

Strategic Leadership and HR Practices in Organisations

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Abstract

This paper examines how IBM strategically aligned its Human Resource Management (HRM) practices with its broader business objectives to navigate the disruptions caused by the COVID19 pandemic. The analysis focuses on the strategic adaptation of core HR functions including staffing, training and development, compensation, and performance management to support remote work and maintain operational agility. Framed within Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) theory, the study highlights how these practices were integral to sustaining IBM's strategic goals of digital leadership and workforce resilience. Furthermore, the paper explores the critical role of structured change management, detailing the application of Kotter's 8-Step Change Model and Kurt Lewin's 3-Step Change Management Model in guiding the organizational transition. These models provided a phased approach to managing change, from creating urgency and forming a guiding coalition to unfreezing old structures, implementing new work models, and refreezing new norms. Supported by adaptive leadership, the integration of SHRM with these established change management frameworks enabled IBM to mitigate immediate disruptions and build a foundation for long-term organizational agility, offering a replicable model for enterprises in volatile environments.

Keywords: IBM, Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM); Kotter's 8-Step Change Model, Remote Work, Change Management, Organizational Agility, Kurt Lewin's 3-Step Change Management Model, Leadership, COVID-19 Pandemic, Digital Transformation, Talent Management

1. Executive Summary

This report critically examines how IBM strategically aligned its human resource (HR) practices to manage the disruptive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly through the implementation of a one-year remote work policy [1]. By leveraging core HR functions—staffing, development, retention, and compensation—IBM reinforced its long-term strategic goals of digital leadership, operational continuity, and workforce agility. The analysis underscores that these HR functions were not merely reactive adjustments but integral components of IBM's broader strategic response to crisis-induced change. Staffing, for instance, was strategically redirected toward recruiting digitally proficient talent capable of thriving in virtual workspaces, thus aligning with IBM's aim to expand its cloud and AI services [2]. Development efforts were enhanced through virtual learning platforms, fostering continuous skill acquisition to ensure employees remained

adaptable and aligned with shifting business priorities. This directly supported IBM's objective of maintaining a future ready workforce capable of navigating technological disruptions.

Retention strategies during the pandemic emphasized flexibility, wellbeing, and employee autonomy—values that increased engagement and loyalty amid uncertainty. These were not only retention mechanisms but also strategic tools for sustaining productivity and morale in a dispersed workforce [3]. IBM's compensation models were re-evaluated to include remote work stipends and performance-based rewards, ensuring alignment with output driven metrics that reflect the shift toward results-oriented management (Harvard Business Review, 2021). Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) at IBM has thus played a pivotal role in synchronizing human capital strategies with the company's evolving business model. Through digital transformation,

IBM harnessed SHRM to create a resilient operational model, combining agility with human-centricity to safeguard performance under duress [4].

The report also highlights IBM's effective application of transformational and situational leadership models to address the psychological and operational complexities of remote work. Transformational leadership helped galvanize teams through purpose and innovation, while situational leadership enabled leaders to flexibly adapt their styles based on team needs and remote work dynamics [5,6]. This dual leadership approach ensured alignment between individual and organisational goals while reinforcing a culture of trust and accountability. In navigating organisational

change, IBM implemented structured frameworks such as Kotter's 8-Step Model and Lewin's Change Management Theory, enabling a phased and psychologically attuned transition to remote operations [7,8]. These frameworks facilitated the identification of change drivers, minimized resistance, and institutionalized new norms that are now integral to IBM's post-pandemic operational design. In conclusion, IBM's strategic leadership and innovative HR practices during the pandemic not only mitigated immediate disruptions but also laid the foundation for long-term resilience. Its integration of digital infrastructure with adaptive HR strategies exemplifies a model for organisations seeking to future-proof their workforce.

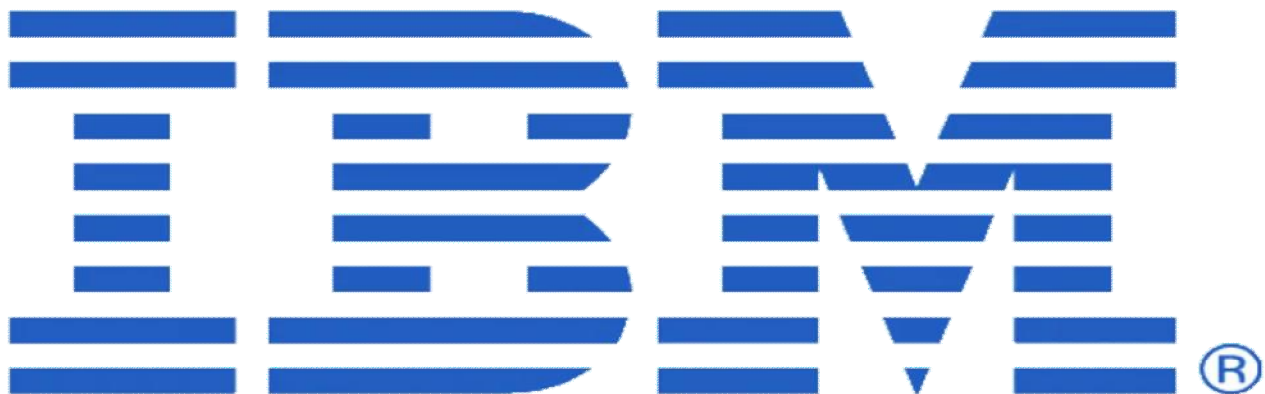


Figure 1: IBM Logo Taken from the Company Website (<https://www.ibm.com>)

