

# ARTICLES

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## THE INTRICATE SYSTEMIC RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE LABOR MARKET, LABOR RELATIONS, AND HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT IN A PANDEMIC CONTEXT

*As intrincadas relações sistêmicas entre mercado de trabalho, relações de trabalho e gestão de recursos humanos em contexto pandêmico*

*Las intrincadas relaciones sistémicas entre el mercado laboral, las relaciones laborales y la gestión de recursos humanos en un contexto pandémico*

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### ABSTRACT

The article analyzes how organizations interpret the systemic relationships between the labor market and labor relations in human resource management (HRM) strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research adopted a qualitative approach, carrying out four focus groups with 24 people managers and interviewing four union representatives in Brazilian cities located in three of the five Brazilian regions: Northeast (Fortaleza, CE), South (Joinville, SC), and Central-West (Brasília, DF). The findings indicated knowledge gaps in the area of HRM regarding labor market and labor relations. They observed the occurrence of similar HRM practices institutionalized by a common repertoire at different levels while unions were adapting to the new labor legislation in Brazil (enacted in 2017). The Covid-19 pandemic brought structural changes such as an increase in telework and adjustment to labor legislation and organization. It also brought behavioral changes and affected the worker's health. The study contributes a) theoretically by expanding the analysis of HRM under the institutional approach, b) methodologically by providing comparative research, and c) empirically by illustrating how HRM works in different regions of the country.

**Keywords:** labor market; labor relations; human resources; Covid-19 pandemic; institutional approach.

### RESUMO

O artigo analisa como as organizações interpretam as relações sistêmicas envolvendo o mercado e relações de trabalho em suas estratégias de gestão de recursos humanos (GRH) na pandemia da Covid-19. Por meio de abordagem qualitativa, realizaram-se quatro grupos focais com 24 gestores de pessoas e entrevistas com quatro representantes sindicais em três regiões do Brasil: Sul (Joinville, SC), Nordeste (Fortaleza, CE) e Centro-Oeste (Brasília, DF). Os achados indicam lacunas de conhecimento das áreas de GRH sobre mercado e relações de trabalho, práticas similares de GRH em patamares distintos e institucionalizadas por repertório comum, enquanto os sindicatos adaptam-se à nova legislação trabalhista. O contexto pandêmico trouxe mudanças estruturais, como o teletrabalho, ajuste à legislação e organização do trabalho, e também mudanças comportamentais, e efeitos na saúde do trabalhador. O estudo contribui teoricamente ao discutir a GRH sob a abordagem institucional; metodologicamente propicia pesquisas comparativas; e empiricamente ilustra como acontece a GRH em distintas regiões do País.

**Palavras-chave:** mercado de trabalho, relações de trabalho, recursos humanos, pandemia da Covid-19, abordagem institucional.

### RESUMEN

El artículo analiza cómo las organizaciones interpretan las relaciones sistémicas que involucran el mercado de trabajo y las relaciones laborales en sus estrategias de gestión de recursos humanos (GRH) en el contexto de la pandemia COVID-19. A través de un enfoque cualitativo, se realizaron cuatro grupos focales con 24 gestores de personas y entrevistas con cuatro representantes sindicales en tres regiones de Brasil: Sur (Joinville, SC), Nordeste (Fortaleza, CE), y Centro-Oeste (Brasília, DF). Los hallazgos indican lagunas de conocimiento en las áreas de GRH sobre el mercado y las relaciones laborales, prácticas similares de GRH en diferentes niveles, institucionalizadas por un repertorio común, mientras los sindicatos se adaptan a la nueva legislación laboral. El contexto de la pandemia trajo cambios estructurales (e. g.: teletrabajo, ajuste a la legislación y organización del trabajo) y conductuales, incluida la salud de los trabajadores. El estudio contribuye teóricamente al ampliar el análisis de la GRH bajo el enfoque institucional; metodológicamente al propiciar las investigaciones comparativas; y empíricamente al ilustrar cómo funciona la gestión de recursos humanos en diferentes regiones del país.

