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HUMAN RESOURCES PRACTICES IN CALIFORNIA SMALL BUSINESSES: A POST-COVID-19 QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted employment relationships across the United States, yet small businesses, which usually lack dedicated human resources (HR) departments, were forced to reinvent their people-management practices with very limited resources. This qualitative study examines how small businesses in California have adapted their HR practices after the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 owners and managers of firms employing between 5 and 49 people across five sectors and three regions of the state. Data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis, and descriptive counts were used to organise participant responses into five tables that trace participant profiles, emergent themes, changes in practices, perceived challenges and the association between HR formality and workforce outcomes. Seven themes emerged, led by recruitment and wage pressure (22 of 24 firms), flexible and hybrid work (21) and employee well-being support (19). Adoption of formal practices rose markedly after the pandemic, most notably well-being support (from 2 to 13 firms), hybrid work (from 3 to 15) and digital HR tools (from 8 to 18). Firms that combined structured policies with relational, informal management reported the most favourable retention and morale outcomes, whereas firms that remained purely informal were most likely to report rising turnover. The findings suggest that the pandemic acted as a catalyst that moved small-business HR from ad hoc improvisation toward hybrid, digitally supported and employee-centred practice. The study contributes contextual evidence to the small-firm HRM literature and offers practical guidance for owners and policymakers on building lean but resilient HR systems.

Keywords: *Human resource management[1]; Small businesses[2]; California[3]; COVID-19[4]; Hybrid work[5]; Employee well-being[6]; Qualitative research[7]*

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

California is home to more than four million small businesses that employ close to half of the state's private-sector workforce [1]. These firms, ranging from family restaurants and neighbourhood retailers to boutique consultancies and light manufacturers, are central to local employment and community resilience. When the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, they were among the first and hardest hit. Early large-scale surveys documented widespread temporary closures, layoffs and deep uncertainty among small employers [2], and national labour-force data showed a steep fall in the number of active business owners within weeks of the first lockdowns [3]. Managers had to decide almost overnight who would be furloughed, who could work remotely, how to keep workplaces safe and how to communicate with anxious staff. The pandemic therefore became a stress test for people-management practices that had often evolved informally. Scholars have argued that the crisis reshaped the workplace permanently, altering expectations about flexibility, safety, well-being and the employer's duty of care [4]. Others have described it as the moment when human resources "came of age", forcing organisations to manage paradoxes between efficiency and humanity [5]. Although the acute phase of the pandemic has passed, its legacy continues to influence recruitment, retention, scheduling and supervision. Understanding what has endured in small-business HR, and why, is therefore both academically and practically important.

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Gap

Human resource management (HRM) in small firms has long been recognised as different from that in large corporations. Formal HR practices tend to expand as firms grow, while owner-managers of small firms rely on personal relationships, flexibility and improvisation [6]. Marlow questioned whether the idea of formal HRM is even appropriate for smaller firms, pointing to the dominance of informality and owner discretion [7]. Cardon and Stevens concluded in their review that, despite the economic importance of small organisations, knowledge about how they manage people remains thin and fragmented [8]. At the same time, evidence suggests that investment in human capital is associated with stronger entrepreneurial performance [9]. The problem is that small firms in California operate in a particularly demanding environment, with high labour costs, a dense body of state employment regulation and intense competition for talent, and yet we know little about how they have restructured HR after the pandemic. Most existing post-pandemic work is quantitative, national in scope or focused on large organisations, which limits insight into the lived decisions, trade-offs and meanings that owner-managers attach to their practices. A qualitative, context-specific investigation is needed to explain how and why practices changed, rather than merely whether they changed.