2. Introduction

Founded in 1911, IBM (International Business Machines Corporation) has emerged as a global leader in digital transformation, artificial intelligence, and cloud-based solutions, operating in more than 170 countries. Central to IBM's strategic resilience is its human resource management, which functions not merely as an administrative unit but as a driver of competitive advantage and organisational agility. The company's evolution—from a hardware-centric business to a consultancy and software powerhouse has necessitated a continuous realignment of its human capital strategy with its broader corporate goals [9]. Strategic human resource functions such as recruitment, development, performance management, and compensation have been leveraged to foster innovation, enhance employee capability, and support IBM's adaptive business model.

Programs like *SkillsBuild* and *Think Academy* the internal, award-winning IBM learning platform that educates employees and illustrate the company's commitment to cultivating a workforce that is both technically proficient and strategically aligned with emerging industry demands. IBM's inclusive hiring practices and its sustained focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion further demonstrate how HR serves as a vehicle for fulfilling the firm's mission and long-term vision [10]. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented disruptions, compelling IBM to

implement a one-year work-from-home policy and reconfigure traditional HR practices for the remote work environment.

This included the adoption of virtual recruitment processes, remote onboarding, digital learning ecosystems, and revised performance appraisal systems tailored to distributed team [11]. Such transformations not only addressed immediate operational challenges but also strategically reinforced IBM's long-standing commitment to flexibility, resilience, and innovation. The integration of HR practices with digital infrastructure allowed IBM to maintain business continuity, safeguard employee wellbeing, and ensure strategic alignment despite the volatile global context.

3. Role of HR Functions in Strategic Objectives

This paper critically examines IBM's human resource and leadership strategies within the framework of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM), evaluating how they were adapted to meet organisational objectives in a remote working context and sustained through effective change management and leadership development [12]. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic compelled organizations to reevaluate their HR strategies, shifting from traditional models to more strategic, value-adding roles.

At IBM, the Human Resources function has become a vital contributor to achieving business continuity and adaptability in a

post-pandemic world. Rather than serving solely administrative duties, HR at IBM is now fully integrated into the organization's strategic framework, tasked with aligning workforce capabilities to evolving market demands and business objectives. One of the

most significant transformations in IBM's HR approach has been the design and implementation of dynamic talent management systems.

Traditional HR Functions	Strategic HRM at IBM
Administrative tasks (payroll, records)	HR analytics for workforce planning
Reactive problem-solving	Proactive talent development
Siloed HR department	HR integrated with business strategy
Focus on compliance	Focus on innovation and agility
Transactional service delivery	Transformational change management
Internal focus on HR operations	External focus on employer branding and market needs

Table 1: IBM's HR Function Evolution (Traditional HR vs. Strategic HRM)

These systems support employee flexibility, foster digital proficiency, and cultivate psychological resilience. The department's emphasis on agility ensures that the right talent is sourced, developed, and retained to drive innovation in a highly competitive technological environment. The increasing reliance on digital tools for collaboration and performance monitoring has further demonstrated the critical role HR plays in navigating remote work models and maintaining productivity.

In addition to workforce development, IBM's compensation and reward systems have also evolved. The company has introduced more flexible and performance-based compensation models, emphasizing outcomes over physical presence or fixed hours. These modern approaches to rewards are designed to increase motivation, recognize high performance in remote settings, and retain top talent in a volatile job market.

Furthermore, IBM's HR professionals are instrumental in embedding a culture of continuous learning and adaptability. With rapid advancements in AI, cloud infrastructure, and cybersecurity, the need for ongoing skills development has intensified. HR initiatives now focus on personalized upskilling programs, such as digital badges and online academies, to ensure employees remain future-ready. These programs also serve to align employee growth with organizational transformation efforts, reinforcing IBM's positioning as a leader in tech-enabled services [13].

Such efforts signal a shift in HR from managing compliance to actively shaping a results-driven, innovation-focused culture. IBM's HRM practices also emphasize strategic workforce planning, using predictive analytics to forecast talent needs and reduce skills gaps. By leveraging big data, the HR function can anticipate trends in workforce behavior, enhance employee engagement, and support diversity and inclusion targets. This data-driven approach not only supports smarter decision-making but also aligns closely with IBM's mission of using technology to drive meaningful change [14].

