

2 HR strategy, structure, and architecture

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2.1 Introduction: the evolution of strategic HRM research

The field of strategic HRM has gone through various incarnations over its relatively short history as an area of focus in the broader human resource management field. The purpose of this chapter is to look back over the evolution of strategic HRM research and review where we are in the field. We then shift our focus to reflect on some current exciting areas of research and forward into areas of research that are critical to continue to push the field forward. The field of strategic HRM has gone through many different stages as a field of study. As a starting point, we can think of the emergence of the field as a shift in focus. Historically, human resource management researchers examined various HR practices linked to practical initiatives and processes such as selection, training, compensation, performance management, job design, and voice to name a few. Drawing heavily on industrial/organisational psychology, the emphasis was on the impact of these organisational initiatives on employees and work groups within the workplace as well as employee's experiences and reactions to the exposure to those practices. With this starting point, the field of strategic HRM made several shifts in focus that evolved into newer ways to looking at some important issues within organisations.

2.1.1 Thinking at the unit level

Several aspects of this research shifted in the earlier days of strategic HRM to help define what was meant by strategic HRM. First, key questions related to unit or organisational performance gained prominence producing a series of small subgroups in the field. Examining the unit level performance effects stemming from selective staffing (for

example, Koch and McGrath, 1996; Terpstra and Rozell, 1993) or pay for performance plans (for example, Banker et al., 1996; Shaw, Gupta and Delery, 2001) as examples helped usher in the notion of “strategic” HRM – trying to understand how these practices impacted important unit or organisational outcomes of interest.

Second, while HR practices were examined in isolation as key areas of inquiry, some strategic HRM scholars switched orientation to examine how multiple HR practices operated in concert (for example, Arthur, 1994; Huselid, 1995). The underlying logic for focusing on bundles of HR practices or HR systems is that employees are not exposed to HR practices in isolation but rather, are exposed to multiple practices simultaneously. So the effectiveness of selection practices rests, in part, on the competitiveness of the compensation system or the nature of the job design in place. Failure to account for the internal alignment of these HR practices within a system provides misleading information about the real impact of any HR practice. This remains a key defining aspect of strategic HRM research.

A third defining attribute of strategic HRM research in the mid-1990s was a focus on context. Just as a single HR practice’s effect cannot be understood without information into the presence/absence/nature of other practices, different bundles of HR systems were expected to be more or less effective in different contexts. Researchers have focused on many contexts such as technology (Kintana, Alonso and Olaverri, 2006), industry (Datta, Guthrie and Wright, 2005), strategy (Youndt et al., 1996), and country (Lertxundi and Landeta, 2011) to dig deeper to understand when different HR systems are likely to positively and/or negatively impact important organisational outcomes.

2.1.2 An architectural perspective

As the field continued to progress with the evolving strategic HRM focus on HR systems, higher level outcomes, and contingencies, a slightly different emphasis emerged with researchers adopting an architectural perspective within strategic HRM. This architectural perspective explores three interrelated issues – how companies structure their portfolio of internal and external employment arrangements, why some employees within organisations are exposed to high investment human resource systems but others are not, and the performance implications associated with how companies structure their HR architecture.

Lepak and Snell (1999) developed a theoretical framework for how companies make decisions regarding the allocation of work among internal and external employees as well as how they deploy HR systems to manage these different groups of workers. This framework recognises that not all employees are equally valuable to a company's success – different employees within an organisation contribute towards company goals in different ways. Second, companies rely on external labour – temporary employees, contractors, and other contingent workers – in conjunction with a full-time workforce to meet their strategic needs. Third, differences in the role of employees as well as whether or not they are internal or external may account for variability in the use of different HR systems within companies. Lepak and Snell (2002) found support for the HR architectural perspective and Lepak et al. (2007) found that industry impacts how companies structure their HR architecture by influencing the relative level of high investment HR system use for core employees. These findings are particularly important because they suggest that existing research that focuses only on one group of employees in their sampling designs, or research that fails to isolate HR system use for different employees groups, may be inaccurate in their assessments of the use and effects of high investment HR systems. Lastly, Lepak, Takeuchi and Snell (2003) examined the firm level performance benefits associated with how firms structure their portfolio of employment arrangements. The results indicate that extensive use of core knowledge-based employees and/or short-term contract workers is positively associated with enhanced firm performance. Interestingly, these results indicate that an increased reliance on non-core job-based employees and long-term external workers is associated with diminished firm performance.

