Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper spans twofold. Firstly, to investigate Human Resource Management practices (HRMP) adopted by organisations during the pandemic. Secondly, to bundle similar HRMP into Human Resource Management (HRM) bundles that provided unhindered organisational support to employees during the crisis.
Design/methodology/approach – The authors conducted 39 in-depth interviews across industries using a semi-structured interview schedule. Thereafter, the authors transcribed the interviews verbatim and analysed them thematically using MAXQDA 2021.
Findings – The study identifies effective practices during times of uncertainty and how soft HRM practices helped organisations survive during a crisis. When bundled together, these practices enabled organisations to continue operations during the pandemic, keeping their employees engaged and motivated.
Practical implications – Based on the learnings from the COVID-19 pandemic, the study provides a toolkit of HRMP bundles that organisations can adopt for future crisis management, enhancing the organisations’ absorptive capacity.
Originality/value – The study investigates the practices incorporated during COVID-19, leading to the identification of soft HRM bundles. The study adds value to the existing domain of HRM by including a unique set of soft HRMP bundles that have not been discussed in earlier studies and could be of high utility to organisations during the crisis.
Keywords Crisis management, Covid-19, Human resource management bundles, Human resource management practices, Absorptive capacity

1. Introduction
Crises are deviations from normal due to economic downturns, natural disasters and political uncertainty (Ererdi et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic is one such example of a crisis that deterred normalcy. The resulting global pandemic transformed the world of work and posed several human resource challenges (Butterick and Charlwood, 2021). However, unlike earlier crises, which only affected labour markets, this pandemic threatened the health and well-being of employees at all levels. Furthermore, national governments issued mandates and restricted human mobility to control the spread of the virus, which only added to the global slowdown. Due to the newness and the rapid mutating features of the COVID-19 strain, information about its symptoms and treatment was not readily available.
The uncertainty surrounding its mutation and spread highlighted the importance of economic repercussions arising from social and informational ambiguity (Sharma et al., 2020). Organisations altered their processes and work arrangements to cope with the unprecedented changes arising from prolonged lockdowns to adapt and help employees cope with the stress (Caligiru et al., 2020). Therefore, organisations across all sectors heavily invested in the adoption of people management strategies (Elayan, 2021). It became essential for all organisations to adopt the best practices that would allow them to survive during the crisis and come out more resilient. While researchers have highlighted the practices adopted in the travel industry (Paraschi et al., 2022) and the tourism and hospitality sector (Kaushal and Srivastava, 2021), studies on best practices adopted across industries are still an area of exploration. Our study contributes to the expanding literature by examining the bundle of best HRMP that were adopted by organisations across industries to overcome the setbacks caused by the pandemic in India.

The adoption of HRMP and their bundles during a crisis helps identify the best practices for effective crisis management (Adikaram et al., 2021). While COVID-19 restricted employees to remote work, organisational leaders were challenged to keep them engaged and motivated. An organisation needs a coherent set of actions to manage a crisis effectively, and HR practitioners need to be aware of their employees’ needs, maintain regular communication and ensure work flexibility (Poulsen and Ipsen, 2017; Terblanche, 2022). Moreover, employees must trust and have confidence in their management’s ability to help them develop optimistic attitudes and cope with the crisis (Suthatorn and Charoensukmongkol, 2022). Also, in the case of such pandemics wherein people are collectively perplexed and uncertain, institutional trust plays an essential role in lowering the worries of its employees (Tong et al., 2022). Therefore, organisations must be cognisant in their efforts to maintain “normalcy” even in a crisis.

Identifying the challenges organisational leaders and managers face facilitates motivating employees and keeping them productive during the crisis posed by the pandemic. The purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, to identify the HRMP used to deal with the crisis. Secondly, to bundle practices similar in nature under Human Resource Management (HRM) bundles that were effective in crisis management. Our findings show that HRMP adopted during the pandemic helped organisations keep their employees motivated and productive during the pandemic. Another key finding of the present study is that soft HRMP was predominant across all sample organisations. Therefore, our study indicates that employees can find motivation and purpose to work for their organisation with organisational support from their leaders and managers, which gradually enhances the organisations’ ability to learn and build their absorptive capacity (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990). This study also identifies practices and bundles that can facilitate organisations in building toolkits to adapt to similar situations. Furthermore, this study adds to the growing body of literature on effective HRMP for crisis management, by focusing on the role of soft HRMP in serving the purpose and allowing us to analyse how organisations instilled new practices or adapted existing ones to fit the Indian pandemic narrative by focusing on the two research objectives:

**RO1.** To identify the HRMP adopted by the HR practitioners to mitigate the crisis.

**RO2.** To bundle similar HRMP into Human Resource Management bundles that provided unhindered organisational support to employees during the crisis.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: An analysis of the literature on COVID-19’s impact on HRMP is presented in Section 2. Section 3 elaborates on the data collection and
methodology used for the study. The study findings are detailed in Section 4. Section 5 presents the implications of the study and its conclusion.

