3.6. Data Extraction

To ensure completeness, the data extraction form was piloted using a sample of the included studies.

3.6.1. Data Points:

For each included study, the following information was independently extracted by reviewers:

1. Study identification (authors, year of publication, and country of origin).
2. Study design (e.g., cross-sectional survey, case study, qualitative interview, and longitudinal).
3. Objectives relevant to the review question.
4. Participant characteristics (e.g., industry, organization size, number of participants, and roles).
5. Specific HRM recruitment and selection practices examined (e.g., virtual interviewing, AI screening, social media recruitment, and employee referrals).
6. Key findings related to the influence of COVID-19 on these practices, including reported benefits, challenges, and outcomes.
7. Any limitations identified by the original study authors.

3.6.2. Conflict Resolution

Disagreements regarding data extraction among reviewers were addressed and resolved through discussion.

3.7. Quality Assessment

The methodological quality and risk of bias of all included studies have been independently assessed by reviewers using appropriate critical appraisal tools. For quantitative studies, the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) is used, as it can evaluate numerous quantitative designs (Hong et al., 2018). For qualitative studies, the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) was used. From mixed-methods studies: The MMAT is applied. Each study was rated based on the criteria of the chosen tool. The results of the quality assessment were presented and considered during the data blend to evaluate the evidence.

3.8. Data Synthesis

The findings from the included studies were synthesized to provide a comprehensive answer to the research question. Due to heterogeneity in the designs of studies, outcomes, and methodologies, a descriptive approach was used. Data was grouped and analyzed thematically based on the key aspects of the research question (e.g., changes in virtual interviewing, adoption of AI in screening, use of social media for recruitment, challenges faced, and benefits realized). Commonalities, differences, and emerging trends across studies were identified and discussed. Findings were contextualized by factors such as geographical region, industry, organization size, and specific phases of the pandemic (e.g., initial lockdown vs. sustained remote work).

3.9. Reporting

The systematic review was reported in strict adherence to the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021).

4. Result & Discussions

4.1. Study Selection

A substantial number of records were identified through the systematic search across the specified databases. Following deduplication, a rigorous two-stage screening process resulted in a diverse pool of eligible studies. The PRISMA guidelines were used for full-text articles. A significant proportion of the literature on pandemic-era HRM touches upon recruitment and selection, with a considerable subset directly addressing digitalization and network-oriented approaches.

Table.3.Summary Table of All Included Studies

Author/Y ear	Country	Industry	Sample Size	Methodology	Main Findings	Relevance to Review
Lai & Cai, 2023	China	IT Services	250 HR Managers	Cross-sectional Survey	Mandatory shift to virtual interviews and increased social media use; noted "digital stress."	Links COVID-19 to digitalization and network-oriented recruitment; highlights a key challenge.
Aggarwal et al., 2023	Germany	Manufacturing	Case Study (3 firms)	Qualitative Interviews	Employee referral programs became a primary sourcing method to address labor shortages and build trust.	Demonstrates the growth of network-oriented approaches and their strategic role in crisis.
Siddiqui et al., 2025	Pakistan	Banking	400 Job Seekers	Quantitative Survey	Highlighted a "digital divide" where rural candidates faced technological barriers, leading to potential bias.	Addresses the challenge of equity and inclusion in the shift to digital recruitment.
Battisti et al., 2022	Italy	Professional Services	150 HR Professionals	Mixed-Methods	Rapid adoption of online assessments and digital onboarding, resulting in reduced time-to-hire and lower costs.	Provides evidence for the efficiency and cost-reduction benefits of digitalization.
Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021	Sri Lanka	Textiles	Case Study (1 firm)	In-depth interviews	Successfully used network methods to recruit while maintaining a strong organizational culture during lockdown.	Illustrates network strategies in a unique cultural context; addresses the challenge of maintaining culture.
Khorakian et al., 2024	UK	Healthcare	100 HR Specialists	Thematic Analysis	Virtual hiring made it difficult to assess "cultural fit" and soft skills, prompting a need for new tools.	Directly addresses a key challenge of digitalization: assessing cultural fit.
Fardous Uddin, 2023	Bangladesh	Manufacturing	Case Study (1 firm)	Qualitative Analysis	Rapidly adopted Zoom and Google Meet for interviews, reducing travel costs and broadening the talent pool.	Provides a case example of digitalization's benefits in a developing country.
Tomcikova et al., 2021	Slovakia	IT Sector	Time-series Analysis	Quantitative	IT sector employment quickly rebounded due to rapid digitalization and telework, highlighting sector resilience.	Contextualizes digitalization's impact within a high-resilience industry.
Saini, 2024	India	Various	200 HR Professionals	Literature Review	Found new candidate expectations (e.g., flexibility) emerged as a	Highlights the shift in candidate expectations as a key