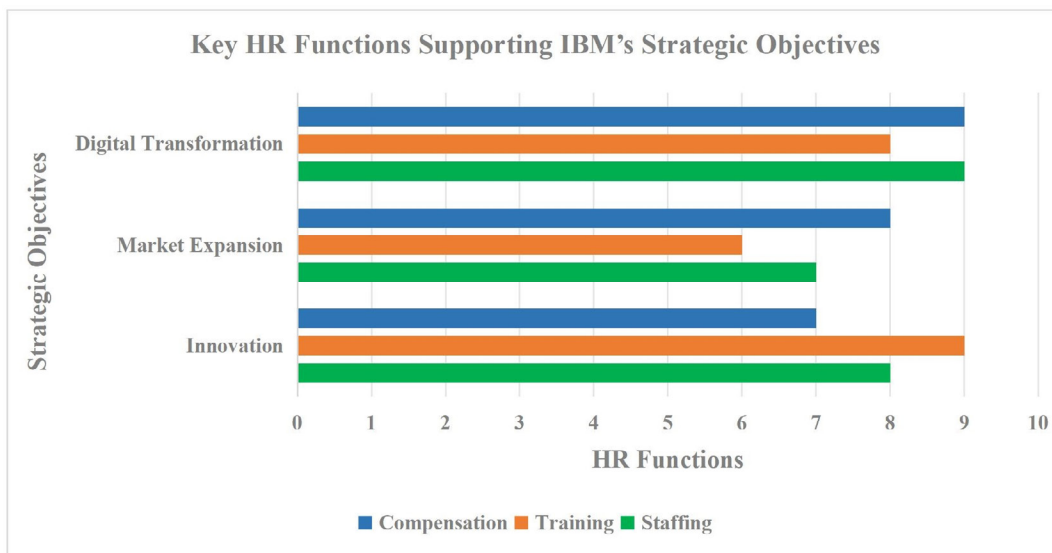


Figure 2: Bar chart shows key HR Functions supporting IBM's Strategic Objectives

Moreover, IBM's strategic HR planning ensures that the right talent is available at the right time, particularly by leveraging workforce analytics and predictive hiring tools. The capability to foresee future skills requirements, while nurturing existing employee potential, strengthens the company's ability to align human capital with technological advancements. Through continuous engagement, learning, and well-being initiatives, HR functions at IBM directly contribute to maintaining operational stability and driving long-term strategic ambitions, even amidst global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1 Staffing

Traditional recruitment processes are shifting towards AI-enabled digital hiring. IBM's Watson Recruitment platform allows for bias-free and efficient candidate screening, using artificial intelligence to predict candidate success and reduce unconscious bias in hiring decisions. The move to remote work has accelerated the use of such technologies, enabling IBM to maintain its talent acquisition momentum without reliance on physical interviews and in-person assessments. Virtual onboarding processes have also been revamped to ensure that new hires are smoothly integrated into the organisational culture. IBM employs digital orientation programs, mentorship platforms, and virtual collaboration tools to immerse new employees in its values, systems, and workflow practices from a distance [15]. This proactive approach helps mitigate the risks of disengagement and isolation often associated with remote working environments.

Additionally, the competencies required for staffing have evolved significantly. Traditional criteria such as technical expertise are now complemented by essential remote-working competencies like self-motivation, digital literacy, adaptability, and virtual teamwork abilities. IBM's updated competency frameworks emphasize these traits, ensuring that recruits are not only technically capable but also resilient and collaborative in virtual contexts.

Moreover, IBM's strategic workforce planning now incorporates predictive analytics to identify emerging skills gaps and proactively build talent pipelines for future roles. By aligning staffing processes closely with business strategy, IBM strengthens its competitive advantage and ensures continuity in innovation and client service delivery, even amid global disruptions.

3.2 Training and Development

IBM's commitment to continuous learning has been further strengthened by the shift to remote work. The organisation's 'Your Learning' platform delivers personalised, AI-curated content tailored to individual career paths and skill gaps, enabling employees to take ownership of their professional development even when working remotely. This platform integrates seamlessly with employees' daily workflows, encouraging self-paced and lifelong learning as a strategic imperative.

In a virtual work model, skill sets such as digital communication, time management, online collaboration, and virtual leadership have become critical. IBM has expanded its training offerings to

include modules specifically focused on enhancing these skills to ensure operational efficiency and to maintain a high level of team cohesion. Virtual leadership training has been introduced to equip managers with techniques for motivating remote teams, managing performance from a distance, and fostering trust in a dispersed work environment [16].

Moreover, IBM recognizes that technical competencies alone are insufficient for success in a remote model. Emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged as a crucial capability for remote workers and leaders alike. Programmes aimed at developing emotional intelligence—such as self-awareness, empathy, and interpersonal sensitivity—have been embedded into IBM's training framework to help sustain strong interpersonal relationships, promote team engagement, and mitigate the feelings of isolation often associated with remote work [17]. Employees are trained to better manage virtual conflicts, give and receive feedback online, and maintain resilience in the face of digital fatigue.

Furthermore, IBM's approach to development is heavily analytics-driven. Learning data is continuously analysed to measure training effectiveness, identify emerging skill needs, and personalise content recommendations for employees [18]. This data-driven approach ensures that training initiatives are strategically aligned with both individual career aspirations and broader business goals, thereby enhancing IBM's agility and competitiveness in the post-pandemic market. Through strategic investments in digital learning, leadership development, and emotional intelligence training, IBM fosters a workforce that is not only technically proficient but also adaptable, resilient, and emotionally intelligent — key traits necessary for thriving in the new world of work.

3.3 Compensation and Benefits

The sudden shift to widespread remote working has compelled IBM to reassess its compensation and benefits framework to reflect new employee needs and work realities. With the elimination of traditional commuting costs, employees are instead incurring increased expenses related to home office setups, including internet upgrades, ergonomic furniture, and digital tools. In response, IBM has introduced targeted subsidies to support employees in building efficient and health-conscious home work environments.