**Palabras clave:** mercado de trabajo, relaciones laborales, recursos humanos, pandemia de COVID-19, enfoque institucional

## INTRODUCTION

The Brazilian labor market has been under structural changes – increasing participation of women, an aging population, and a better-educated workforce. Also, since 2015 there has been a distinct period in the labor market: on the supply side, individuals seek employment, while organizations need a specific profile of labor (Amorim, 2020; Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socioeconômicos [DIEESE], 2020b). The 2017 labor reform became a conditioning factor for the Brazilian labor market (Franco & Ferraz, 2019; Guimarães & Silva, 2020; Krein, 2018) by making relevant aspects of individual and collective labor contracts more flexible. Companies have instituted adaptation or restructuring programs in response to the prolonged economic crisis and changes in business brought about by the digitization of the economy (Béhar, 2019; Concolato et al., 2017), while human resource management (HRM) units intuitively addressed everyday and strategic decisions (Bianchi et al., 2017).

The Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 contributed to aggravating these challenges. In a few weeks, organizations had to review how they manage, operate, and produce (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020; Benavides et al., 2021). The exacerbation of the organizations' social bodies' behavioral and emotional challenges (Antunes, 2020; Biron et al., 2021), the economic downturn, health restrictions, emergency policies and regulations designed to maintain jobs, income, and financial flows, monitoring the mental health of workers were just some of the new conditions of the business context in Brazil (Camilo, 2021; Silva & Moraes, 2021) and in the world (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Savona, 2020). Thus, different aspects of labor legislation were adjusted, forcing organizations to adopt forms of labor relations not previously experienced (Costa, 2020; Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica [IPEA] 2020).

HRM experienced tense and accelerated challenges, faced differently in organizations and, especially, in the different regions of Brazil. Despite this context, there is still a lack of research addressing the position of HRM regarding labor relations from a Brazilian perspective or a comparative perspective among the country's regions – which present different economic vocations and require, therefore, different actions by national or international organizations in their various fields of activity. Most studies focus on analyzing organizational phenomena in the Southeast region of Brazil, and there is a lack of research (particularly comparative studies) addressing other territories (Meneses et al., 2014). This work contributes to filling this gap by approaching three of the five Brazilian regions (South, Northeast, and Central-West) rarely mentioned in the literature.

This study examines three cities located in different regions – Joinville (Santa Catarina) in the South, Fortaleza (Ceará) in the Northeast, and Brasília (Federal District) in the Central-West – to answer the following question: How do Brazilian organizations interpret systemic relations of the labor market and labor relations in their HRM strategies and procedures?

The analysis of distinct but intertwined elements, such as the dimensions of the labor market, labor relations, and people management in a challenging context such as that provided by the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil, reinforced the theoretical option for the institutional approach. According to Gooderham et al. (2019), this theoretical lens allows the comparative

identification of convergences and divergences between HRM practices in different contexts. Schotter et al.(2021) analyzed the research agenda from the perspective of the institutional approach focused on HRM and highlighted the need for studies that comparatively reveal the difference of this object in different organizations, considering its multilevel nature and evolution under the institutional context. Thus, this research finds support in the institutional approach to add theoretical and empirical bases for comparative studies at the national level on forms of action in the HR area in Brazil. It emphasizes the cities of Fortaleza, Joinville, and Brasília, located in different regions, seeking to offer expanded coverage of the country. Other studies on people management adopting the same perspective are needed. A review by Araújo et al. (2019) from 2005 to 2015 in Brazilian journals focused on administration identified only five articles on people management based on the institutional perspective, which is a scarcity that Lacombe and Chu (2008) and, more recently, Amorim et al. (2021), have pointed out.

The research used a qualitative, descriptive, and explanatory approach. Data collection included publications that dealt with the researched regions, four focus groups with 24 HR managers, and interviews with four union members.

The study contributes theoretically by expanding the analysis of HRM under the institutional approach, involving Brazilian regions that have been little studied. The methodology provides comparative research and empirically illustrates how labor relations and HRM interact in different regions during a health crisis.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework is based on the labor market and labor relations, the institutional approach regarding HRM, and aspects related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Brazilian labor market has changed significantly since the early 2000s. Some of the changing aspects are (i) the aging of the employed population; (ii) the improvement in the education of the employed population; (iii) a sharp drop in the unemployment rate until 2014, and a strong increase from August 2015, declining in 2019 and further affected by the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic; and (iv) increasing the degree of formality of employment contracts (Amorim, 2020; DIEESE, 2020b). Despite maintaining regional disparities (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2021), the increase in the income level of employed persons across the country by 2020 has led to greater difficulty in retaining, replacing, and hiring employees with an intermediary and high qualification. When combined, these changes created a very different context for HRM operation (Cruz et al., 2017), compared, for example, to the 1990s (Wood et al., 2011).