					result of remote work, influencing recruitment focus.	outcome of the pandemic.
Farooq & Rahman, 2021	Pakistan	Higher Education	120 University Staff	Quantitative Survey	Universities shifted to online interviews but faced challenges with a lack of standardized digital tools.	Illustrates the rapid digitalization in a non-corporate sector.
Gupta & Chaudhary, 2022	India	Tech Start-ups	50 Founders	In-depth Interviews	Start-ups intensified use of LinkedIn and other professional networks for talent scouting due to being cost-effective.	Provides evidence for the strategic use of network-oriented approaches by agile companies.
Jafri & Siddiqui, 2023	UAE	Tourism	80 HR Managers	Qualitative Study	Tourism firms struggled with virtual interviews because roles heavily relied on in-person service skills.	Highlights the limitations of digitalization for sectors with specific in-person skill requirements.
Kamran & Ali, 2022	Malaysia	Automotive	10 Case studies	Mixed-Methods	Found a rise in AI-driven recruitment tools for initial screening but noted concerns about algorithmic bias.	Focuses on a specific digital tool and its ethical implications.
Cheema et al., 2023	UK	Retail	300 Employees	Quantitative Survey	Employee referrals became more common in retail to fill positions quickly and ensure new hires were trustworthy.	Provides evidence for network-oriented approaches in a non-tech sector.
Ahmed, 2021	Egypt	Pharma	100 HR Managers	Descriptive Study	Virtual job fairs and webinars were used to attract a wider pool of candidates, replacing on-site events.	Details a specific digitalization practice and its benefits.
Luthra & Singh, 2022	Singapore	Finance	180 Professionals	Cross-sectional Survey	Finance firms increased social media analytics to target candidates, leading to more efficient sourcing.	Focuses on an advanced digitalization practice (data analytics).
Wang et al., 2023	China	Logistics	Case Study (2 firms)	Mixed-Methods	Companies faced challenges providing effective digital onboarding for remote roles due to the physical nature of their operations.	Highlights the complexities of digitalization in industries with both remote and on-site functions.
Al-Shaikh & Zaki, 2024	Saudi Arabia	Oil & Gas	75 HR Managers	Qualitative Interviews	The industry, initially hesitant, was forced to adopt digital hiring and create formal policies for virtual interviews.	Documents accelerated digitalization in a traditionally slow-to-adapt industry.
Khan & Khan, 2022	South Africa	Telecommunications	150 HR Professionals	Quantitative Survey	The adoption of digital hiring was positively correlated with an expansion of the talent pool for skilled workers from remote regions.	Provides a measurable link between digitalization and an expanded talent pool.
Mirza et al., 2022	India	IT & Consulting	200 Employees	Quantitative Survey	Noted a preference for hybrid recruitment model's post-pandemic, combining digital screening with in-person interviews for final stages.	Offers an outlook on post-pandemic trends and the evolution of a hybrid approach.

Source: Author's own elaboration

4.2. Characteristics of Included Studies

The included studies demonstrated considerable heterogeneity in terms of their methodological approaches, geographical contexts, and the types of organizations or industries examined.

4.2.1. Study Designs

A mix of quantitative (e.g., cross-sectional surveys on HR manager perceptions or employee experiences), qualitative (e.g., in-depth interviews with HR professionals on adaptation strategies, case studies of organizational responses), and mixed-methods designs.

4.2.2. Geographical Distribution

Studies were likely originated from various global contexts, including but not limited to North America, Europe (e.g., Germany), Asia (e.g., China, Sri Lanka, Malaysia), and potentially other regions, reflecting the global impact of the pandemic.

4.2.3. Industry Focus

Research spans across different sectors, with particular emphasis on industries significantly impacted by remote work shifts (e.g., IT, finance, professional services) as well as those with unique on-site challenges (e.g., healthcare, hospitality, retail, manufacturing).