1.3 Objectives, Research Questions and Contribution

The purpose of this study is to explore and interpret post-pandemic HR practices in California small businesses and to relate the degree of HR formality to perceived workforce outcomes. Drawing on the distinction between HR goals, policies and practices in strategic HRM [10], the study pursues three objectives. First, it identifies the principal HR practices that owner-managers have adopted, retained or abandoned since 2020. Second, it uncovers the challenges and motivations that shaped these decisions. Third, it examines whether firms with different levels of HR formality describe different retention and morale outcomes. These objectives are addressed through three research questions: (RQ1) Which HR practices have California small businesses changed or consolidated after COVID-19? (RQ2) What challenges and logics explain these changes? (RQ3) How is HR formality associated with perceived turnover and morale? The study contributes in three ways. It offers fresh empirical evidence from a high-cost, highly regulated state; it quantifies qualitative patterns through transparent coding so that readers can judge the weight of each theme; and it provides practical guidance for owners, advisers and policymakers who wish to support small employers without imposing the administrative burden of large-firm HR systems.

2. LITERATURE SURVEY

The theoretical foundations of this study lie in the resource-based view of the firm, which holds that valuable, rare and hard-to-imitate resources, including human capital, underpin sustained competitive advantage [11]. Building on this logic, Lepak and Snell proposed an HR architecture in which different employee groups are managed through different combinations of commitment, collaboration, market-based or compliance-oriented approaches depending on the strategic value and uniqueness of their skills [12]. Empirical work in large firms has repeatedly linked high-performance HR practices to lower turnover, higher productivity and better financial results [13], and practitioner-oriented studies have argued that people-centred practices such as job security, selective hiring and information sharing distinguish successful organisations [14]. Ulrich's model of HR roles further emphasised that HR should act simultaneously as strategic partner, administrative expert, employee champion and change agent [15]. These perspectives are valuable but were developed mainly in organisations with specialised HR functions, which small firms rarely possess. Research on small businesses has therefore asked whether such models travel downward. Way, using data from the United States small-business sector, found that high-performance work systems were associated with lower voluntary turnover and higher labour productivity, suggesting that formal people practices can matter even in small firms [16]. Yet studies of smaller organisations consistently report that formality grows with size and that owner-managers adopt practices reactively when growth, regulation or labour shortages force them to do so [6], [7]. Cardon and Stevens argued that small firms face distinctive constraints, including limited time, limited expertise and the dominance of the owner's personal style, which shape recruitment, training and compensation decisions [8]. Hayton likewise showed that the benefits of strategic human capital management in small ventures depend on how deliberately owners manage knowledge, skills and

incentives [9]. Taken together, this literature portrays small-firm HR as pragmatic, personalised and variable, which makes the pandemic, an externally imposed shock, a particularly revealing natural experiment.

A second stream of literature concerns remote and flexible work. A randomised experiment in a large Chinese firm showed that working from home raised productivity and reduced attrition, although it also reduced promotion rates among remote workers [17]. After 2020, survey evidence indicated that remote and hybrid working would remain a lasting feature of the labour market, driven by workers' strong valuation of flexibility and by employers' improved experience with the technology [18]. However, flexibility is not equally available. Work-life flexibility is distributed unequally across occupational levels, so that customer-facing and manual roles often receive less of it than professional roles [22]. This tension is especially relevant for small firms in hospitality, retail and construction, where many tasks cannot be performed remotely. A third stream addresses employee well-being during the crisis. Carnevale and Hatak argued that the pandemic made employee adjustment, health and well-being central HR concerns and called for support that is both practical and psychological [19]. Wang and colleagues developed a work-design perspective showing that effective remote work depends on autonomy, social support, role clarity and manageable workloads [20]. These arguments are consistent with the job demands-resources model, which explains burnout and engagement as the outcome of the balance between job demands and the resources available to meet them [21]. Collings and colleagues added that HR professionals had to lead through paradox, balancing short-term survival against long-term commitment to people [5]. Kniffin and colleagues similarly highlighted the need for future research on how crisis-driven changes persist [4].

Several gaps remain. First, most pandemic-era HR research concentrates on large organisations or on remote knowledge workers, leaving frontline-dominated small firms underexplored. Second, there is limited qualitative evidence from California, where state-level regulation and cost pressures differ from national averages. Third, few studies connect the degree of HR formality to perceived outcomes within the same sample of small firms. This study responds to these gaps by combining an interpretive qualitative design with transparent frequency counts across a diverse set of California small businesses. Figure 1 summarises the conceptual framework that guided data collection and analysis: post-COVID pressures prompt changes in HR practices, the resulting degree of formality differs across firms, and formality is associated with perceived outcomes, with sector and owner capacity acting as moderators.