There are three institutional approaches for HRM: the varieties of capitalism and/or business structures, historical institutionalism, and one focused on the regulatory framework (Allen & Wood, 2021). These approaches consider institutions, their context, and HRM as interconnected elements. This article uses the approach of ‘varieties of capitalism’ as exposed by Hall and

Soskice (2001) and Whitley (2007). Such approaches make up a tradition of international studies of institutional analysis, which, applied to research on HRM, exposes a theoretical perspective of the different formats it takes in different countries (Gooderham et al., 2019; Hall & Soskice, 2001; Hofstede et al., 2010).

Hall and Soskice's (2001) contribution enables national comparisons based on firms' relationships and their respective characteristics, including labor relations, professional training, and corporate governance. In the macro dimension, this approach deals with aspects related to workforce training, the prevalence of the market, or the coordination between actors managing institutions and their influence on organizations. In the micro dimension, it identifies aspects of HRM performance with labor relations. From such dimensions, it is possible to verify how organizations change and when and how institutions influence them in these changes (Allen & Wood, 2021).

Gooderham et al. (2019) suggest that the HRM analysis is based on the interpretation of the systemic processes of people management, common to most firms. The study of HRM allows the alliance between the employee's individual performance and the organizational results, which is the recommended aspect of interpreting the institutional context of HRM. Such a theoretical-conceptual-practical perspective aims to avoid the administration's deterministic biases favoring positions supported by observations of organizations' context, typical of the institutional approach (Parry et al., 2021).

For Trullen et al. (2020), adopting a practice and its consolidation through routine make it more homogeneous and adapted to organizations' HRM. This process reinforces the ideas of institutionalization and habitualization (Tolbert & Zucker, 1999). Notwithstanding the diversity of the firms' activities, the similarity of practices between the actors involved in different organizations and the isomorphism effect legitimize their practices in their organizational context (DiMaggio & Powell, 2007).

We highlight the interaction that organizations establish with the labor market through their HRM (Kochan et al., 1994), which promotes labor supply and is an important variable in organizations' internal policies regarding their classic functions. For Ulrich et al. (2008), such policies are established in the attraction, selection, retention, development, and remuneration of employees to align the organization with the changes in the labor market. The adjustments of HRM within organizations seek to align processes with the firms' strategy (Biron et al., 2021) and institutionalize procedures legitimized by the main actors in the field (Wooten & Hoffman, 2008).

Therefore, this article encompasses the institutional environment around HRM and analyzes the literature on labor relations, labor laws, unions, and the labor market.

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic changed organizational perspectives globally. There were high economic and social uncertainties, and much of the service provision collapsed. Production units were closed, and governments reacted in many different ways. In addition, measures to increase social distancing and the use of face coverings and hand sanitizers became social norms (Peci et al., 2021).

Organizations developed strategies appropriate to the new context (Biron et al., 2021), with a focus on workers – including removal of employees from the risk group from face-to-face work

activities, adaptations of job positions by adopting telework, compensation adjustments counting on government support programs, discussions about minimum job stability, and maintenance of benefits.

The complexity of the pandemic revealed new dynamics of the labor market, the involvement of public authorities, and the mobilization of HRM to introduce new forms of work organization and worker protection. From the perspective of firms, the consequences on their institutionalization processes and management policies are still poorly analyzed.

## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory study (Oliveira & Piccinini, 2009) focused on the labor market, the context of labor relations, and the impacts of these two dimensions on the configuration of the people management models practiced in three of the five Brazilian regions (South, Northeast, and Central-West). The research sought complementary methodological approaches, triangulating data sources in three stages: i) literature review, ii) document analysis, and iii) focus group and interviews.

The literature review sought an expanded perspective of the concepts (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010) of the labor market, labor relations, and HRM in Brazil, with selective reading to unveil these topics (Lima & Miotto, 2007). Publications from 2000 to 2021 in national and international academic journals were quantified and analyzed.