2. Literature review

2.1 Human resource management bundles and crisis management

HRM acts as a function to manage human capital acquisition processes, retention policies and exit strategies (Mefi and Asoba, 2020). HRMP and policies have been critical in crisis management since they drive the entire response and adaptation process (Tolentino et al., 2021). Moreover, it is possible to construct effective combinations out of distinct HRMP that form the core of the bundling (Guest, 1997). A meta-analytic investigation by Subramony (2009) revealed that bundles of complementary HRM strategies are more effective at influencing business performance than individual best practices. HRMP bundles permit the detection of interconnectedness between various activities firms and their HR managers undertake. However, the type of approach the organisation adopts during a crisis dictates whether they focus on cost-cutting or developing and equipping their human resources to adapt to the changes. The pandemic compelled organisations to consider factors other than economic losses in the labour market. While the economic disruptions were massive, the resulting stress, anxiety and uncertainty caused by the pandemic significantly impacted people’s mental health (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Organisations had to prioritise HRM to secure the well-being of their employees while making innovative modifications to their work schedules. However, existing literature fails to provide direction regarding HRM bundles and practices that need to be implemented for effective HRM during specific situations or crises (Adikaram et al., 2021; Boselie et al., 2001).

The pandemic necessitated organisations to make quick decisions and implement to continue operations and avoid closure. Various practices and their combinations were involved in the process, as bundles have an advantage over specific practices. The concept of bundling is not new and has its roots in the pioneering work of MacDuffie (1995), which goes:

> It is the combination of practices in a bundle, rather than individual practices, that shapes the pattern of interactions between and among managers and employees [...] Furthermore, a bundle of interrelated overlapping practices provides several ways for workers to acquire skills and multiple incentives to boost motivation.

In the broader sense, the HRM function deals with and identifies two dimensions, soft HRM and hard HRM (Guest, 1987; Storey, 1992), which is extensively supported by American academicians (Truss et al., 1997). The Harvard model advocates the Soft version (Beer, 1985), while the Michigan model endorses the Hard approach (Fombrun et al., 1984).

2.2 Hard and soft approaches to human resource management

Human resources are a company’s most significant asset, and HRM exists to maximise the link between organisational goals and employee demands, guaranteeing a healthy balance (Jaskeviciute et al., 2021). As the barriers between personal and professional lives blur, the necessity to redesign and incorporate flexibility into existing HRMP has become more apparent (Agarwal, 2021). Therefore, adopting appropriate HRMP in organisations is crucial to reassure employees regarding their jobs and the changing work landscape and to alleviate their fear and anxiety (Manuti et al., 2020).

The management of human resources is dichotomous, and the practices therein can be categorised under two models: soft HRM and hard HRM (Guest, 1987; Storey, 1988). The soft HRM approach assumes that employees’ performance depends on their autonomy at work (Truss et al., 1997).
et al., 1997). In contrast, the hard HRM approach assumes tight control over employees will increase their performance (Guest, 1987). Hard HRMP is the preferred solution for organisations during a crisis (Brunetto et al., 2022). However, “soft” HRMP were more significant than the “hard” calculative practices of control during the pandemic (Edvardsson and Durst, 2021). Also, a culture comprising trust, support and encouragement, as required during COVID-19 (Tong et al., 2022), can best be built using soft skills (Kamin, 2013). However, both the hard and soft HRM approaches find their roots in McGregor’s Theory X and Theory Y.

Based on notions of McGregor (1985) Theory X, the hard HRM model emphasises the use of tight managerial control and performance management techniques, while the soft HRM model is often associated with Theory Y, which focuses more on commitment and self-direction (Edgar and Geare, 2005; Truss et al., 1997) and is characterised by its alignment with the goals of flexibility and adaptability, highlighting the central role of communication in management (Truss et al., 1997).

In his seminal book, The Human Side of Enterprise, Douglas McGregor categorised the approaches into “hard” and “soft”. He questioned some of the fundamental assumptions surrounding human behaviour in organisations and highlighted the softer roles of a manager that could help employees reach their full potential (Zendage, 2018). Managers with Theory X mindset follow the traditional mandates of direction and control and view their subordinates as lacking self-direction at work. On the other hand, managers with the Theory Y perspective assume that employees enjoy their work, have self-control and take responsibility for their work, empowering employees and using managerial behaviour accordingly. As Douglas MacGregor proposed:

> The central principle of organisation which derives from Theory X is that of direction and control through the exercise of authority—what has been called the scalar principle. The central principle which derives from Theory Y is that of integration: the creation of conditions such that the members of the organisation can achieve their own goals best by directing their efforts toward the success of the enterprise. (MacGregor, 1960, p. 49)

Theory X/Y set a standard for the human relations movement, of which Theory Y significantly contributed to shaping relationship management principles during the last half of the 20th century (Carson, 2005). Self-administered diagnostic tools based on an assessment of Theory X/Y attitudes enabled managers to be more cognisant of their actions and assumptions regarding their subordinates (Zendage, 2018). Theory Y leaders assume that their followers are self-motivated to fulfil the objectives to which they are committed and adopt a relationship-oriented, democratic style of leadership (Şahin et al., 2017). Leaders with Theory Y managerial assumptions have also been associated with satisfied followers, affective commitment and organisational citizenship (Gürbüz et al., 2014). Crisis management literature advocates the use of soft HRMP to nurture, upskill and promote their employees to use their full potential, providing autonomy and support (Adikaram et al., 2021; Cregan et al., 2021; Truss et al., 1997; Wu et al., 2021). Summarising the bundling literature and the approaches adopted, we follow in line with the previous researchers supporting the soft HRMP to handle crises.

