

# **The role of HR practices in developing employee resilience: A case study from the Pakistani telecommunications sector**

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**Note: This is a Pre-Print Post-Peer review accepted version, please cite:**

Zaheer Khan, Rekha Rao-Nicholson, Pervaiz Akhtar, Shlomo Tarba, Mohammad F. Ahmad and Tim Vorely (2017), The role of HR practices in developing employee resilience: A case study from the Pakistani telecommunications sector, *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, forthcoming.

## **Abstract**

There has been increasing interest in understanding the factors that contribute to the development of employee resilience. Despite such interest, there is a dearth of research examining the contributory role played by HR practices in enhancing employee resilience. Looking at the context of Pakistan's telecommunications sector and deploying a qualitative methodology, this paper examines the impact of HR practices on employee resilience. The findings indicate that four key areas of HR practices—job design, information sharing and flow within an organisation, employee benefits (monetary as well as non-monetary), and employee development opportunities—enable the development of employee resilience. Consequently, the effective implementation of HR practices in these areas has been the key factor for the development of employee resilience.

**Keywords:** HR practices, resilience, Pakistan, emerging economies, telecommunications sector

## **1. Introduction**

In this paper, we investigate the role played by human resource practices (HRPs) in the development of employee resilience. This question is important as, recently, there has been increasing interest in understanding the factors that contribute to developing employee resilience and how these affect organisational performance (Luthans & Youssef 2007; Robertson, Cooper, Sarkar & Curran 2015; Linnenluecke, 2015; Bustinza et al., 2016; Kossek & Perrigino, 2016). Resilience is understood as the ability to sustain performance in the face of severe adversity, but also to recover and cope with change (Carmeli & Markman, 2011; Sameroff & Rosenblum, 2006; Walker, Holling, Carpenter & Kinzig, 2004; Williams & Shepherd, 2016). Similarly, Luthans (2002a:702) defined resilience as the “capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, failure, or even positive events, progress, and increased responsibility”. As noted by Kossek & Perrigino (2016), resilience—namely, the ability to adapt to adversity and endure job demands—is growing in prominence in the management literature, with limited regard to occupational influences. Furthermore, it is often investigated at the individual level with fragmented conceptualizations, while being perceived as a trait, capacity, or a process (Kossek & Perrigino, 2016). For instance, based on primary survey data, Bullough, Renko & Myatt (2014) empirically tested the resilience shown by entrepreneurs in Afghanistan under adverse conditions and concluded that, even under conditions of war, individuals develop entrepreneurial intentions if they are able to grow from adversity (resilience) and believe in their entrepreneurial abilities (entrepreneurial self-efficacy).

Previous research indicates that there could be a number of ways through which HRPs could impact resilience (Bardoel, Pettit, De Cieri & McMillan, 2014; Robertson et al., 2015). In particular, the role played by psychological capital (e.g., the positive resources of efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience) has been noted to be important in enabling factors that enable

dealing with workplace related stress (Avey et al., 2009). The existing studies are focussed upon understanding the role played by psychological capital and positive organisational behaviours in the development of individual resilience (e.g., Avey et al., 2009; Luthans & Youssef, 2007; Youssef & Luthans, 2007), and upon the impact of high performance work systems on employee resilience and engagement (e.g., Cooke et al., 2016). However, these debates do not sufficiently consider the role played by HR practices, and whether such practices, either individual or bundled, promote employee resilience (e.g., Bardoel et al., 2014; Cooper et al., 2014; Cooke et al., 2016). Such HR practices could include flexible job design, rigorous selection processes, extensive training and development, developmental and merit-based performance appraisals, competitive compensation, and extensive benefits (Macky & Boxall, 2007; Takeuchi et al., 2007). There is no consensus in regard to what constitutes the ideal configuration or ‘bundle’ of HR practices as a basis of high performance work systems (Boxall & Macky, 2007; Macky & Boxall, 2007). However, the existing studies acknowledge that effective HR practices are characterised by being multiple, mutually reinforcing, and are built around organisational logics (e.g., Huselid, 1995; MacDuffie, 1995; Kooij et al., 2013; Bello-Pintado, 2015).

Despite the contribution of HRPs to improving organisational performance, their impact on enhancing employee resilience is underexplored in the wider management and organisation literature (Avey et al., 2009; Cartwright & Cooper, 1990; Cartwright & Cooper, 2009; Cooper et al., 2013; Bardoel et al., 2014; Li et al., 2014; Kossek & Perrigino, 2016). This is unfortunate, as HRPs are acknowledged to be important for the creation of good working environments and the promotion of a culture of engagement, both of which could help employees to develop resilience and cope with adversity (Bowles & Cooper, 2012; Truss et al., 2013; Wang, Cooke & Huan, 2014). Against this backdrop, scholars suggested that more attention should be paid to the employee-related outcomes of the implementation of

HRPs—such as employee resilience—instead of focussing only on the effects of HRPs on company performance (Guest, 1997; Avey et al., 2009; Boxall & Macky, 2009). For example, using a primary sample of 205 manufacturing companies, Bustinza, Vendrell-Herrero, Perez-Arostegui & Parry (2016) argued that, in contexts characterised by ever-changing market conditions and technological capabilities, specific HRPs are needed for an organization to successfully implement technological change. Furthermore, recently, Huang, Xing & Gamble (2016), on their part, concluded that organisational resilience can be promoted by adopting HRPs that enhance individual employee well-being and ability to cope with adversity. By drawing on the job demands-resources model and analysing data collected from 697 employees of foreign-invested retail stores in China, the authors found that workload and employee participation in decision-making had a similar impact on the well-being of both male and female employees; thus articulating the influence of gender on employee resilience (Huang, Xing & Gamble, 2016). Branicki, Steyer & Sullivan-Taylor (2016), on their part, emphasized that the extant resilience research is still empirically underdeveloped in relation to day-to-day stressors, rather than extreme events. By providing first-hand accounts, the authors revealed the micro-processes involved in producing resilience at both the individual and organisational levels, and highlighted the challenges associated with human resource management (HRM) interventions while attaining resilience in the organizational setting. Consequently, several authors noted the existence of a gap in the literature with regard to how to create resilient organisations, (Avey et al., 2009; Bhamra et al., 2011; Richtnér & Löfsten, 2014), and the link between HRPs and employee resilience in particular (Guest, 2002; Avey et al., 2009; Guest, 2011; Cooper et al., 2013; Cooper, Liu & Tarba, 2014; Linnenluecke, 2015).