The literature review used the Web of Knowledge, ScienceDirect, and Spell databases and was conducted between November 2020 and March 2021 (without limiting results based on journals' impact factors). The keywords used were the most representative of the research object – labor market, labor relations, and human resources (with the terms in Portuguese and English). Since only a few articles were found, the search was expanded by combining at least two terms in the title, abstract, or keywords. The 73 articles found were organized based on the analysis of their main debates: strategic management of human resources (15 articles); state of the art (1 article); the role of actors in the business environment and HR (7 articles); new technologies and the role of innovation in HRM (5 articles); the remaining 45 were divided into broad categories such as HR in Brazil and socioeconomic context.

We conducted a systematic search in the Spell database focusing on articles referring to the cities of Joinville, Fortaleza, and Brasília, obtaining 86, 62, and 10 articles, respectively. When filtering these articles considering the topic discussed in this study, we obtained 21, 20, and 3 articles, respectively, indicating low academic production.

Documentary analysis was conducted to help understand the problem addressed in the study (Cellard, 2008; Creswell, 2010). The analysis explored documents with statistics on Brazil's labor market and the regions' specificities, examining the databases of the Brazilian Ministry of Labor and Employment (MTE, 2021) and IBGE (2021). The current situation in labor relations

was outlined with aggregated data from Brazil and the cities of Joinville – Santa Catarina, Fortaleza – Ceará, and Brasília – Distrito Federal via consultation with DIEESE (2020a).

Four focus groups with HR managers were held to learn the local reality of HRM, collecting their statements and perceptions about the institutional environment related to HRM, the labor market, and labor relations. The focus group was oriented with questions that considered the literature reviewed, notably the questions suggested by Trullen et al. (2020) and Gooderham et al. (2019). The focus groups gathered individuals from a diverse set of organizations that represented the local economic activities of the three cities, counting on professionals operating at the strategic levels in the area of HR. The study considered the focus group technique since it compiles impressions and opinions from a group of people engaged in a common situation (Barbour, 2009). Union leaders and economic advisors were interviewed. In all cases, knowledge of the reality and practice of work relationships and frequent contact with regional companies were requirements for participation (Exhibit 1). Following Bardin (2016), the content analysis was applied to the texts resulting from the testimonies obtained in three stages (pre-analysis, exploration of the material, and treatment of the results with inferences and possible interpretations).

#### Exhibit 1. Field activities and participants

City/Period	Activities	Participants
Joinville (September – October 2020)	Focus group 1 Focus group 2 Interview	Managers: 5 (health, logistics, metallurgical industry, and pharmaceutical industry) Managers: 4 (logistics, metallurgical industry, and sanitation) Union member: 1 (industry worker)
Fortaleza (November 2020)	Focus group Interview	Managers: 8 (retail, infrastructure, health, food, clothing, and chemical industry) Union advisor: 1 (worker of industry, commerce, and services)
Brasília (April 2021)	Focus group Interviews	Managers: 7 (information technology, health, metallurgical industry, and public transportation) Union member: 1 (service workers) Union advisor: 1 (worker of industry, commerce, and services)

The choice of the researched regions is justified as Joinville, Fortaleza, and Brasília are regionally and sectorally relevant poles (Companhia de Planejamento do Distrito Federal [Codeplan], 2021; Instituto de Pesquisa e Estratégia Econômica do Ceará [Ipece], 2020; Prefeitura Municipal de Joinville, 2020). They coordinate production and management processes at the local, national, and global levels: Joinville – a traditional industrial hub of Santa Catarina; Fortaleza – one of the main work centers in the Brazilian Northeast; Brasília – the predominance of public sector activities, and a thriving private sector in interaction or under the influence of the former. The bibliographic review revealed that the three regions are little studied.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all focus groups and interviews were conducted online through meeting platforms and recorded with the proper authorizations (Salmons, 2014). The focus groups lasted around four and a half hours, while the interviews took around an hour. The ethical confidentiality of information was maintained regarding the identification of participants and organizations.

The first attempt to contact the organizations in the cities was through an institutional approach via the information on their websites. Still, the firms did not reply to the invitation to participate when approached in this way. Thus, we contacted professional associations and universities that mediated the invitation and helped us connect with several organizations. This networking opened a more continuous dialogue with professional associations for a content exchange providing HR professionals with knowledge from academia. The interaction and healthy feedback between university versus market and theory versus practice enabled gains for researchers and participants. The dynamic obtained in the scope of this research was similar to the dynamic expected for university extension activities carried out with companies (Stal et al., 2006).