### 2.3 Role of human resource practitioners during pandemic

COVID-19 simultaneously hit the world with multiple crises, and organisations were no exception (Adikaram et al., 2021). Efficiently supervising employees without a business continuity plan effective enough to deal with multiple crises was an exceptionally demanding task. The pandemic highlighted the role of leaders in organisations, especially those responsible for managing people at work and implementing appropriate mitigation strategies.
Basnyat and Clarence Lao (2020) found that a proactive HR department improves employee turnover intention. Manuti et al. (2020) found that engagement increased when employees' sense of HRM involvement was high. However, through strategies like working from home, it was for the first time that organisations also hindered employees' privacy (Maddox-Daines, 2023). Therefore, assisting employees to adjust to the new change was extremely important in this context. According to HRM Asia [1], the role of the Chief Human Resources Officer became critical in guiding teams and individuals who were still adjusting to the changes (Liew, 2022). PwC’s Global Crisis Survey 2021 results show that business leaders prioritised their employees’ physical and emotional requirements to maintain employee morale (PWC, 2021). Brakman et al. (2021) state that pandemics, such as COVID-19, play an indispensable role in the automation and robotisation of work and the global shifting of labour demand toward emerging market countries. Therefore, strategic agility is vital for organisations in times of crisis, especially when they must inculcate the capabilities and skills required to work around unprecedented changes (Liu et al., 2020). Hence, the role of HR practitioners becomes imperative in identifying and implementing the practices that enhance agility and resilience and prepare them to deal with present and future crises.

Organisations need to train the old workforce, upgrade their skills and equip the new workforce with digital skills (Cooke et al., 2022); working on their absorptive capacity (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990) is paramount for organisations. Absorptive capacity is a dynamic capability to acquire, assimilate, transform and exploit knowledge (Zahra and George, 2002). This capability serves as a facilitator enabling organisations to develop strategic practices for effective and unhindered functioning of the organisation. Arunprasad et al. (2022) emphasise the need for HRMP to be directed at (i) selecting employees with the required skill set to work remotely and (ii) policies that encourage collaboration and cooperation on virtual platforms. Furthermore, Caligiuri et al. (2020) state that organisations can mitigate disruptions more smoothly when (i) they have employees who have a tolerance for ambiguity, resilience and curiosity, (ii) training is designed to foster relationship formation and shared experiences and (iii) organisational support and stress-mitigating practices are aimed at keeping employees motivated. Recent literature on COVID-19 also advocates and has implemented soft HRM bundles (Shipman et al., 2023; Thomas and Suresh, 2023; Vinod et al., 2023), realising the crucial role of HR managers and being cognisant of the ongoing debate on soft and hard approaches and the value they hold in crisis management. Thus, we grounded our theoretical framework on soft HRM bundles and practices. The choice stems from the humanistic perspective, considering the nature of crisis. Recent studies on COVID-19 also supported the humanistic perspective (Adikaram et al., 2021; Elayan, 2021; Stuart et al., 2021). However, most of the existing literature has focused on specific problems of HR systems and investigated the same (Adikaram et al., 2021). The current study investigates the COVID-19 crisis as an umbrella and various challenges faced as a spectrum of HR activities. Hence, we endeavour to encounter these gaps by investigating and providing an empirical framework to identify, understand and encounter the multitude of challenges faced by HR practitioners.

2.4 Theoretical framework
Theory Y provides the foundations for organisations to achieve their goals by creating a work environment where employees have creative freedom and the opportunity to reach their full potential. Building on Theory Y assumptions, the Soft HRM model emphasises the training and development of employees that enables individual development and increased organisational productivity and growth (Truss et al., 1997). Our article builds on
MacGregor’s Theory Y and the Soft HRM model to understand how HR practitioners and leaders mitigate the repercussions of a crisis.

Modern organisations need to be efficient, resilient and robust to survive in the rapidly changing environment resulting from a crisis. Thus, leaders are expected to stay updated about developments of the situation, be reliable in support and ensure flexibility in organisational operations (Pelser et al., 2016). In the context of crisis, HR practitioners have been linked to leadership effectiveness in organisations chiefly due to the leader’s ability to motivate and persuade positive perceptions amongst followers and stakeholders to adopt more constructive crisis response strategies (Wu et al., 2021). HR practitioners and leaders exhibit an emotional connection with their followers, which allows them to align the organisation’s vision and goals with the employees’ work objectives by being more supportive, responsive and attentive to their needs (Chen et al., 2015). Extant literature shows that viewing employees as assets rather than resources came out worst when it comes to managing a crisis akin to COVID-19 (Maddox-Daines, 2023). However, the kind of practices adopted and their effectiveness during the crisis is still a topic of interest among researchers (Adikaram et al., 2021; Boselie et al., 2001).

Our study attempts to understand how HR practitioners and managers embraced their role as leaders and created an environment wherein employees and stakeholders felt safe and motivated to perform better. Therefore, we bring together the assumptions of Theory Y that assert the significance of human resource development and the goals the soft HRM model aspires to achieve. Figure 1 depicts the theoretical framework that we adopt in our study.

Despite the abundant literature on high-performance enabling HRM, HRMP as bundles has not been established to enhance the performance and productivity of human resources in organisations (Adikaram et al., 2021; Boselie et al., 2001; Truss et al., 1997). Therefore, our research emphasises identifying the HRMP and HRM bundles for effective crisis management. The research contributes by providing an empirical framework highlighting the HRMP and HRM bundles’ effectiveness in crisis management.

![Figure 1. Theoretical framework](source: Created by authors)
3. Methods
3.1 Design and sampling
As the nature of the study was exploratory, a qualitative research design was adopted to investigate the adoption of HRMP in Indian enterprises during the pandemic. Open-ended questions allow researchers to gather rich and detailed information from the participants and become imperative, encouraging participants to freely express their thoughts, experiences and perspectives (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Shipman et al., 2023). In addition, this approach enabled us to explore the complex and nuanced aspects that may not be captured using closed-ended or other quantitative techniques.