2.1.3 Digging deeper – multi-level

While researchers continued to explore more traditional strategic HRM and variability in how employees are managed, the mid-2000s witnessed a shift to bring back in more psychological aspects to the research. This integration sought to link HR practices to the attitudes, behaviours, and performance of individual employees, and then back to firm performance. The current iteration of this work is picked up in Chapter 6 on employee engagement by Alan M. Saks and Jamie A. Gruman.

Several theoretical frameworks were published that began to develop the conceptual linkages (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004; Lepak et al., 2006).

Adjacent developments in multi-level theory and empirical methods (Kozlowski and Klein, 2000) further stimulated advancement of multi-level HR research by providing frameworks that could be applied to HR topics.

One focus of this research sought to establish cross-level effects where firm or unit-level HR practices influence individual level employees. This work was primarily focused on mediational processes within strategic HRM models. For example, Takeuchi et al. (2007) examined the role of collective human capital and establishment social exchange norms as key factors that are influenced by HR systems which, in turn, predicted establishment performance. Takeuchi, Chen and Lepak (2009) examined the impact of HR systems on employee perceptions of perceived organisational support which, in turn, impacted important employee satisfaction, commitment, and emotional exhaustion. Nishii, Lepak and Schneider (2008) focused on employee attributions of their organisations' intentions and found that the attributions employees make regarding why certain HR practices are used, even if those attributions differ from stated managerial intentions, impact how employees behave on the job. Liao et al. (2009) found that managers and employees differed in their perceptions of the employee's exposure to HR practices and that employee's perceptions directly impact the extent to which employees demonstrate high levels of customer service in banks.

The second focus of multi-level HR research sought to explore bottom-up effects where employee characteristics and behaviour combine in different ways to create new, higher-level constructs. This bottom-up process is known as *emergence*, and several studies sought to understand how HR practices might shape the emergence of employee characteristics and behaviour. Most of the research on emergence has focused on human capital resources, which are discussed shortly.

2.1.4 Revisiting what HR systems really are

Just as multi-level modelling continues to occupy a greater point of emphasis within the field, several researchers have focused a bit more on the HR system itself and have sought to decompose systems into key underlying mechanisms that drive employee attitudes and behaviours. One model is the AMO model (Jiang et al., 2012a) that refers to aligning HR practices with the three components of employee performance. The logic is that some practices such as selection training

and recruitment operate by influencing the abilities (A) of workers are oriented toward (A). Other practices such as compensation, rewards, and performance management are more oriented toward influencing employee motivation (M) to display certain attitudes or behaviours on the job. Still other practices are oriented toward the opportunities (O) employees have to contribute which are influenced by practices such as job design, work design, voice and participation. Jiang et al. (2012b) found that skill-enhancing HR practices were more positively related to human capital and less positively related to employee motivation than motivation-enhancing practices and opportunity-enhancing practices. Moreover, the three dimensions of HR systems were related to financial outcomes both directly and indirectly by influencing human capital and employee motivation as well as voluntary turnover and operational outcomes in sequence.

Another model to decompose HR systems is based on the employee–organisation relationship framework (Tsui et al., 1997). This approach divides HR systems into practices reflecting inducements and investments offered to employees (for example, training and job security) and those reflecting employer expectations on employee performance (for example, pay-for-performance and performance appraisal). Shaw et al. (2009) found that two dimensions of HR systems have different impacts on employee quit rates such that HR inducements and investments help reduce quit rates of both good- and poor-performers, whereas expectation-enhancing practices reduce good-performer quit rates and enhance poor-performer quit rates.