The main research findings are presented by region, followed by an analysis of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the firms' HR units. Also, a comparative synthesis is offered in an additional section.

## THE INDUSTRIAL PERSPECTIVE: THE CASE OF JOINVILLE, SANTA CATARINA

The city of Joinville concentrates on a traditional industrial economic activity, responsible for almost 35% of the formal workforce employed in the state of Santa Catarina (MTE, 2021). For decades, family-owned companies with a strong presence in the metallurgical, mechanical, and chemical industries have projected the region into the national market (Mondo et al., 2015; Prefeitura Municipal de Joinville, 2020). The state's unemployment rates are among the lowest in the country (approximately 6% in 2020) (IBGE, 2021). Thus, there were reports of difficulty in hiring and the need to recruit more qualified labor coming from other regions of the country (both at the managerial level due to the low supply of professionals from the region's business schools and among less qualified workers as the disputed workforce is attracted by the informality of seasonal tourism occupations on the state's coast and rural areas). Organizations reported greater openness to hiring older workers and immigrants in the face of this labor shortage.

As for HRM, the participants declared that this area is involved in the organizations' strategic management through medium and long-term planning, adopting diversified policies and practices, and aligning with the modern HRM models as observed by Fernandes et al. (2021). Leadership development initiatives and hiring consultants are examples of such practices.

Questions about organizational culture emerged linked to merger, acquisition, or business expansion processes and in the form of management. The focus groups showed that it is common for candidates to be recommended by relatives or acquaintances. Also, there was an appreciation of the personal and family commitment involved in the recommendation. The inherent complexity of the intertwining between strategic challenges and organizational culture, as suggested by Hofstede et al. (2010), motivated the hiring of consultants to support organizations and, thus, the dissemination of institutionalized HR practices.

Managers reported that the region had organized unions for labor relations, but there were few strikes or protest movements by workers. The union leader pointed out that workers

make little room for strikes due to a labor market marked by personal relationships (culture of discipline at work, job vacancies are filled by people whom other employees recommend relatives and/or friends). In this way, interaction with the union occurs through direct conversations and consultations and, in an institutionalized way, in collective negotiations or specific negotiations around working hours and other topics arising in the pandemic (lay off, for example).

As for the effects of the labor reform, companies began to test possibilities provided by the new legislation – intermittent work, adoption of alternative working hours, hiring workers through legal entities, and carrying out individual termination agreements. However, these new arrangements have not yet generated more consolidated practices, mainly due to current legal uncertainties (Guimarães & Silva, 2020; Lúcio, 2020).

## A LOCUS IN TRANSITION: THE CASE OF FORTALEZA, CEARÁ

Ceará, like other states in the region, is transitioning from an economy based on agriculture to a more modern one, with recent industrialization and growth in the service sector. In Fortaleza, industry and commerce account for 8.0% and 17.2% of formal jobs, respectively (MTE, 2021). The unemployment rate in the city was 10.7% in 2020, one of the lowest among the capitals of Northeast Brazil (IBGE, 2021). A relevant aspect of economic expansion is the offer of a lower-paid and low-skilled workforce, a competitive differential in low-value-added activities. Such characteristics mean that the labor market flow is influenced by the options offered by informality, generally in services (tourism and street commerce), and public policies for supplementing income. Paradoxically, there is a shortage of qualified and less qualified workforce, and, in the case of higher qualifications, there is a demand for professionals from other regions.

In tasks of lower professional qualification, the situation is complex. For companies, there is an opportunistic behavior in the supply of labor in the face of minimally more advantageous remuneration. According to Schneider (2009), such behavior casts doubt on the opportunity to invest more in the qualification of workers due to the risk of turnover. Companies are both reluctant to invest in labor training and better remuneration for fear of rising costs and losing competitiveness.

The perception is that the importance of HR is growing among organizations, with corporate education practices and actions for the well-being and health of workers. However, there were few references to the link at the strategic management level. According to Barbosa (2005), the difficulties faced in basic HRM activities such as capturing and maintaining the workforce drain much of the energy of such units, indicating the stage of personnel administration.

In the perception of participants with experience in other states, HRM in the state of Ceará is still comparatively a step behind. However, the HR community has been strengthening and working together to exchange information and experiences (usually in WhatsApp groups and professional events). The region demonstrates a process – still in the early stages – of institutionalizing the HR action space of organizations (Tolbert & Zucker, 1999).