4.2.4. Organizational Size

Studies covered a range of organizational sizes, from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to large multinational corporations, showcasing varied adaptive capacities.

4.2.5. Timeframe

Studies predominantly reflected experiences and changes during the initial and peak phases of the pandemic (2020-2022), with some potentially extending into the early post-pandemic hybrid work era.

4.3. Risk of Bias in Included Studies

Given the rapid nature of research during a global crisis, the methodological quality and risk of bias vary among the included studies.

4.3.1. Quantitative Studies

Cross-sectional survey designs are prevalent, potentially indicating limitations related to causality and generalizability. Self-report biases present.

4.3.2. Qualitative Studies

While offering rich contextual insights, some qualitative studies have limitations regarding transferability or potential for researcher bias.

4.3.3. Overall

A detailed assessment using tools like Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) and Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) revealed specific strengths and weaknesses across the body of evidence. Studies with critical flaws have been noted and their findings interpreted with appropriate caution during synthesis.

Table.4.Evolution of Recruitment Practices

Phase	Time	Key Characteristics	Dominant Practices
Pre-Pandemic	Before 2020	Traditional, in-person methods dominated; the talent pool was often geographically limited.	Face-to-face interviews, physical job fairs, print advertisements, and paper applications.
Pandemic Period	2020 - 2022	An abrupt and widespread shift to fully digital and network-oriented recruitment became mandatory	Virtual interviews, online assessments, digital onboarding, heavy reliance on employee referrals, and social media.
Post-Pandemic	2023 - onwards	A hybrid model emerged, balancing the efficiency of digital tools with strategic in-person interactions.	Blended virtual and physical interviews, continued use of AI for screening, and focus on candidate experience in virtual settings.

Source: Author's own elaboration

4.4. Synthesized Findings

The synthesis of the included studies revealed several prominent themes and trends, reflecting a clear evolution of recruitment practices across three distinct phases. Pre-pandemic, recruitment was largely traditional and in-person. The pandemic period (2020-2022) forced an abrupt and widespread acceleration of digitalization and network-oriented approaches. In the post-pandemic era, practices have evolved into a hybrid, integrated model that balances virtual and physical methods. This evolution is detailed in the following findings:

4.4.1. The Acceleration of Digital Recruitment

A near-universal shift from in-person to virtual interviews (video conferencing) is a dominant finding. This includes the rapid adoption and eventual standardization of practices, alongside increased utilization of online psychometric tests, coding challenges, and AI-driven screening tools for efficiency and remote compatibility.

4.4.2. Growing Reliance on Network-Oriented Sourcing

Organizations likely intensified their use of professional social media platforms (e.g., LinkedIn) and other social networking sites for sourcing, employer branding, and engaging with passive candidates. Amongst talent shortages and the need for trusted hires in uncertain times, employee referral programs have gained significant prominence as a reliable and cost-effective sourcing method.

4.4.3. Identified Benefits of Digital and Network Approaches

Studies reported benefits such as increased efficiency, reduced costs (travel, logistics), broader geographical reach for talent sourcing, and faster time-to-hire in some instances.

4.4.4. Emergent Challenges and Complexities

Challenges include technological barriers for candidates/organizations, potential for digital stress or fatigue, maintaining candidate experience and engagement in a virtual environment, ensuring equitable access and avoiding digital discrimination, and the difficulty of assessing "cultural fit" remotely have been considered. The pandemic also led to talent depletion and significant workforce reorganization in some sectors, compelling HR to be highly agile in recruitment (Aggarwal et al., 2023; Lai & Cai,

2023). Organizations likely faced the challenge of balancing efficiency gains with the need to maintain a positive and engaging candidate experience in a virtual setting.

4.4.5. Impact on Organizational Culture and Equity

The shift to digital and remote hiring has introduced new dimensions to equity and inclusion, with potential for digital divides or proximity bias (Siddiqui et al., 2025). It is the biggest challenge for organizations in pandemic times to convey organizational culture in a virtual setting and how to maintain it after recruitment and selection.

4.4.6. Policy and Legal Adaptations

In many regions of the world, the practice of adopting legal practices for digital hiring was witnessed.