This paper argues that understanding the impact of HRPs on employee resilience is vital, as human resources, being the hardest to replicate and not showing up on financial statements,

are the main company assets for the creation of sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Tung, 2008). Because of the role it plays in improving organisational performance, HRM is highlighted as a vital strategic activity for companies (Tichy et al., 1982: 47; Boxall & Steeneveld, 1999). The role it plays in helping employees develop resilience cannot be denied, as it focusses upon a company's human component (Steffy & Grimes, 1992; Huselid, 1995; Kossek & Perrigino, 2016). Thus, the idea of creating employee resilience is salient for good organisational relations, which HRPs are suited to promote (Mossholder et al., 2011). It has been noted that individual and organisational resilience can be an antecedent to strategic flexibility and organisational ambidexterity (Jurni et al., 2013), and to a more efficient organisation of work processes (Patel et al., 2013). It is in this context that HRPs could develop employee resilience. Resilient employees would be more engaged and this, in turn, could enhance company performance. Yet, hitherto, few companies have considered the role played by HRPs in enhancing employee resilience and the tangible contribution of HR has thus gone unmeasured (Guest, 2011).

This paper aims at addressing the link between HRPs and employee resilience; in so doing, it contributes to the literature on the building of positive psychological capital and resilience through HRPs within organisations. In particular, in this paper, we investigate how HRPs impact employee resilience. We examine this question in the context of Pakistan, a late-liberalizing emerging economy, and we focus on that country's telecommunications sector. The liberalization process required organisations to adapt and manage change, and a resilient workforce is central to the effective implementation of such changes. On account of their scale and magnitude, Suarez & Oliva (2005) described the changes as "*avalanche-like*", which makes them an important focus of further research.

Accordingly, researching the impact of HRPs on employee resilience in this sector is important for several reasons. First, due to the liberalization and growth of Pakistan's

economy, the country's telecommunications sector provides a good setting to examine the impact of HRPs on employee resilience. Second, Pakistan's telecommunications sector was liberalized during the 2000s and became highly competitive with the entry of foreign service providers, which acted as a catalyst to sector wide transformations, including the introduction of systematic management practices such as HRPs. Third, the post-liberalization phase offered a unique opportunity to examine the issue of employee resilience building through HRPs, as there is dearth of research examining the impact of HRPs on the building of employee resilience in a late-liberalizing emerging economy's post-liberalization phase. Fourth, through the provision of a sophisticated telecommunications and networking infrastructure, the sector has been a driver of economic growth but, as an important employer, it has placed additional stress on its employees by requiring the provision of high demand and timely telecommunications services to customers. Lastly, most research in this area is focussed upon developed countries and is conceptual and fragmented in nature; there is a need for further research in the context of emerging economies (Johnson et al., 2005; Youssef & Luthans, 2007; Linnenluecke, 2015). Emerging economies provide an important context in which to examine the intervention of organizational practices for the promotion of workforce resilience, as the formal institutions in emerging economies are in a state of flux and these markets also suffer from extremely adverse working conditions, thus placing additional stress upon workforces in dealing with institutional uncertainty.

Above all, many late-liberalizing economies only have limited exposure to western management practices; as a result, they tend to have organisational cultures distinct from those of their foreign competitors. Li et al. (2014), in their study on the HRPs adopted by Chinese organisations, indicated that the latter tend to focus upon collectivist HRPs, rather than the individualist employee management techniques found in western cultures. In the case of Pakistan, this paper explores what Khilji (2002) described as the need to implement

organisational changes to reflect world-class HRPs in order to become more competitive. Drawing on qualitative evidence drawn from Pakistan's telecommunications sector, this study identifies four key HRP areas suited to develop employee resilience: job design; information sharing and flow within an organisation; employee remuneration and benefits (monetary as well as non-monetary), and employee development opportunities. We argue that the effective implementation of HRPs in these areas has been central to the development of employee resilience and adaptive coping strategies.

This paper makes three important contributions to the literature on positive psychology, resilience, and HRM. First, we show that bundles of consistent and mutually reinforcing HR practices—and their effective implementation—can promote the development of employee resilience. Second, we provide important insights from Pakistan, one of the least explored late liberalizing economies, which add to the very few studies examining high performance work systems, employee resilience, and engagement in emerging economy organisations. Third, we document the influence of western HRPs on employee resilience in the telecommunications sector, which, through international competition, has been a driver of economic growth in Pakistan and requires greater resiliency from its workforce to deal with the provision of a changing and highly dynamic telecommunications service to customers. The remainder of this paper is structured in four sections: Section 2 frames the focus in terms of the literature; Section 3 outlines the research context as well as the methods adopted in undertaking this study and conducting the data analysis; Section 4 presents and analyses the findings of this study, looking at the key themes emerging from the interviews; and, finally, Section 5 presents the discussion and conclusion, and finishes by reflecting on the limitations of this research and providing directions for future research.

## **2. Literature Review**



## *2.1 Positive Psychology and Employee Resilience*

Much discussion pertaining to resilience is rooted in the theories of positive psychology and positive organisational behaviour (e.g., Avey et al., 2009; Luthans, 2002a; Luthans et al., 2008; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). The literature conceptualises resilience as a capability that helps individuals survive and find meaning under adverse and turbulent circumstances, such as those experienced during the wave of liberalization, as noted in our study (e.g., Coutu, 2002; Bullough et al., 2014; Bustinza et al., 2016). In this paper, we describe resilient individuals as people who possess three distinctive characteristics: 1) they embrace their current circumstances equably; 2) they find meaning in adverse/turbulent situations; and 3) they have the ability to adapt and respond to their current situations to overcome adversity. Consequently, resilience can be understood to be a behavioural construct (Spreitzer et al., 2005) that can help individuals and organisations succeed in dynamic and volatile (business) environments (Friga et al., 2003; Bullough et al., 2014; Bustinza et al., 2016). As such, focussing on resilience in Pakistan's telecommunications sector—a liberalizing and dynamic sector in a volatile emerging economy—is particularly apt.

