

Revisiting HRM Systems Strength: Conceptualising the dynamic nature of HRM implementations

Jorrit van Mierlo and Tanya Bondarouk
University of Twente, the Netherlands¹

In 2004, Bowen and Ostroff provided the world of HRM a new research avenue. Their concept of HRM process has inspired many researchers and has served as a basis for many studies in HRM. The main conclusion drawn from their concept and papers spawned by it, is that employee perceptions play an important role in HRM implementation. However, although influential, the concept of HRM Systems Strength as put by Bowen and Ostroff (2004) has some flaws that have been ignored by HRM researchers.

We aim to challenge the unidirectional model of Bowen and Ostroff (2004) and raise three points of criticism. Firstly, regarding the perceptions people have of HRM systems, the authors only take perceptions of employees into account. However, organisational actors like higher managers and line managers play an important role in HRM implementation. Consequently, their perceptions, about for example new HR practices, cannot be ignored. Secondly, HRM Systems Strength ignores the dynamic nature of the HRM “signalling” process. No attention is paid to what happens to the system after its introduction. We argue that especially for newly introduced HR practices, a recursive multi-loop process exists. Finally, after its introduction to employees, an HR practice does not stop evolving. Instead, organisational actors modify the HR practice by the way they use it. Their interaction (or lack of it) with the newly applied behavioural guidelines, can either be according to those guidelines, or deviate from them. As a consequence, with their behaviour, organisational actors influence the way the HR practice matures, becomes internalised and eventually adds to performance. To understand the dynamic process of the way in which an HRM system is shaped in organisations and shows similarities over time and space, we propose to explore its reciprocal construction.

The objective of this conceptual paper is to address the dynamic nature of HRM systems. Therefore, we will challenge the HRM Systems Strength concept and develop a new map that conceptualises the dynamics of HRM implementation. We have developed a preliminary framework (see the Appendix) which theorises the dynamic nature of HR practices. It shows the way in which HR practices influence the work behaviour of various organisational actors, who with their behaviour – at the same time – recursively influence those HR practices.

References

Bowen, D. E. & Ostroff, C. (2004). Understanding HRM-firm performance linkages: the role of the "strength" of the HRM system. *The Academy of Management Review*, 29(2), 203-221.

Preferred subthemes

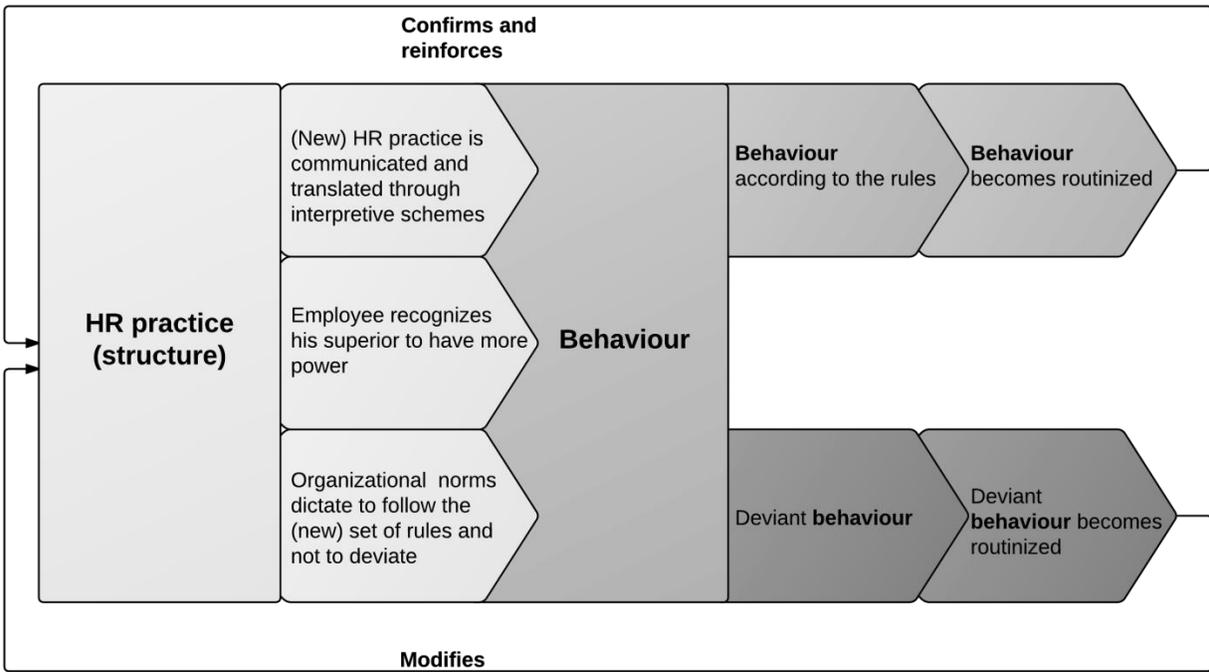
Theme 10: Implementing Organizational Change

Theme 01: The Active Employee: antecedents, outcomes, and implications for HRM

Corresponding author:

Jorrit van Mierlo, University of Twente, Enschede, the Netherlands
Email: j.vanmierlo@utwente.nl

Appendix: framework



Framework 1: The recursive nature of HR practices in organisations (continuous loop).