The data collection process involves purposive sampling to identify human resource practitioners holding key positions or who were involved in the decision-making process during the crisis. After identifying key informants, we used their references and snowballed to identify the respondents for our study. Personal contacts of the authors in two major consulting firms formed the outset, enabling us to identify the target population with varying demographics, backgrounds and transition experiences and outcomes (Becker et al., 2022). Moreover, after identification, we contacted practitioners from different industries with varied experiences and backgrounds. This ensured the facilitation and inclusion of participants who may have been otherwise overlooked or difficult to reach through traditional sampling methods. The final sample included 39 practitioners who held critical leadership positions in their organisations and were involved in the decision-making process during COVID-19, such as Vice-President HR, HR head, Project Manager and HR coordinator. The job experience of the practitioners in our sample ranged from 3 years to 20 years. Table 1 provides a complete overview of the organisation, position within the company, industry type and the operations involved.

3.2 Research instruments and analysis
Semi-structured interviews enable researchers to probe deeper, collect features of specific cases and properly understand the construct under investigation (Babatunde et al., 2021). The interview questions focused on how organisations dealt with the pandemic and implemented strategies to minimise disruptions. The interview was conducted over virtual meeting platforms and through telephonic mediums. The ethical protocol of informed consent and voluntary participation was duly followed for all interviews. The interviews lasted for approximately 30–40 min and were transcribed verbatim. We simultaneously analysed the interviews as suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967). After 36 interviews, no new theme could be identified; therefore, we reached the conclusion of data saturation. (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin, 1990; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In addition, we conducted three more interviews to ensure no new themes emerged from the responses.

We used computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA 2021 to structure and analyse the data. Thematic analysis used in this study follows Braun and Clarke’s (2006) article to detect, analyse and present patterns in the data (Babatunde et al., 2021). Firstly, we reviewed the transcripts several times to familiarise ourselves with the data. Next, first-order codes were identified, including the practices incorporated during the crisis. After that, the identified practices were bundled to present the result in the aggregate form. Two researchers followed the process independently, and intercoder reliability was established to minimise the chances of error and biases (Mays and Pope, 2000; O’Connor and Joffe, 2020). Cohen’s Kappa was also calculated to determine consistency between coders that met the inter-coder reliability cutoff at 0.80 (Schwandt, 1996). Finally, after several rounds of discussion, we arrived at the HRM bundles and practices. The details of the bundled themes and practices are presented in Table 2.
4. Findings

HRMP bundles, themes and practices identified in our study are displayed in Figure 2. The circular dendrogram groups incorporated HRMP into themes and themes into bundles. The size of the circles denotes the frequency of the HRMP, and each colour represents separate bundles and the theme therein. The first branches off the root node indicate the HRMP bundles. The bundles that were identified through our analysis were (i) health and safety (HS), (ii) engagement and motivation, (iii) work-life enrichment (WLE) and (iv) corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Table 1. Sample distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation ID</th>
<th>Nature of business</th>
<th>Multinational/local</th>
<th>Position of HRP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organisation 1</td>
<td>Financial services</td>
<td>Global operations</td>
<td>Dy. Manager HR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation 2</td>
<td>Petroleum and natural gas</td>
<td>Local operation</td>
<td>HR executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation 3</td>
<td>Pharmaceuticals</td>
<td>Global operations</td>
<td>HR recruiter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation 4</td>
<td>Marketer &amp; retailer</td>
<td>Global operations</td>
<td>GM HR</td>
</tr>
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<td>Financial services</td>
<td>Local operation</td>
<td>Manager HR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Global operations</td>
<td>HR executive</td>
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<td>Global operations</td>
<td>HR executive</td>
</tr>
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<td>Financial services</td>
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<td>HR executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>HR recruiter</td>
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<td>Organisation 36</td>
<td>Mining</td>
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<td>Organisation 37</td>
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<td>Manager HR</td>
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<td>Manager HR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation 39</td>
<td>Food industry</td>
<td>Local operation</td>
<td>Manager HR</td>
</tr>
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Source: Created by authors
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bundle</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Health and safety             | Mental health (MH)              | Mindfulness sessions  
Stress management services  
Sharing positive recovered stories                                                                                                           |
| Physical health (PH)          | 24/7 Doctor consultation  
Distributed health care devices  
One on one and group wellbeing coaching  
Distribution of immunity kit, hygiene kit and wellness kit  
Wellbeing program and therapy session                                                                                                             |
| Covid awareness (CA)          | Circulation of SOPs and advisories  
Thermal scanning  
Regular sanitisation of premises  
Physical distancing  
Covid awareness drive  
Distribution of mask, gloves and sanitiser  
Sessions and applications guiding covid appropriate behaviour                                                                                      |
| Medical support (MS)          | 24*7 help desk  
Virtual doctor consultation  
Plasma and blood donation drive  
Tie-ups with oxygen providers, which employees can avail of by providing relevant documents  
Isolation facilities for bachelors and mildly symptomatic  
Tie-ups with hotels and hospitals for isolation  
Vaccination drive for employees and families                                                                                                        |
| Work-life enrichment          | Employee family welfare (EFW)   | Paid leave if someone in the family is positive and needs to be taken care  
Organising virtual event  
Insurance cover for employees and family  
Digital resources and entertainment hub  
Employee resource group  
Employee and family vaccination drive  
Forming hobby clubs  
Family connect programs                                                                                                                          |
| Compensation/incentives and   | Paid leave during the period of self-isolation  
Extended leaves for family care  
Regularisation of absence because of COVID-19 pandemic  
Paid advance salaries  
Appreciation for frontline employees by increasing their bonuses  
$13,000 to the nominee in case of demise  
Two years' salary in case of demise  
$1,000 bonus to create a home office  
Internet plan and wi-fi services to employees  
Access to virtual programs  
Remote access to organisational resources                                                                                                          |
| Benefits (CB)                 | Alternate work arrangements (AWA) | (continued)                                                                                                                                 |