In labor relations, the group reported a financial and political weakening of unions after the 2017 labor reform. The union adviser also acknowledged that unions were negatively affected by the loss of revenue, leading them to reach faster collective agreements and conventions with companies and employers in order to raise funds. The managers told of a smooth relationship with the unions, without the threat of conflicts or strikes. In some situations, unions were consulted on necessary adjustments to adapt firms in the face of the pandemic. The labor reform had little effect on their HRM policies and practices, with rare cases of hiring self-employed professionals for management positions.

## THE MOVEMENT OF OUTLIERS: THE CASE OF BRASÍLIA, FEDERAL DISTRICT

In the private sector of Brasília, there is significant participation of the service sector in hospitality, commerce, logistics, security, health, education, and, more recently, information and technology (Codeplan, 2021), with some industrial activity in its surroundings. Public employment accounts for 37.1% of formal occupations, the private service sector for 42.4%, and industry for 2.9% (MTE, 2021). The region has an increasingly autochthonous workforce but characteristically receives workers from different regions of the country. The local labor market follows the national trend with regard to high unemployment rates, which was 14.8% in 2020 (IBGE, 2021). Despite this context, HR managers resent the lack of skilled labor.

Participants reported that their organizations have multi-year strategic HR planning linked to the business. Among the HRM priorities are workforce attraction, retention, and training. These priorities, common to organizations in the various sectors examined, reflect the shortage of qualified labor diagnosed in the documentary research.

A relevant and specific aspect of Brasília, the public sector is permanently a potential competitor for the private sector. The great professional goal of a large part of the workforce is to obtain employment in the public sector. In this sense, training the most qualified workforce usually focuses on public employment. Thus, some companies observe the open public bids when prospecting in the labor market. Their HR departments pointed to hiring professionals from other regions of the country as a habitual option.

The predominance of public service in the job market brings distinct and challenging cultural traits to HR departments. Among them are the diversity of employee origin, the multiculturalism of the teams, and characteristics linked to the public sector, such as slow communication and work processes. These are also mimicked (DiMaggio & Powell, 2007) in private organizations, as in the case of a lower feedback rate and less submission to pressure for deadlines and results.

There are no relevant conflicts or strikes with unions in labor relations, especially in the service sector. In industry, the scenario described is very close to that found in other regions of the country, given that labor relations include collective bargaining around wages and/or profit-

sharing agreements or working hours. Participants reported that the policies and practices of their organizations already largely meet unions' demands.

The organizations demonstrated no significant change in the pattern of hiring workers or in their practices with the 2017 labor reform. If anything, there was a greater emphasis on making individual agreements for dismissal. For managers, the reform affected the financing and functioning of workers' and employers' unions. For union members, after the reform, companies distanced themselves from unions.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil in March 2020 drastically changed the social and economic framework. The reality of organizations and their management were severely affected, and important developments surged, such as an increase in telework.

The Covid-19 pandemic affected how the focus groups and interviews took place. They were conducted over time, and the different conditions were responded to concerning the evolution of the general picture of the pandemic in Brazil. The participants from Joinville (September – October 2020) demonstrated a clear perception of the severity of the pandemic in the country. At the same time, the statements reflected a feeling of overcoming the so-called first wave of the disease and a feeling of normalization (i.e., tacit acceptance) of the health restrictions imposed on social and economic life. In Fortaleza (November 2020), there was increased concern about the spread of coronavirus variants and the high risk of a second wave. In Brasília (April 2021), the country experienced higher cases and deaths weekly.

The participants' contributions show that the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic was a shock to the business and consequently to the managers. The first reactions involved both redundancies and the attempt to preserve the contract of employment. Redundancies occurred due to the interruption of production and loss of business perspective from the sudden interruption to the economy. On the other hand, firms that chose to maintain employment relationships needed to keep the business running, as in logistics and urban services, or hope that production would resume in the short term.

Companies' actions included suspending activities, reducing working hours, and the definition of vacations for employees belonging to risk groups or with school-age children. Some firms reported negotiating with unions about layoffs or reduced working hours and/or remuneration. Such agreements were also boosted by the provisional measures edited by the government to enable minimum losses both to the companies' revenues and the employees' income.