Such allowances not only enhance productivity but also signal IBM's commitment to employee wellbeing, thereby strengthening employee engagement and retention [19]. Furthermore, the structure of performance-based incentives has evolved to align with the outputs expected in a remote work model. Traditional evaluation metrics, often based on observable inoffice activity, are being replaced with more sophisticated, output-focused indicators that emphasise deliverables, innovation, and collaborative effectiveness [20]. Managers now use goal-setting frameworks like Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) to maintain clarity around expectations and to fairly assess performance without micromanagement [21].

IBM has also expanded non-monetary benefits to cater to the emotional and mental wellbeing of its remote workforce. These initiatives include virtual wellness programs, mental health counselling services, and flexible work-hour policies to accommodate the challenges of work-life integration. In doing so, IBM acknowledges that maintaining employee morale and holistic health is critical to sustaining productivity and organisational resilience in a prolonged remote work environment.

Additionally, IBM leverages data analytics to monitor compensation equity across its global workforce, ensuring fairness and inclusivity in remote work settings where visibility might be reduced. This proactive approach helps mitigate bias in pay decisions and supports IBM's broader diversity and inclusion goals. By adjusting its compensation and benefits approach, IBM effectively responds to the practical challenges faced by its remote workforce while also enhancing its reputation as a forward-thinking, employee-focused organization equipped to manage the demands of a post-pandemic world.

4. Strategic HRM to IBM's Performance

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) at IBM transcends traditional administrative roles, serving as a critical enabler of the company's long-term strategic objectives. IBM's HR function is deliberately aligned with its mission to lead in innovation, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence, ensuring that talent management practices contribute directly to organisational performance.

By embedding strategic foresight into core HR activities—ranging from workforce planning to performance appraisal and employee development—IBM cultivates a culture of agility, continuous learning, and technological adaptability. A concrete illustration of SHRM in action is IBM's use of its AI-powered Your Learning platform, which offers personalised development pathways based on individual career goals and business needs.

According to internal reports, over 95% of IBMers used the platform in 2021, resulting in over 26 million hours of learning completed globally. This investment in upskilling not only bridges existing skill gaps but also ensures alignment between workforce capabilities and strategic imperatives, such as IBM's shift toward hybrid cloud services and data analytics solutions. Leadership development is another cornerstone of IBM's SHRM framework. The company's Leadership Development Experience (LDX) initiative identifies high-potential individuals and nurtures them through coaching, simulation-based learning, and global

assignments. This program has yielded quantifiable outcomes, such as a 20% increase in internal succession readiness for executive roles (IBM Annual Report, 2022), reinforcing IBM's strategic goal of maintaining leadership continuity and driving innovation from within.

Furthermore, SHRM has underpinned IBM's response to the COVID-19 pandemic by institutionalizing flexible work practices and introducing robust virtual collaboration tools. The swift implementation of a company-wide remote work policy, alongside remote performance management systems, allowed IBM to maintain 90% of its service delivery capacity at the height of the crisis (Harvard Business Review, 2021).

HR also launched wellbeing campaigns focusing on mental health, resilience, and work-life balance—efforts which contributed to a 12% increase in employee engagement scores during 2020–2021, as reported in IBM's internal Pulse surveys.

IBM's data-driven HR practices further exemplify the strategic use of analytics in decisionmaking. The application of predictive analytics for attrition risk, performance forecasting, and diversity tracking has enhanced IBM's ability to retain top talent and meet inclusivity targets. For instance, IBM's use of AI in workforce analytics helped reduce voluntary turnover among high-potential employees by 25% in key business units between 2019 and 2022 [22].

SHRM at IBM has played an instrumental role in driving business outcomes, from innovation readiness and operational resilience to employee engagement and leadership continuity. By aligning human capital strategies with corporate vision and integrating real-time analytics, IBM not only sustains its global competitive advantage but also models how strategic HRM can future-proof organisations in a volatile and technologically evolving environment.

5. Performance Management

IBM's Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) framework incorporates data-driven performance metrics and continuous feedback loops, creating a robust system for managing employee outputs in a remote setting. With the shift to work-from-home (WFH) arrangements, traditional metrics that focused on presence and visibility became obsolete. Consequently, IBM had to redefine key performance indicators (KPIs) to prioritise deliverables, quality of work, innovation, and client satisfaction, rather than mere attendance or logged working hours [23].



Figure 3: COVID-19 graphic illustrating a woman working from-home, source <https://www.shutterstock.com/>

Virtual performance management at IBM now includes frequent virtual check-ins between managers and employees to align goals, discuss challenges, and recalibrate expectations as necessary. These check-ins are supplemented by digital performance dashboards that allow both employees and leadership teams to track progress in real-time, fostering transparency and accountability. Furthermore, IBM's use of AI-driven analytics enables the identification of high performers and skill gaps, facilitating data-driven talent development strategies.