Table 2. HRMP bundles and themes during COVID-19
4.1 Health and safety

Natural pandemics endanger public health and unintentionally inflict damage (Paraschi et al., 2022). The most significant concern during COVID-19 was getting infected and eventually becoming a capable carrier of infecting others. Thus, the role of organisations becomes imperative, and organisational trust plays a significant role in passing the COVID-19 protocol for the employees, assuring them of their HS (Tong et al., 2022). Maintaining social distance was paramount. The following steps were made to ensure protocols at work.

4.1.1 COVID-19 awareness. When COVID-19 first appeared, the main problem was raising awareness about the virus and ensuring COVID-19-appropriate behaviour. Organisations created and communicated standard operating procedures (SOPs) and advisories that must be strictly adhered to. Thermal scanning was made mandatory before entering any organisation. Organisations providing essential services were allowed to operate with recommended restrictions, while organisations in non-essential sectors were forced to embrace alternate work arrangements. About 92% of the total sample held COVID-19 awareness campaigns to educate employees and their families. Social distancing was strictly enforced, and sanitation and hygiene were ensured by distributing gloves, masks and sanitisers.

4.1.2 Physical health. During the pandemic, the prime focus was the HS of employees. To ensure that this goal was met, employees had access to doctors 24/7. When vaccines were under development, many organisations distributed Immunity Kits, including allopathic medicines (such as Vitamin C and Zinc supplements) and ayurvedic medication (such as giloy and kwath). Some organisations also provided one-on-one and group well-being counselling on caring for a COVID-19 infected individual without getting infected. During the lockdown, organisations with shift operations ensured the shifts were adjusted to reduce interaction and meet the social distancing requirements for the plant’s safe operation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bundle</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employee engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td>Issuing a personalised appreciation letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Virtual connect session (pasta live and chai break)</td>
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<td>“Pen Down day” employees were urged to take a Friday off and cancel all meetings</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Encouraged employees to have a vacation by clubbing long weekends</td>
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<td>More frequent leaders/CEO address</td>
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<td>In house swap skill program</td>
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<td>Tutorials for virtual platforms</td>
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<td>Subscriptions to online learning portals</td>
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<td>Webinars on soft-skills, time management etc</td>
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<td>In-house skill swap program</td>
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<td>E-learning platforms based on employee needs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Corporate social responsibility (CSR)</td>
<td>Connecting with the community for the distribution of masks and sanitiser</td>
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<td>Funded 200 bedded COVID-19 hospital</td>
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<td>One day’s salary to PM CARES fund</td>
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<td>Distribution of food packets and essentials</td>
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<td>Providing transport facilities to migrant labourers</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Innovative initiatives to tackle oxygen shortage</td>
</tr>
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Table 2. Source: Created by authors
4.1.3 Mental health. Government-imposed strict lockdowns prevented residents from leaving their houses. Social isolation impacts mental health and makes people feel lonely, leading to stress and anxiety. Employees experience energy depletion and burnout due to worry and anxiety from the pandemic (Kloutsiniotis et al., 2022).

Organisations were aware of the situation and took the required actions to address it. Organisation 1 launched the “Together We Win” initiative. Organisation 2 launched the “We Care” initiative, and Organisation 6 launched “Collective Well-being”. These initiatives dealt with stress management and offered counselling services to those in need. Organisation 27 began sharing stories of people who recovered from COVID-19, easing the prevailing atmosphere. Live sessions with recovered patients were considered a standard practice as the pandemic spread, creating hope in the lives of many. Organisation 12 approached celebrities and created an app that included discussions about mental health and ways to improve one’s well-being.

4.1.4 Medical support. The central question during the COVID-19 outbreak was, “Do we have enough medical infrastructure to address the situation?” As disappointing as the answer to this question was, the truth was that the Indian healthcare system was overburdened to handle the COVID-19 health crisis (Choudhary et al., 2021; Jain et al., 2021).

Limited medical supply and support system constraints forced organisations to accumulate as many resources as possible to aid their employees during the crisis. Virtual medical consultation was provided to avoid hospital exposure. Organisation 30 collaborated with hospitals and hotels for isolation and quarantine purposes. About 70% of the sample

Source: Created by authors
organisations created a resource directory that could be consulted at the time of need. Organisation 31 provided isolation facilities for mildly symptomatic employees who did not require hospitalisation. Organisation 24 leveraged its relationships with oxygen providers to maintain supplies in their workplace that employees could access by raising a ticket and presenting the necessary documentation. Plasma and blood donation programmes were also arranged by Organisation 30. When the vaccination programmes began, all the organisations encouraged their employees to vaccinate; some even set up camps for employees and their families.

4.2 Engagement and motivation
Working from home became the new normal as most organisations functioned remotely. Keeping employees engaged and motivated became tough for organisations and HR professionals when the situation prevented them from continuing regular practices. New practices that cater to the prevailing situation need to be incorporated. Tan et al. (2021) and Laguna et al. (2017) argue that engagement shapes personal resources such as self-efficacy and enthusiasm. Rožman and Tominc (2021) suggested that employees may experience stress and disengagement if they do not receive the knowledge and assistance to perform their jobs effectively or think they are unproductive during the pandemic. Leaders had to ensure employees did not feel disengaged and developed resilience to bounce back by acquiring new skill sets. After analysing the practices incorporated by different organisations, we grouped them into two subcategories discussed below.