Previous studies note that psychological capital also plays an important role in overcoming stress and job turnover, a role that has been highlighted in relation to individual resilience (Avey et al., 2009; Luthans et al., 2007). Psychological capital has been defined as “an individual's positive psychological state of development and is characterized by: 1) having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; 2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; 3) persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and 4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resilience) to attain success” (Luthans, Youssef et al., 2007:3).

Thinking about the dynamics occurring between resilience and psychological capital is important when looking to establish and develop more resilient organisations.

As such, employee resilience needs to be understood as being central to organisational performance. At the individual level, those employees who experience very high stress levels in their work are likely to underperform and find said stress detrimental to their overall well-being and engagement (Gilboa et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2014; Kossek & Perrigino, 2016). Any role ambiguities and situational constraints associated with a work environment can negatively affect job performance and potentially impact organisational performance. Examples of factors that might restrict employee performance could be unsuitable machinery, inadequate supplies, or even personal aspects such as inflexible working hours. These stressors are also likely to impact employee work satisfaction, especially since, in many instances, employees have little—if any—control over such constraints (Peters & O'Connor 1980; Gilboa et al., 2008; Kossek & Perrigino, 2016). In their study of employee performance in the context of China, Siu et al. (2012) found that social stressors—such as interpersonal conflicts and organisational politics—have a negative impact on job performance. Such work-related stress and job dissatisfaction can cause organisational burnout (Johnson et al., 2005; Salanova et al., 2005; González-Romá et al., 2006; Kossek & Perrigino, 2016) and may create mistrust between employees and employers (Chughtai & Buckley, 2008). Such demotivation and disenfranchisement would inevitably affect organisational performance, and could potentially lead to further organisational challenges and generate intra-organisational transaction costs (Williamson, 1987).

Research in this area demonstrates that organisational performance and individual outcomes are greatly influenced by the social support that the employees receive in managing their work related issues (Schwarzer et al., 2004). Consequently, Robertson et al. (2012) contended that addressing work-related individual stress and stress-generating situations will

bring about valuable productivity gains for organisations. This finding was echoed by Siu et al. (2012), who contended that any social support provided to employees acts as one of the moderators of these social stressors. Consequently, organisations are striving to develop the capabilities needed to develop employee resilience and, with it, enhance their own (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). In the next section, we will explore the development of employee resilience in the context of the HRPs that organisations can utilize to promote it. The underlying purpose of these mechanisms is to develop resilience capabilities in employees.

## *2.2 Human Resource Practices and Employee Resilience*

It is established that human resource practices (HRPs) are closely linked to organisational performance (Paul & Anantharaman, 2003; Wright et al., 2003; Subramony, 2009). HRPs such as training, job design, compensation, and incentives directly affect organisational performance and employee job satisfaction (Guest, 2002; Tims et al., 2013). The use of HRPs in enhancing organisational performance is driven by the assumption that they enable increased motivation in and the development of other capabilities by employees (Guest 1997). Appropriate HR policies can provide a coherent synthesis of behavioural approaches, suited to employee development, which also have substantive organisational outcomes (Xing & Liu, 2016; Xing, Liu, Tarba & Wood, 2016). In a study of the service industry, Chuang & Liao (2010) noted how those HR policies and practices that value, recognise, and reward customer service are important in motivating employees. Similarly, in a study of orthopaedics units, the quality and efficiency of the care provided to patients was found to be significantly improved in those hospitals that had adopted HR practices supporting cross-functional coordination among medical care providers (e.g., Gittell, Seidner & Wimbush, 2010). This paper extends this line of research by investigating the impact of HRPs on supporting the building of employee resilience in a competitive service industry

(telecommunications) following liberalization (e.g., Kossek & Perrigino, 2016). If a resilient workforce is central to the improvement of organisational performance and the reduction of work-related stress, it follows that specific organisational HRPs should promote employee resilience (e.g., Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Bardoel et al., 2014; Bustinza et al., 2016; Huang et al., 2016). However, the existing studies pay limited attention to the role played by HRPs in developing employee resilience (e.g., Bardoel et al., 2014; Cooper et al., 2014; Branicki et al., 2016; Bustinza et al., 2016; Huang et al., 2016; Kossek & Perrigino, 2016), and only a few studies specifically examine high performance work systems and psychological capital for individual and employee resilience. The literature tends to focus on high performing individuals (e.g., Avey et al., 2009; Luthans & Youssef, 2007; Luthans et al., 2008; Gupta & Singh, 2014; Cooke et al., 2016), although this causes it to overlook the majority of the workforce. Such studies provide valuable insights into the role played by psychological capital and high performance work systems in individual and employee resilience. However, these studies were predominantly conducted in advanced economies characterised by stable economic and political environments. Moreover, they remain mostly silent about whether individual or bundles of HRPs are important for the development of employee resilience (e.g., MacDuffie, 1995; Bello-Pintado, 2015).

It has been argued that resilience developed through HR practices should reflect on employee capabilities to develop skills and to survive and succeed in adverse and turbulent situations (Coutu 2002; Avey et al., 2008, 2009; Bustinza et al., 2016). Moreover, it has been argued that consistent and mutually reinforcing bundles of HRPs will have a stronger impact on employee resilience than series of individual HRPs (Combs et al., 2006; Chuang & Liao, 2010; Lawler et al., 2011). It is also important to highlight the relevance of this study's context and the nuances that rich qualitative studies can bring to theory building in regard to those HRPs that help develop employee resilience capabilities. HRPs tend to be deeply

entrenched in national cultures and contexts (Laurent, 1991; Xing et al., 2016); however, in emerging economies, such as Pakistan, there is evidence of the diffusion of western practices (Khilji, 2002; Kureshi, Qureshi et al., 2010). Furthermore, like in other emerging economies, the post-liberalization phase observed in Pakistan creates a challenging environment in which employees are required to adjust to the changing job requirements of the private sector, compared to state owned enterprises. This is in keeping with existing studies, which note that research on resilience should pay more attention to period of threat detection or of changes in the external environment—such as those observed during post-liberalization phases—and how organisations respond to such events (Suarez & Oliva, 2005; Burnard & Bhamra, 2011; Bustinza et al., 2016).