The firms' HR departments engaged in at least two other lines of action. First, they collaborated in communicating the new sanitary protocols to maintain or adapt the production processes. At that moment, the mandatory use of face covers, hand sanitizers, and measures to increase social distance came into force. From this point of view, there were cases of companies

that hired more buses to avoid crowding in the transport of their workers and those that adapted the layout of production, cafeterias, and offices. The second line referred to initiatives to care for people, such as preventing mental health issues caused by social distancing and grief and encouraging flu vaccination. Most of the actions were directed at employees, but some initiatives included their families.

Over the months, the agreements to reduce working hours and remuneration and policies based on layoffs were replaced by the resumption of production at a slower pace. However, the challenges multiplied with the arrival of the second wave of Covid-19 without the support of new government measures of economic assistance. Companies began to have difficulties maintaining their operations because the number of employees in quarantine with cases of Covid-19 among family members grew significantly. It was also highlighted that part of the employees followed the health and safety protocols within the organization but did not have the same care at home when in contact with family and friends, which meant that much of the organization's effort was lost, corroborating Gigauri's findings (2020) regarding the roles played by HR in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic.

## A SYNTHESIS OF THE FINDINGS FROM THE INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The situations identified in the three researched regions bring, at the same time, unit/convergence and diversity/divergence in the institutional perspective, as portrayed by Hall and Soskice (2001). Among the unit/convergence, aspects related to the labor relations system deserve attention. In general, the statements of managers and union members in the three cities converged on the low-pressure power of unions in the institutional environment. Union action proved to be weakened so that union entities played an almost homologating role in collective labor contracting by organizations.

In Joinville and Brasília, where labor markets were more structured, managers reported stable relationships with unions. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the contacts with the unions focused on cooperation and support to achieve collective agreements in renewing existing clauses or looking for conditioned stability for workers. The participants in Fortaleza showed another angle. The job market in the city is still being structured, and the coexistence with unions proved problematic due to the lack of interlocutors and little opening for conversations beyond the regular collective negotiations. At least two factors contributed to this scenario. First, the unions' fragile financial situation due to the new provisions of the 2017 labor reform that ended the compulsory contribution employees had to pay to these organizations. Second, the low average remuneration in the city causes high porosity between the formal and informal sectors of the economy and limits the unions' ability to attract new members.

As for the labor market, another common element was the company's effort to attract and retain labor, given the shortage of skilled workers. HR professionals took practical initiatives to deal with this challenge, constantly interacting with other professionals and joining forces with

the creation of standard remuneration parameters among the firms. In Joinville and Brasília, these groups are formally organized in business or professional associations. In Fortaleza, this interaction was informal through social media and messaging apps (such as WhatsApp), showing the low institutionality of the local community of HR practitioners, as suggested by Trullen et al. (2020).

Another converging aspect between the regions was the willingness of the field of HRM to interact in discussion groups about HR policies and practices under the local supervision or leadership of professional associations.

Regarding the divergent aspects, from the institutional point of view, it is possible to point to the differences in professional training conditions. Joinville has traditional training structures for work in the industry, whereas Fortaleza does not have such training for the operational workforce and is restricted to encouraging leadership training at the managerial level. In Brasília, more qualified training prevails, almost always focused on positions in the government bureaucracy.

HR managers from the three regions indicated that their organizations experience the labor market and relations with unions in complex and diverse contexts. However, they dealt with these factors intuitively when making strategic or day-to-day HR decisions – i.e., the professionals were not used to carefully analyzing the data from official sources. Their manager's daily perception confirmed the official data presented to them during the focus groups.

Thus, HRM inserted in the institutional environment presented different development paths in different locations within Brazil, with similarities and particularities. Among the similarities, it was observed that HRM also constitutes a field of exchanging professional experiences among managers of different organizations. As for particularities, the research identified different paths of HRM consolidation within organizations. In this sense, the set of observations on HRM in the regions studied was aligned with international trends that identify convergences and, thus, similarities in management practices. Also, similar to these trends, it was noted that the HRM of the researched regions reveals path dependence within the same national territory, i.e., it has specific historical and constitutive paths. Exhibit 2 summarizes the research findings.