4.2.1 Employee engagement. Rich et al. (2010) define employee engagement as the “simultaneous investment of an individual’s physical, cognitive and emotional energy in active, full work performance” (Saks, 2022). HR professionals noted that numerous engagement programmes were tailored to keep employees interested and motivated during these challenging times, particularly during lockdowns. While these programmes influence employee engagement, the HR department’s proactive involvement in handling workplace practices and policies also influences employee engagement and, thus, their turnover intention (Basnyat and Clarence Lao, 2020).

Organisation 2 provided personalised appreciation letters to their employees to help them feel valued during these difficult times. Because virtual engagements were the only medium available during the lockdown, organisations held many weekly virtual events. These events included internet gaming, quizzes, singing and talent competitions for employees and their families. CEO/Leader speeches were scheduled regularly. During the weekdays, “chai and pasta breaks” were provided, where employees had informal chats about their jobs and lives, allowing them to socialise with their colleagues as before COVID-19.

Organisation 16 implemented a “Pen Down Day” policy wherein employees did not have to report to work on Fridays. Organisation 10 created an “online family connect” initiative to connect with employees’ families through video conferencing. The innovative outreach campaign was used to keep families connected and motivate them during the lockdown. Such practices help to ensure essential communication among employees, thereby nurturing a sense of belongingness among the workforce operating remotely (Poulsen and Ipsen, 2017).

4.2.2 Upskill and training. Although a catastrophic phenomenon, the COVID-19 pandemic helped organisations to enhance their knowledge of multiple crisis management. Organisations had an opportunity to work on their realised absorptive capacity (Sancho-Zamora et al., 2021). People, organisations and employees with higher resilience bounce back victorious. As discussed previously, acquisition of new knowledge and assimilating (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Zahra and George, 2002) with the current situation made it critical for the organisation to bounce back. COVID-19 has been one of the many events that changed
the future of work. Even though technology advancements and adoption increased rapidly during the pandemic, it became necessary to develop favourable and supportive social-technological interventions to facilitate changes in future organisational work (Budhwar et al., 2022). Organisations took it as an opportunity to devise ways and practices that kept employees driven. With frequent lockdowns and uncertainty looming over the “getting back to normal” routine, the mobility of all non-essential employees was limited to the four corners of their homes. Employees, thus, had fewer workloads and ample leisure time. Organisations use this period to upskill their employees and provide training for future work prospects.

The online training sessions that were conducted served two purposes. Firstly, employees were being trained for changes in the workplace and developing their skillsets to adapt to new technology. Secondly, online training also served as a medium for socialising with colleagues and keeping them engaged—a win-win situation for the organisations and the employees. Basic practices involved tutorials on virtual platforms and SOPs related to working from home. Besides the basic practices, organisations also provided subscription plans to online learning portals, prominently Coursera and Udemy, among many others. Organisations also collaborated with renowned practitioners to arrange webinars on soft skills. Time management and work-life balance seminars were also organised for employees.

Organisation 25 created a unique e-learning platform, ensuring employees use their time productively. Employees could upskill through e-learning courses and multiple webinars across roles and functions. To keep employees interested and motivated, Organisation 18 established an in-house skill-swap program where they could teach and learn a new skill from their co-workers.

4.3 Work-life enrichment
WLE has become critical for firms to help employees cope during difficult times. In this context, Choi et al. (2022) established the concept of “smart work”, advocating for employee-friendly work arrangements that can improve employees’ quality-of-life through telecommuting and flexible work hours. To achieve a healthy work-life balance, organisations must implement policies supporting flexible work arrangements, location flexibility and time flexibility (Cooke et al., 2022).

Our analysis yielded three sub-themes that can be integrated into WLE. These are: (1) employee and family welfare, (2) compensation/incentives and benefits and (3) alternate work arrangements.

4.3.1 Employee and family welfare. Catering to the employees’ and their families’ needs adds a sense of commitment and obligation to the organisation, resulting in organisational citizenship behaviour (Indarti et al., 2017). During the isolation period, all organisations included in this study provided paid leave to their employees. Some organisations offer paid leave if someone in the family tests positive for COVID-19 and needs care. Employee resource groups were formed so employees could communicate with one another in times of need or emergency. Various online activities for employees and their families were arranged, and digital resources and entertainment hubs were built and made available to employees and their families for recreation.

Organisations 17 and 21 took the initiative and started an employee reach program that aimed to reach out to each employee and their family, enquiring about how they were managing through difficult times and providing an assurance that they could approach the organisation in case of any help. This gesture from the organisation provided a sense of
belongingness and made them feel like valuable organisation employees. With the onset of vaccines, organisations organised free vaccine campaigns for employees and their families.

### 4.3.2 Compensation/incentives and benefits

About 43% of the organisations in our sample revised their medical policies to include COVID-19 in the medical insurance policies extended to the employees and their families. Organisation 2 extended its policy, providing leaves and regularising absences arising from COVID-19. Organisation 21 rewarded its frontline personnel by raising their incentives. Organisation 23 committed to paying its employees two years’ income in the event of their death. Organisation 2 committed to providing $13,000 to employees’ families as relief in case of demise due to COVID-19. Furthermore, during COVID-19, executive coaching was arranged for one-on-one and group coaching sessions to address employees’ needs by Organisation 16.