Previous research suggests that resilient individuals are better prepared to deal with the stressors found in constantly changing work environments, such as those associated with post-liberalization emerging economies. Employees that are more resilient tend to be more open to new experiences, are able to respond to changing demands, and are emotionally capable of managing adversity (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004; Branicki et al., 2016). It is in this context that scholars noted a positive association between resilience and employee performance (Luthans et al., 2007), job satisfaction, commitment and work happiness (Youssef & Luthans, 2007). Likewise, with stress being understood as a contributory factor to employee turnover (Coomber & Barriball, 2007; Kossek & Perrigino, 2016), it becomes apparent that resilience is important in determining how individuals respond to changing and stressful environments (e.g., Bustinza et al., 2016; Kossek & Perrigino, 2016).

We therefore argue that both national and sectorial factors will have an impact on the employee work related stress issues, and that the role played by HRPs is vital in developing employee resilience. This is especially pertinent in post-liberalization periods, which see employees experiencing structural changes in their work environments. The remainder of this

paper explores the need to better understand the importance of HRPs in fostering employee resilience, which, in turn, enhances organisational resilience.

### **3. Research Context and Methods**

The empirical focus of this study is the Pakistani telecommunications sector, which has emerged as one of the country's leading sectors in terms of foreign direct investment (FDI), revenue generation, and employment creation. As evidence of this, the sector witnessed FDI for US\$356.3 million during the period of July-December 2014 alone (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2014-2015). Mobile telephony and network services are on the rise in Pakistan, with a coverage estimated to be at 75.2 % at the end of March 2015 (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2014-2015). Showing a similar trend, recent figures suggest that the number of cellular service subscribers is also on the rise, with approximately 136.5 million cellular subscribers in December 2016, up from 135.9 million in November 2015 (The Times of Islamabad, 2017). Given its growing employment of both males and females and the market competition, the telecom sector represents an ideal context in which to study the impact of HRPs on employee resilience. Yet, the sector is also influenced by a number of macro-environmental factors—such as political instability, unfavourable economic conditions, and terrorism—which place additional stress on employee productivity and well-being and may hinder their resilience abilities.

The competitive nature of the telecommunications sector and the high demand nature of the services required by customers place an additional burden on employees to perform and cope with the changing service demand. Additionally, in the 1990s and 2000s, Pakistan embarked on various privatization and deregulation programmes which saw private sector competition among telecommunications companies intensifying, thus placing additional

stress on employees to provide timely telecommunications services to suit the changing customer needs.

This project is part of a wider initiative aimed at understanding the transfer of western employment practices. We chose the telecommunications sector as the focus of this paper for a number of reasons. First, because it is one of the most thriving sectors in Pakistan, with many leading Western companies operating in it, which provides an important lens to understand the employment practices of Western companies in Pakistan. Second, following the liberalisation wave, most telecom companies have now formally established human resources departments in lieu of the traditional practice of entrusting their duties to administrative departments, and we wanted to explore the impact of HRPs on employee resilience under the newly formalized HRPs. Lastly, during 2014-15, the telecom sector achieved remarkable success with the launch of Next Generation Mobile Services (NGMS); in this context, the role played by employees in the provision of dynamic telecommunications services and, with it, employee resilience, are vital. Using a qualitative case study approach, this paper is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with personnel from Pakistan's leading telecom company (TEKO)<sup>1</sup>. This approach was deemed appropriate for this study since there is limited research on the topic under investigation (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2014; Tsang, 2014). We adopted a purposive sampling strategy (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007); in order to be selected for this study, the company had to: 1) be registered with the Security and Exchange Commission of Pakistan; 2) have received FDI and operated in the service sector; and 3) have introduced formal HR systems at least in the last 2-3 years. The last criterion was adopted to ensure that the selected company had experience with the implementation of formal HRPs, instead of merely operating with an administrative human resources system.

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons of confidentiality, TEK0 is a fictitious company name

The interviews were conducted with a cross section of respondents (Piekkari et al., 2010), such as line managers, human resource managers, project managers, and employees (see table 1 for sample details). This is in contrast to the existing studies who either present the managers point of view or that of the employees in examining the impact of HRPs on organizations. In total, we conducted 29 interviews with 23 respondents (13 senior level managers and ten employees). These interviews were conducted in two phases at the company's offices in Islamabad, Pakistan. We conducted 15 interviews between March and December 2013, and 14 interviews between June and August 2014.

**Table 1 – Sample Background and No. of Interviews**

<b>Position</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>	<b>Total No. of Interviews</b>
<b>Director</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>HR Manager</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Line Manager</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Business Development Manager</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Project Manager</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Manager training &amp; Development</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Employees</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>29</b>

The interviews were of a semi-structured and exploratory nature, albeit falling into three broad areas. First, we asked the managers how they viewed their operations in Pakistan, their investment plans, and the HRP functions within their company. Second, we focussed on specific HRP related questions, such as how easy it had been to implement western style HRPs in Pakistan, HRP development plans, the impact of liberalization on job design and worker motivation. Third, we focussed on resilience both with respect to the organisation and



the employees. At the organisational level, this included the company's hiring practices, the justifications for the specific HRPs, the impact of HRPs and policies on employee resilience, productivity, and organisational performance. At the individual level, the interviews considered the benefits of the HRPs on employee happiness, resilience, welfare, stress and fatigue, well-being, coping strategies, and skills development, as well as the experience of employees with regard to the company, job satisfaction, and work/life balance. The interviews were kept flexible and the participants were encouraged to share their views openly. On average, each interview lasted 50 to 75 minutes. During the interviews, notes were also taken. At the end of each interview, a one-page summary was also prepared and shared with the interviewee to get feedback and check whether the summary reflected an accurate account of the interview. At this stage, the interviewees were also asked to remove any information that did not reflect his or her true opinion or add any that complemented that provided during the interview. This approach also yielded additional data that we had not foreseen during the interviews. This rigorous process further enhanced the reliability and validity of the study.