2.2 Looking ahead

2.2.1 Group-level HRM

Traditional strategic HRM research has paid primary attention to HR systems and their performance effects at the organisation level of analysis. Even though work groups and teams have drawn substantial research attention of management scholars (Kozlowski and Bell, 2003) and serve as important work contexts for employees, limited efforts have been exerted to study HR systems in work groups. To enrich future research in this area, we suggest the following directions.

First, more efforts are needed to understand the variance in HR systems across work groups. Researchers have acknowledged the discrepancies

between designed HR systems and implemented HR systems and recognised the role of group or first-line managers in implementing HR systems (Nishii and Wright, 2008). Due to the difference in group managers' abilities and motivation to deliver HR systems, it is reasonable to expect that HR systems designed at the organisational level are implemented to different levels in work groups. For example, using a sample of 51 teams of a Korean company, Pak and Kim (in press) found that 33 per cent of the variance in employee experience of HR systems resided between work teams within the same company. This finding shows that work groups account for a significant amount of variance in HR systems. In order to enhance the influence of designed HR systems on group outcomes, it is important to explore the causes of the variance in HR systems across work groups. Jiang (2013) focused on group managers' abilities and motivation to implement HR systems and found that managers who are willing to take HR responsibilities tend to perceive HR systems as planned by organisations and those with more skills and experiences in implementing HR systems are more likely to make employees have similar perceptions of HR systems to managers' own perceptions. Future research can delve into the group-level variance in HR systems by examining other individual differences of group managers or group characteristics.

Second, research attention is needed to identify HR practices that are especially critical for promoting group work. The traditional strategic HRM research focuses on the role of HR systems in promoting employees' abilities, motivation, and opportunities to complete their work in general. However, the past research has not specified what HR practices contribute more to group performance versus individual performance. In order to establish a strong relationship between HR systems and group outcomes, we recommend researchers to develop group-based HR systems and examine how the group-based HR systems are related to group outcomes beyond general high-performance work systems. For example, rather than selecting the best all-around candidate in general, group-based HR systems may emphasise employees' abilities to collaborate and work in teams. Similarly, group-based HR systems may focus on team building and interpersonal relations in addition to improving employees' job skills and abilities in general. Lepak and Snell (2002) have provided some insights into group-based HR systems by proposing a collaborative HR configuration. Chuang, Jackson and Jiang (2016) recently conceptualised and developed an HR system for knowledge-intensive teamwork and set an example for examining HR systems for other types of work groups in the future.

Third, we encourage more research to examine how and when HR systems are related to outcomes at the group level of analysis. Team researchers have proposed and examined several key factors that may affect team effectiveness, including team cognition (DeChurch and Mesmer-Magnus, 2010), team diversity (Joshi and Roh, 2009), team compositions (Bell, 2007), team processes (LePine et al., 2008), team efficacy and potency (Gully et al., 2002), and team conflict (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). These studies provide opportunities for strategic HRM research to explore how group-level HR systems affect team effectiveness, especially through the mediators that are not commonly examined at the organisation level of analysis. Moreover, strategic HRM researchers can examine how HR systems operate with other critical antecedents of team effectiveness to affect group outcomes. For example, Jiang, Chuang and Chiao (2015) examined the influence of high-performance work systems on customer knowledge and service climate in small service units and found that service leadership substitutes for the positive influence of HR systems on both variables. Future research can look into other factors such as team characteristics and task characteristics to understand the conditions under which HR systems are more likely to improve group outcomes.

Fourth, because traditional strategic HRM focuses on why and how HR systems affect organisational performance and the emerging multi-level HRM research emphasises the cross-level influence of HR systems on individual outcomes, strategic HRM scholars can explore how the group-level factors transfer the impact of organisation-level HR systems on individual-level outcomes and how the individual-level outcomes can be aggregated to contribute to group-level and organisation-level outcomes. Jiang, Takeuchi and Lepak (2013) developed a three-level mediation model involving organisation-, group-, and individual-level analysis and provided a starting point for researchers to examining the mediating role of group-level factors in the cross-level relationship between HR systems and outcomes at different levels.