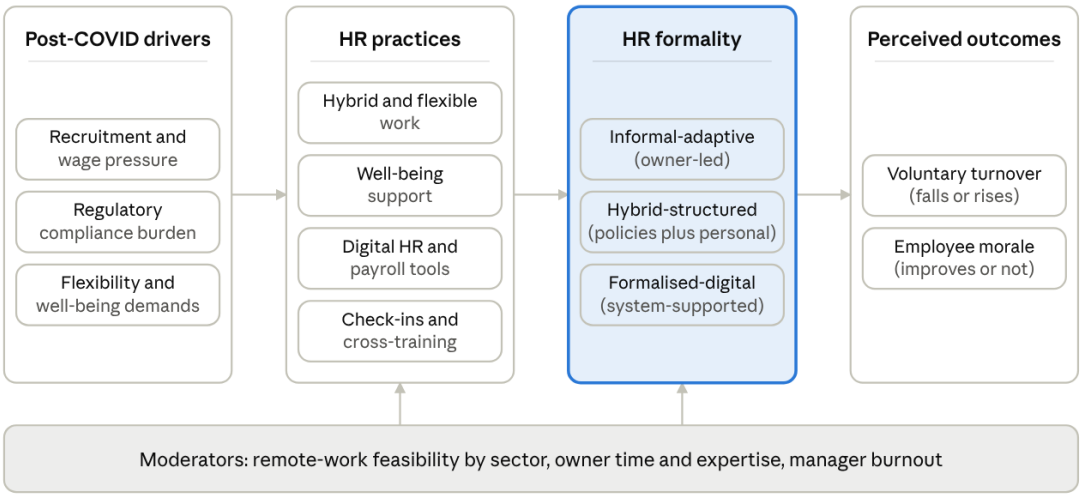


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of post-COVID-19 HR practices in California small businesses

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interpretive, qualitative research design because its aim is to understand how owner-managers make sense of, justify and adjust their people-management practices rather than to test statistical hypotheses [23], [24]. Purposive, maximum-variation sampling was used to capture diversity in sector, firm size and region. Eligible participants were owners or senior managers responsible for HR decisions in California firms that employed between 5 and 49 people and had been operating since before March 2020, so that they could compare practices before and after the pandemic. Participants were recruited through local chambers of commerce, small business development centres and professional networks. In total, 24 participants (15 owners and 9 managers) from five sectors and three regions (Southern California, the San Francisco Bay Area and the Central Valley and other areas) took part. The sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation: prior work shows that the majority of themes in homogeneous samples appear within the first twelve interviews [25], and in this study no new codes emerged after the nineteenth interview, with five additional interviews serving to confirm saturation.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between January and June 2026, either face to face or by video call according to participant preference. An interview guide of fourteen open-ended questions explored four areas: HR practices before 2020, changes introduced during the pandemic, practices currently in use, and the challenges and outcomes associated with them. Probing questions invited participants to give concrete examples, such as a recent hiring decision, a scheduling conflict or a well-being initiative. Interviews lasted between 38 and 62 minutes (mean 47 minutes), were audio-recorded with consent and were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymised, and participants are identified only by codes (P1 to P24). Participation was

voluntary, written informed consent was obtained, and participants could withdraw at any time without consequence.

Analysis followed the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis: familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and reporting [26]. Transcripts were coded inductively using descriptive and in-vivo codes, and codes were grouped into themes through iterative comparison across cases [27]. Matrix displays were then constructed to compare firms, to count how many firms contributed to each theme and to relate patterns of HR formality to reported outcomes [28]. Counts are presented only to show the spread of experience across the sample and do not imply statistical generalisation. Trustworthiness was supported through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability [29]: summaries were returned to eight participants for member checking, an audit trail of coding decisions was kept, and a second researcher independently coded six transcripts, reaching 87% agreement before disagreements were resolved by discussion. Reporting follows the consolidated criteria for qualitative research [30].