The data analysis followed the standard qualitative protocol (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2014; Miles et al., 2014). First, we transcribed each interview. Second, we started with an initial set of questions and enabled the themes to emerge from the data. Third, we identified and grouped the relevant human resource practices that helped employees develop resilience. Fourth, these categories were used to develop narratives for coding purposes. Fifth, we identified the connection among different themes in order to develop a holistic picture of the impact of HRPs on developing employee resilience. Lastly, the reliability and trustworthiness of the study was enhanced by interviewing not only senior managers but also employees (Sinkovics et al., 2008), as previous studies examining the role played by HR in organisation level phenomena had only focussed on soliciting

responses from HR managers. Furthermore, single cases can provide important insights for future research and have often been undervalued in regards of their potential to generate theoretical generalizations (e.g., Tsang, 2014).

Our findings indicate that TEKO uses a number of HRPs to develop employee resilience capabilities. To explore how they had developed employee resilience, this section discusses those HRPs that TEKO had implemented following sector liberalization. Table 2 provides the details on the HRPs and activities and their impact on the development of employee resilience, which form the basis of this section.

**Table 2 – Summary of HRPs and their effects on employee resilience**

<b>Human Resource Practices</b>	<b>Human Resources activities introduced within organisation</b>	<b>Impact on Employee resilience</b>
<b>Job design</b>	Provision of gender neutral job designs	√
	Inclusivity and diversity in the workplace	√
<b>Information flow within the organisation</b>	Constructive information exchange and feedback mechanisms, such as appraisals	√
<b>Employee benefits</b>	Provision of stock options and other monetary benefits	√
	Provision of non-monetary schemes, such as peer-to-peer support and social interaction	√
	Provision of non-monetary schemes, such as mentoring and flexible working hours	√
<b>Employee Development</b>	Training and Development	√
	Trips to foreign countries	√
	Constructive feed-forward mechanisms	√

## **Job design and employee resilience**

The findings suggest that job design and diverse team-based work are important constituents of HRPs that help in the development of employees' resilience. The job design theme shows TEKO's effort in designing gender neutral jobs and assigning high impact projects to female staff as well. In this study, high impact projects indicate task opportunities within the organisations and those involving external clients that were reputation building, innovative, and challenging to the employees. Both male and female workers indicated that they had equal career advancement opportunities and this helped them in dealing with challenging job tasks, as it created positive mental frames in terms of job satisfaction, led to a resilient workforce, and promoted cognitive coping mechanisms in dealing with changing business requirements. By designing gender neutral jobs, the marginalization of the female employees can be avoided, thus promoting their welfare and adaptive coping mechanisms to deal with stress. The female participants said that their career advancement opportunities were the same as those of their male colleagues, and this helped them in overcoming job related stress and in seeking other job opportunities. As job-related stress is increasingly noted to contribute to employee turnover (Coomber & Barriball, 2007), resilience may be a key factor in determining how individuals respond in stressful environments, particularly those that came into existence following the liberalization of the industry.

One of the female staff members, Employee 3, said:

*"I am assigned to high impact projects in equal amounts as my male counterparts. This builds strong work ethics and improves worker performance as they develop a strong organisational identity and feel valued"* [Employee 3]

These findings have important implications in the context of Pakistan, as gender related issues dominate the social discourse and females get fewer opportunities compared to males. Job design has been suggested to be an important motivating factor in the wider HRP literature (Huselid, 1995). The findings indicate that through job design and the assignment

of high impact projects to both male and female employees, the company was promoting a sense of direct employee participation and organizational citizenship behaviour which enabled the employees to develop resilience and overcome job-related stress through adaptive coping mechanisms. Scholars suggested a relationship between direct employee participation in influencing organisational performance and employee well-being (Parker et al., 2001; Humphrey et al., 2007; Derue et al., 2011).

### **Benefit schemes and employee resilience**

The findings suggest that various employee benefit schemes also contribute towards building employee resilience. Our interviews also pointed out that employee benefit schemes are motivational, and help employees to develop a strong affinity with the organisation and to feel part of it. One of the employees remarked:

*"I feel that HRM systems play an important role in helping employees develop a strong character and this helps in developing a never give up attitude in staff. My organisation has developed various benefits for employees, such as stock options, easy access car and house loans, and job related training; in this way, employees feel part of the company and work hard to improve the performance of the company ... these benefits improve employee optimism and reduce the feeling of burnout and of not being valued by the employer "* [Employee 10].

Similar views were echoed by the managers:

*"Our company offers several benefits for staff as staff burn-out is one of the major issues in our high demanding service sector. We provide paid maternity leave to our female employees, flexible work hours, emergency leave, and mentoring schemes. These benefits are important to develop a strong work force and reduce stress"* [Line Manager]

### **Supportive culture, hierarchy and employee resilience**

We found that a supportive culture and hierarchy were important dimensions of HRPs to develop employee resilience and cognitive coping mechanisms to deal with stress. The

findings highlighted that employees were encouraged to discuss their job-related concerns with their line managers. Like many organisations in Pakistan, TEKO is characterised by a hierarchical management structure; however, from the induction of the new employees, the company highlights its commitment to fostering a supportive work culture that promotes employee bonding and increased self-efficacy coping mechanisms. Our interviewees suggested that a supportive culture and sharing concerns with their superiors was important for employee welfare, which, in turn, helped to build resilience in their daily work routines. One of the interviewees mentioned:

*“The company promotes a supportive culture, one in which employees can walk up to their managers and share their concerns; this strengthens the resolve of employees as they feel good about being part of a company that values them. We have a hierarchy system; however, the message we received in our induction was that we were part of a family and supervisors and managers were there to support lower level employees”*  
[Employee 5]

The extant literature also shows that supportive cultures and interpersonal relationships promote employee engagement, which is conducive to the creation of an environment in which employees can develop resilience and well-being (Bowles & Cooper, 2012; Xing & Liu, 2016, 2015). The role played by a supportive culture is also important, as it has been noted that effective HR systems are often premised on developing supportive behaviours and relationships within organisations (e.g., Mossholder, Richardson & Settoon, 2011).