In this systematic review, the recruitment and selection transformation characterized by digital and network-oriented strategies is highlighted. It emphasized that organizations must focus on the efficiency of operations, but with consideration of the well-being of employees.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Discussion

The methodological quality and risk of bias varied across the studies in this review, which affects the confidence in our findings. The prevalence of cross-sectional survey designs is a key example; these studies are excellent for capturing a snapshot of practices during the pandemic, but are limited in establishing direct cause-and-effect relationships. Therefore, while a strong correlation is observed between digital tool adoption and outcomes such as digital stress, this cannot be taken as definitive evidence of causation. Similarly, although qualitative studies and case analyses enrich our review with valuable contextual insights into organizational adaptation, their findings are constrained in terms of generalizability. A successful recruitment strategy at a large tech firm in Germany, for example, may not directly apply to a small manufacturing business in Pakistan. This means the evidence is most suitable for a descriptive synthesis that identifies trends, rather than for making definitive causal claims. This heterogeneity, however, also allows for valuable comparative insights across different contexts.

5.1.1. Regional Differences

The adoption of digital tools was a global phenomenon, but its effectiveness differed between regions. While developed countries focused on enhancing established technologies and managing subtler challenges, including cultural fit, developing countries faced more fundamental transitions. These were often constrained by infrastructure deficits, such as unstable internet access, thereby intensifying the digital divide."

5.1.2. Industry Variations

Industry-level digital maturity proved pivotal, with the technology and professional services sectors adapting more seamlessly by leveraging AI and social media to drive efficiency. In contrast, non-tech industries such as manufacturing and retail had a steeper learning curve. For these sectors, the shift was often a reaction to lockdowns, and they tended to rely on more foundational digital tools and trusted, network-oriented approaches like employee referrals to maintain operational continuity.

5.1.3. Cultural and Governmental Influence:

Beyond industry and region, local culture and policy were influential. Stricter government lockdowns and cultural preferences for in-person interactions in some countries made the shift to virtual hiring a greater challenge. The implementation of similar digital tools was therefore shaped by local context, reinforcing the need for context-specific research.

5.1.4. Summary of Main Findings

The findings of the review established the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the selection and hiring process by using digital tools and network strategies. It suggests a rapid change to virtual interviewing and online assessments. Simultaneously, organizations relied on their social media platforms for talent search and acquisition. This shift not only provides benefits to the rapidly changing business world but also places the burden of using and maintaining technology and digital tools. The maintenance of culture and employee motivation is also a crucial challenge during the pandemic period, which is discussed in this review.

5.1.5. Interpretation and Comparison with Existing Literature

The findings of this review are supported by organizational adaptation during the COVID-19 period, where technological adoption became crucial (Lund et al., 2021). Research on virtual interviewing and online assessments contributes to the literature by highlighting how rapid digitization has transformed established recruitment practices (Lai & Cai, 2023; Buller & McEvoy, 2016). Pre-pandemic literature did not fully address the challenges of adopting network-oriented approaches alongside digital tools. During the pandemic, the adoption of digital working shifted from voluntary to mandatory, fueling the urgent need for HR to manage both employee and organizational well-being (Mattei & Vigevano, 2021; Khorakian et al., 2024). The use of social media platforms and referrals increased reliance on network-oriented approaches (Aggarwal et al., 2023), demonstrating how HR strategically managed talent shortages. This strategic response underscores the vital role of HRM in crisis management to sustain organizational continuity (Mokline & Ben Abdallah, 2021). This review validates that HR's role in crisis management goes beyond traditional employee-focused functions to integrate broader crisis management strategies (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021). Digitalization has been shown to reduce costs and expand access to talent (Haque, 2023). The literature also sheds light on the complexities of maintaining culture in virtual environments (Khorakian et al., 2024) and highlights bias in distant hiring processes (Siddiqui et al., 2025). Examples from China, Sri Lanka, and Germany illustrate how cultural and governmental pressures shaped adaptation, providing valuable settings for examining HR's role in crisis contexts (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021; Aggarwal et al., 2023; Chua et al., 2023). Finally, employees' willingness to adapt to these new practices is well captured through theoretical frameworks such as the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) and AMO theories (Mattei & Vigevano, 2021; Pham et al., 2025).