**Exhibit 2.** Focus group with HRM managers – main findings

City/Period of focus group	Labor market	Labor relations	HRM	Characterization
Joinville (September – October 2020)	Stable	Traditional	Traditional, transitioning to strategic	Institutionalization of HRM practices
Fortaleza (November 2020)	Structuring	Traditional	Traditional	Professionalization and restructuring of the HRM area
Brasília (April 2021)	Stable	Traditional	Traditional	Institutionalization of HRM practices

From the institutional point of view, the concern with attracting and retaining the workforce was identified as a common element in the strategic perspective of HRM, indicating the process of institutionalization of the HR departments as observed by Ulrich et al. (2008).

On the other hand, the Covid-19 pandemic created a new and adverse scenario for the HR departments. Without much experience in dialogue and interaction with bodies outside the organizations, these areas were led to act in an emergency at the beginning and, over time, in a more structured way in the face of the harsh conditions of the pandemic: retracted economy, health crisis, and lack of short-term solution perspective. According to Gooderham et al. (2019), the pandemic created a context that demanded new internal processes connected to operating forms characteristic of public policies. Since then, the context brought the need to routinize new practices as a condition for business continuity (Trullen et al., 2020; Gigauri, 2020).

In addition to the Covid-19 pandemic, people management practices were too timid to respond to the institutional context created after the labor reform, failing to offer propositions based on the experience lived in their interaction with the unions and on the interpretation of the labor market or labor relations rising from legislative changes. The unions proved to be even more atavistic in the face of the new institutional context, reproducing traditional practices instead of reinventing themselves around forms of financing that would allow their strengthening in the long term. Such a premise requires an integrative dyad between the organization and the union, from a significant institutional change, reinforcing the different roles of HRM (Hofstede et al., 2010) and its multilevel parameters (Schotter et al., 2021), while unions could be ahead of the game through the development of contemporary strategies to minimize the diversities found, instead of “surrendering” in this context.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research analyzed the perception of the HR managers regarding their form of operation in Brazil and concerning aspects of labor relations and the labor market. Given the changes in recent years, it is reasonable to assume that HR managers felt pressured to seek information to guide their strategies.

The focus groups carried out in three regions showed that companies face crises on both national and regional scales. There are constant challenges, and they outline a complex scenario for HRM, demonstrating that managers are not well organized and do not carry out a careful analysis of the environment when addressing the influence of factors such as the labor market and economic trends to make strategic or daily decisions. In everyday life, information and opinions from the HR community prevail, while formal reports or academic analyses are rarely used.

The evolution of the Covid-19 pandemic has shaped a new role for the firms' HR departments. The initial shock was faced with the introduction of teleworking, compliance with health protocols, and adjusting working hours and job positions. After this period, there was a phase of accommodation, coexistence with the disease, and a certain degree of stability

(late 2020). The second wave and the greater spread of the disease put the companies' operations at stake due to the overlapping of employees' leave of absence due to illness and monitoring family members and the community.

The attitude identified in the organizations' HR departments was reactive, indicating a limited reading of the emerging context. HRM has played a subsidiary role in Brazilian companies, and the study revealed that HR practices are still lagging behind the labor market and labor relationships, even in times of turmoil, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

The research findings reveal four non-excluding dimensions that could explain this behavior: (1) issues related to labor relations and the labor market are undervalued within the scope of HRM and are not even considered as part of mandatory training; (2) HR and labor relations management are treated as separate professional and knowledge areas that are poorly integrated into organizations; (3) HR attitudes in the face of the economic, social, and health crisis proved to be reactive and subservient to the goals of the organizational leadership; and (4) HRM was at the forefront of the pandemic crisis as providers of solutions to the challenges posed by the health crisis.

A limitation of this research is the period in which participants were contacted and interviewed during the pandemic. The intensity of managers' agendas undoubtedly hampered the HR managers' participation.

This article contributes to the advancement of the HRM discussion from an institutional perspective in different contexts of the labor market and labor relations in Brazil. It presents convergences and divergences of HRM practices and policies in organizations in different regions of the country that have been little explored in previous studies. Such results indicate the potential for further research to continue exploring other regions of Brazil and a future return to the regions examined in this article to evaluate the same topic in another context. This study encourages HRM development initiatives linked to the organizations' local and/or regional contexts. In a general sense, a better understanding of these dimensions justifies future studies with HRM departments focused on (1) measures to overcome crises, alignment with the dimension of organizational strategies, the institutionalization of HRM actions, and (2) the impacts of the 2017 labor reform in Brazil considering the point of view of workers and their representatives in unions.

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## AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

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