### **Training & Development and employee resilience**

The data suggest that the company had developed a good reputation in providing training and development and this helped in the development of employee resilience and coping strategies to deal with stress. Our interviews with both managers and employees

brought up that TEKO had a good reputation in its sector, and that HRPs had played an important role in developing new as well as old employees into a strong workforce through the provision of training and development programs. One of the managers stated:

*"We have a good image in our country and our respective sector, and this is all because of the strong and conducive human resource management practices in place in terms of training and development. And if our employees leave for some reasons and look for other opportunities, our competitors even know that the employee they are hiring has strong work ethics and personality due to the good training systems we have in place"* [Project Manager]

Those employees who had received training reported higher levels of satisfaction with their jobs. For instance, one of the employees showed gratitude towards the company for sending him abroad for training, and explained how this had helped him to cope with demanding and complex tasks and to cope better with the changing working environment in Pakistan. Since females are underrepresented in the Pakistani workforce—and particularly in the telecommunications sector—training and employee development opportunities can promote employee resilience through a sense of belonging and support. Providing training to the entire cohort of employees was also important on the part of the case company, as it could prevent the marginalization of female workers and promote employee resilience and well-being. Additionally, the findings indicate that training and development enable the development of both adaptive and problem solving coping skills to deal with stress and enhance resilience. One of the employees indicated:

*"The company sent me to [Singapore] for training and this really helped me gain valuable experience and skills of living in a [foreign] culture and coping with complex tasks and environments. I feel that this training really helped me to develop confidence and problem solving and adaptive skills, which are important for the telecom service oriented industry as this was my first trip outside of my country and I learned new ways of dealing with unfamiliar contexts"* [Employee 7]

The interviewees also referred to how, following liberalization, TEKO had created a voluntary leave scheme for those employees whose services were no longer required following the streamlining and restructuring of the post-liberalized organization. While being necessary to ensure TEKO's longer term sustainability and competitiveness, this sent a shockwave and created additional stress for the employees. This highlights the need to consider HRPs in conjunction with other organisational changes impacting employees. One interviewee indicated:

*"Quite frankly, employees are quite stressed that, if we don't opt for voluntary leave then it will be our turn ... Our company initiated HR practices like skills development that have been important to overcome burnout and stress and adapt to these changes" [Employee 1].*

These views were also echoed by the managers:

*"Since the liberalization reforms, we have created a pool of surplus [employees] whose services are no longer needed or who are inefficient and redundant, as we cannot afford to keep employees who can't perform. We have streamlined our HR practices to help employees overcome these changes and adapt to the new market realities" [Manager HR]*

The findings suggest that the provision of training opportunities was generally regarded as important for staff to manage job-related stress and overcome burnout following the liberalisation of the sector. This is in line with those studies that noted how workplace training positively influences employee perceptions of workplace challenges and stress management (Luthans et al., 2006; Luthans et al., 2008), which also serve to enhance the employee resilience. Research on positive capital also suggests that it generates positive employee emotions, which is relevant to positive attitudes and behaviours conducive to organisational change (Avey et al., 2008). Carmeli & Gittell (2009) explored how the relational dimensions of relational coordination—shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect—foster psychological safety and thus enable organizational members to

engage in learning from failures, and showed that psychological safety mediates the link between high-quality relationships and learning from failures in organizations. Carmeli, Yitzhak-Halevy & Weisberg (2009) examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and four aspects of psychological wellbeing (self-acceptance, life satisfaction, somatic complaints, and self-esteem), and found that employees who experience a psychological state of wellbeing may function better than those who experience emotional deficit. Based on a sample of 74 top management teams (TMTs), Carmeli, Friedman & Tishler (2013) examined whether and why relational connections marked by connectivity facilitate strategic decision comprehensiveness and cultivate two forms of TMT resilience that capture both efficacious beliefs and adaptive capacity, and found that strategic decision comprehensiveness is positively associated with both forms of TMT resilience, and that connectivity—through strategic decision comprehensiveness—is indirectly related to both TMT resilience—efficacious beliefs and TMT resilience—adaptive capacity. Furthermore, by conducting a two-wave survey of a sample of 234 employees and 45 managers, Shin, Taylor & Seo (2012) found that resilience is positively related to two types of employee commitment to change (normative and affective), that these effects were mediated through state positive affection and social exchange, and that, eventually, the two types of commitment to change were negatively related to turnover.

The findings suggest that training and development opportunities promote employee optimism, hope, and being valued by their employers, which is conducive to developing adaptive- and emotional intelligence-oriented coping mechanisms, thus enhancing worker resiliency. During the interviews, the managers and employees mentioned that, through training and development opportunities, employees can gain valuable transferable knowledge and learning that can enable them to cope with both work and non-work related stress, thus getting help in jointly adapting to job stress and personal life challenges (Leppin et al., 2014).



The findings also indicate that, in some cases, the case company had introduced short workshops and training courses on workplace safety, and had blended training to cope with work- and family-related stress resulting from the high job demands associated with the telecommunications industry. These training courses had acted as instrumental mechanisms in dealing with employee burnout and the provision of high quality service to customers, since the telecommunications industry is highly dynamic and competitive.

### **Feedback and employee resilience**

The findings indicate that the company had developed strong feedback mechanism, with employees receiving frequent feedback on their current projects and on how they could address and improve their own performance. The feedback system had enabled the employees to develop their own resilience and, with it, enhance TEKO's resilience and performance. Feedback mechanisms aimed at promoting employee resilience and coping are particularly important in the dynamic telecommunications sector, in which the constant pressure to respond to frequently changing customer requirements place additional stress on the employees. One of the managers noted:

*"We conduct employee ratings annually and promote those employees who have done well. We provide feedback and offer need-based training to those employees who we feel will benefit and develop into competent staff"* [Manager Training and Development]

*"Our company has a very formal feedback system in place and we provide frequent feedback to our employees and, where necessary, we offer mentorship so the employees are not stressed-out and feel part of the company"* [Director]

The findings indicate that TEKO had developed a formal feedback system and that mentorship was also provided to the employees so that they could develop resilience and cope better with their day-to-day job related demands. In this respect, the social support, both

formal and informal, had sought to enhance employee resilience through the development of active coping mechanisms, which promoted optimism and hope in the employees, enabling them to deal with uncertain and high demand telecom service delivery situations.

### **HR benefits, flexible working schemes and employee resilience**

The employees also mentioned better human resources benefits aimed at developing employee resilience and promoting confidence in the company. For example, the interviewees highlighted flexible work timing as being more important for the welfare of the employees and to help them to develop resilience and adaptability as an active coping mechanism in both work and non-work settings.