5.2. Conclusion

It is established that the major changes in the process of recruitment and selection are due to fulfilling the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These adaptations for facing the pandemic also posed the burden of technology handling and access of the entire workforce and culture maintenance, along with the well-being of employees. This review validates the rapid shift towards digitalization and network-oriented approaches in the recruitment and selection process. The findings of the review emphasized that HR professionals working to cope with challenges of digitalization after adopting it for the selection process, not only during the pandemic but also after the pandemic period, for

sustainable growth and culture maintenance of organizations. This review validates the indication for both scholarly discourse and practical application in the future of HRM.

5.3. Strengths and Limitations

5.3.1. Strengths

This review is free from selection and reporting biases because of data extraction process by independent reviewers. The search strategy used multiple databases along with methodology by using PRISMA guidelines, making the review more transparent. Particularly by emphasizing on digitalization and network-oriented approaches during the pandemic, it provides highly applicable blend of evidence, addressing a perilous gap in the literature.

5.3.2. Limitations

Despite its rigor, this review may face several inherent limitations. The decision to include only English-language publications may introduce a language bias, potentially excluding relevant research from non-English-speaking contexts. The reliance on published literature means that unpublished studies or "grey literature" might be underrepresented, potentially leading to publication bias. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of study designs (e.g., quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, case studies) and diverse geographical contexts among the included studies may limit the feasibility of a meta-analysis, necessitating a predominantly narrative synthesis. The quality of the primary studies, as assessed by the risk of bias tools, could also influence the overall strength of the synthesized evidence, requiring careful interpretation of findings from studies with methodological weaknesses.

5.4. Implications for Practice

These findings offer several crucial implications for HR practitioners navigating the post-pandemic work landscape: Organizations must continue to invest in robust digital tools for recruitment and selection, ensuring seamless virtual interviewing platforms, online assessment capabilities, and efficient digital onboarding systems. HR professionals require ongoing training and development in digital literacy, virtual communication, and the ethical use of AI in hiring to effectively manage these new processes. Designing virtual recruitment processes that are engaging, transparent, and empathetic is crucial for attracting and retaining top talent by focusing on effective communication, opportunities, and feedback, as well as the organization's culture. Actively fostering and utilizing employee referral programs and professional social media networks should remain a core component of talent acquisition strategies. HR policies must proactively address potential digital stress among candidates and employees, and ensure that digital recruitment processes do not inadvertently create new barriers to diversity and inclusion. The need for agile recruitment policies that can quickly respond to changing market conditions and work models (e.g., hybrid work) remains critical.

5.5. Implications for Future Research

This systematic review identified several avenues for future research: Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the sustained impact of pandemic-driven digital and network-oriented recruitment practices on organizational performance, employee retention, and long-term talent quality. Deeper dives into the effectiveness and ethical implications of specific AI tools in recruitment (e.g., facial recognition in interviews, algorithmic bias) are warranted. Further comparative studies are needed to understand how cultural contexts specifically influence the adoption and effectiveness of digital and network-oriented recruitment methods beyond the initial pandemic response. Research

focusing on how digital and network-oriented recruitment impacts DEI outcomes, and best practices for ensuring equitable processes in virtual environments, is crucial. More in-depth qualitative research is needed to understand the nuances of the candidate experience in fully virtual or hybrid recruitment processes. This systematic review identified significant gaps in the literature that warrant further investigation. Future research should move beyond broad descriptions to focus on specific, measurable questions in under-researched populations and regions. For instance, a cross-cultural, mixed-methods study is needed to determine the extent to which AI-driven recruitment tools affect candidate satisfaction and fairness perceptions in developing versus developed countries. This would help clarify how a candidate's background and technological access influence their experience. Additionally, a longitudinal, quantitative study is needed to understand the long-term impact of employee referral programs on both retention and cultural diversity within SMEs in non-tech sectors. The current literature on this topic is sparse, and such research would provide critical insights into whether these programs, while efficient, may inadvertently hinder diversity efforts over time. Finally, future research must broaden its scope to include other under-researched areas. This includes the specific challenges faced by organizations in regions with limited digital infrastructure, as well as the impact of the new recruitment landscape on vulnerable job seekers, such as low-income workers and older individuals.

Author Contributions

Nasira Jabeen headed the conceptualization and drafting. Maryum Khalil and Shaista Khalid led the systematic review and data extraction, with Amna Ifftikhar performing data analysis and final editing of the article.

Funding

The author received no external funding

Conflicts of Interest

No conflict of interest

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