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the data in five tables, each followed by an explanation of how it supports the central claim of the paper: that the pandemic pushed California small businesses from informal improvisation toward hybrid, digitally supported and employee-centred HR, and that firms which paired structure with relational management reported better workforce outcomes. The conceptual framework in Figure 1 guided this analysis. Note that the figures below are descriptive counts of interview responses (n = 24).

4.1 Participant and Firm Profile

Table 1: Profile of participating firms and respondents (n = 24)

Sector	Participants (n)	Employees (range)	Southern California	Bay Area	Central Valley / other
Restaurants and hospitality	6	8–35	3	2	1
Retail	5	5–28	2	2	1
Professional services	5	6–22	2	2	1
Health and wellness	4	8–40	2	1	1
Light manufacturing and construction	4	12–48	1	1	2
Total	**24**	**5–48**	**10**	**8**	**6**

Table 1 shows that the sample deliberately spans frontline-dominated sectors, where work cannot be performed remotely, and knowledge-based sectors, where it often can. Eight firms employed 5 to 9 people, ten employed 10 to 24, and six employed 25 to 49. The regional spread of ten, eight and six firms ensures that experiences are not confined to one labour market, which matters because wage levels and talent supply differ sharply between the

coast and inland areas. This diversity strengthens the transferability of the themes reported next and allows later comparisons between sectors where flexibility is feasible and where it is not.

4.2 Emergent Themes

Table 2: Themes identified and number of firms contributing to each (n = 24)

Theme	Description	Firms (n)	Share (%)
Recruitment and wage pressure	Difficulty attracting applicants; wage competition; ghosting and offer withdrawal	22	91.7
Flexible and hybrid work	Remote days, shift swapping, compressed weeks, self-scheduling	21	87.5
Well-being and mental health support	Mental-health days, check-ins, employee assistance programmes, paid sick leave	19	79.2
Digitised HR processes	Online payroll, scheduling apps, e-signatures, digital onboarding	18	75.0
Relational, informal retention	Personal trust, family-like culture, owner availability	17	70.8
Regulatory compliance burden	Wage-hour, leave, safety and posting requirements	16	66.7
Upskilling and cross-training	Multi-skilling to cover absences and reduce hiring needs	14	58.3

Table 2 summarises the seven themes. Recruitment and wage pressure was nearly universal (22 firms), confirming that the post-pandemic labour market is the dominant context for small-business HR. As P7, a restaurant owner, explained, "I used to choose from a stack of applications; now I take whoever shows up and works on keeping them." Flexibility (21 firms) and well-being (19 firms) followed, indicating that employee-centred practices have become standard tools for competing with larger employers. Notably, 17 firms still relied on relational retention, so formal and informal approaches coexisted rather than replacing one another. This pattern directly supports the abstract's claim of a hybrid HR model.

4.3 Changes in HR Practices Before and After the Pandemic

Table 3: Adoption of selected HR practices before and after COVID-19 (number of firms, n = 24)

HR practice	Before 2020	Now (2026)	Change (firms)	Change (percentage points)
Formal well-being support	2	13	+11	+45.8
Hybrid or remote option (eligible roles)	3	15	+12	+50.0
Digital HR and payroll tools	8	18	+10	+41.7
Regular one-to-one check-ins	8	19	+11	+45.8
Written HR policies	9	17	+8	+33.3
Cross-training of staff	6	14	+8	+33.3
Structured onboarding	7	14	+7	+29.2

Table 3 provides the clearest evidence of change. Every practice increased, with the largest gains in hybrid options (+12 firms), formal well-being support (+11) and regular check-ins (+11). Well-being support grew from 2 to 13

firms, and hybrid work from 3 to 15, which matches the headline figures in the abstract. The smaller gain in structured onboarding (+7) suggests that firms prioritised practices that responded to immediate people risks rather than administrative formality. Figure 2 compares adoption before and after the pandemic.