*“Flexible timings and options to work from home are quite critical for working women in general and, unfortunately, in our country, the companies are not really offering flexible working schemes, which affects employee welfare and adaptability”*  
[Employee 2]

*“In order to get more diverse employees ... companies should make their work timings flexible and eliminate frequent late sittings. The companies need to provide pick & drop services and day care facilities as this can enhance employee emotional well-being. We feel stress due to the lack of such incentives in our country”*  
[Employee 6]

The managers also noted that flexible-working hours and transportation schemes are important to promote employee resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms.

*“Our company is looking into developing flexible working patterns and also considering company-run coaches that can pick and drop our employees, as this helps the employees to stay focussed and promote better retention and adaptability as well”*  
[Manager HR]

These findings seem to suggest that, since liberalization, the company had been considering the adoption of a holistic approach towards balancing the work-personal life interface, one which could enable adaptive coping mechanisms and enhance workforce resilience. Recent

research also pointed out that supportive work–family organizational and occupational cultures and flexible schedules can minimize conflict in the structure of work, thus promoting employee resilience (Kossek & Perrigino, 2016).

### **Peer-to-Peer support, social interaction, and employee resilience**

The interviewees also mentioned peer-to-peer support as being important for the advancement of their careers and to help them develop resilience in the changing work requirements of the fast paced telecommunications industry. For example, one of the employees mentioned:

*"Peer-to-peer support is excellent in my organisation and this has helped me and other newcomers to settle in well in the new environment. My colleagues are always willing to share their experiences and things to do that will help in being valued by my organisation and solve customer problems"* [Employee 4]

The company also promoted socialization activities and away days aimed at promoting good team ethics and employee bonding.

*"Our company holds away days for employees, especially trekking and company picnics schemes, as we don't want our employees to feel stressed out due to their work related commitments"* [Manager Human Resources]

The employees also mentioned social interaction activities as being important to promote employee resilience and sense of belonging.

*"The away-days social trips are important to feel good about the company and this also helps newcomers to get adjusted to the [company culture] as some of my friends who work for other organisations don't have away days and they really feel stressed and often talk about how lucky I am that, at least, my company takes us on social trips and this helps to feel fresh and motivated for work"* [Employee 5]

Workplace peer-to-peer social support is one of the important ingredients and belief systems by which individual employees are looked after and supported by their colleagues and management and can get the necessary on the job support; it is a vital resource that guards from poor performance in both work and non-work environments (Kossek et al., 2011). Furthermore, studies noted that peer support action plans in fire and rescue services play an

important role in the promotion of resilience and positive coping strategies (Dowdall-Thomae et al., 2009).

## **5. Discussion and Conclusions**

The aim of this article was to examine the impact of specific HRPs on employee resilience in the context of the Pakistani telecommunications sector. The role played by HRPs is even more important in environments characterized by frequent stress and shocks, such as the one observed in this study. The organisation's capability to deal with the external shocks and stress is developed through HRPs by developing employee resilience competencies, which, in turn, leads to the development of a more resilient organisation. Relatively little research has focussed on how particular HRPs impact employee resilience (Cartwright & Cooper, 2009; Bowles & Cooper, 2012; Cooper et al., 2013; Cooper et al., 2014; Xing & Liu, 2015, 2016).

This is the context in which the present article has examined HRPs and their impact on employee resilience in Pakistan, a country that, as an emerging economy, is continuing to experience social, economic, and political transformation. We assert that the HRPs are more salient in countries, such as Pakistan, which are experiencing a wave of liberalization and the arrival of western-oriented management practices, with formal institutions in a state of flux and adverse working conditions.

The findings suggest that a 'bundle' of HRPs and related activities directly contribute to build employee resilience in a Pakistani telecommunications company, thus supporting the recent view, expressed by scholars, that resilience capacity can be promoted through programmatic interventions (e.g., Kossek & Perrigino, 2016).

The findings indicate that, following the privatization and liberalization of the telecommunications sector, the case company had introduced gender neutral job designs that had been instrumental in promoting the development of more resilient employees. This

finding is important in the context of Pakistan, as gender related issues are gaining increasing importance, with the entry into the workforce of female employees, who had previously had limited work opportunities due to the country's fluctuating history in terms of gender equality related issues (Özbilgin et al., 2012). A gender neutral job design sees female employees treated equally, leading high visibility projects in equal measure to their male counterparts, which contributes to their resilience and cognitive and adaptive coping mechanisms suited to deal with the high work demands associated with the telecommunications industry. The results point out that TEKNO had promoted inclusivity and diversity in the workplace through job design-oriented HRPs, and this had had a positive influence on employee resilience. The extant research indicated that job designs directly contribute to employee motivation and enhance productivity (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Wood et al., 2012).

The findings suggest that the case company had been particularly effective in promoting information sharing, which had been critical in helping to develop employee resilience and behavioural coping mechanisms. Information sharing helped employees to understand the company's policies and, in turn, enhanced employee well-being in dealing with changing job requirements. A greater flow of information from the top hierarchy to the lower rank employees served to create a positive working environment, as employees better understood the organisation's overall objectives. Information sharing also helped in building trust and, with it, employee resilience. Previous research noted the importance of information sharing for job enrichment and organisational performance (Wood & De Menezes, 2011; Wood et al., 2012). Moreover, improving the flow of information can reduce employee turnover and increase productivity (Huselid, 1995). The findings also indicate that the top managers were highly involved in encouraging the flow and sharing of information and encouraged the employees to discuss their issues and problems with them. The involvement of senior management in encouraging the flow of information and in designing job neutral

work assignments gave employees more control and fostered greater employee resilience. This process also helped to promote teamwork to develop collective employee resilience, with team functional flexibility and social contact recognised as vital sources of satisfaction that also help to reduce work-related stress (Warr, 2007). Such inter-personal relationships are highly relevant for the enhancement of individual resilience (Xing & Liu, 2016, 2015). In turn, these practices help the development of employee resilience, thus reducing the psychological strain of employees. These findings further support some recent studies that focussed on particular supervisor and leadership styles that can impact employee well-being and promote ambidexterity (Xing, Liu, Tarba & Wood, 2016; Xing & Liu, 2016; Xing & Liu, 2015).