Another critical shift has been towards a culture of continuous feedback rather than annual performance appraisals. Real-time feedback mechanisms, facilitated through virtual collaboration tools, ensure that employees receive timely recognition and constructive advice, which is vital for motivation and professional growth in a remote environment [24]. IBM also utilises peer reviews and 360-degree feedback systems to ensure a more holistic evaluation of employee contributions. To maintain fairness and objectivity, IBM incorporates behavioural metrics—such as collaboration effectiveness, adaptability, and innovation mindset—into its performance evaluation frameworks. This ensures that employees who thrive in remote and dynamic conditions are appropriately recognised and rewarded [25]. In addition, the company places emphasis on goal alignment, ensuring that individual objectives are directly linked to broader strategic initiatives, thereby reinforcing organisational coherence. In essence, IBM's evolution of its performance management systems under the SHRM model has been instrumental in maintaining employee engagement, driving productivity, and supporting organisational agility during and after the pandemic.

6. Employee Engagement and Retention

Employee engagement strategies are now more critical than ever, particularly in a remote working environment where physical distance can lead to disengagement and isolation. At IBM, SHRM

practices have been reimaged to foster a sense of community and maintain high levels of employee morale. Initiatives such as virtual town halls, digital appreciation badges, remote wellness programs, and online social events have been introduced to strengthen connections among employees [26]. These strategies not only enhance communication but also give employees a platform to voice their concerns and contribute ideas, reinforcing a culture of inclusion and belonging.

In addition to engagement, retention strategies have also evolved under SHRM principles. Flexible work arrangements, including hybrid models and adaptable working hours, are now standard offerings to meet diverse employee needs. IBM recognises that career development remains a vital driver of retention; thus, it has expanded virtual mentorship programs, online leadership academies, and personalised career pathing tools to support professional growth remotely.

Furthermore, IBM leverages predictive analytics to identify flight risks and proactively engages employees with targeted retention initiatives, such as personalised learning opportunities or internal mobility options. Wellbeing has become a central pillar of IBM's employee value proposition. Remote mental health resources, access to online therapy sessions, and resilience training have been embedded into the employee support system to mitigate burnout and maintain workforce vitality.

By prioritising wellbeing and continuous career development, IBM not only retains top talent but also strengthens its employer brand in a highly competitive talent market. Thus, IBM's SHRM approach to engagement and retention underscores its commitment to nurturing an agile, motivated, and future-ready workforce, ensuring sustained organisational success in an increasingly digital and volatile business environment.

7. Organisational Learning

The shift to remote work has accelerated IBM's commitment to fostering a culture of continuous learning. Learning and development activities have transitioned to fully digital platforms, making them more accessible and scalable across IBM's global workforce. Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) plays a pivotal role in embedding learning into the daily workflow through initiatives such as microlearning modules, online certifications, and internal massive open online courses (MOOCs) [27]. IBM's 'Your Learning' platform is a prime example of how technology-driven, personalised learning paths are supporting employee development. Using AI and data analytics, the platform curates content based on individual career goals, current skills, and emerging market needs. This ensures that learning remains relevant, targeted, and capable of closing skills gaps proactively. Additionally, IBM promotes a "learning agility" mindset, encouraging employees to adopt a growth-oriented approach where experimentation, knowledge sharing, and self-driven upskilling are valued. Virtual collaboration tools like Slack, Mural, and Watson Workspace are utilised not only for project work but also as mediums for peer learning and innovation labs.

Furthermore, leadership development programs have been redesigned for remote delivery, with virtual simulations, case studies, and mentorship sessions playing an integral role. By embedding learning into the organisational fabric, IBM ensures that employees remain resilient, innovative, and future-ready despite the physical constraints of remote working environments [29]. Thus, IBM's SHRM-driven organisational learning framework supports strategic agility, enhances employee satisfaction, and fortifies the company's competitive advantage in an increasingly knowledge-driven economy.

8. Leadership Theories and Their Application at IBM

Leadership has played a pivotal role in IBM's ability to navigate the complexities of the COVID19 pandemic and the resultant global shift to remote work [30]. In responding to this large-scale disruption, IBM relied on a hybrid leadership approach that incorporated transformational, situational, and emotional intelligence-based leadership models. While each of these frameworks offered value, their suitability varied depending on the evolving challenges and organisational priorities during the remote transition.

Aspect	Transformational Leadership	Situational Leadership
Definitions	Inspires change through vision/values	Adapts style to employee needs
Operation (e.g.)	AI ethics framework rollout	Tailored R&D team mentorship
Time Horizon	Long-term cultural shift	Short-to-medium term adjustments
Key Advantage	Employee engagement/retention	Operational flexibility
Limitations	Requires sustained CEO commitment	Can lack unifying vision

Table 2: Comparing Transformational vs. Situational Leadership at IBM

Transformational Leadership, as conceptualised by Bass and Avolio (1994), emerged as particularly effective in sustaining organisational alignment and motivation during uncertainty. This style's emphasis on vision-setting, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration resonated with IBM's strategic pivot to digital services, cloud technologies, and workforce wellbeing. CEO Arvind Krishna's leadership exemplified this model—he championed flexibility, launched widespread upskilling programs (e.g., Skills Build), and maintained visibility through virtual town halls.

These initiatives helped foster a sense of shared purpose, boosting employee engagement. A Gartner report (2021) showed that companies led by transformational leaders during the pandemic had up to 20% higher employee engagement and 30% faster digital adoption rates, reinforcing the value of this approach at IBM. However, situational leadership provided necessary adaptability, especially for managing IBM's diverse, globally distributed teams. This model posits that leadership effectiveness depends on a leader's ability to adapt their style to followers' readiness levels. IBM applied this effectively in virtual onboarding—where newer employees required directive support—and in project teams composed of seasoned staff who thrived under a delegative style.