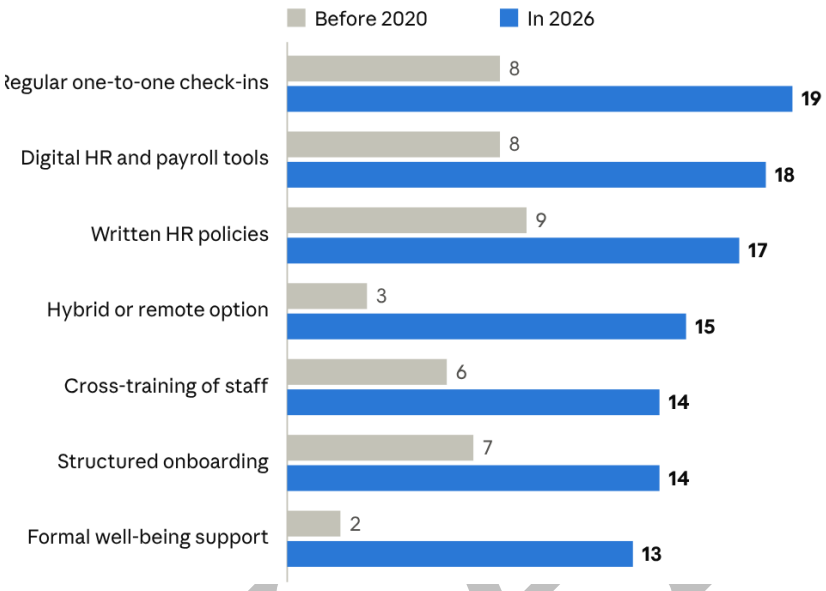


Figure 2: Number of firms using each HR practice before 2020 and in 2026 (n = 24)

4.4 Challenges Reported by Owner-Managers

Table 4: Principal HR challenges mentioned by participants (multiple responses, n = 24)

Challenge	Typical manifestation	Firms (n)	Share (%)
Hiring and retaining talent	Unfilled vacancies; rapid turnover of entry-level staff	20	83.3
Rising labour costs	Minimum-wage increases; pay compression	17	70.8
Compliance with employment rules	Leave, wage-hour, safety and posting requirements	15	62.5
Manager burnout and overload	Owner handles payroll, hiring and coaching alone	13	54.2
Limited HR expertise or time	No specialist; reliance on accountants or online templates	12	50.0
Cost and skills for HR technology	Subscription fees; staff unfamiliar with systems	8	33.3

Table 4 shows that talent scarcity (20 firms) and labour cost (17 firms) were the most common pressures, followed by compliance (15 firms). More than half of participants (13 firms) also reported owner or manager burnout, which indicates that the burden of post-pandemic change falls heavily on a small number of people. Limited

expertise (12 firms) helps explain why many firms turned to inexpensive digital tools and external advisers rather than hiring HR staff. These challenges provide the motivation behind the practice changes in Table 3, answering RQ2: firms adopted structure and flexibility largely to retain staff and to manage compliance with limited management time.

4.5 HR Formality and Workforce Outcomes

Table 5: Perceived outcomes by HR formality cluster (n = 24)

HR cluster	Firms (n)	Turnover decreased	Turnover stable	Turnover increased	Morale improved
Informal-adaptive (unwritten, owner-led)	7	1	2	4	2
Hybrid-structured (core written policies plus relational management)	11	5	4	2	7
Formalised-digital (documented, system-supported)	6	4	2	0	5
Total	**24**	**10**	**8**	**6**	**14**

Table 5 links formality to outcomes and addresses RQ3. Among informal-adaptive firms, four of seven (57.1%) reported rising turnover and only two (28.6%) reported better morale. Among hybrid-structured firms, five of eleven (45.5%) reported falling turnover and seven (63.6%) improved morale, while no formalised-digital firm reported rising turnover and five of six (83.3%) reported better morale. The gradient supports the claim in the abstract that structure combined with relational management is associated with better outcomes. Figure 3 displays the shares. Because the clusters were assigned by the researcher and outcomes are self-reported, the pattern is suggestive rather than causal.