The results indicate that the provision to employees of both monetary and non-monetary benefits schemes promoted employee resilience. The findings suggest that these benefits were helpful for employees in building psychological capital, leading to build their resilience. The other important form of support implemented through HRPs was peer-to-peer support, which promoted employee social interaction. This social support enhanced employee resilience. The results also indicate that employee resilience was strengthened through mentoring and flexible working schemes. With more females entering the workforce in Pakistan, and due to extended family responsibilities, flexible working schemes are helpful in reducing job-related stress through work-life balance schemes, thus promoting behavioural coping mechanisms. These findings indicate that western HRPs are being diffused in Pakistan. Occupational health has become an important issue for the resilience of workers, leading to their well-being (Sparks et al., 2001), and research shows a positive link between flexible working schemes and employee well-being (Sparks et al., 2001; Baptiste, 2008; Wood & De Menezes, 2011). Thus, these findings offer novel insights and highlight how both monetary and non-monetary benefits are important in developing employee resilience.

The data indicate that employee training and development oriented opportunities were important HRP for the development of employee resilience. Employees, especially those who want challenging job opportunities, are unlikely to be satisfied with mundane day-to-day operations (Felstead et al., 2015), and occupations that provide limited outlets for employee creativity and enthusiasm can have a detrimental impact on employee resilience in the short term, which may also affect organisational performance and productivity in the longer term. Providing employees with training and development opportunities and offering them options to constantly update their skills can enhance their psychological capital and improve performance. In this respect, training is especially relevant in a high-technology sector like telecommunications, and, by enhancing employability, can engender resilience within employees by reducing the insecurities and uncertainties linked to any job losses caused by liberalization-related organizational changes. The findings further suggest that the company provided international training to its employees; this resulted in enhancing employee abilities and resilience in dealing with uncertain task environments and enabling better coping with job-related stress and burnout. In the employees' minds, the value of these experiences (i.e., psychological capital) can, in turn, greatly affect their performance outcomes in their current jobs and improve their resilience (e.g., Spreitzer et al., 2005; Youssef & Luthans, 2007; Avey et al., 2009; Linnenluecke, 2015).

### **Implications for Research and Contributions**

The findings of this study have important implications for research on positive psychology, positive organisational behaviours, and HRM (e.g., Luthans, 2002a; Luthans & Youssef, 2007; Youssef & Luthans, 2007; Avey et al., 2009; Xing & Liu, 2015, 2016; Xing et al., 2016). Previous studies investigating individual resilience in the context of organisational psychology noted that psychological capital plays an important role in

reducing stress and burnout (Luthans & Youssef, 2007; Luthans et al., 2007; Avey et al., 2009). Studies indicated the need to investigate other organisational enablers, such as HRPs, that support employee resilience (e.g., Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Bardoel et al., 2014; Cooper et al., 2014; Xing & Liu, 2016).

In this paper, we add to the extant positive psychology and HR literature in three important ways: First, we demonstrate the utility of HR functions in contributing towards the development of employee resilience. Specifically, this study highlights how the implementation of bundles of consistent and mutually reinforcing HR practices promotes the development of employee resilience. Second, this study contributes to the existing literature by providing important insights gleaned from the little explored late liberalizing economy of Pakistan; by doing so, it adds to the very few studies examining high performance work systems. Developing employee resilience is important in the context of late liberalizing economies, such as that of Pakistan, as they are unlikely to have in place institutional support and organisational systems aimed at developing resilience in their workforces. Moreover, developing employee resilience is important beyond the organisation, and provides an important mechanism to facilitate the process of liberalization and change. Third, the study documents the influence of HR practices on employee resilience from one of the important sectors in Pakistan, namely the telecommunications sector, which had been under researched, and thus firmly brings the influence of HRPs on employee resilience in this sector in the mainstream international human resource management field with regard to emerging economies.

### **Implications for Practice**

The study offers several lessons for practitioners. First, in order to promote employee resilience, managers need to pay attention to designing gender neutral jobs and assign high



impact jobs equally to male and female employees. Second, managers should seek to foster a supportive organisational culture that values team work and the free flow of information from managers to employees and vice versa. This would support the development of employees to build resilience competencies. Third, managers need to encourage informal peer-peer support and teamwork, and provide formal feedback. Fourth, in order to develop employee resilience, managers should promote flexible working schemes and provide more opportunities for work-life balance or working from home, which could lead to organisational performance and a reduction in absenteeism. Fifth, managers should develop sound training and development schemes that could lead to build employee resilience. Lastly, managers need to design both monetary and non-monetary benefits for their employees, which would help in the development of employee resilience. Overall, the implications of these findings for practitioners are that the careful design and implementation of 'bundles' of HRPs would culminate in a more favourable work environment, leading to the development of a more resilient workforce.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Given the exploratory nature of this study, further research on this topic is warranted. First, we studied the impact of HRPs on employee resilience in a single company by utilizing a qualitative research design. Future studies could build on this research and conduct both a qualitative and large scale survey research of managers and employees in order to have a comprehensive view of the role played by HRPs on employee resilience.

Second, our findings may be context-specific and the impact of HRPs in other industries and contexts may differ. In order to overcome this limitation, future studies could do comparative studies through pair matching, for example, comparing various economies,

both within the developing and developed camps and across them, in order to provide a more balanced view of the impact of HRPs on employee resilience.

Third, we have not inferred the organisational performance effects of HRPs in detail. Future research could explore the possibility of linking these resilience measures to organisational performance in other emerging economies. Our study shows that female employees have greatly benefited from job design and flexible working practices, yet more detailed research is required to understand how HRPs can further enable and enhance the development of resilience in female workers in Pakistan and other similar economies undergoing a liberalization process. Fourth, the particular styles adopted by supervisors and leaders can also affect the well-being and resilience of employees. Thus, future studies could build upon our findings and conduct field experiments and survey-based studies to disentangle the role played supervisor and leader styles and how this affects employee resilience and coping capabilities in different industrial settings. Finally, the findings of studies like this one would have relevance beyond Pakistan and could help develop HRPs for other late liberalizing economies and for countries in which women have limited access into workforces.

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