Yet, the theory's limitation lies in its manager-centric orientation, often lacking consideration for broader systemic or emotional factors critical in a prolonged crisis like COVID-19.

In remote environments, where visibility into employee context is reduced, the practical application of the model becomes inconsistent and may require additional frameworks to support nuanced engagement [29]. In recognition of these gaps, IBM also embedded Emotional Intelligence (EI) into its leadership development programs. EI encompasses self-awareness, empathy, and social skills—attributes that became central to managing remote teams under stress and uncertainty.

IBM trained leaders to apply EI competencies in virtual settings, particularly to address mental health, isolation, and communication fatigue. Research from the CIPD (2021) highlights that emotionally intelligent leadership in remote contexts directly correlates with increased trust, psychological safety, and team cohesion. While all three models offered distinct contributions, transformational leadership stands out as the most strategically aligned and sustainable for IBM's long-term development needs in the remote and hybrid work era.

Its inherent future orientation, focus on intrinsic motivation, and capacity to drive cultural change align seamlessly with IBM's goals of digital reinvention and human capital investment. In contrast, situational leadership, while useful in the short term, lacks the cohesive narrative and emotional depth needed for sustained change management. Emotional intelligence, though vital, functions best when integrated into a broader leadership philosophy—such as transformational leadership—rather than operating in isolation.

8.1. Recommended Leadership Style

Given the evolving demands of the post-pandemic work environment, a hybrid of transformational and situational leadership is recommended for IBM. Transformational leadership is essential for setting a compelling vision, fostering innovation, and driving strategic alignment, especially in a remote work context where inspiration and trust are critical. By motivating employees to transcend immediate self-interest for broader organisational goals, transformational leaders help sustain high engagement and adaptability.

Simultaneously, situational leadership offers the necessary operational flexibility to address varying employee needs and competencies across different virtual teams. Leaders can adjust their style—ranging from directive to delegative—based on the experience levels and motivational states of their team members (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982). This ensures that individual support and guidance are optimally aligned with performance expectations, thereby enhancing overall productivity. Combining these two leadership styles enables IBM to provide macro-level strategic inspiration while maintaining micro-level responsiveness and adaptability.

This dual approach supports resilience, agility, and sustained organisational performance in a complex and uncertain environment. In sum, IBM's effective leadership response to remote work challenges was multifaceted, drawing on the strengths of multiple leadership theories. However, transformational leadership provides the most robust framework for driving innovation, sustaining employee engagement, and aligning leadership behaviour with strategic imperatives in a remote work context.

9. Change Management and Implementation Plan

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a work-from-home (WFH) policy, effective change management has been a crucial factor in IBM's success. Change management frameworks help organisations handle the human and operational aspects of transitions, ensuring minimal disruption while maximising acceptance and engagement. IBM's strategy involved applying proven change management models, particularly Lewin's Change Model and Kotter's 8-Step Change Model, which provided a structured approach to navigating the shift to remote work.

By integrating Lewin's and Kotter's models, IBM ensured a structured, employee-centric transition to remote work. The

detailed implementation plan, with clear timelines, stakeholder roles, and resistance management strategies—enhances the realism and effectiveness of the approach. Future organisations can adopt similar frameworks to navigate large-scale changes while maintaining productivity and employee satisfaction.

9.1. Factors Driving Change

As discussed earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic was a primary driver of change, forcing IBM and other organisations worldwide to adapt to new realities. The external pressure of health and safety requirements, paired with the need to continue serving global clients, drove the company's quick pivot towards a remote work structure. Additionally, internal drivers, such as IBM's strong digital infrastructure and its commitment to employee well-being, facilitated the smooth transition to a virtual environment. Recognizing these factors, IBM's HR and leadership teams worked together to craft a responsive strategy that would ensure continued operational success while addressing employee concerns about the new work arrangement.

The shift to remote work was driven by external and internal factors:

- **External Drivers:** Government-imposed lockdowns, health and safety regulations, and the need to maintain global client services.
- **Internal Drivers:** IBM's existing digital infrastructure, leadership's commitment to employee well-being, and the opportunity to reduce operational costs.

To sustain these changes, IBM's HR and leadership teams collaborated to develop a responsive strategy, ensuring operational efficiency while addressing employee concerns.

9.2. Resistance to Change

Although change was necessary, resistance from employees, especially those unaccustomed to remote work, posed a challenge. Resistance often arises due to uncertainty, fear of the unknown, and the discomfort of adapting to new technologies and processes. At IBM, management anticipated this resistance and planned accordingly. The company addressed concerns by implementing clear communication strategies, providing emotional support, and ensuring that employees received adequate training and resources for their new work setup. Additionally, managers were trained to support their teams in navigating these changes, addressing emotional needs, and helping employees adapt to the new working conditions (Kotter, 1996). To ensure employee buy-in, IBM implemented some strategies to managing resistance:

- **Pilot Testing:** A phased WFH rollout with select departments before full implementation.
- **Feedback Loops:** Monthly pulse surveys to assess employee sentiment.
- **Incentivization:** Performance bonuses for high productivity in remote settings.