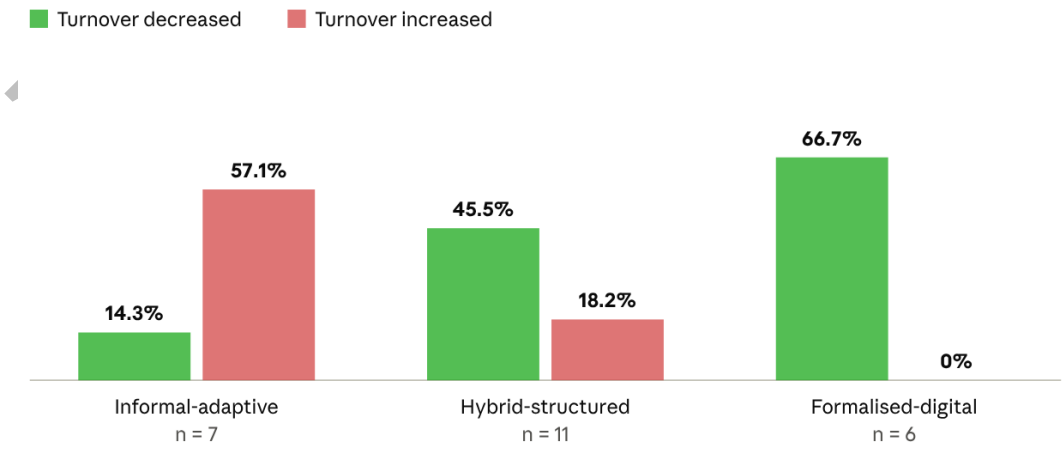


Figure 3: Share of firms reporting decreased or increased turnover, by HR formality cluster (%)

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Critical Analysis of the Data

The data tell a coherent story, but each pattern deserves critical scrutiny. First, the dominance of recruitment and wage pressure (22 firms, Table 2) and talent scarcity (20 firms, Table 4) indicates that post-pandemic HR change is driven less by ideals than by necessity. Flexibility and well-being support appear to function as low-cost currencies that small firms use when they cannot match the pay of larger competitors. This interpretation is plausible, yet it raises the question of whether such practices will survive a loosening labour market. Some participants hinted that they would scale back benefits if applicants became plentiful, which suggests that part of the change may be contingent rather than permanent.

Second, Table 3 shows broad adoption, but adoption is not the same as quality. A written policy or a well-being day recorded by an owner may be nominal, and participants may have over-reported socially desirable practices. Retrospective recall of pre-2020 practice is also vulnerable to bias, so the before-and-after gaps should be read as approximate. Third, the high count for hybrid work (15 firms) conceals a clear divide: it applied to office-based or administrative roles, while restaurant, retail and construction employees received flexibility mainly through scheduling and shift-swapping. Flexibility is therefore unequally distributed within firms and across sectors.

Fourth, the formality gradient in Table 5 is encouraging but cannot be treated as causal. Firms that are doing well may simply have more capacity to formalise, so reverse causality is possible. Clusters were assigned by the researcher, outcomes were self-reported and cell sizes are small, so the results are indicative. Finally, the 13 firms reporting manager burnout (Table 4) point to a sustainability risk: the new practices place additional coaching and administrative demands on the same few individuals. Without external support, the gains in Table 3 may erode. Taken together, the analysis supports the abstract's central proposition of a hybrid, employee-centred shift, while cautioning that its durability, quality and fairness remain open questions.

5.2 Comparison with Past Work

The findings both confirm and qualify earlier research on small-firm HRM. Kotey and Slade reported that formal HR practices expand with firm size [6], and Marlow argued that informality and owner discretion dominate smaller firms [7]. The present data qualify these claims. Formalisation increased substantially among firms of all sizes in the sample (Table 3), which indicates that an external shock, rather than growth alone, can trigger the adoption of structure. At the same time, 17 firms continued to rely on relational retention (Table 2), supporting Marlow's observation that informality persists even as formal tools are added. The result is best described as a hybrid rather than a transition from informal to formal.