### 4.3.3 Alternate work arrangement

Continuous operations are critical for an organisation’s survival. Remote working or “work-from-home” arrangements became the only way for businesses to function normally. A few months into the pandemic, there was an increased reliance on technology for online meetings, remote working and robotics to perform manual jobs. Remote work has also impacted employee well-being and productivity (Iwashita, 2021). According to a Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler (KPMG) report, post-pandemic markets have been swiftly shifting to a hybrid model wherein 89% of enterprises either implemented or intend to implement remote working practices (KPMG, 2022).

Organisation 22 provided a bonus of $1,000 to purchase furniture and machines to help employees set up the home office. Our findings are consistent with the literature that discusses the swift adoption of remote working (Kumar and Chakraborty, 2022) and the fast-evolving hybrid workspace (Petani and Mengis, 2021). Most organisations made internet plans/Wi-Fi services available to their employees at their homes. Access to virtual platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams, among others, was made available to schedule virtual meetings, discuss business and maintain operations. There was also remote access to organisational resources.

### 4.4 Corporate social responsibility

CSR refers to voluntary organisational actions and practices that contribute to societal goals through external and internal CSR activities (Rodrigues and Krishnamurthy, 2022). Organisations have greater access to resources that allow them to provide services to governments and society, particularly in times of need.

Pharmaceutical companies in our sample used their resources to increase the manufacturing of masks and sanitisers for hospital supplies and distribution at the community level. Organisation 36 funded an exclusive 200-bed high-quality medical facility to treat COVID-19 patients. Drives for distributing food packets and essentials to the migrant labourers and providing them with transportation facilities were also arranged.

Employees feel more pride when their organisations actively participate in CSR initiatives and are socially responsible (Ahmad et al., 2022). CSR act as a strategic tool for ethical and sustainable behaviour but also enhances business activities moreover, positively associates with absorptive capacity (Pütz et al., 2023). Our interviews revealed that most organisations established a corpus to contribute to the Prime Minister’s Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations (PM CARES) fund for COVID-19. Furthermore, we found that many employees voluntarily donated a day’s income to the corpus.

### 5. Discussion and conclusion

COVID-19 was an unprecedented disaster. Organisations had no business continuity plan designed to deal with such a crisis. Thus, working on potential absorptive capacity
was the only solution. Assimilation and utilisation of available information become imperative for the organisation. Thus, HRMP were critical because they considerably impact organisations’ ability to prevent, plan for and respond to disasters (de Camargo Fiorini et al., 2021). The lessons learned from this pandemic will lay the groundwork for preventing similar disasters, enabling organisations to work on their absorptive capacity. Organisational leaders adopt and implement appropriate practices to enable employees to realise their potential, as suggested by previous literature (Guest, 1987; MacGregor, 1960; Storey, 1992). Also, when designing a crisis plan, HR professionals should consider employees’ physical, mental and psychological health (Vardarlı, 2016). Extant literature shows that hard practices during COVID-19 were less successful in keeping the employees productive and were not strategically effective (Maddox-Daines, 2023). It, thus, becomes important to practice soft skills to ensure an environment of trust, encouragement and support for the workforce to be motivated and engaged during times of crisis (Kamin, 2013), as marked by engagement and motivation bundle. Thus, this paper draws support for Theory Y and focuses on developing soft HRM bundles, which not only helped many organisations survive during crises but emerged strategic as well. Our study also resonates with previous studies that have found Theory Y leadership styles facilitate supportive actions that are crucial in gaining employee trust and cooperation (Thomas and Bostrom, 2008).

The findings from this study reveal that HRM practitioners modified their HRMP to keep their employees safe and motivated during the pandemic and identified the role of bundling. The adoption of soft HRMP bundles were witnessed across industries wherein organisations responded to employee feedback and prioritised their well-being. The prominent HRMP incorporated during COVID-19 is displayed in Figure 2 and supports the existing claims (Adikaram et al., 2021; Subramony, 2009; Wu et al., 2021). The findings show that organisations prioritised HS practices, followed by WLE, employee engagement and motivation and CSR in handling internal and external challenges (Pearson and Mitroff, 1993). As highlighted by the CSR bundle, organisations also contribute significantly to society by using resources in the best possible way (Vinod et al., 2023). While organisations did not specifically use HRMP bundles, the thematic analysis revealed the interrelatedness between certain practices designed to mitigate specific effects of the pandemic, and these linkages were evident to provide cues to mitigate future crises. In an environment characterised by uncertainty like the COVID-19 pandemic, the absorptive capacity affects the current and future decisions an organisation makes, activating the learning curve. The adoption of HRMP introduces new experiences and challenges impacting expectation formation, which enables organisations to anticipate and take corrective measures. A framework of how HRMP bundles can effectively tackle the disruptions from a crisis and use them to their advantage can be seen in Figure 3.

When faced with a crisis, all organisations go through similar phases: identifying warning signals, prevention, damage control, business recovery and organisational learning (Pearson and Mitroff, 1993). Our framework also finds similarities in the phases organisations and their HR managers underwent to strategise the best possible solutions for effective crisis management. Furthermore, our study also adds to Adikaram et al.’s (2021) COVID-19 crisis framework in two ways. Firstly, our crisis management framework focuses solely on HRM bundles that organisations adopted to keep their employees motivated and prepared for the dynamic environment during the pandemic. This would imply that the organisation ensured that employees’ skills and training would also be helpful, making the workforce future ready. HR managers also implemented creative decisions to tackle any unanticipated situations that could hamper the organisation’s daily operations and
maintain open communications across all levels. Secondly, our crisis management framework is not limited to only the COVID-19 crisis. We show this by mapping our framework to Pearson and Mitroff’s (1993) Crisis Management phases that demonstrate how an organisation evolves and learns from a crisis to be more resilient.