9.3. Change Management Models

IBM utilised two well-established frameworks to manage its transition to a hybrid Work-FromHome (WFH) model: *Lewin's Three-Step Change Model* and *Kotter's Eight-Step Change Model*. These frameworks offered structured approaches for guiding

employees through organisational transformation while maintaining alignment with IBM's strategic priorities. Implementing a hybrid work arrangement demanded careful planning and a disciplined change management strategy to minimise disruption and promote long-term adaptability.

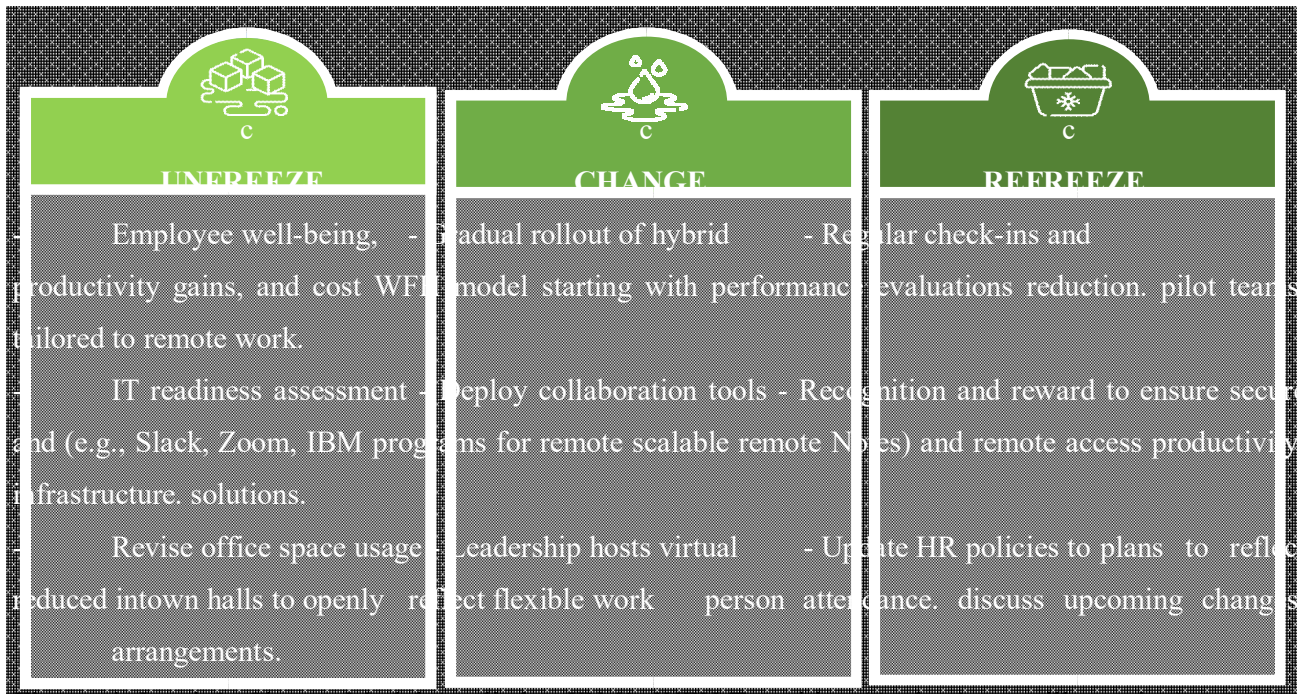


Figure 4: Lewin's Change Model Applied to IBM's WFH Transition (Author's own illustration)

Lewin's Three-Step Change Model, comprising *Unfreeze*, *Change*, and *Refreeze*, served as the foundational structure for IBM's transformation. The model outlines change as a three-stage process: preparing the organisation for transformation, executing the change, and embedding the new practices into everyday operations.

During the unfreezing stage, IBM concentrated on building awareness of the need for change and gaining employee commitment. The organisation communicated the rationale for introducing a WFH policy, highlighting benefits such as improved employee well-being, enhanced productivity, and cost efficiency. To encourage engagement and feedback, IBM conducted internal surveys and virtual town hall meetings led by senior leaders. At the same time, IT teams assessed the scalability, resilience, and security of remote work systems to ensure technological readiness.

The change stage involved a gradual implementation of the hybrid model, beginning with selected pilot teams. IBM supported this transition through the deployment of collaborative tools such as Slack, Zoom, and IBM Notes, as well as secure remote access solutions. Human Resources updated policies to reflect flexible work arrangements, while targeted training sessions were delivered to strengthen employees' skills in cybersecurity, online

collaboration, and time management. These initiatives ensured that employees were both technically prepared and confident in adapting to new work practices.

In the refreezing stage, IBM worked to integrate remote work into its culture and formal procedures. Performance evaluation frameworks were adjusted to accommodate virtual work environments, and recognition programmes were introduced to reinforce engagement and productivity. Office spaces were reconfigured to reflect reduced physical occupancy, and continuous feedback mechanisms were implemented to support ongoing refinement and sustainability of the model.