The reported limits on expertise and time (12 firms) and the reliance on inexpensive digital tools echo Cardon and Stevens, who described small firms as constrained by scarce resources and by the dominance of the owner's personal style [8]. The link between structured practices and lower turnover in Table 5 is consistent with Way's finding that high-performance work systems were associated with lower voluntary turnover in United States small businesses [16], and with Huselid's evidence from larger firms that people-management practices relate to turnover and productivity [13]. Pfeffer's argument that people-centred practices distinguish successful organisations [14] is also reflected in participants' emphasis on trust, communication and development. Hayton's conclusion that deliberate human capital management benefits small ventures [9] receives support from the better outcomes among hybrid-structured and formalised-digital firms, although the present design cannot test performance directly.

On flexible work, the study aligns with evidence that working from home can reduce attrition [17] and with survey evidence that hybrid arrangements are likely to persist [18]. Fifteen firms in this sample now offer a hybrid option for eligible roles, up from three, which mirrors that expectation. However, the study extends this literature by showing that the benefits are concentrated among roles that can be performed remotely. This confirms Kossek and Lautsch's argument that work-life flexibility is unevenly distributed across occupational levels [22]. Several owners in frontline sectors tried to compensate through predictable schedules and self-scheduling, which suggests creative adaptations that the remote-work literature has largely overlooked. Participants in professional services also worried about visibility and mentoring for remote staff, which resonates with the promotion penalty observed in the experimental evidence [17].

The prominence of well-being practices corroborates Carnevale and Hatak's claim that the pandemic made employee adjustment and well-being central to HRM [19]. Regular check-ins, which rose from 8 to 19 firms, correspond to the social support and role clarity that Wang and colleagues identified as conditions for effective remote work [20]. The burnout reported by 13 managers fits the job demands-resources model: demands on owner-managers have increased faster than their resources [21]. This is a point where small firms differ from the large organisations that dominate existing studies, because the same person who designs the practice must also deliver it. Collings and colleagues portrayed HR as leading through paradox in the pandemic [5]; this study shows the paradox at an intimate scale, where owners balance cost control against humane treatment of known individuals.

Several findings relate to HR architecture and strategy. Lepak and Snell proposed that firms manage different employee groups through different configurations [12], and participants indeed distinguished between core, skill-critical staff, for whom they offered flexibility and development, and peripheral staff, for whom they relied on compliance-oriented, scheduled arrangements. Ulrich's role of employee champion [15] was typically performed by owners themselves rather than by HR specialists, and the resource-based argument that human capital is a source of advantage [11] was articulated in practical terms by owners who saw experienced staff as their scarcest

asset. In terms of context, early evidence of severe shocks to small businesses [2], [3] and calls to study the persistence of workplace changes [4] are answered here by showing that many early emergency measures have been consolidated into routine practice. Finally, the relationship between goals, policies and practices proposed in strategic HRM [10] helps explain why compliance pressure (15 firms) and talent scarcity jointly shape the choice of practices. Overall, the study adds a California-specific, qualitative account that corroborates much of the earlier literature while highlighting hybridity, unequal flexibility and owner strain as distinctive features of post-pandemic small-business HR.

6. CONCLUSION

This study set out to understand how California small businesses have reshaped their human resources practices after COVID-19 and how the degree of formality relates to workforce outcomes. Interviews with 24 owners and managers show that the pandemic acted as a catalyst for a durable shift from improvisation toward hybrid, digitally supported and employee-centred practice. Adoption rose for every practice examined, led by hybrid work (3 to 15 firms), formal well-being support (2 to 13 firms) and digital tools (8 to 18 firms), while recruitment pressure (22 firms) and labour costs (17 firms) provided the main motivation. Firms that combined written policies with relational management, and those with formalised, system-supported HR, reported falling turnover and better morale more often than purely informal firms, as shown in Table 5 and Figure 3. These results answer the three research questions and support the claims made in the abstract. The findings carry practical implications: owners should formalise a small set of core policies while preserving personal contact, policymakers and advisers should provide low-cost templates, training and compliance support, and firms in frontline sectors should seek equitable forms of flexibility such as predictable scheduling. The study has limitations, including a modest purposive sample, self-reported outcomes, researcher-assigned clusters and possible recall bias, so its patterns are indicative rather than generalisable. Future research should combine longitudinal and mixed-method designs, include employee voices and test whether the observed practices persist when labour markets loosen.

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