2.2.2 Time issues in strategic HRM research

Theoretical models of the HR systems–performance relationship suggest that it takes time for organisations to design and implement HR systems, which also need time to influence employee and firm performance (for example, Becker and Huselid, 1998; Lepak et al., 2006). However, the temporal dynamics of the relationship between HR systems and performance outcomes has received little attention

and several scholars have expressed the concerns of ignoring temporal issues in strategic HRM research (for example, Lepak et al., in press; Ployhart and Hale, 2014; Wright and Haggerty, 2005). For example, Ployhart and Hale (2014) noted that failing to understand the temporal dynamics makes it difficult to know whether and why the changes in HR systems are related to changes in performance outcomes, and also leaves it unclear about how fast or how long it will take for change to occur. The answers to these questions will not only contribute to theoretical understanding of the causal relationship between HR systems and performance outcomes but also provide more meaningful and actionable implications for managerial practices.

To enrich our understanding of time issues in strategic HRM research, we join other scholars (for example, Lepak et al., in press; Ployhart and Hale, 2014; Wright and Haggerty, 2005) to offer the following directions. First, we encourage more studies on how the changes in HR systems lead to changes in performance outcomes over time. Some recent studies have started to look into this question by using some unique longitudinal datasets (Kim and Ployhart, 2014; Piening, Baluch and Salge, 2013; Shin and Konrad, 2017). For example, using 359 firms with over 12 years of longitudinal firm-level data, Kim and Ployhart (2014) examined whether and why staffing and training influence firm profit growth. By controlling for prior profit in random coefficient growth models, they drew more rigorous conclusions about the causal relationships between the two HR practices and firm profit growth and found that the relationships may differ as a function of economic conditions. Future research can follow this approach to examine the influence of a broader set of HR practices on organisational performance over time. Researchers can also explore the dynamic mediating process by examining how the changes in HR systems are related to the changes in organisational performance through the changes in employee outcomes.

Second, more efforts are also needed to explore the functional form of HR effects over time. Researchers can examine whether the adoption of HR systems has a constant and linear effect on performance outcomes as time passes, or whether the effects of HR systems diminish or grow over time. This may require a field experimental design to examine how performance outcomes change over time after the adoption of HR systems. For example, Banker et al. (1996) examined the impact of work teams on manufacturing performance and found that quality and labour productivity improved over time after the formation of work

teams. This study only examined the linear relationship between time after the adoption of work teams and performance outcomes. Future research can contribute to this stream of research by exploring the nonlinear relationship and examining whether additional investments in HR systems may change the performance effects of HR systems over time.

Third, we expect more studies to examine how patterns of change in HR systems are related to performance outcomes. Previous research has proposed different ways for maximising the performance effects of HR systems. On the one hand, researchers have suggested that organisations need to ensure the consistency in HR practices in order to create a strong system to direct employee attitudes and behaviours over time (for example, Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). On the other hand, scholars have suggested that flexibility in HR systems is required to help organisations to adapt to diverse and changing environment (for example, Wright and Snell, 1998). Based on the two perspectives, it is important to understand whether firms should maintain stability or flexibility in HR systems. It is also critical to know whether firms should make continuous incremental changes or episodic radical changes and when firms should make the changes in order to achieve the flexibility in HR systems.

Fourth, future research also needs to study whether the components of HR systems have different impact on employees in certain periods of time. For example, Lepak et al. (in press) proposed that staffing practices may have a strong effect on employees soon after they join a company but the effect may decrease over time. However, employees may be affected by certain pay schemes and/or benefit programmes throughout their career in the company. Providing empirical evidences for these arguments is helpful for organisations to understand when to make investments in specific HR practices to generate greater return on HR investments.

2.2.3 Strategic human capital – a multidisciplinary lens

With the swing of the pendulum, more recently we have witnessed the emergence of a distinct area of research that overlaps with more mainstream strategic HRM research. In this newer area of focus researchers continue to examine “human capital” within the workplace but have done so by blending economics, strategy, HRM, and psychology in the study of strategic human capital. In some ways this is a natural

extension of the architectural perspective in that it focuses on the relative contributions different employees (human capital) make towards organisational competitiveness. But within this newer focus, there are several interesting areas of research that continue to push what we know about managing human capital strategically.