The change process unfolded in distinct phases. The first two months focused on unfreezing through communication and infrastructure assessment. Months three to five involved pilot programmes, training, and policy implementation. Months six to eight concentrated on refreezing, with standardisation, performance tracking, and post-implementation review. To measure the success of the transition, IBM monitored several key performance indicators (KPIs), including employee satisfaction, comparative productivity, IT system reliability, security incident rates, and compliance with new policies and training requirements.

In parallel, IBM applied Kotter's Eight-Step Change Model, which provided a more detailed, sequential method for managing organisational transformation. The process began by establishing a sense of urgency about adapting to the evolving work landscape. IBM then formed a guiding coalition of senior leaders to drive and sustain the change initiative. A clear vision and communication plan were developed to ensure consistent understanding of the transformation's objectives.

The next steps involved empowering employees through access to appropriate resources and training, celebrating early successes such as effective virtual collaboration, and consolidating progress by reinforcing the new work practices. Through this comprehensive approach, IBM embedded hybrid work as a core element of its operational and cultural framework.



Figure 5: Kotter's 8-Step Model Applied to IBM's WFH Transition (Author's own illustration)

9.4. Overcoming Resistance and Ensuring Success

IBM took several strategic actions to address and overcome resistance to change. These actions included:

- **Training and Support:** The provision of online training sessions, webinars, and virtual town halls helped employees feel supported throughout the transition.
- Training focused on new tools for remote communication and collaboration, as well as emotional intelligence skills to manage virtual relationships effectively.
- **Leadership Involvement:** Leaders at all levels were encouraged to model the new behaviours expected in a remote work environment. Managers played a crucial role in motivating employees, offering feedback, and ensuring that productivity remained high even in a virtual setting (Yukl, 2012).
- **Employee Involvement:** IBM encouraged employee involvement through feedback loops, surveys, and focus groups, ensuring that employees had a voice in the transition process. This created a sense of ownership and reduced

resistance to the new working arrangements.

- **Communication:** Clear, transparent, and frequent communication was essential in ensuring that employees understood the changes and felt reassured. IBM's internal communication strategies were pivotal in addressing uncertainties and fostering a sense of connection, despite the physical distance (Kotter, 1996).

9.5. Change Management Implementation Plan

IBM's change management plan for the WFH policy was structured as follows:

- Pre-Implementation:
- Communicate the need for change and its benefits clearly to all employees.
- Provide initial training on remote work tools and digital platforms.
- Create a feedback mechanism to understand employee concerns and address them proactively.

- **Implementation:**

- Launch the WFH policy with a clear schedule and support structures in place.

- Ensure all employees are equipped with the necessary tools (laptops, internet access, software) to work remotely.

- Establish virtual collaboration channels to maintain team engagement and morale.

- **Post-Implementation:**

- Regular check-ins with employees to assess their wellbeing and adjust resources as needed.

- Monitor productivity through performance metrics and adjust as necessary.

- Reinforce the new culture of remote work through continued communication and leadership engagement.

- **Communication Plan:**

- Use multiple communication channels, such as emails, internal webinars, and virtual town halls, to keep employees informed.

- Ensure transparency about the progress of the change process and any challenges faced.

- Foster an open-door policy where employees can share feedback and concerns, ensuring that issues are addressed promptly.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations

IBM's strategic response to the COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies its organisational agility and resilience. The integration of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM), contextsensitive leadership styles, and formal change management models enabled the company to transition smoothly into a remote work environment while safeguarding productivity, employee morale, and long-term strategic alignment. This coordinated approach transformed remote work from a reactive measure into a sustainable business model, enhancing IBM's capacity to compete in an increasingly digital and volatile market. To build upon this foundation, IBM should adopt the following priority actions to strengthen the effectiveness of its remote work framework:

First, IBM should institutionalize its AI-driven learning and development platforms to support continuous skill development across remote and hybrid teams. By aligning personalized learning paths with evolving business needs, the company can proactively close skills gaps and maintain a competitive edge in emerging technologies [31-36]. Second, leadership development should prioritize emotional intelligence, virtual communication, and adaptive decision-making. Expanding executive coaching programs and integrating leadership simulations into training modules will ensure leaders are equipped to manage dispersed teams effectively and empathetically.

Third, to mitigate risks of employee isolation and disengagement, IBM should formalize virtual social cohesion strategies. This includes regular pulse surveys, virtual team-building exercises, and peer recognition programs aimed at strengthening relational ties and team identity across geographic boundaries. Fourth, IBM must enhance its performance evaluation systems to reflect the realities of remote work. This entails adopting outcome-

based performance metrics and flexible goal-setting mechanisms supported by workforce analytics, allowing for fair, datainformed assessments that account for varied work contexts.

Fifth, resistance to ongoing changes should be managed through participatory change initiatives. IBM should engage employees early in co-creating remote work policies, offering feedback loops through focus groups and transparent communication platforms, thus promoting buy-in and psychological ownership of new practices.

In conclusion, IBM's experience demonstrates that a strategically integrated HRM framework, adaptive leadership, and structured change processes are critical for thriving in dynamic work environments. To remain at the forefront of innovation and workforce sustainability, IBM must continue evolving its remote work strategies with deliberate investments in talent development, leadership agility, and inclusive employee engagement. These actions will not only reinforce IBM's operational resilience but also cement its status as a global leader in the future of work.

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