Multiskilling is a widely recognised soft HRM practice organisation used to upskill employees and equip them to handle forthcoming changes. Moreover, organisations also used this time for technical advancement and to prepare their workforce, emphasising training sessions and subscriptions to online learning portals. While Organisations 17, 20 and 28 focused on developing the employees’ communication and capacity to deal with stress, other organisations still lack initiatives focusing on soft skill development. Since employees are the greatest resource that an organisation can possess, it becomes imperative that they have the required skillsets to perform effectively. Besides

**Source:** Adapted from Adikaram et al. (2021) and extended by authors
developing the hard skills related to technical and administrative procedures, organisations must focus on developing their employees’ communication skills, decision-making and problem-solving skills, leadership skills and interpersonal or people skills that fall under soft skills (Ibrahim et al., 2017). The identified bundles synchronise with the assumptions of Theory Y, providing empirical support for a softer approach to HRM for crisis management.

5.1 Theoretical implications
The present study allows us to draw various theoretical implications. Firstly, to the best of the authors’ knowledge, this study is among the first to investigate, identify and bundle the HRMP adopted during the crisis, adding to the existing crisis management literature. While previous literature focuses on crisis management of a specific nature, our study provides a framework (refer to Figure 3) that allows organisations to handle multiple crises, such as health crises and management crises, among others. Secondly, our study highlights the importance of soft HRM approaches and practices that are more flexible and value employees and staff development during a crisis, laying the importance of soft bundles during crisis management. Our study re-establishes the importance of Soft HRMP in crisis management because the extant literature has majorly focused on hard HRMP, which were implemented to minimise costs during a crisis (Roan et al., 2001). Thirdly, absorptive capacity forms a core element in sustaining organisations within dynamic and unpredictable landscapes. This study demonstrates the pertinent role of absorptive capacity in organisations (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Zahra and George, 2002) through evidence-based HRM bundles resulting from the organisations’ agility and ability to learn. This confluence implies that fostering absorptive capacity not only enhances organisations’ adaptability but also contributes to resilient HRM strategies. Fourthly, previous research has largely ignored CSR as one of the potential HRM bundles; however, our finding suggests CSR bundles can enhance employees’ sense of pride and adds to the literature on crisis management. CSR activities implemented by organisations see more participation by employees and their families. For example, fundraisers by organisations during a crisis can help contribute to the re-adaptation of society. Fifthly, since lack of preparation for managing such multiple crises limits the opportunity for HR professionals to respond strategically (Maddox-Daines, 2023), the evidence-based framework presented in the study would help organisations build their strategic agility. To conclude, our study tries to integrate all the practices and bundle them, providing a coherent view of HRMP during a crisis rather than providing alternative HRM approaches based on flexible work schedules and a flexible management structure.

5.2 Managerial implications
Findings from our study reveal essential information on the adoption and implementation of HRMP relating to crisis management. Bundles identified in the study would help reduce the confusion amongst corporate leaders when disruptions cannot be predicted. The managerial implications of the soft HRM toolkit provided in the study are as follows. Firstly, there is a dearth of literature focusing on HRM bundles that cater to a management crisis. The study identifies HRM Bundles facilitating organisations by providing them with a toolkit for HR practitioners that could be adapted to similar crises. Secondly, the evidence-based mapping in Figure 2 helps practitioners choose appropriate HRMP depending upon the nature of the crisis. HR practitioners can choose the appropriate practices from the framework provided and can incorporate them to leverage in future crisis management. Moreover, the HRMP
bundles provide insights for managing future crises and adopting resilient practices. Our findings show that soft HRM approaches enhance an organisation’s capacity to deal with uncertainty, allowing the realisation of absorptive capacity. Thirdly, our framework would help assess organisations in human resource planning by providing a way forward in aligning HRM with organisations’ strategic goals, enabling strategic HRM and will provide them with multiple choices from the framework. Fourthly, the study establishes that standalone practices cannot help in crisis management. It requires a set of practices which caters to different dimensions of work and stress. Table 2 addresses the practices incorporated for those dimensions.

Fifth, the study offers four HRM bundles: HS, engagement and motivation, WLE and CSR. Each of these bundles provides a set of practices that practitioners could incorporate. For example, mental health plays a crucial role in employee well-being, irrespective of crisis. The HS bundle highlights the practices organisations can introduce to enhance employee well-being. Similarly, other bundles can be leveraged to enhance organisational effectiveness and assist in HRM functions. Also, emphasising the significance of soft HRM bundles, this study is conclusive of the fact that organisations need to consider employees as resources rather than assets (Maddox-Daines, 2023) for crisis management.

5.3 Limitations and scope for future research
This study has certain shortcomings that must be addressed. The qualitative nature of the study affects its generalisability since the responses from the interviews may not be free from biases. Our study was restricted to India, implying that new themes may develop, and some of this study’s uncovered elements may not apply in other contexts. The negative aspects of HRMP were not explored in the study as data collected was at the organisation level; therefore, the impact of the practices on employees could not be established. Future research can address this limitation by gathering data at the employee level. This exploratory study opens doors for more quantitative studies to confirm significant contributing factors to crisis management. Moreover, evaluative studies can be conducted to analyse the effectiveness of our HRMP bundles for crisis management.

Notes
1. https://hrmasia.com
2. Denominations have been converted to USD for greater generalisability.

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