Most HR research prior to the late 1990s adopted frameworks that were grounded in Becker's (1964) human capital theory. Research from this perspective gives primary attention to the distinction between generic and specific forms of human capital. Generic human capital is transportable across organisations (for example, cognitive ability), whereas specific human capital is tied to a specific context (for example, firm, work group). Starting with Lepak and Snell (1999), the focus began to shift and recognise different forms of human capital that could exist in different employee groups. This work also began to blend human capital theory (from economics) with resource-based theory in strategy (for example, Barney, 1991) to emphasise the role of human capital for generating competitive advantage. Together, research was beginning to shift from directly linking HR practices to firm performance, to connecting HR practices to firm performance and competitive advantage through human capital resources (for example, Lepak et al., 2006).

The second generation of this research began to take a closer look at the nature of the human capital construct. Specifically, Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) developed a conceptual model explaining how employee knowledge, skill, ability, and other (KSAO) characteristics come to form into human capital resources. Their framework is inherently multi-level and argues that human capital resources emerge from the KSAOs of individual employees. However, human capital resources are not the simple aggregation of individual KSAOs. Rather, there is an emergence enabling process that exists, where the nature of the task environment interacts with emergent states (for example, climate, shared knowledge). The emergence enabling process transforms the individual KSAOs into unique, unit-level resources. Importantly, the human capital resources that emerge are shaped by HR policies and practices.

Concurrent to these theoretical advancements, there had been a sufficient amount of empirical research that enabled narrative and empirical summaries of the human capital literature. Nyberg et al. (2014) summarised over 150 articles on human capital and concluded

that there was considerable evidence linking human capital to firm performance. Crook et al. (2011) meta-analysed over 60 empirical studies and found a moderate correlation with firm performance outcomes. However, in a path model, the effect of human capital on operational performance was nearly three times larger (0.32) than the direct effect on firm performance (0.10). Thus, at this point there is pretty consistent theoretical and empirical evidence to suggest human capital is strategically valuable and contributes to firm performance.

2.3 Conclusions

In conclusion, the current evolution of research that we have outlined in this chapter can be seen to be bringing together multiple theoretical disciplines to develop a more comprehensive understanding of human capital. This type of research is important because scholars trained in different disciplinary foundations frequently accept assumptions within one's domain but reject assumptions from other domains, prohibiting a holistic view of human capital (Nyberg and Wright, 2015; Wright, Coff and Moliterno, 2014). Ployhart et al. (2014) integrated theoretical perspectives on human capital from economics, strategy, sociology, and psychology, to provide a typology that distinguishes KSAOs, human capital, human capital resources, and strategic human capital resources. This framework further reconciles some nagging difficulties with applying human capital theory (Becker, 1964) to a more strategic and resource-based view; phenomena the original theory was not intended to explain. In doing so, their paper concludes by noting that nearly all collective human capital resources will be firm-specific because they are based on combinations of individuals within a particular firm and context.

Research on strategic human capital continues to expand in new directions. For example, there is growing attention paid to star employees, who are hypothesised to generate above-normal performance, have broad visibility, and high social capital (Call, Nyberg and Thatcher, 2015; Tzabbar and Kehoe, 2014). Stars present an interesting set of challenges for human capital research: although they are strategically important, they may also capture most of the value they create, and hence not contribute strongly to organisational value capture. Another area that is receiving growing attention is the research on turnover. It is increasingly recognised that turnover represents the erosion of human capital resources (for example, Nyberg and Ployhart, 2013; Park and Shaw,

2013). Research is starting to show that turnover can negate the positive benefits of human capital resources (for example, Kim and Ployhart, 2014). Hence, a final area of research has begun to focus on talent pipelines and the flows of talent into and out of organisations (Reilly et al., 2014; Brymer, Molloy and Gilbert, 2014). This research thus recognises that human capital is a resource that is dynamic and multi-level.

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